

# Greetings to the WSWS/SEP conference by Chris Marsden of the British Socialist Equality Party

## "The war heralds a crisis of rule for British imperialism"

26 April 2003

*Below we are publishing the greetings brought by Chris Marsden to the conference held by the World Socialist Web Site and the SEP 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."*

*On April 1 the WSWS 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 WSWS 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"]*

*We have also published in recent days the remarks of delegates who introduced the resolutions and the greetings brought by other leading international members of the WSWS Editorial Board and the International Committee of the Fourth International.*

First of all, I would like to extend the warmest greetings to this conference from Britain's Socialist Equality Party. It is indeed a rare privilege to address such a meeting. The international political solidarity which is expressed here, rooted as it is in the shared concern for humanity, carries historically infinitely more weight than the so-called special relationship under which banner Britain's Prime Minister Blair is supporting Bush's criminal venture in the Gulf.

In the same spirit, I'd like to take this opportunity to endorse and commend the resolution that has just been moved by Comrade Rippert for the international unity of the working class. I'd like to read one passage from that resolution. It says:

"The only genuine mass base for the struggle against imperialism and war is the American and international working class. This struggle requires a conscious international orientation and perspective. It cannot be developed from above—through the auspices of one or another of the imperialist powers, national governments, or institutions such as the United Nations. France and Germany, no less than Britain and the United States, are motivated by their own imperialist interests and foreign policy requirements. None of the bourgeois governments represent the aspirations of ordinary people for peace. That is why protest, which, no matter how militant and broadly based, is aimed at pressuring the powers-that-be, cannot halt the drive to war.

"Only by building a movement from below—among the broad masses of

working people—and imbuing it with an international socialist strategy aimed at the complete transformation of society, can the struggle against war go forward."

That, I believe, is a very well written, strong passage, expressing the essential orientation of our movement. In this regard, I would like to say something about the real situation that exists in Britain, which is put forward by every news media as the most stalwart ally of the United States—its partner in crime, as it were.

In reality, the situation in Britain could not be more different. It remains the case that the protests against the war in the UK were amongst the biggest in the world. Despite the fact that there was mass propaganda and pressure to support this war, millions took to the streets in opposition. The movement affected all layers of society; it affected all ages as well.

Everyone has commented that there were young people on these demonstrations, masses of young people, many of whom had never considered themselves to be political, but were animated by a real concern. Time and again, when we spoke to people, they made certain statements: "I don't believe Saddam Hussein, bad as he is, is the real threat to world peace. It is America. I'm concerned about American foreign policy. I don't know why we are endorsing this war. I don't think we should."

To get a picture of just what Blair came up against, you only had to watch the TV news in Britain. At one point Blair took part in a very staged forum, about 35 people, all hand-picked. Still, there was not a single person in the audience who would support him. He ended up completely flustered. One person said, "I think Bush is a war criminal, a murderer." Blair replied, "Well, I think that's a little bit harsh." He just didn't know what to say. Then he attended a debate on Channel 4 at which there were members of families whose relatives had died on 9/11, and they slow hand-clapped him.

None of this sentiment has gone away. The only thing that has been demonstrated by the decision of Blair to go to war is the complete indifference of the government to the popular will. This is a new principle of government. The fate of thousands of troops, hundreds of thousands of Iraqis, is to be decided by the moral qualms of Tony Blair.

We all know that what animates Blair is what the financial oligarchy tells him to do, what Rupert Murdoch and his op-ed pieces tell him to do, what Bush tells him to do. There's no lie that he won't swallow, there's nothing that he won't say, nothing is too embarrassing.

Consider the latest fiasco, when he said two soldiers had been executed by the Iraqis. This became the most significant feature of his press conference. And then the family of one of the two said this was just a plain, damn lie. So Blair moved on to the next business.

All of this has a very definite social and political content, and it will

have an enormous political impact. I want to make it very clear. The war has focused the hostility of broad layers of the British population against the Blair government. But it only brought into sharp relief something that was already highly developed and increasingly obvious, i.e., the divorce between the mass of working people and the government in Britain. And the same situation prevails in many other countries around the world.

This division has been maturing in Britain for close to a quarter of a century, and it is the political expression of what is a widening social gulf between rich and poor that began under the government of Margaret Thatcher. It has resulted in the ascendancy of a financial oligarchy that feels itself above the political restraints that once held the worst excesses of the ruling elite in check.

