

Report from the World Socialist Web Site /Socialist Equality Party conference: "Socialism and the Struggle Against Imperialism and War"

"Internationalism stands at the center of the history of the working class"

22 April 2003

Below we are publishing the remarks of Ulrich Rippert to the conference held by the WSWs 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."

Rippert is a member of the WSWs International Editorial Board and national secretary of the Partei für Soziale Gleichheit (Socialist Equality Party) of Germany. He introduced the second of six resolutions discussed and adopted by the conference: "For the international unity of the working class."

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"]

In the coming days we will publish the remarks made by the presenters of the remaining resolutions, as well as greetings brought by international delegates to the conference.

I'm very happy to be participating in this conference and listening to this very important discussion. I think many of the contributions represent a real change in the political situation and indicate that the *World Socialist Web Site* is becoming the instrument of an enormous transformation and the building of an international revolutionary party.

I would like to bring to this conference the warmest revolutionary greetings of the German comrades of the Partei für Soziale Gleichheit. When this conference was announced, nearly every comrade in Germany wanted to be here because they felt they would be missing a historic event, and I think they are right. This conference is of enormous historic importance.

The war has created a situation in Europe that can only be described as one of shock. This is bound up with the fact that Europe and, in particular, Germany experienced in the previous century all of the horrors that resulted from the type of aggressive militarism that has once again emerged, this time spearheaded by the United States. January of this year marked 70 years since Hitler came to power. Many people still remember

this event with horror. Germany is the country where the concentration camps existed. This is where families, basically every family, lost relatives in the war, and they still speak about this tragedy of those who did not come back from the conflict.

The fact that the American government now acts in defiance of international law and the entire structure of diplomatic and legal relations established in the aftermath of the Second World War is something that people in Europe find difficult to grasp.

The shock and outrage are reflected in the demonstrations that are taking place every weekend—and these are massive demonstrations. Whole families are turning out—very old people and very young people. On the morning of March 20, when the war started, 80,000 school students held a mass rally at the city center. It was a spontaneous outpouring of opposition.

What is the official response to the war on the part of the German and some of the other European governments? As you know, the German and the French governments opposed the US war policy. But they did it, as we have explained, because they concluded that they could not accept an American protectorate in Iraq. This would give the US control over the most important oil resources and place American military forces in an even stronger position to menace Iran, where Germany and France have major economic interests. Iran, moreover, borders on the Caspian basin, creating conditions for the US to dominate 80 percent of the world's energy resources.

The German and French governments decided they could not accept this. They had to oppose it. In the beginning they thought they could restrain the Bush government by diplomatic means. But that failed. When it became clear they could not prevent this war, their response was that they would have to build up their own independent military force, and that is the discussion that is now taking place in Germany.

In the press there are statements by political advisers and military experts explaining that there is only one force that can restrain this American policy, and that is Europe, on the basis of an enhanced military power. This is combined with a policy of cuts in social spending. A lot of the money for the military buildup is being taken out of the pockets of the working class.

Just three days before Bush went on television and gave his war ultimatum to Iraq, German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder gave a speech to the nation in which he announced social cuts on a scale that has no precedent since the Depression of the 1930s. That is why the government in Germany, even if the antiwar demonstrations are not directly organized against it, is very nervous. Its response is to more and more shift its

position toward support of the US government in this war.

At the beginning of the war the parliamentary fraction of the Green Party adopted a position in which it explained that under all conditions, irrespective of whether the war was legal or illegal, it would support opening German airspace to US war planes and giving the American military unlimited access to its bases on German soil, as well as providing the US military with tactical support.

When we intervene in these mass demonstrations, we oppose all tendencies that try to subordinate the antiwar movement to the German or French governments. This tendency is quite strong. Our position is a totally opposed one.

Our position is to give no support, tactical or otherwise, to the German or French government. Rather, we advance the fight for the unity of the European and the American working class as the decisive link for building up the international unity of the working class worldwide.

This orientation seeks to unite the struggle against war with the struggle against unemployment, social cuts and the attacks on democratic rights. This perspective, to unite the European and American working class, is of profound historical importance. It is necessary to understand it in its historical context.

If you ask the question—why did the European revolution fail in the last century?—there are many reasons, some of which were explained in the opening report. Among the most critical are the betrayal of social democracy in 1914 and the counterrevolutionary role of Stalinism beginning in the late 1920s. But another important factor was the ability of American capitalism to keep the mighty power of this working class under its political control. Under conditions in which the European workers were isolated from their American brothers, the reactionary forces in Europe were able to betray, suppress and strangle the revolution.

