

Berlin meeting on Iraq war: “A turning point in international politics”

Peter Schwarz
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We are publishing here the speech given by Peter Schwarz to a public meeting of the World Socialist Web Site and the Partei für Soziale Gleichheit (Socialist Equality Party of Germany) held June 1 in Berlin. Schwarz is a member of the WSWs International Editorial Board. The topic of the meeting was “Lessons of the Iraq War: the Tasks of the European Working Class.”

The WSWs posted a summary report of the meeting on June 6.

The Iraq war constitutes a turning point in international politics, the meaning and far-reaching implications of which have been little understood up to now. It is as if one were to remove the pillars supporting an intricately constructed building. At first the walls and other elements keep the building together, and just a few cracks and dislocations are visible. But every attempt to seal the cracks or correct the dislocations proves fruitless. Eventually the entire building collapses. No part remains intact.

In a similar manner, the basis of the old political mechanisms and institutions of the post-war period has been stripped away by the new direction of American foreign policy. This applies not only to international relations, but to national conditions as well. There is barely a social or political structure in any country that does not rest in one form or another on these international mechanisms and institutions.

In this sense, the Iraq war has truly revolutionary implications. Revolutions are not merely the products of intensified social tensions, though such developments play an important role. Revolutions develop when the existing social order is unable to resolve great historical questions. We have entered such a period.

The international rules and institutions that have been swept aside by the Bush administration in its war against Iraq were the foundations of world politics throughout the entire post-war period. Generally accepted principles of international law such as the sovereignty of nations and the ban on wars of aggression, and institutions such as the United Nations, were all set up and guaranteed by the US itself.

In recent months the Bush administration has made unmistakably clear that it no longer feels itself bound by these rules and institutions. The new US foreign policy is based on military power, intimidation, lies and political intrigue. This applies not only to so-called rogue states and less developed countries, but also to so-called allies and highly developed countries.

Bush’s statement, “You are either with us or against us,” sums up the essence of his entire foreign policy.

The way in which he has travelled through Europe to give his seal of approval to the “willing” in Warsaw, while snubbing the “unwilling” in Berlin, makes clear that the US is now using its influence to split and weaken the old continent, not to unite and stabilize it as in the past. Bush’s rather childish gestures are supplemented by an economic policy that puts enormous pressure on the euro and the European export industry by deliberately decreasing the value of the dollar.

Bush’s foreign policy represents not just a return pre-1945—prior to the

United Nations, the system of international military alliances, the transatlantic partnership—but rather to pre-1918—prior to the League of Nations and the “14 Points” of US President Woodrow Wilson. It is nothing other than a return to the most naked forms of imperialism. In the final analysis, it opens the way for a new world war, because under imperialism, as Lenin explained, only strength, including military strength, can decide the relation of forces between the great powers.

What is the aim of the new American foreign policy? It is the subjugation of the entire planet to the needs of American big business.

In the first half of the twentieth century, Germany, as the most developed and dynamic capitalist economy on the old continent, attempted twice to overcome its own contradictions through the violent re-division of Europe. Today, America, as the most developed and dynamic capitalist economy on the planet, is attempting the violent re-division of the entire world.

In so doing, America is not content with militarily conquering countries and stealing their raw materials, as it has done in the case of Iraq. It is seeking to remodel the entire world economy on the basis of the most naked and ruthless forms of the free market. From the standpoint of the American ruling class, any social welfare measures, taxation of income and profits, state interference in the economy or regulations to protect the environment are unacceptable limitations on their “freedom” to exploit the world.

That’s why the new course of American foreign policy has not only altered all international relations, but also has broad repercussions for the domestic state of relations in every country. It intensifies the contradictions between the classes and increases political instability. It strips away the basis for any form of social consensus and class compromise.

