

# Greetings to the WSWS/SEP Conference by Linda Tenenbaum of the Australian SEP

"The WSWS is the source of a new, international socialist perspective"

25 April 2003

*Below we are publishing the greetings brought by Linda Tenenbaum, assistant national secretary of the Socialist Equality Party of Australia, 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."*

*Tenenbaum was among the international delegates who participated in the conference. In the coming days we will publish the greetings brought by delegates from Britain, Russia and Canada.*

*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. [ See "Contradictions and lies in the US case for war against Iraq", "Internationalism stands at the center of the history of the working class", "The historic background and content of the struggle for the political independence of the working class", "The turn to authoritarian methods is a symptom of the failure of American capitalism", "War means an intensification of the exploitation of the US working class", and "We believe in the power of historically progressive ideas".*

On behalf of the Socialist Equality Party, the Australian section of the International Committee of the Fourth International, and all its members it is a great privilege to bring to every delegate here the warmest fraternal greetings.

There is no question but that the deliberations of this conference will be followed with close attention by an international audience, not least of all, in Australia. No one should doubt the significance of what is taking place in this hall. What is decided here, the political orientation and perspective embodied in the resolutions that are adopted, will come to play a critical role in the future direction of a movement that has before it the greatest political challenges in modern history.

One hundred sixty years ago, in 1843, just five years prior to the revolutions that swept Germany and Europe in 1848, Karl Marx wrote an extraordinary letter to Arnold Ruge outlining the fundamental theoretical and political tasks confronting the emerging communist movement. He

wrote:

"...there can still be no doubt about the task confronting us at present: the ruthless criticism of the existing order, ruthless in that it will shrink neither from its own discoveries, nor from conflict with the powers that be."

Marx continued: "This does not mean that we shall confront the world with new doctrinaire principles and proclaim: Here is the truth, kneel before it. We develop for the world new principles from the existing principles of the world. We shall not say: Abandon your struggles, they are mere folly; let us provide you with true campaign slogans. Instead, we shall simply show the world why it is struggling, and consciousness of this is a thing it must acquire whether it wishes or not.

"The reform of consciousness consists entirely in making the world aware of its own consciousness, in arousing it from its dream of itself, in explaining its own actions to it."

Marx concluded: "We are therefore in a position to sum up the credo of our journal in a single word: the self-clarification of the struggles and wishes of the age. This is a task for the world and for us. It can succeed only as the product of united efforts."

This is what our united efforts are being directed towards. As the resolution on the international unity of the working class that we adopted yesterday pointed out, we have the task of making conscious the fundamental strivings, the independent class interests of the working class. These are not for profit or for the defence of the nation-state system. They are for a social order that can guarantee peace and social equality to the peoples of the world. They are to create a genuine international human culture that is not dominated by national divisions, ethnic rivalries or communal tensions.

Marx stressed "making conscious." Perhaps a good place to start is this conference itself. On the surface, if we were to base ourselves on our initial impressions of this gathering, we would say that it comprises a group of people who have come together from different parts of the US, and, indeed, the world, some of whom are politically experienced, others less so, some entirely new, who share certain definite ideas and ideals.

This would be true, but it is only the very start of an analysis. This conference is a part, a very specific part—the conscious head—of a broad social and political phenomenon, an unprecedented global movement that has begun to erupt against a new period of imperialist war.

I said a "specific" part because this conference has brought together the very best, most principled and far-sighted elements of the emerging movement who are seeking out a revolutionary solution. Less than two weeks into the bloody enterprise of war in Iraq, which aims at nothing less than the reorganisation of the globe, the initial forces for a new international revolutionary mass movement are already beginning to

gather.

It is impossible to overemphasise the significance of the huge demonstrations that have swept the United States. As the Bush administration and the Pentagon embark on their aggressive war of conquest, and they, along with the corrupt and servile US media, beam their lies and distortions around the world, another social force is also emerging. The American working class is coming back onto the historical arena.

In the most profound sense, the political situation in America—and the evolution of the American working class—is the key to the international situation.

Throughout its history, the American ruling class has utilised every means at its disposal to politically suppress the working class and subordinate it to the official political framework. Viewed from the other side of the world, or the bottom of the world, I have to tell you that, for the past three decades, the American working class has been all but invisible. Huge developments in technology and communications have been utilised to present an image of America as one homogeneous entity, of the US government and the Pentagon, of Wall Street and the US media as all-powerful and invincible. While social tensions have been building up and deepening beneath the surface, they have nevertheless been unable to pierce the surface.

But now they have. All of a sudden the American people have erupted into view as a powerful, oppositional force. What does this signify to ordinary people in other countries? That it is possible to challenge the US government. As David North remarked in his opening address to this conference, while the American ruling class and its military are certainly not a pushover, they are not invincible. The world can be changed. There is a social force that has irreconcilably opposed interests and those interests can be independently pursued.