It remains the case that by the time the Tories were driven from office, they were hated not only by large sections of the working class, whose livelihoods they had destroyed, but also by those sections of the middle class for whom the premises of Thatcher's "popular capitalism" had turned to dust.

Blair himself was chosen by big business in 1997 as their favored candidate precisely because the Tories had become unelectable. He was elevated to leadership in order to spearhead the Labour Party's rebirth as an openly pro-market party, shorn of its previous commitment to social reforms.

He did try to make out that he was different from the Tories—more democratic, less dogmatic, etc. But his landslide victory was more a negative verdict on 18 years of Conservative Party rule than a sign that the working class was inspired by his so-called "Third Way" rhetoric. There was a certain hope, a faint hope, shared by many that the incoming government would do something to ameliorate the terrible social divide that had developed in Britain and was threatening the very social fabric of the country.

Britain is a country characterized by tremendous wealth and tremendous poverty. It is the country closest to the social conditions that exist for the American working class. Thatcher and Reagan were twins, and the policies they pursued have had the same impact in both places.

Blair has not answered any of these things. He did entirely the opposite. He presided over a further growth of inequality and poverty, which has left a quarter of the population, and fully a third of all children, living below the European Union's poverty level.

Labour has introduced cuts in public spending, privatized much of the public sector, including health and education, slashed company taxes and curtailed democratic freedoms to a degree that Thatcher could only dream about. In the process, it long ago exhausted whatever good will greeted Blair's election.

His government now enjoys less popular support than any other in history. In the 2001 elections, for example, turnout was just 59.4 percent. That's a 15 percent decline on 1997, and non-voters outnumbered Labour supporters by a staggering 15 percent. The drift away from both Labour and voting altogether was most pronounced in the inner cities, where turnout was often less than 30 percent. Blair himself was regarded with suspicion, mistrust and often hatred long before the drive to war in the Gulf began.

These feelings have been magnified by his association with this crime against humanity. At the same time, the antiwar movement has provided a focus for broader political opposition to the government that hitherto could find no outlet. In pursuing this war, Blair is building up a well of resentment that has already drawn millions into political life and struggle for the first time, under conditions where his entire governing strategy is threatening to come unstuck.

Comrades have spoken on the political and military difficulties that are now becoming apparent for the allies in this war. If you couple that with the impact this will have on domestic social relations, then you can see the tremendous political difficulties opening up. It is not simply the survival

of the Blair government that will be threatened. What it heralds is a fundamental crisis of rule for British imperialism, of which the working class must take advantage in order to prevent a descent into barbarism.

It is this spirit that we have to understand the question of the international unity of the working class. What social force can challenge imperialism? What social force is interested in challenging imperialism? What social force is of necessity forced to go the whole way in the struggle against imperialism?

The delegate from Ohio asked: on what basis do we assume that the working class will fight to construct an egalitarian society? Well, in whose interest is egalitarianism? Who benefits from equality? Not the rich. Socialism is not an idea that is imposed *on* the working class; rather, it articulates the interests *of* the working class.

Internationalism is a basic necessity. You cannot fight powers that have global reach—and an international strategy, however flawed, and a massive military machinery—unless you are able to mobilize the world's working class. When you can do that, you harness a force that becomes unstoppable. But this has to be fought for consciously.

We noted recently that the general secretary of Britain's Trades Union Congress refused to support the last antiwar protest—and up to that point the TUC had been making noises about being supportive—because he said it was a movement dedicated to bringing down the prime minister. Now all of the official leaderships of the protest denied any such intention, which speaks volumes about their own politics.

However, from his appraisal of the direction the antiwar movement can take, Brendan Barber, as a servant of Britain's rulers, was right to be hostile and afraid of this movement. Because the only way the antiwar movement can realize its aims is by going beyond acts of protest. It means taking up a struggle against the ruling parties of big business in Britain—in the United States, in Germany, in France, wherever—and replacing it with a government by and of working people.

The struggle for internationalism has a very definite content. It has to be a struggle to be an international party of the working class. The workers need their own party, equipped with an international strategy and the ability to mobilize the collective strength of workers all over the world. The building of such a party is the essential purpose of this conference. That is the spirit in which we should give unanimous support to both the resolutions that have been moved today and the resolutions that will be moved tomorrow.

Thank you, comrades.



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