If one looks at the biographies of the leading representatives of the Bush government, its foreign policy comes as no surprise. They are ideologists of conservative think tanks, regarded as ultra-right eccentrics until a few years ago—people like Paul Wolfowitz, Richard Perle and other leading representatives of the Pentagon; religious fanatics such as Attorney General John Ashcroft; multimillionaires from the oil industry and criminal enterprises such as Enron. This cabal is crowned by a man who was an alcoholic until the age of 40 and lacks any serious education.

The real issue is why this extreme right-wing clique was able to conquer the leading positions within the American government and impose its will, not only on the American people, but on the entire world.

In the introduction to his biography of Hitler, the British historian Ian Kershaw writes that he is not so interested in the character of the German dictator, but more in “the question of how Hitler became possible.” He writes: “If a satisfactory answer to this question cannot be found on the basis of the given characteristics of Hitler, then one must look instead principally to German society—the social and political driving forces which made Hitler possible.”

It is necessary to examine the phenomenon of Bush in a similar manner.

What are the social and political driving forces that made his administration possible?

Apart from a small layer of superrich and the media, which is also run by huge corporate concerns, the Bush government lacks any significant social base. It stole the presidency, with Bush receiving fewer popular votes than his Democratic rival, Al Gore. He became president only because of a decision by the right-wing dominated US Supreme Court.

Nevertheless, he has been able to proceed unhindered with his agenda, not only in terms of foreign policy, but also at home, where he has pushed through huge tax cuts for the rich combined with an offensive against the socially most disadvantaged layers.

This can be accounted for only by the complete collapse of any sort of resistance from the official political opposition. The Democratic Party awarded Bush a blank cheque for his war against Iraq. It has refrained from any opposition to his foreign policy or his attacks on social and democratic rights.

The same role has been played by the American press. Even newspapers such as the *New York Times*, which were once proud of their liberal traditions, have regurgitated the lies and propaganda of the government.

Such behaviour must have profound objective roots. American society has become so divided that any sort of political or social compromise has been rendered impossible.

In Germany at the beginning of the 1930s all bourgeois parties—the Nationalists, the Liberals, the Catholic Centre and, in half-hearted fashion, even the Social Democrats (SDP)—favoured an authoritarian regime because the economic crisis had made any sort of social compromise impossible. The only genuine alternative was a reorganisation of society on the basis of socialism.

For similar reasons today virtually the entire political establishment in America has lined up behind Bush. Even the most modest opposition could unleash social forces that would take up demands far exceeding anything the Democratic Party is prepared to tolerate.

With its support for Bush, the American establishment is reacting to a deep-going crisis of American society and the entire world capitalist system, which has been dominated by America for an entire century. The internal tensions of the US economy and society demand that the country acquire unrestricted access to all of the world's resources. The American bourgeoisie can no longer tolerate sovereign countries in any part of the world that could make judgements detrimental to American capitalism. Global economy is no longer compatible with the self-determination of nations. America cannot tolerate any rivals. This is the basis for growing transatlantic tensions.

The course undertaken by the American government leads inevitably to a catastrophe. The criminal clique at the head of a nation representing 5 percent of the world's population will not be able indefinitely to impose its will on the remaining 95 percent.

The brutal suppression of Iraq is a foretaste of what is to come. There are few other examples of a war fought on such an unequal basis. Primitively armed Iraqi recruits and civilians were slaughtered by American high-tech weaponry.

In the US itself fundamental democratic rights have been toppled one after the other in the name of the "war on terrorism". Appalling levels of social inequality will be exacerbated when the government unloads the cost of the war onto the people.

Last Saturday the German newspaper *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* and the French *Libération* published a joint appeal by the German philosopher Jürgen Habermas and his French colleague Jacques Derrida, who attempted to give an answer to this question. They appealed to the European public to oppose the unilateral plans of the US. "Europe must use its weight at an international level and within the United Nations in order to counterbalance the hegemonic unilateralism of the US," reads the appeal.

The statement is accompanied and supported by several articles from well-known intellectuals published in a number of prominent European papers. The Italian writer Umberto Eco published a piece in *La Repubblica*, author Adolf Muschg in the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* and the American philosopher Richard Rorty in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*.

