

Greetings to the WSWS/SEP conference by Vladimir Volkov, of the Russian bureau of the WSWS International Editorial Board

"The Russian working class will once again summon up its great revolutionary traditions"

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Below we are publishing the greetings brought by Vladimir Volkov 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."

Volkov is a member of the International Editorial Board of the WSWS. He was among the international delegates who participated in the conference.

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.

We have gathered at this conference at a turning point in world history. The fundamental contradictions of world capitalism, which during the twentieth century led to two terrible world wars and which were only temporarily subdued by the unique conditions that existed after 1945, have once again broken loose, threatening all of mankind with death and destruction.

The task that stands before us is to develop an answer to this crisis—one which allows the international working class to assume its political independence and join together, as is stated in one of the conference resolutions, "on the basis of a common world perspective for peace, social equality and justice."

The elaboration of this perspective is possible only on the basis of a study of the lessons of history and, in particular, an understanding of the conditions surrounding the rise of the Soviet Union, the reasons

for its crisis and, finally, the collapse that has been occurring for the better part of the last 10 years.

As was already noted in the introductory report by David North, the Russian Revolution of 1917 was a response to the world crisis of capitalism. It emerged out of the collapse of the world capitalist order in 1914 and was, in essence, an attempt to overcome this collapse through the reorganization of the world economy on the basis of democratic and socialist foundations, under the control of the masses of working people.

At that time the US entered the arena of world history as an important center and arbiter of the world capitalist order. It strove to lead a reorganization of the entire world on the basis of the preservation of the former social foundations—private property—and in the interests of the ruling elites of the leading imperialist countries.

The two counterposed principles that emerged out of the opposing positions of the Soviet Union and United States—planned economy or the market—still occupy a central place in contemporary world history. The disappearance of the USSR from the world map by no means made this conflict less real. One hundred years ago the uncontrolled power of the market pushed mankind to an abyss of barbarism. But just as in the early part of the twentieth century the masses of workers intervened in the course of history in an effort to create a planned and democratic society, so today there exists an answer to this terrible threat.

The collapse of the USSR was accompanied by a hysterical propaganda campaign asserting that socialism was forever finished. According to these claims, the success of the capitalist reforms in the former Soviet Union was definitive proof that any attempts to go beyond the limits of capitalism were doomed in advance to failure and possessed no positive content.

In reality, these assessments were quickly buried by the course of events—in particular, the catastrophic social decay that accompanied the restoration of capitalism in Russia and the other republics of the former USSR.

One can say a great deal about social conditions in contemporary Russia. I would like to point out a few of the most characteristic features. It is important to understand that these conditions are not the result of specific national circumstances or peculiar qualities of the Russian character. Rather, they are the direct product of the influence

of processes unfolding in the leading capitalist countries in the world. World capitalism finds its clearest and most repellent reflection in the social conditions that exist in Russia today.

Social polarization: Without a doubt, Russia has one of the highest levels of inequality in the world. According to official statistics, the average monthly income is about \$80. Typical pensions are not in excess of \$60 a month. At the same time, the passions of the new Russian businessmen for luxuries and orgies of spending have created countless scandalous stories and anecdotes. A large part of the Russian economy is in the private hands of a very thin layer of people. According to one analysis, 85 percent of the value of all private Russian companies is controlled by eight groups of shareholders.

Criminality: An unprecedented explosion of criminal activity accompanied the restoration of capitalism. Today, it has merely taken on more legalistic forms. For example, excluding official statistics accounting for murders, kidnappings, and other crimes, 83,000 people—200 people a day—disappear every year in Russia.

Some experts maintain that criminality in Russia, associated with the redistribution of wealth, has not simply been a negative phenomenon. They claim that these gangster elements “saved” Russia “from revolution.” Insofar as these layers channeled a significant part of social discontent and took upon themselves, particularly at the start of the 1990s, a “series of functions traditionally associated with the state,” they played, it is claimed, a positive role.

The lifestyle of the new Russian elite: The predilections of the New Russians seem to have been copied from the most extreme of Hollywood’s anti-utopian films. Not long ago it became known that in Moscow there exists an exclusive club for the wealthy, which, for a fee of \$500, enables one to experience the life of a homeless person. For a few hours a member of Russia’s new elite can live the life of a beggar in one of Moscow’s public squares. For \$2,000, the wife of a famous politician or prestigious businessman can spend some time as a street prostitute.

These examples speak volumes about the colossal degradation that characterizes the new Russian ruling elite.

From the corporate scandals that occurred in the US not long ago, to the mad strivings for world supremacy, at the cost of the murder of hundreds and thousands of peaceful citizens, to the character traits of the Bush administration, it is clear that these features are universal among the upper echelons of world economy and politics. Those who occupy these positions do not possess the slightest understanding of the world in which they live, are not conscious of the consequences of their own personal conduct, and demonstrate an incapability to acknowledge any responsibility for their own actions before society.

The war against Iraq is a concentrated expression of this state of affairs. As is well known, after the start of the American-British military intervention in Iraq, Russian President Putin condemned the war as “a big political mistake.” Speaking with the voice of a “dove,” he expressed his thoughts about the dangers of violating the sacred rights of “national sovereignty.”

Only the most naive person could believe in the sincerity of these statements. Having condemned the start of this bloody adventure, Putin has not called into question the legitimacy of the goals of the war or the methods that are being used to enslave a practically defenseless and economically impoverished country. He has not cast doubt upon the false pretenses and arguments that are being used by the Bush administration and the servile American mass media to unleash this act of naked neocolonial aggression.

Any assumption that the government of Russia has the means to

withstand American imperialism is absurd. The only social force that is capable of struggling against world imperialism is the international working class, of which the Russian working class is an essential part.

Unlike in Europe, America and other parts of the world, in Russia there have not been any mass antiwar demonstrations thus far. This tragic fact is to a large degree an expression of the disorientation and the conditions of decline associated with the agonies of Stalinism. The Soviet working class paid a dear price for the isolation and ultimate betrayal of the world revolution that began in Russia in 1917. The failure of the revolution to extend to the leading countries of world capitalism resulted in the isolation of an economically backward country. The revolution became the victim of a brutal, nationalist reaction that took the form of the bureaucratic Stalinist degeneration.

The revolution of 1917 was the product of a prolonged development, which was bound up with the assimilation by the Russian proletariat of the international experiences of the working class movement, the elaboration of a revolutionary perspective, the growth of class consciousness, and the formation of an entire layer of socialist intelligentsia and socialist representatives of the working class.

Stalinism and its repressive apparatus, in the course of the Great Terror, physically destroyed this layer at the end of the 1930s. This tragedy had catastrophic consequences. Ultimately, Soviet society was not able to recover from the blow that was dealt to it in 1937.

The loss of an understanding of the international character of the origins of the Soviet Union by the Soviet working class and a wide layer of the Soviet intelligentsia, and the failure during the 1980s and 1990s to understand the meaning of the struggle for the political independence and international unity of the working class, are central reasons why the crisis of Stalinism in the USSR did not lead to the rebirth of the revolutionary traditions of Bolshevism and a struggle for international socialism, but rather to the demise of the USSR and its submission to the economic dictates of the transnational corporations.

The same factors are preventing the working class of Russia today from definitively saying “no” to the war against Iraq.

But this will come to an end. In the mass antiwar protests occurring around the world we see the emergence of a movement of the working class, which stands in objective opposition to the entire world capitalist order. The growth of this movement will inevitably exert influence on the mood in Russia. The Russian working class will inevitably summon up once again its great revolutionary traditions.

The development of class consciousness is at the heart of this international reorientation. It is here that we see the essential role of the *World Socialist Web Site*, as the center of world socialist culture and an instrument for the education and arming of the international working class with a clear political perspective.



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