

"War means an intensification of the exploitation of the US working class"

24 April 2003

Below we are publishing the remarks of Jerry Isaacs to the conference held by the World Socialist Web Site and the Socialist Equality Party in Ann Arbor, Michigan March 29-30, 2003 entitled "Socialism and the Struggle Against Imperialism and War: the Strategy and Program of a New International Working Class Movement."

Isaacs, a member of the WSWWS Editorial Board, introduced the fifth of six resolutions discussed and adopted by the conference: "War and the social crisis in the United States."

On April 1 the WSWWS published a summary account of the conference ["World Socialist Web Site holds international conference on socialism and the struggle against war"] as well as the opening report given by David North, chairman of the WSWWS International Editorial Board and national secretary of the SEP in the US ["Into the maelstrom: the crisis of American imperialism and the war against Iraq"].

The texts of the six resolutions unanimously adopted by the conference were published April 2 through April 4 ["Resolutions condemn war in Iraq, call for international unity of working class", "Resolutions call for political independence of working class, oppose attacks on democratic rights", "Resolutions on war and the US social crisis, development of the World Socialist Web Site"]

On April 22 the WSWWS published the remarks of Patrick Martin and Ulrich Rippert, who introduced the first and second conference resolutions, respectively [See "Contradictions and lies in the US case for war against Iraq", "Internationalism stands at the center of the history of the working class"] On April 23 we published the remarks of Barry Grey and Lawrence Porter, who introduced the third and fourth resolutions [See "The historic background and content of the struggle for the political independence of the working class", and "The turn to authoritarian methods is a symptom of the failure of American capitalism"].

In the coming days we will publish the greetings brought by international delegates to the conference.

I urge the delegates to support the conference resolution "War and the social crisis in the United States." The resolution begins by noting that the turn to unbridled

militarism by the Bush administration is a manifestation of the deep-going internal crisis of American society, which finds its most acute expression in levels of social inequality not seen since the 1920s.

If one considers the character of the demonstrations that have taken place in the United States and internationally, it becomes clear that this imperialist war has served as a catalyst to draw millions of people into political struggle. But the streams that are contributing to this growth of social dissent and political struggle have many sources—first and foremost, the growth of social inequality, the attack on democratic rights, the inability of broad masses to persuade or influence the capitalist state.

The economic boom of the 1990s brought to an apex the social polarization that had begun to accelerate in the mid-1970s. The indices of inequality show what is moving the younger generation and broad layers of the working class. Between 1980 and 2000, the annual income of the top fifth of US families rose by 30 percent. As of 2000, this top layer had an income 10 times that of the bottom fifth of families. Executive pay went up 571 percent, while living standards stagnated for the vast majority of people. More than half of the jobs created during the so-called boom pay less than a livable wage.

The resolution states that "Militarism serves two critical functions: first, conquest and plunder can provide, at least in the short term, additional resources that can ameliorate economic problems; second, war provides a means for directing internal social pressures outward."

Lenin, in his work *Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism*, illustrated these points when he cited the remarks of Cecil Rhodes, the millionaire financier in England who played a key role in the Boar War and British colonial conquests in Africa, including the country that bore his name, Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe).

Lenin cites the account of a friend of Rhodes, who quotes Rhodes as saying, "I was in the East End of London yesterday and attended a meeting of the unemployed. I listened to the wild speeches, which were just a cry for 'Bread, bread!' and on my way home I pondered over the

scene and I become more than ever convinced of the importance of imperialism.... My cherished idea is a solution for the social problem, i.e., in order to save 40 million inhabitants of the United Kingdom from a bloody civil war, we colonial statesmen must acquire new lands to settle the surplus population, to provide new markets for the goods produced in the factories and the mines. The Empire, as I have always said, is a bread and butter question. If you want to avoid civil war, you must become imperialists.”

Far from the international intrigues of US imperialism resolving the social crisis, however, war means an intensification of the exploitation of the working class in the United States. The war against Iraq and future wars are aimed at crushing the resistance of the oppressed masses and guaranteeing access to natural resources and pools of super-exploited labor—which, in turn, will be used to lower wages in the advanced capitalist countries.

Moreover, the cost of the war—in terms both of the lives of young soldiers and the burden of budget cuts and increased attacks on living standards—will be borne by working people. It will correspond with deeper and deeper assaults on social programs, demands for ever-greater output from the working class, cuts in wages—as we’ve seen in the airline industry—and continued downsizing. The massive war buildup is paid for by the working class and is part of the enormous redistribution of wealth from workers to the wealthy elite, carried out, in part, through huge tax breaks for big business and the rich.

In 1980, at the height of the Cold War, the US spent two dollars on the Pentagon for every dollar it spent on aid to the cities. Today, the Pentagon gets more than four dollars for every dollar spent on the cities. Nearly 40 percent of all federal revenues are consumed by the Pentagon military machine. Each cruise missile fired on Iraq costs more than a million dollars. In one night, 800 of them were sent into Baghdad and other cities—at the cost of more than a billion dollars. It is not difficult to list a host of pressing social needs in America that go unmet while vast resources are channeled into criminal adventures such as the current war.

According to the 2000 Census, nearly three-quarters of a million homes in America do not have adequate indoor plumbing. Seventy-five million Americans went without medical insurance at some point in the course of 2002. According to a recent study by the Government Accounting Office, one out of every three school buildings in the country needs extensive repair or replacement.

These conditions are leading to an intensification of the class struggle. But the crucial issue is the following: as masses of people come into struggle, they must become conscious that they are in a conflict with the entire political, economic and social order. Such an understanding cannot

arise spontaneously from even the most fervent protests. The work of the *World Socialist Web Site* and the Socialist Equality Party is to make the working class conscious of its political tasks.

Our resolution states: “This conference insists that the struggle against militarism is inseparably bound up with the defense of democratic rights and the social position of working people. It must be based on opposition to the monopoly of wealth by a tiny and unaccountable elite, which is utterly incompatible with the maintenance of a democratic society. At the very center of the struggle against war must be the fight for genuine social equality, directed at eliminating the vast social inequities and guaranteeing the needs of working people for jobs, a living wage, a secure retirement, decent education, health care and housing.”

I want to conclude by suggesting a historical analogy. The question of Abraham Lincoln and the American Civil War has come up a number of times at the conference. Prior to the Civil War there was a belief that a compromise could be reached with the slave owners. Even after Lincoln was compelled to declare war on the slaveocracy, many still believed the issue of slavery could be evaded. In the end, however, Lincoln realized that the only way he could defeat the ruling elite in the South and destroy its ability to wage war was to attack its property and wealth. That required abolishing slavery and freeing the four million slaves in the South.

There is no way war can be prevented today outside of the working class developing a program that attacks the economic and social basis of the profit system which, in fact, is the source of imperialist war.

Once again I urge, in conclusion, that delegates support this resolution.



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