One has to concede to these intellectuals that they identify the sore point. While official politics and most of the media are concerned with forgetting the war and getting on with the agenda as if nothing had happened, these intellectuals call things by their name.

Their response, however, consists of a pathetic mixture of pious wishes and unrealistic hopes. They appeal to the European governments to oppose America's drive for hegemony and to bring about a "multi-lateral and lawfully governed international order" as well as "an effective world domestic policy in the framework of a reformed United Nations". They declare, "If there was ever a time when public opinion was called upon to force politicians to be more idealistic than they would like, that time is now."

Habermas and Derrida have made their stand very late. If there is one lesson to be drawn from the events of recent weeks it is the complete inability of European governments as a whole, and the SPD-Green coalition in Germany in particular, to put up any sort of opposition to the Bush government. With their support for the UN resolution sanctioning the American and British occupation of Iraq and legitimising the war post facto, the official opposition on the part of Berlin and Paris has ignominiously collapsed.

The initial rejection of the war by the government of Chancellor Gerhard Schröder and Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer in Berlin was not *only* an electoral manoeuvre. They were genuinely worried that the reckless path followed by the US could seriously threaten stability in the Middle East and undermine their own interests. For its part, France saw the position adopted by Germany as an opportunity to establish itself at the head of an international block against the US and thereby increase its influence on the world stage.

The violent reaction from Washington came as a shock to both countries. They were not prepared for a situation where the US government would use its influence in Europe in such a brutal fashion to split the continent.

At the same time, encouraged by the antiwar tones from the German and French governments, millions took to the streets to protest against the war. The biggest ever international antiwar demonstrations took place on February 15 and 16.

Habermas and Derrida describe these demonstrations as an outstanding occurrence that will go down "in the history books as the birth signal of a new public in Europe". They base their hopes of building a European counterweight to the US on these demonstrations, but they close their eyes to the fact that there is a yawning gulf between this movement and the European governments.

There were certainly illusions among the demonstrators in the policies of the French and German governments. Nevertheless, it was clear that the mass protests had more profound social roots and evinced a potential to develop into a European-wide movement against the anti-social policies of the European governments.

Habermas and Derrida are blind to the significance of this issue. There is not a word in their appeal about the deep social divisions in Europe (and in the US). Instead they seek to glorify the European Union in a grotesque manner.

Europe, they claim, "developed exemplary solutions in the second half of the twentieth century for two problems:" The EU was an exemplary form of "governance beyond the national state" and the European welfare system was a model that "must not fall behind as a consequence of future policies aimed at taming capitalism in an increasingly border-free framework."

In reality, the EU—an amalgamation of European governments, dominated by the most powerful European business interests—is one of the main motors for the dismantling of the “European welfare system”. The European Union—an attempt to unite Europe from above—is by no means an expression of the unity of the European people. Even Habermas and Derrida should know that the EU’s Maastricht criteria call for strict budget austerity at the expense of previous social reforms. Increasingly, the EU and its bureaucracy in Brussels are identified by the European masses as agents for the wiping out of jobs and dismantling of the welfare state.

The governments of France and Germany have drawn very different conclusions from the mass demonstrations to those made by Habermas and Derrida, although German Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer acknowledges himself to be a pupil of Habermas. They see the intervention of millions, including very many young people, as a challenge to their own social and political agendas. Their reaction is to cuddle up more closely to the Bush government.

By voting in favour of the latest UN resolution, they have delivered a stab in the back to the movement against war. One cannot overemphasise the extent and significance of this shameless capitulation. It has served to strengthen not only the Bush government, but right-wing forces across Europe as well. Bush can now boast at home and abroad that the United Nations has given its seal of approval to his assault on Iraq.