Above all, it is this explosive reemergence of the American working class that has given such powerful impetus to the growth of the global protest movement and to the masses in Iraq itself. A critical factor in the courageous and unexpected resistance—unexpected in official circles, at least—of the Iraqi people to the criminal invasion of their country has been the mobilization of unprecedented numbers of American people against their own government in defense of the right of the Iraqi people to live a decent life in peace.

In Australia, like elsewhere, the demonstrations in the middle of February were the largest in history. On Friday night, February 14, some 250,000 people marched through the streets of Melbourne, the country's second largest city. The demonstration was not organized by any specific political party, there were few posters, no announcements in the media.

In fact, the organizers, an amorphous collection of individuals, groups and organizations, had hoped that possibly 30,000 would participate. But instead the widespread opposition to the threat of war saw a public outburst of sentiment. That demonstration fed into the protests in New Zealand, which in turn fed into the demonstrations developing in Europe and the US.

The media did its best to downplay the size and extent of what was under way, particularly in Britain and the US. But reports on the Internet and by word of mouth inspired and encouraged others, helping to develop the growing global momentum. By Sunday in Sydney, some 500,000 people took to the streets—again, many times more than either the organizers or the police had anticipated.

I don't think it is too far-fetched to draw a parallel with the kind of global financial movements that have, in recent years, rocked the international stock markets. In the space of one day—even hours or minutes—the crisis in one country has spread, creating crisis and mayhem in the world's financial system. But this time, the gathering momentum was from below.

Why did so many people demonstrate? As in the US, the sentiments that

were at the heart of the Australian demonstrations had been building up for years. For 20 years social inequality has been deepening and a reversal of social conditions won in decades of struggle has been under way. There exists a broadly based and palpable hostility to all the major political parties. Election after election has been marked by enormous volatility as people vent their anger, casting their votes not *for* but *against*.

The Howard government, which has committed to this war, is reviled by the vast majority of people. But so, too, are the Labor Party and the unions, which are regarded as spineless and irrelevant.

There is a deep sense among ordinary people that they are being deceived, that they are being lied to. Promises are broken. They feel they have no voice, that no one articulates their sentiments and needs. They feel disenfranchised.

But now that a war is being carried out in their name, against ordinary people, like themselves, with whom they sympathize, they are refusing to accept it. They feel compelled to act. Above all, they are beginning to feel themselves to be part of global movement. Whenever a speaker mentioned there were demonstrations taking place at the same time elsewhere, or referred to the global character of the protests, the whole place would erupt in a roar of approval and enthusiasm.

In the past month, the character of the demonstrations has begun to change quite dramatically. In mid-February, before the invasion of Iraq, what dominated was a feeling of optimism, a sense of strength and international solidarity. Every layer of society was represented. These were large, heterogeneous gatherings. There were all sorts of illusions, even exuberance. There was even something of a festive atmosphere.

In the space of a month these sentiments have turned to shock and horror. The protests are becoming angry and outraged. The average age is becoming younger. Last week many young people, some as young as nine, rallied in the centre of Sydney. Many were Arab youth. This was an angry and frustrated demonstration. The police targeted the Arab youth, as they have for several years, particularly since 9/11, violently attacking them. Some 50 people were arrested.

The danger is that the protests simply become a vehicle for growing frustration. To the extent that they fail to provide an alternative political perspective, a genuine way forward, the mounting hostility and horror can be directed into something entirely counterproductive.

The question has been asked of me several times this weekend: why is Australia supporting this war?

The Howard government has pledged 2,000 troops, including elite SAS squads. According to media reports this morning, Australian SAS troops are as close as anyone to Baghdad, holding one of the main highways.

The decision to unconditionally support the US-led war was made completely undemocratically. Bush phoned Howard at 6 a.m. on Tuesday, March 18. A cabinet meeting of government ministers was convened by Howard at 8.30 am, and it rubberstamped the commitment already made by Howard in Washington last June.

Later that morning, parliament was brought together and simply informed of the decision to go to war. The Upper House, the Senate, where the government parties are in a minority, voted against, but this was a purely ceremonial affair, as far as the opposition parties—Labor and the Democrats—were concerned. In any event, it was totally irrelevant; the government just ignored the vote.

Two days later the US military was dropping bombs on Baghdad, with Australian support.

On the surface, the country's involvement appears to be inexplicable. Australia is a tenth-rate power. It has no obvious predatory interests in Iraq, in fact the reverse. It has enjoyed a lucrative trade relationship with Iraq, involving especially sheep and wheat exports.

Yesterday, Foreign Minister Alexander Downer, who is about to visit Washington, expressed concerns that these exports may go to US companies in the aftermath of the war. "We do have people nevertheless,

to use the word of the war, who are 'embedded' in the American Office of Reconstruction and Humanitarian affairs," he told the media.