This is why I ask you to support the resolution in front of us on the international unity of the working class. Internationalism is not just a slogan or a general demand. Internationalism is a political perspective and program.

In the discussion, I was interested in the question posed by one delegate, who asked for proof that the working class could carry out the revolution. By way of an answer, it is not sufficient to say that the working class is the class that produces all of the wealth in society. It is necessary to understand that the international unification of the working class is a political perspective that stands at the center of the whole history of the working class.

At the very onset of conscious working class struggles, Marx and Engels explained that capitalism established a world market and an international division of labor, and that it was possible to establish a socialist society only on an international level. Today, with the globalization of production, this is even more pronounced.

The ruling class is bound with a thousand threads to the nation state. It needs the nation state to suppress the masses. The only social force that is able to develop the productive forces and free them from the limitations of the nation state is a class that is not bound up with the state—and that is the working class.

If you look at the history of the working class, the conflict between a nationalist adaptation to the national bourgeoisie and its state and the struggle for the international unification of the working class is at the center of all major disputes that have taken place. All of the big struggles within the workers movement were concentrated on this question.

The betrayal of the German social democracy in 1914, when they said at the beginning of the war that in the hour of national emergency, we defend the fatherland; Lenin and Trotsky and the Marxists of that time fought against this nationalist perspective, and the October Revolution was a result of the political struggle they carried out.

Ten years later, the development of the Stalinist bureaucracy was bound up with a nationalist adaptation under the slogan of socialism in a single

country. The struggle of Trotsky and the Left Opposition was against this nationalist outlook and perspective.

The founding of our movement 50 years ago, the International Committee of the Fourth International, came in a political struggle against Pabloism, which was a nationalist adaptation to the special conditions that existed in different countries in the aftermath of the Second World War. Since then, the whole history of our movement has centered on a consistent struggle against any form of nationalist adaptation and opportunism.

In the past we have often been asked why we are not a mass political movement. This is bound up with the fact that in previous decades the reformist, nationalist bureaucracies were able to control the working class in every country. That created extremely difficult conditions. This domination of the nationalist bureaucracies was bound up with the fact that capitalism itself was still developing to a certain extent within the framework of the nation state.

With the globalization of production we have a qualitatively new stage in the development of society. The mass demonstrations which we see in all countries and the international character of these demonstrations are an expression of this new economic and social foundation.

Our task is to bring this understanding as a conscious political perspective into this mass movement. In the resolution we say: “This conference recognizes the political responsibility posed by the massive international mobilization against imperialist war.”

How do we understand our responsibility in these mass demonstrations? We bring into them this perspective of unity worldwide on the basis of a revolutionary socialist program. This is why we have concentrated our work in recent years on developing the *World Socialist Web Site*.

This is the instrument not only to explain our internationalist political perspective. The *World Socialist Web Site* becomes the means by which this international unification of the working class takes form and develops. We speak to the working class as an international class. We raise the eyes of the working class from its immediate problems and immediate surroundings to the most important strategic experiences and most critical issues in world politics, and educate the working class on the basis of these international developments.

If you ask yourself how the WSWS becomes such a rallying point, why it creates this interest, why so many people come to this web site, it is because it is a conscious expression of an unconscious development that already exists in broad sections of society.

That is why this conference is of enormous importance. I would like to end my contribution by quoting one paragraph from the book Trotsky wrote in the first year, 1915, of World War I. The book is entitled *The War and the International*.

I was always very much animated by the revolutionary optimism that went through Trotsky’s whole analysis of the First World War and the breakup of the Second International. Trotsky ended his analysis with the following words:

“We revolutionary socialists did not want the war. But we do not fear it. We do not give in to despair over the fact that the war broke up the International. History has already disposed of the international.

“The revolutionary epoch will create new forms of organization out of the inexhaustible resources of proletarian socialism, new forms that will be equal to the greatness of the new tasks. To this work we will apply ourselves at once, amid the mad roaring of the machine guns, the crashing of cathedrals, and the patriotic howling of the capitalist jackals. We will keep our clear minds amid the hellish death music, our undimmed vision. We feel ourselves to be the only creative force of the future. Already there are many of us, more than it might seem. Tomorrow there will be more of us than today. And the day after tomorrow, millions will rise up under our banner, millions who even now, sixty seven years after the *Communist Manifesto*, having nothing to lose but their chains.”

Our optimism, even under conditions of this terrifying war, is the same as that of Trotsky in the first years of the First World War. Our optimism is not artificial and it is not shallow. It is based on a clear understanding of the political lessons of the history of the past century and the struggle for the international unification of the working class.



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