An interview with French Socialist Party spokesman Karim Pakzad

David Walsh
27 February 2003

On February 14, one day before millions marched in Europe in opposition to the impending US war against Iraq, reporters from the World Socialist Web Site *visited the headquarters of the French Socialist Party (PS) on the Rue de Solférino, not far from the National Assembly. That same afternoon French Foreign Minister Dominique Villepin spoke in opposition to the US in the United Nations Security Council, bringing to a close a remarkable week in which the Iraq question had provoked the sharpest crisis in American-European relations in the postwar period.*

We spoke to Karim Pakzad, the spokesman for the Socialist Party on Iraq. His comments were revealing from a number of points of view. Following the interview, we will provide our analysis.

Karim Pakzad: The French Socialist Party is opposed to this war for various reasons. First of all, we think that the Bush administration's conception of this war, that is to say, a unilateral war, a preemptive war, does not correspond to international law. We are for the reinforcement of the role of the United Nations in all the crises around the world.

It [the UN] is the only place where one can discuss and take measures for the solution of international questions. The fact that President Bush announced that the US has decided to intervene in Iraq whether it be with or without UN sanction does not really correspond to the conception that we ourselves have of the rules that regulate international relations.

A war against Iraq in the present situation would place regional stability in grave danger—a region which is already experiencing a great deal of instability, particularly because of the conflict between the Palestinians and the Israelis, a conflict that is extremely important for a region. We think we need to spend far more time and energy resolving this conflict rather than creating a second conflict.

Therefore, in this situation we believe that this war will destabilize the entire region. We do not believe, furthermore, that this intervention is destined to result in the democratization of Iraq. The conception that we have is that one cannot export democracy, or no matter which political system, by means of war, by military means.

We, the French Socialists, support the Iraqi opposition. We wish for a democratic change in Iraq, we want the disarmament of Iraq, but we do not believe that all that will be accomplished by war. It is for this reason that we are in favor for the moment of the French government's position and that of various other European governments: that is to say, the strengthening of the inspectors so that they can go all the way in their mission.

Iraq must be disarmed by peaceful means. We believe that a peaceful disarmament in Iraq will also permit the democratic opposition, the Iraqis themselves, to have sufficient means to overturn the regime without waiting for intervention from a foreign country. And here is the final reason: we think that the most important task of the international community today is to successfully carry out the struggle against terrorism.

We think that this war [with Iraq] will contribute to nourishing, to strengthening terrorism. It will be a destructive war ... there will be tens of thousands of dead. The gulf between the Muslim world and the Western world will be still greater after this war. Therefore, we think that this war, instead of combating terrorism, will strengthen terrorism. For all these reasons we are against this war. The Socialist Party is not a pacifist party; we are not against all wars, but we are against this war for all the reasons that I have given.

WSWS: If the UN were to sanction this war, would you be for an armed intervention?

KP: We are calling on the French government to do everything, including the use of its right to veto, in order that this war not take place, for the simple reason that we believe that the United Nations, that the Security Council, should not be transformed into an apparatus for legitimizing a war that is already decided upon. At present, American officials do not hide their desire to say that "no matter what, we are intervening."

Then, in this situation where the decision is already taken to intervene in Iraq, the American leaders would like to have the endorsement of the United Nations. It is the duty of the United Nations, instead of providing legitimacy to a war, it is necessary that the United Nations take, if it is possible, further measures for effectively disarming Iraq.

WSWS: Do you think that the disarmament of Iraq is the real motivation of the Bush administration?

KP: We believe that it is not the only one. Several important officials in the American administration say clearly that they wish to change the political face of the region, certain even say that the US has a mission to change the given state of the region, and it is for this reason that we believe that the Americans have decided to intervene, whether it be with or without UN agreement. It is for this reason that we cannot accept this logic based solely on war with or without the UN.

WSWS: Are you in agreement with Jacques Chirac on this question?

KP: We think that Jacques Chirac must put even greater pressure with other countries, and, above all, with world public opinion. Tomorrow there will be several million people in more than 60 countries who will be demonstrating against this war. These people are not in favor of the Saddam Hussein regime. The way in which the Americans want to conduct this war is not just. Therefore, our government and other governments must place pressure on the US in order that Iraq is disarmed by peaceful means.

WSWS: How do you see the conflict between France and the US?

KP: There is no conflict, there is a difference of opinion. There are two different appreciations of the situation. We are, as you know, friends of the US. At the same time, we are not in their pay, we are not taking orders from the US. Our relations are based on friendship and we maintain our own judgment of every aspect of world affairs.

WSWS: What is pushing the US into this war? What are the real reasons behind this?

KP: Listen, there are different analyses. They think they have the means of changing not only the Iraqi regime but the entire Middle East. It is the

© World Socialist Web Site

desire for power. I believe that there are economic reasons, geo-strategical reasons, reasons connected to energy. All are present, but I think the principal reason is that there is in the US a team in place led by the ultra-conservatives of the conservative party who think that the US has the mission to reformulate, to remodel the face of the region and of the entire world. This way of looking at the world is very dangerous.

The opposition to the Bush administration's policy put forward by Karim Pakzad and the Socialist Party is dishonest, unprincipled and untenable.

In their general content, his comments reflect not merely the position of the Socialist Party, but essentially the consensus of the French ruling elite in regard to the coming American military attack on Iraq. This elite opposes the US-British war policy entirely from the standpoint of the interests of French imperialism in the Persian Gulf and, more generally, around the world. In its overall attitude to Iraq, the PS has no significant differences with the regime of President Jacques Chirac and his right-wing Union for a Popular Movement (UMP).