The *Süddeutsche Zeitung* commented that the Bush government had “received post facto legitimacy for its policy of intervention—something it had tried in vain to achieve before going to war.... [It had obtained] the seal of approval of the United Nations, and, with it, the appearance, at least, of lawfulness and legitimacy. Those in power in Washington will wave this resolution around and say to their critics: Look here, the Security Council has confirmed us as the rulers of Iraq. It has thereby implicitly recognised our intervention and our entire preventive strike doctrine. The old international laws are dead. Long live the law of Imperium Americanum.”

The retreat carried out by Berlin and Paris strengthens all those forces that are already planning the next war—most likely against Iran or Syria. At the same time there are significant indications that, with their capitulation, Schröder und Fischer have dug their own political graves. The offensive being conducted by right-wing layers inside the SPD, seeking to dump the SPD-Green Party coalition in favour of a coalition between the SPD and the conservative opposition, has been encouraged by the German government’s reversal on the Iraq issue.

According to opinion polls, the SPD has plummeted to its lowest level of popularity ever. Schröder is able to keep his own party under control only by posing a series of ultimatums and threatening to resign on a daily basis. Despite a campaign of intimidation, nearly half of the SPD membership continue to reject his policy of budget cuts—his “Agenda 2010”. Hundreds are leaving the party every day. The right wing tries to utilise this crisis in order to install a government that has no democratic legitimacy, but will seek to carry out attacks far exceeding those contained in “Agenda 2010”.

If there is one central lesson to be drawn from these events, it is that opposition to American imperialism can be developed only in conflict with the existing governments and institutions. It is necessary to construct a new international workers party that combines the struggle against war with the defence of the past social gains of the working class.

Working people must develop their own independent response to the danger posed by American imperialism. They must reject any compromise or reconciliation with American imperialism and not allow themselves to be fooled by the conciliatory noises being made by the European bourgeoisie towards Washington.

The entire European press is obsessed with the question of how best to improve relations with Washington. Further conflict with US imperialism

is, however, inevitable. At the present time it poses the biggest danger worldwide to peace and the biggest danger to social equality and justice. The concessions made by the European bourgeoisie will only further whet its appetites. The issue is not how to prevent a confrontation with American imperialism, but how to prepare for such a conflict.

A pacifist response—“against war and militarism”—is not sufficient. It remains purely passive. The working class requires an active policy: For the dissolution of NATO! For a defensive alliance of the European peoples with those of the Middle East and Africa!

What is necessary is not an antiwar movement, but a movement against American imperialism.

Such a movement must base its policy on the clash of interests between the European and American working class on the one side and American and European imperialism on the other. It must be directed against all attempts by the European bourgeoisie to impose American conditions on the continent—beginning with Schröder’s “Agenda 2010”.

The conflict with its own people has driven the European bourgeoisie to side with American imperialism. In 1940, following France’s defeat in the war against Nazi Germany, the majority of the French ruling class decided in favour of Vichy France, i.e., to serve as junior partner to the victorious great power. After the Iraq war, there is a growing danger of a sort of Vichy Europe, which functions as junior partner to American imperialism.

The internal conditions of such a Europe would be no better than those prevailing in Vichy France. It would be dominated by the most powerful business and financial interests and characterised by the dismantling of all forms of social protection, poverty wages, militarism and the suppression of democratic rights. Already the most right-wing forces in Europe—in particular, Eastern Europe—which rest on the narrowest of social bases are lining up behind the American flag.

Our answer to a European Union of the big banks and industrial concerns is the United Socialist States of Europe—the unification of Europe from below on the basis of a revolutionary socialist policy for the working class.

We are for the unity of the European and international working class. We are for a Europe with open borders, with equal political and social rights for all workers, irrespective of skin colour or nationality. Our aim is to unite the working class in the struggle against imperialism.

Such a policy has nothing in common with anti-Americanism. Quite the opposite, it would prove an enormous pole of attraction for the American working class. It is not directed against America, it is directed against the ruling elite in America. It would rapidly make clear that American imperialism is neither all-powerful nor unconquerable, and demonstrate that its apparent strength is a direct result of the cowardice of European governments and the official political opposition within America itself.



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