

Britain: Socialist Equality Party holds meetings to oppose war against Iraq

Our correspondent
19 December 2002

"Iraq has clearly complied with United Nations demands that it make an accounting of its various weapons programmes with the publication of its extensive 12,000 page report," Chris Marsden, national secretary of the Socialist Equality Party of Britain, told audiences at two public meetings in London and Manchester. But despite an elaborate charade of the US "carefully scrutinising" the document it is a foregone conclusion that the Bush administration "will reject Iraq's report at some time in the next week or so and then it will attempt to initiate procedures leading up to a bombing campaign and military invasion that could leave tens of thousands dead."

"Whatever the immediate timetable, we are on the cusp of an event of world-historic significance—one that will shape the lives of everyone here," Marsden said. "For the planned war against Iraq is the most finished expression to date of America's drive for world hegemony, a shift in the relations between US imperialism and the rest of the world that has already brought the political and economic order established following World War II to the point of collapse and which heralds the real and growing dangers of a Third World War."

"The end of the Soviet Union and subsequent collapse of the official workers' movement in countries around the world is viewed with euphoria by the US ruling class. Internationally it sees no immediate and credible rival to its global ambitions, while the working class is not seen as representing a major political threat to its rule at home."

"It therefore believes that it now has an opportunity to proclaim the onset of a new American century."

America's global ambitions would inevitably bring it in to conflict with its imperialist rivals, particularly in Europe. "Relations between Europe and America are destined to become ever more fractious and hostile. The old consensus represented by NATO is already in a state of decay and this will worsen."

"Indeed questions such as the balance of military power will begin to assume importance once again."

To illustrate how dramatically things have changed, Marsden noted that even relative birthrates are now a question of competition between Europe and America. "The *Economist* August edition noted that whereas European birthrate and population had been declining for last two decades, 'America's population actually grew.... These trends suggest that anyone who assumes the United States is now at the zenith of its economic or political power is making a big mistake... The United States could well become even more powerful than it is today....'

"The leader continues, 'Demography should set Europe's agenda, too.'"

Europe's efforts to challenge Washington will be limited by their longstanding dependence on US imperialism and the realities of intercontinental rivalries, which militate against the development of a common front, said Marsden. In particular the strains will grow on the relations between France and Germany, hitherto the axis of European politics.

"Above all, challenging US power must involve strenuous efforts to slash wages and social conditions for millions of working people. And what has already been achieved will not be nearly enough."

"The onset of war will have a potentially disastrous impact on world economy and thus on both relations between the major powers and relations between the ruling elite and the working class."

"In the worst case, a war with Iraq could cost the United States almost as much as the government spent in the last budget year—nearly \$2 trillion, according to a study by the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. The war's minimum cost would be \$99 billion."

"This is in marked contrast to the US experience during the last Gulf war in 1991, which cost America an estimated \$61 billion. Then its European and Japanese allies were made an offer they felt unable to refuse and agreed to shoulder all but \$7 billion of the overall cost. Some analysts argue that the US even made a profit."

"This time there is no indication that Europe or Japan will cough up again and the costs may be far higher."

Many analysts have warned of the very real danger of a plunge into recession, Marsden continued. The pro-war *Times* newspaper proclaims, "The outcome of any campaign is not in doubt, given America's astonishing military superiority over the rest of the world ... [but] a prolonged campaign that led to general disarray in the Middle East and a much higher oil price would bring a sharp recession along with higher inflation and unemployment."

It noted that the Centre for Strategic and International Studies in Washington estimates that protracted military resistance in Iraq and significant damage to oilfields in the region would mean the price of oil could shoot up to \$80 a barrel and stay up at about \$40 for several years. The growth rate in the US would slow by 4.5 percentage points compared to a no-war case, and the economy would slip into a recession.

But, said Marsden "this will not deter Washington which has its eye on a more immediate prize, to the point where political myopia has become tunnel vision."