The PS spokesman uncritically accepts and legitimizes the overarching framework of the American assault on Iraq, the so-called "war on terror." On the basis of this supposed crusade against international evil, the Bush administration justifies an enormous escalation of US militarism. At the same time, the US government, and virtually every other bourgeois regime, is using the threat of terrorist attack as a pretext for carrying out sweeping attacks on democratic rights. Pakzad, however, merely criticizes the manner in which this global "war on terrorism" is being conducted.

Pakzad lends credence to Washington's basic lie that Iraqi conduct has produced the present crisis, asserting that Iraq must be "disarmed," the weapons inspectors must be allowed to do their work, the Iraqi "opposition" has to be supported, Saddam Hussein is a menace, etc. He implicitly accepts the destruction of Iraqi sovereignty and, by logical extension, the de facto establishment of some form of imperialist protectorate, as long as it is carried out under the auspices of the United Nations.

Pakzad maintains the fiction that the UN, whose role as a tool of imperialist machinations has been starkly revealed in the Iraq crisis, is the only place "where one can discuss and take measures for the solution of international questions." The French ruling elite clings to the UN, because that institution is part of the structure of international relations that provided a degree of stability for the French bourgeoisie in the postwar period and, more specifically, because it hopes that the UN can prove something of a counterweight to American power in a new and more uncertain period.

The differences between the US and France over Iraq reflect the diverging interests of the two powers. The ruling elite in France has concluded that it must oppose American intervention in Iraq, for fear of seeing American hegemony over a strategically critical region and US monopoly control over world oil reserves.

Pakzad reveals, moreover, the concerns of sections of the European bourgeoisie over the destabilizing impact of the Bush administration's reckless and belligerent policies, asserting, "A war against Iraq in the present situation would place regional stability in grave danger."

France is a major imperialist power, with a history of brutal colonial rule in Equatorial, West and North Africa, the Middle East and Southeast Asia, in particular. If the Chirac regime chooses to posture as "pacifist," this is chiefly because for the moment it lacks the "big battalions" with which to oppose the US. It is entirely capable of launching its own predatory wars under different circumstances. Indeed, French troops are presently engaged in the defense of neocolonial interests in the Ivory Coast.

Paris has made abundantly clear that its differences with Washington are not of a principled character. UMP deputy Pierre Lellouche, for example, told *Le Monde* last month that "the position of France has never been far from the American position at heart. It is on the method—passing through the Security Council—that we differ."

Pakzad is incapable of exposing the imperialist war aims of the US in Iraq because the PS is itself a party of French imperialism. While Pakzad and the Socialist Party oppose US intervention in this particular instance, they are as determined as the Bush cabal to conceal the real aims that underlie it.

Insofar as Pakzad is pressed on Washington's actual motives, his position becomes internally contradictory and intellectually indefensible. On the one hand, he is willing to acknowledge that the US has designs on Iraqi energy supplies and that an "ultra-conservative" clique in the Republican Party is pursuing a war with the aim of changing the face of the region and the "entire world." On the other, he accepts as good coin the Bush administration's line that its concerns center on "disarming" Iraq, and expresses agreement with this aim.

Pakzad will not even admit to a conflict between France and the US over Iraq policy, merely a "difference of opinion" between "friends." It is useful to have on record that the leadership of the French Socialist Party considers itself the friend of the warmongering Bush administration. In this attitude toward the US there is an element of self-delusion and denial.

The PS spokesman's attempt to reconcile mutually exclusive positions reflects the deeper dilemma of the French and European bourgeoisie. The European elites are obliged, for their own self-preservation, to oppose the unlimited assertion of US hegemony. At the same time, they are fearful of a decisive break with Washington, with all the incalculable and threatening consequences of such a development.

The Socialist Party's current political support for Chirac and the UMP government marks the second time in less than 12 months that the traditional "left" parties in France—the PS and the French Communist Party (PCF)—and their "far left" hangers-on have thrown in their lot with the French right.

Last spring, Chirac faced neo-fascist Jean-Marie Le Pen in the second round of the presidential election, following the first-round debacle of the PS candidate, Prime Minister Lionel Jospin. The left parties and trade unions rallied behind Chirac, the incumbent president, declaring him the "defender of Republican values." This policy opened the door to the present right-wing domination of all levers of French political power.

The PS and PCF—and virtually the entire French left—now argue that the Chirac regime should be supported for its opposition to Washington in the United Nations, and that the task of the "left" is to hold the government's feet to the fire to make sure it maintains its position. "Let's use our veto," declares a PS antiwar poster currently to be seen around Paris. The PCF says the same thing. "All together we can stop the war! French veto at the UN," reads one of its slogans.

This promotion of Chirac and the UMP government takes place under conditions in which the same government is laying siege to the jobs, pensions and past social gains of the French working class, and carrying out unprecedented attacks on democratic rights.

The Socialist Party, whose political ancestors such as Guy Mollet and François Mitterrand fully pursued French imperialist interests in Algeria in the 1950s, is not a "workers party," or even a vehicle of social reform. It has become over the course of the past several decades one of the chosen instruments of French capitalist rule.

The comments of Pakzad and the conduct of the French Socialist Party in the Iraq crisis demonstrate that this party, and the French left as a whole, is not a viable instrument for opposing imperialist war and expressing the interests and concerns of broad layers of working people in France. This is a thoroughly compromised and corrupt milieu.

French workers and youth can oppose militarism and war only by breaking with the Socialist Party and its Stalinist satellite, the Communist Party, and undertaking the building of a new party based on the program of international socialism.

© World Socialist Web Site

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site