He continued: "This is the body which will actually implement a lot of this reconstruction and the people we have embedded there should be of some assistance to ensure that Australian businesses have the opportunity to gain contracts, and particularly subcontracts."

In other words, the government is desperately afraid that the US war and subsequent occupation will undermine Australia's economic interests in the Middle East.

Why, then, is it participating? Explaining the reasons behind Howard's support for the US and Britain, I think, helps clarify the fundamental processes that are under way.

There are two aspects. Firstly, the Australian bourgeoisie recognizes that the old international order has irretrievably broken down and a new set of relations is being established.

What will be the new division? What will Australia's position be, vis-à-vis the major powers? The Australian ruling elite has always been extremely sensitive to the shifting balance of forces on the international arena. After all, it has always been obliged to pursue its own imperialist interests under the patronage of one or another of the major powers: in the first part of the century, Britain; during and after World War II, the United States.

Where should it now direct its loyalties? There are divisions within ruling circles over this. One section regards Australian interests as lying in an engagement, even a partnership, with Asia, where its largest trading partners are located.

The other section, led by Howard, adopts and embodies the traditions of "White Australia." This layer of the ruling elite is profoundly afraid of Asia. It regards Australia as a white Anglo-Saxon outpost in a hostile and alien Asian environment. It sees its future dependent on new neocolonial conquests in the Asia-Pacific region, and, more immediately, its financial interests dependent on dealing with the spiraling instability within the region and putting down insurgencies among the masses.

But such an agenda needs American patronage. That is why Howard supports the war on Iraq: to preserve the Australian-American military alliance—as a quid pro quo for future Australian military adventures.

The second aspect is the escalating social crisis within Australia. During the past three years the government, with the help of the media, has sought to keep the Australian population in a state of excitation, to inculcate a state of permanent fear, a sense of extreme vulnerability. Hordes of refugees from Asia and the Middle East are, we have been told, poised to invade the country and take over its resources, threatening the livelihood and security of ordinary citizens.

Howard seized upon 9/11, then the "war on terror," and now the war on Iraq in order to augment and develop this campaign—as an attempt to divert growing social tensions into the most reactionary directions, into the scapegoating of refugees and immigrants.

But the first 10 days of the war have proved to be something of a disaster. None of the predictions of cheering Iraqis have come to pass. While just a few weeks ago Bush had no closer friend than Howard, and Howard had no closer friend than Bush, when the president invited the prime minister to his Camp David summit with Blair last week, Howard declined. This was a rather revealing about-turn.

Howard now wants to put a certain degree of distance between himself and the Bush administration because he is fully aware of what is being prepared. Of course, the Australian government has no problem with the mass murder and carnage that the US military is about to unleash against the Iraqi population. But it is becoming increasingly difficult to defend such conduct at home to a population that is overwhelmingly opposed to and repulsed by the war.

Last night we received one of many letters from angry and concerned Australians. The letter read:

"Thank you for your article on the protests in Turkey. I just wanted to drop a line to say how good it is to see the human face of a country and not just the grasping conduct of its leadership.

"As an Australian who deplores this war, I hope that the world also sees that the views and actions of its government are not reflective of those of its citizens.

"God bless all those who fight against the tyranny of their own government. And thanks again for a wonderfully informative web site."

Contained in this letter are two important issues: a sense of global solidarity and concern with the experiences of the antiwar movement internationally, and hostility to government.

But the *World Socialist Web Site* is not just a wonderful source of information. It is the source of a new perspective. In the final analysis, the most critical feature of the global demonstrations in February was the fact that an international socialist perspective was advanced for them from the outset.

The International Committee of the Fourth International and the WSWS, unlike any other organization, published a statement that was distributed on every continent, in towns and villages, and in major cities across the globe. In that statement, which was translated into several languages, was one common world perspective. The same perspective was being advanced to the demonstrators in America and Sydney, on the Indian subcontinent, in Asia and Europe. Moreover, the WSWS organized and brought together reports on the protests from all over the world. This was the most extraordinary achievement of its five years of existence.

There is no other international organization, there is no other party for the international working class, advancing one common perspective and program.

Last night, in our informal discussions, what struck me was the seriousness and depth of concern and commitment to a critical and rigorous approach expressed by the delegates to this conference, most of whom have just begun their relationship with the ICFI. It gave me a sense of what the character of the new international revolutionary movement of the twenty-first century will be. We are, together, witnessing the first period of the growth of such a movement.

This conference poses tremendous responsibilities to us all. We have to go back to build and strengthen and develop what we have adopted here. This can be done only on the basis of the political perspective embodied in the resolutions we have advanced. The key question is the development of political consciousness: the clarification of the essential political, theoretical and historical issues confronting the international working class today.



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