"Iraq's huge oil resources could satisfy America's needs for imported oil at current levels for almost a century.... Michael Klare, a US expert on world policy issues, has written an important work entitled 'Resource Wars: A New Geography of Conflict.' He argues that the struggle to control resources of which oil is the most important, will shape the politics, economics and military struggles of the 21st century—something which we have been explaining as the root cause of a new epoch of imperialism that has already led the US in efforts to dominate the oil-rich Caspian Sea region and is now driving forward war against Iraq."

"Klare said in an interview last year, 'we [the US] view oil as a security consideration and we have to protect it by any means necessary, regardless of other considerations, other values.' Noting that to a great extent, the Cold War was a struggle for the control of Europe he added that even then, "in the Middle East, the United States was far more concerned about the threats to oil production than to the ideological

competition with the Soviet Union. In fact, many of the famous strategic 'doctrines' of the Cold War era—the Eisenhower Doctrine, the Nixon Doctrine and the Carter Doctrine—were intended to protect US access to the region's vital oil supplies.'

"This underlying reality is understood by all of those in the media who play along with government hypocrisy over weapons of mass destruction," Marsden said. He drew attention to an article in the *Sunday Times* by John Humphreys entitled, *We're planning a war, but don't mention the oil...*

"Humphrey's writes: 'More than 85 percent of the world's energy needs are supplied by hydro-carbons. Oil accounts for the biggest chunk by far. And it's running out.' He notes that Dr Colin Campbell of the Centre for Oil Depletion analysis' estimates that there is only enough oil beneath the ocean to supply the world for less than four years and that given present consumption levels oil reserves will be exhausted in less than two decades. This would be an optimistic scenario, however, as the US Department of Energy estimates that total world consumption will have increased by 54 percent by 2020."

Marsden continued, "The ruling class in every country will demand that workers pay for their military adventures and the looming crisis of the profits system as a whole in the form of wage restraint, job cuts and the elimination of social services."

It is this political and economic imperative that accounts for the determination of the Blair Labour government in Britain to defeat the ongoing firefighters' dispute at all costs, in order to warn every section of workers against opposing the systematic redistribution of wealth away from the working class to a narrow wealthy elite at the very top of society that was inaugurated by the Thatcher government.

"The Blair government is committed to union busting and willing to threaten mass sackings because the essential social relations on which it is based—the impoverishment of the vast majority to the benefit of a financial oligarchy—is incompatible with any genuine expression of democracy and the self-organisation of the working class in particular.

"The layers that Blair represents will tolerate no limitations on their reckless efforts to accumulate ever more obscene levels of personal wealth, but equally the working class cannot tolerate indefinitely the constant erosion of its living standards.

"In Britain and throughout Europe, therefore, the drive for US hegemony and the scramble by all the major powers to redivide the world between them will lead inevitably to an intensification of class struggle.

"In the process it will generate a social revolutionary movement by the working class, which is the only realistic basis for opposing war and dictatorship.

"Moreover, the same is true in Africa, Asia, Latin America and above all the Middle East. This will assume the character of a rebellion against the national bourgeois regimes that have prostrated themselves, or more correctly prostituted themselves before Washington.

"I hope that some of you managed to catch the recent *Panorama* programme on the BBC laying out the argument against war from within sections of the military and security apparatus.

"There were some like Major General Patrick Cordingley, who led the Allied armoured forces into Iraq during the Gulf war of 1991, who warned that a massacre of Iraqis by superior US and British weaponry would serve to discredit Western governments. Even some British soldiers will not feel the cause is just and that 'It is a great shame if you get a situation where they're being used in a way that the British public are not easy with.'

"Also opposed to another conflict in the Gulf was Robert Baer, a former CIA agent, who warned that it will create massive instability in the region. He stated quite bluntly, 'What we're inviting is World War III.... I talk to people in the CIA. They're worried about the stability of the region. A land war or a massive air war, against an Arab country is going to cause

several governments in the Middle East to fall. Among them Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and possibly Egypt.'

"The Socialist Equality Party and the International Committee of the Fourth International do not look to either the European imperialists or the military potential of Saddam Hussein to defeat the US war drive. We turn our attention consistently to the working class and oppressed masses. And crucially, we include at the centre of our political equations the determined effort to mobilise the revolutionary capacity of the American working class."

