Chris Marsden addresses London meeting: “A turning point for class relations in Europe”

Chris Marsden
26 June 2003

We are publishing below the speech given by Chris Marsden to a public meeting of the World Socialist Web Site *and the Socialist Equality Party held June 22 in London. Marsden is a member of the WSWS International Editorial Board and the national secretary of the SEP in Britain. The topic of the meeting was “Lessons of the Iraq war: the tasks of the European working class.”*

For a report of the meeting, see the accompanying article, “WSWS/SEP London meeting: ‘The working class needs its own international strategy’.”

This past week has seen extraordinary scenes taking place within Britain’s parliament.

Prime Minister Tony Blair has been called a liar by one former cabinet colleague and someone who is, at best, selective with the truth by another.

He stands accused of dragging the country into an illegal war of aggression against Iraq at the behest of the Republican administration in the United States on a false pretext that Saddam Hussein possessed weapons of mass destruction that were a threat to world peace.

Permit me to cite the accusations made against Blair to the Foreign Affairs Select Committee by former International Development Secretary Clare Short and former Foreign Secretary Robin Cook.

Short is by far the most scathing in her condemnation of Blair. She stated that he had made a secret agreement last summer with President George Bush to invade Iraq in February or March.

Blair told Bush that “we will be with you” and, having done so, “used a series of half-truths, exaggerations, reassurances that were not the case to get us into conflict by the spring.”

She said that by September 24 last year, “senior people in the system said to me that a date had been fixed [for war] some time ago.... I believe that the prime minister must have concluded that it was honourable and desirable to back the US in going for military action in Iraq and therefore it was honourable for him to persuade us through various ruses and ways to get us there—so for him I think it was an *honourable deception*.”

This phrase will no doubt haunt Blair in days to come.

Short also spoke of a shocking collapse in proper government procedure; with a small entourage around Blair making decisions that should properly be taken by the foreign office or cabinet. Even Foreign Secretary Jack Straw merely signed on to policy decisions made elsewhere.

And the makeup of this entourage is revealing, in that they are all personal appointees of Blair who are unelected and unaccountable but who are literally deciding on questions of life and death.

Short named Alistair Campbell, Jonathan Powell, Lady Morgan and Sir David Manning as the key figures.

Alistair Campbell is Blair’s director of communications, and his name has become a byword for spin-doctoring and pushing through right-wing policy initiatives that have been hatched by Blair’s clique.

Jonathan Powell is a former diplomat, whose brother Charles used to work as foreign policy adviser to Margaret Thatcher in the run-up to the last Gulf War.

Sally Morgan is a party apparatchik who specialises in liaising between Blair and those party bodies he is presently dictating policy to. She has no independent political record to speak of.

Sir David Manning is a career diplomat who is so close to Washington insiders, and to Bush’s national security adviser Condoleezza Rice, in particular, that he is described as having “wooed her.” His reward for services rendered is to have been nominated as the new British ambassador to the US.

Blair’s coterie named by Short is only one manifestation of how he runs government like a personal fiefdom. An article in the June 8 *Observer* by Anthony Sampson notes how the civil service is up in arms because Blair is bypassing them.He has surpassed Thatcher in establishing his own diplomatic staff at Number 10 and promoting his own favourites—dubbed the Cosa Nostra by Whitehall top brass.

These include Lord Levy as his special envoy in the Middle East; the ambassador in Paris, Sir John Holmes, who was previously Blair’s principal private secretary; and John Sawers, his former private secretary, who is now Blair’s special envoy to Iraq.

For his part, Cook denied that Blair had deliberately misled the country, but asserted that intelligence material was chosen selectively to fit a predetermined policy. “That’s not deceit, not invention, but it was not presenting the whole picture,” he said.

Cook said his claim that Iraq did not possess “a credible device capable of being delivered against a strategic target” had reflected “almost word for word” a briefing he received from MI6. He had been taken aback that the government’s September 2002 intelligence dossier was “very thin.” “The plain fact is that a lot of the intelligence in the dossier turned out to be wrong,” he said.

The second “dodgy dossier,” which included material from a PhD thesis lifted from the Internet, had been a “glorious and spectacular own goal.”

In his own evidence to the inquiry, Ibrahim al-Marashi, the former Iraqi PhD student whose evidence was heavily plagiarised to form the basis of the “dodgy dossier,” said that Downing Street had perverted its meaning to imply that Iraq was backing terrorist groups outside Iraq.

He said his thesis had stated Iraq was supporting foreign opposition groups, but this had been changed to terrorist groups. “By changing the words, they are distorting the meaning, and it looks like they [Iraq] are supporting groups like Al Qaeda,” he said.

Andrew Gilligan, the defence correspondent for Radio 4’s “Today” programme, claimed that a senior intelligence officer responsible for the September file blamed Alistair Campbell for transforming the Joint

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Intelligence Committee document. MPs pointed out that his allegations implied that Foreign Secretary Jack Straw was lying to Parliament. But Gilligan insisted that his source was a mainstream intelligence figure.

For the prime minister, his foreign secretary and his chief spin doctor to all be accused of lying and dissembling by former colleagues is a major scandal that one would expect under any other circumstances to lead to Blair's downfall and possibly that of the entire government.

Certainly, the BBC's political correspondent Nick Assinder surmises, "It is unthinkable that a prime minister could remain in office after being judged by a Commons committee to have deliberately misled the Commons and the country over war—honourably or otherwise."

This outcome cannot be ruled out, but there are reasons why Blair feels he can ride out this scandal that point to the essential political challenge faced by the working class.

Firstly, Blair has contempt for his internal party opponents. The last time they registered a protest vote by backing a Liberal Democrat motion calling for an independent inquiry on whether the government had exaggerated the threat posed by Iraq, only 11 MPs had stood out.

Short is something of a wild card because she probably calculates that her political career is behind her. And, like Cook, she represents a minority position in ruling circles that holds Blair has gone too far in his orientation to Washington, threatening important alliances with Europe.

But Cook is probably ready for a deal if the right post is offered. And other MPs, whether they are ministers or not, do not want to see Blair fall—because they would go with him and because they all agree with the thrust of his policy.

Secondly, all of Blair's opponents are implicated in the criminal venture that was the Iraq war and cannot protest too much.

And thirdly, his reasons for participating in the war—a belief that the interests of British imperialism are best served by an alliance with the US—is if anything even more fervently held by his Tory opponents than himself. And to discredit Blair would rebound on Bush and others, which is the last thing Iain Duncan Smith (Tory party leader) and company would want. Bush has already had to come out in defence of Blair because he too faces demands for an accounting of falsified intelligence on Iraq.

Outside of Parliament, there is no desire amongst ruling circles to see Blair fall. Even the right-wing press such as the *Telegraph* and the *Times* speak only of him being damaged and cannot envisage the Tories coming to office.

In general, their intent is to push him into a more determined implementation of policies that serve the interest of big business as they see them—further privatisations, cuts, attacks on workers' living standards—and if possible to push him more determinedly away from Europe and more firmly towards Washington.

As for the nominally left circles within the establishment, the *Guardian*, which poses as a critic of Blair on rare occasions, summed up its attitude on the very day it reported the inquiry testimony of Cook and Short. Responding to Blair's speech to the Fabian Society in which he called for further inroads by private capital into the National Health Service (NHS), education and elsewhere, it wrote:

"Mr. Blair's Fabian lecture was nevertheless an important restatement of the government's central tasks, particularly in health, education and crime.... The alternative to agreed sympathetic reform by Labour is imposed unsympathetic reform by the Conservatives."

The same abasement before Blair holds true for those who pose as his more radical opponents. Two events this week epitomise the prostration of the union bureaucracy and its so-called awkward squad of lefts in particular.

The Fire Brigades Union sold out the firefighters by accepting the deal proposed by the government months ago. Its leader Andy Gilchrist responded to critics by stating, "If anyone thinks we can overcome the state with a few periodic strikes then they are living on a different planet. If anyone thinks we can launch indefinite strike action and keep the members together they are coming from a different universe."

This is a supremely cynical statement. It was after all the central contention of the FBU leadership that industrial action alone would force the government to back down. They opposed any political struggle against Blair—citing in particular the impermissibility of such a fight during a time of war. And all of us will remember how crucial this stand was. Blair had faced the largest protest movement in British and world history, and feared that it would become a broader political movement against his government. After making a show of supporting the first antiwar demonstration, Trades Union Congress general secretary Brendan Barber dutifully proclaimed that the trade union movement would not support a movement that set out to depose Blair. This signalled a rout of Labour MPs and other nominal opponents of the war and their stampede back behind the government.

And now Gilchrist has the nerve to say that the perspective he championed meant that the firefighters' strike was a hopeless cause from the very start!

The fact is that no section of the union bureaucracy would contemplate a struggle against Blair because it would of necessity mean a struggle against the entire labour apparatus of which they are an integral faction.

This was confirmed by last week's UNISON (public services union) conference, where the executive successfully argued against a proposal to withhold cash to Labour MPs who oppose union policy and support privatisation of the NHS and other areas of the public sector. UNISON gives Labour £1.5 million a year in affiliation fees, and it also gave it £615,000 at the last general election.

General Secretary Dave Prentice urged delegates at the union's annual conference in Brighton instead to reclaim Labour. "It's our party, we will work with our friends to reclaim it and to reform it because that's what our members expect us to do."

He promised that he would be meeting with members of the union movement's new so-called awkward squad such as Amicus's Derek Simpson and the TGWU's Tony Woodley to see how they could "reclaim" Labour. It has to be said that it would be far easier to make a socialist revolution in Britain than to "reclaim" the Labour Party for socialism and the working class.

Nevertheless, delegates overwhelmingly rejected a call to pay only the basic affiliation fee to the party. But despite their tactical disagreements with aspects of Blair's policy, the union bureaucracy—from the top to the bottom—will not countenance the type of political struggle that would be required to bring him down because it would pose the necessity for the working class to break with Labour and build a genuine socialist party. More generally, it would involve the working class in a direct challenge to capitalism, posing as it would the question: Who rules and in whose interests?

This is no exaggeration. For the Iraq war proved beyond all question the impotence of a perspective based purely on protest and divorced from a political strategy based on the independent mobilisation of the working class.

Nothing better illustrates this than the response of the supposedly revolutionary left groupings to the present crisis. Just months ago they found themselves at the head of the biggest mass political mobilisation in British and world history as the antiwar movement took to the streets of London and other world cities.

Yet now, as the tissue of lies used to justify a war that was opposed by these masses collapses, barely a word can be hard from them. There are no protests planned until September, and the most that the Committee to Stop War feels it can ask for is an independent inquiry that will demand an apology from Blair and Bush!

Nobody would oppose an independent inquiry, but the fact is that many of the lies are already exposed and they still don't launch a campaign to

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demand Blair's removal. And they don't because they have no perspective or belief that this is possible.

In reality, the radical groups did not so much lead the antiwar movement as tail it and work to subordinate it to what they see as the "real leaders"—the Labour lefts, the trade union bureaucrats, the Muslim parliament and even the Liberal Democrats. They sat beside the big boys and were excited by their sudden elevation to the front ranks. And now that the big boys have made their peace, the radicals have sunk into despondency once again.

They were excited, not by the revolutionary potential revealed in the antiwar movement, but by the possibility that they could revive the old politics of protest of the late 1960s and 1970s and push the Labour Party and the unions to the left. That is how they seek to defend their own social position from the threat posed by big business.

Now that this perspective has so obviously failed, the left groups have little to say. But what they do say is damning.

Though it is by no means the largest of them, I was struck by the comments of the strangely named Alliance for Workers Liberty (an alliance with itself, apparently), the old *Socialist Organiser* group. Commenting on a motion in the General and Municipal Boilermakers union calling for Blair to resign if he is found to have lied, our sages explain this is unlikely because so few within parliament would support such a demand.

They say, "Once appointed Prime Minister by the Queen, Tony Blair had a secure 'payroll vote' of over 100 MPs, bought by giving them ministerial jobs. (One hundred and thirteen, at the current count). To overthrow him, an *improbably large proportion* of the remaining MPs must not only rebel but join the Tories in a vote of no confidence.

"To force a leadership contest, 20 percent of all Labour MPs—or 82 out of 410, or 28 percent of the 297 non-ministers—must first agree to support an alternative candidate."

This is parliamentary cretinism writ large! The argument goes that if the *improbably large* number of less than a third of Labour MPs don't have a shred of political principle, then what can one do?

They have no answer because what must be done is to break with Labour and the union bureaucracy and set out on a new road—something they are organically hostile to. The radicals are as wedded to Labour and the unions as any union bureaucrat. Indeed, many of them occupy posts in the lower echelons of the union bureaucracy and lend their support to the so-called awkward squad of left fakers.

There is no lack of desire amongst working people to make some sort of political reckoning with Blair, whose supposed popularity was always largely a media creation and who has certainly become—however he is portrayed by the media—a man without honour in his own country.

But presently the working class sees no political way forward and so remains unable to combat the brutal offensive being mounted by the government against their living standards and democratic rights. To overcome this requires a careful consideration of the political basis on which such a movement must be based. And there are three essential aspects I would like to identify.

Firstly, a new political movement of the working class must base itself on the broad opposition to the renewal of imperialist militarism that was evidenced in the mass movement against the Iraq war.

Secondly, it must advance a comprehensive defence of the social position of the working class against the efforts to initiate the untrammelled rule of big business at home—which is being pursued with a ruthlessness equal in its own way to that demonstrated in the efforts of Washington and London to crush Iraq.

And thirdly, it must seek to mobilise the working class throughout Europe independently of the European bourgeoisie, including those governments such as France and Germany that made a show of representing an alternative to the warmongering of Bush and Blair.

This is not the time to elaborate at length on the ongoing failure of the Blair government to resolve the intractable question of Britain's relationship to Europe, but certain things must be said.

The political character of the Blair government was exposed most nakedly by its insistence that it would block a proposed charter of workers' rights in any new European constitution because it defends such things as the right to strike, which the Tories, the media and the government all decried as a threat to social policy in Britain.

There is no accident in the fact that the most right-wing positions on social questions in Europe come from the government that was the most fulsome supporter of the predatory war against Iraq waged by the Bush administration.

Britain, though led by a historically social democratic party, stands together with Aznar's former fascists in the Popular Party as the foremost advocates of political capitulation to US imperialism in foreign policy, combined with the adoption of a Republican-style economic and social agenda that would have shamed any Conservative administration prior to the war. And they have been emboldened by their military triumph in the Gulf to wage another war—this time against the working class of Europe.

The events in the Middle East constitute a turning point for relations between the major powers and for class relations in Europe itself. The European governments have been forced to awaken to the reality of a resurgent US imperialism, intent on dominating the entire world by force of arms and putting them all firmly in their place. And generally, their reaction has been characterised by the shock and awe Washington invoked as the essential purpose of its saturation bombing of Baghdad.

Of course Europe is seeking to articulate some form of response. Militarily, it has created its 60,000-strong Rapid Reaction Force, and four member states, led by France, announced plans in April to set up a European military headquarters independent of NATO. The new draft constitution, meanwhile, sets its aim of establishing a common foreign policy and deepening other aspects of political and economic integration.

But their real difficulties were emphasised when France, Russia and Germany all backed the US-British proposals for postwar Iraq. This humiliating climb-down showed how much the US has been strengthened against its rivals and is able to dictate the agenda for Europe.

Iraq's fate has brought into sharp relief the depth of the political changes that have occurred since the coming to power of the Bush administration. As a result of the aggressive shift to unilateralism by the US, the long-held plans for European political and economic integration have become deeply problematic.

Under Bush, as opposed to previous regimes including Clinton, the US is no longer in favour of the project. Instead it acts as a European power in its own right, fighting to secure control of the continent by actively opposing moves towards unity.

How is this being done?

Firstly, of special importance for us is the special role played by Britain and the Blair government as America's proxy within Europe. Britain does not openly oppose integration, but insists that its character be defined on a pro-US and pro-market agenda. All the talk is of course about national sovereignty, but this is a euphemism for something more specific.

Britain supports the creation of a European army, but insists that it is conceived of within the NATO framework. As Foreign Secretary Jack Straw told the Centre for European Reform on May 19, "Of course we should not aim to match the extraordinary military power of the United States."

Britain supports economic integration, but not a common social policy. Instead, Chancellor Gordon Brown lectures Europe on the need for economic flexibility and the superiority of the US economy as a model. He told the Confederation of British Industry on May 20, "The more Europe and America work closely together the better it is for Britain, Europe and the world."

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The Blair government agrees to the creation of a foreign policy supremo and an appointed president, but seeks to impose a foreign policy in opposition to that articulated by France. In a speech to the Königswinter conference on Anglo-German relations in Berlin May 16, MP Peter Mandelson again argued for cooperating with the US rather than for a Gaullist "balance of power" view. He warned that the danger is of "an unsatisfactory dualism in which countries have to choose whether they are in the American or the non-American camp."

He said, "The real issue, behind the largely Anglo-French debate on multipolar versus multilateral visions for the EU's future role, is what we instinctively expect to do with that increased power: check or support, America?

"And that in turn depends on whether one believes the US is fundamentally a beneficent or dangerous hyper-power.

"The UK view is clear. We want to see a more united and cohesive EU cooperating with a more internationalist United States...we also see no prospect for the foreseeable future of Europe actually producing enough raw power to stop the US from doing something it is really committed to."

At the same conference, Europe Minister Dennis MacShane insisted, "We should never be anti-American. Nor should we seek to create a multipolar world."

The message is clear: Europe should accept without question the reality of US world domination and seek to eke out its own space within the confines set for it by Washington.

In addition to Britain, the US also counts on the active collaboration of the European right—both in and out of power. Spain, Portugal and Italy are all advocates of a policy similar to Blair's—in part because of their desire to see the US economic model dominate Europe and in part because they see this as the only way to secure a share of the spoils of colonial-style exploitation from a hopefully grateful Washington.

Then there are the East European states, which are candidates for EU membership but which function as political fiefdoms of the US. The most important, because of its size, is Poland, which has been given the reward of leading the occupation force in northern Iraq despite having only about 2,000 soldiers it can contribute.

This is the full meaning of Donald Rumsfeld's invocation of New Europe versus Old Europe. In so-called New Europe, he believes that America has a power base from which to threaten its European rivals—and also to press forward its domination of the former territories of the USSR, including their vital oil, gas and mineral reserves.

All of these bastions of US influence are being used to undermine what has been the engine of European integration thus far, the Franco-German axis.

The UN Security Council vote on Iraq was preceded by Secretary of State Colin Powell's world tour, which included Germany. He left the Schröder government in no doubt that it was living on borrowed time—while France's time was already up.

Powell spent as much time with the leader of the CDU, Angela Merkel, as he did with Schröder, while President Bush chose to meet at the White House with Roland Koch, Christian Democratic state governor of Hesse. This deliberate snub prompted a press debate between those urging even greater efforts to appease Washington and those calling for some opposition to be mounted.

The *Suddeutsche Zeitung* warned against a "Gaullist solution" of joining forces with other like-minded states to curb American strength, while the business daily *Handelsblatt* rejected dreams of "turning back the clock" to the pre-Iraq war status quo, arguing that European and American interests are now too far apart. "Those who, out of a desire for harmony, demand that German foreign politics simply conform to US targets are wrong," it said.

Die Tageszeitung was more candid still, warning, "After Washington successfully tried to divide Europe into 'old' and 'new' parts in the pre-Iraq war period, it is now getting ready to torpedo French-German relations." Defining recent attacks on Paris as attacks on Germany and Europe as a whole, it urged, "The German government would do well to reject them in the strongest terms."

There are no prizes for guessing whose advice Schröder took, and Chirac and Putin joined him in abasing themselves before the Bush administration. None of which will appease the White House, which sees every retreat by the European bourgeoisie as an occasion for a further offensive.

Bush's national security adviser, Condoleezza Rice, was recently quoted by Germany's *Focus* magazine saying the Bush administration was trying to patch up strained relations with Germany but would continue to ostracise Schröder. A German visitor was apparently told, "We're now doing everything we can to improve relations with Germany at all levels. But we're going to work around the chancellor. It's better to leave him out."

This is an extraordinary statement. Bush's top adviser states casually that Washington has the same aim of regime change in Germany as it had for Iraq. This did not elicit so much as a mild protest from Berlin.

This brief overview confirms our insistence that the European states—either collectively or individually—cannot be seen as a counterweight to US militarism.

They are first of all second-ranking imperial powers that do not have the ability to challenge their more powerful rival and whose own agenda is to secure a share of the spoils from the exploitation of the world's peoples and resources.

Secondly, they see the right-wing social and economic policies of the Republicans as something that should be emulated and adopted. The last thing any of them would want to see is a mobilisation of broad masses in opposition to the warmongering of Bush that might stimulate opposition to their own military ambitions and their own divisive social policies.

It is the European working class that must spearhead opposition to war and imperialist reaction on all fronts, in a determined political struggle against Washington, but also against London, Paris and Berlin.

In opposition to the nightmare of a new American century based on the type of brutality evinced in Iraq—and against the failed perspective of a unified capitalist Europe— the working class must advance the perspective of a United Socialist States of Europe.

This must be conceived of as a movement in defence of the highest political ideals—of social progress, egalitarianism, democracy and culture.

It would enable the European working class to provide a political lead to the millions of workers throughout the world who face not only a renewal of militarism and colonial-style conquest, but also the depredations imposed on them by the major corporations as they plunder the world's resources.

It would also enable Europe's workers to offer a real hand of friendship to American workers based on a common stand against the Bush administration and all that it stands for. In this way the great socialist traditions that first emerged in Europe will once again be able to stimulate a resurgence of the class struggle in the United States, out of which must emerge a radically altered balance of power between the rich and the poor on a world scale.

The working class in Britain and throughout the world is at a turning point in world history. Iraq is only an initial manifestation of a new era of predatory wars of conquest by the US hegemon, a development that has revealed the full rottenness of the imperialist order in Europe. But as the class struggle intensifies, tremendous opportunities will open up for the reforging of the British, European and international workers' movement on a new axis of socialist internationalism, opening up the possibility of a very different path of historical development for humanity.

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