Concluding his presentation Marsden insisted, "The working class can only go forward if it builds a new leadership, which is armed with a perspective and world outlook capable of challenging and defeating the ruling class on the political arena..."

"All those who argue that the class struggle can be pursued providing only that a few cosmetic changes are made at the top of the trade unions are sowing political complacency and disorienting the working class. Trade unions were never enough to challenge capitalism. That's why the working class built its own party in the first place. And it must do so again. But it cannot reproduce the failed political experiment with reformism.

"The new socialist party that is required must be based on the recognition of global economic organization as the basis of political life and of class interests that have become too antagonistic to be contained by the democratic framework of an earlier era. The prevention of war, the defence of democratic rights and the struggle for social justice requires the abolition of the profit system and the reorganisation of society internationally in order to meet the needs of the vast majority of the world's citizens."

The report provoked a lively discussion at both meetings. In London a member of the audience asked Marsden whether European capitalism could successfully challenge the US.

Marsden explained how in the aftermath of World War II, European capitalism only survived because of two factors—firstly because of the betrayal by Stalinism of the powerful movements that emerged at the time and secondly because of the massive amounts of aid provided by the US.

"This wasn't charity on America's part. Put simply, they didn't want to confront a socialist Europe across the Atlantic. But it remains a fact that the European capitalists agreed to a terrible compact in subordinating themselves economically and militarily to the US. To recapture that ground would require a massive diversion of funds away from social welfare into military weapons programmes. This would cause a massive economic dislocation in Europe, bringing with it a head on confrontation with the working class.

"It is not our job to estimate the possibility of success for European capitalism in confronting the US. Our job is to overthrow European capitalism—that is to base ourselves on the inevitability of an escalation of the class struggle."

In Manchester, J, a student from Sierra Leone, explained, "I have been reading the *World Socialist Web Site* for some time and I am very impressed. I have come to this meeting to hear critical views on the situation in the Middle East and I have not been disappointed.

"I reflect back on the situation in sub-Saharan Africa regarding equality and social justice. In Africa, the Middle East, South America and everywhere else, the World Bank is pushing globalisation on to all these countries. Just as in Iraq, it is all about resources. In Cote d'Ivoire and the Congo it's all about 'blood diamonds'.

"They say the countries of Africa are poor because of corruption, lack of transparency and so on. Over the past 10 years in Sierra Leone I have witnessed the impact of the policies of the imperialist powers. The government doesn't determine prices or fiscal policy. The World Bank controls everything. There is a new form of colonialism."

Marsden replied, "The fate of sub-Saharan Africa expresses the world

situation. During the Cold War the Soviet Union acted to restrain the US. A window of opportunity was created for the national bourgeoisie in the underdeveloped countries. They implemented various national strategies like import substitution, but they could not break their dependence on the imperialist centres. The relations with imperialism were adapted, but not fundamentally altered.

“Now the imperialist powers are insisting on the restoration of the untrammelled control by the Western banks and corporations of the resources of the world.

“The present governments of the ex-colonial countries must act as intermediaries for the imperialists. Either they represent the interests of British, French or US imperialism or they will be removed.

“Those who speak of ‘the end of history’ and the triumph of the market are utterly indifferent to the fate of the vast majority of the people of the world. Conditions in many countries are even worse than they were in the nineteenth century. What is taking place is grotesque—the civil wars, the AIDs crisis, the ethnic violence which is whipped up whilst the continent is pillaged.

“We have to return to the perspective of the Russian revolution and to the construction of a party of the international working class.

“The class struggle knows no national boundaries. How can you confront the imperialist powers without allies in the advanced countries? That is the conception that the best representatives of the African and Asian working class understood in the past.

“The *World Socialist Web Site* is not merely a news service. It is the instrument for the construction of the world party of socialism. The conception that politics requires the active intervention of the working class has been undermined and eroded. The working class has to become politically organised once again. Once workers see the need for that again and begin to intervene in their own interests, the world situation will change fundamentally.”



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact