

WSWS/SEP international conference

## “Europe confronts a profound dilemma”

18 July 2003

*Below we are publishing the greetings brought by Stefan Steinberg, a leading member of the Partei für Soziale Gleichheit (PSG) in Germany, to the World Socialist Web Site and Socialist Equality Party international conference. The conference, entitled “Political Lessons of the War on Iraq: the way forward for the international working class”, was held on July 5-6 in Sydney, Australia.*

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*On July 9, the WSWS published a summary account of the conference [See: World Socialist Web Site holds conference on the political lessons of the war on Iraq] and, on July 10-11, the opening report by Nick Beams, member of the WSWS International Editorial Board and national secretary of the Socialist Equality Party in Australia [See The political economy of American militarism Part 1, Part 2]*

*The conference resolutions—“End the US-led occupation of Iraq!”, “Australian troops out of Iraq and the Solomon Islands!”, “For the international unity of the working class”, “For the Political Independence of the Working Class”, “War, the social crisis and the assault on democratic rights” and “Support and develop the World Socialist Web Site”—were published on July 14-16.*

*In the coming days we will publish greetings from other international delegates to the conference.*

Dear comrades and friends, I am very pleased and privileged to bring the fraternal greetings of the German Socialist Equality Party to this conference of the *World Socialist Web Site*. In my remarks today I would like to concentrate on political developments in Europe—particularly in connection with the Iraq war.

As we have already said on a number of occasions, the Iraq war was a turning point in world politics and a closer look at the current situation in Europe reveals that all of the fundamental political relations and institutions which were taken for granted in the post-World War Two period are in a state of utter turmoil and flux.

The European bourgeoisie confronts a profound dilemma. The post-war framework for the relative peaceful development of Europe has been shattered by the eruption of American imperialist aggression. To give just one example—at the heart of Europe—Germany experienced its longest period of relative prosperity and peaceful development in modern history in the period following the Second World War. A crucial factor in the prosperous development of Germany and other European countries after the disaster of Hitler Fascism was the supportive role played by American imperialism, which regarded Western Europe as a bulwark against the Soviet Union.

Under the terms of the Marshall Plan billions were invested in the redevelopment of the West German economy and close links to the US played no small role in the country’s “economic wonder”. As well as improved living standards for a large proportion of the population, workers also enjoyed considerable social accomplishments—a broad

embracing welfare state was developed. At the same time, with general American approval, a core of European states began the moves towards a centralised European market.

All of this took place under the largely benevolent eye of the US, which was able to advance its own economic interests and at the same time secure an Iron Curtain alliance of western nations against the Soviet Union. On occasion differences emerged between European countries and the US, but in general the conflicts were patched up with no real loss of face for either side. In Germany, a consensus predominated that the *Westbindung*—an orientation to the west, in particular America—was crucial for German prosperity and democracy.

The first major change in relations came with the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet bloc at the start of the 1990s. A loosening of ties between Europe and the US began and the process of European unification accelerated. A new wave of economic integration in Europe took place. In 1992 the Maastricht Treaty foresaw completion of European economic unity with monetary union planned for 1999. The year 1994 began with membership requests from Hungary and Poland, starting the process of EU expansion to the east.

Eventually, at the beginning of this year the common currency became a reality. For the first time since the end of the Second World War, a Europe has emerged with an enormous domestic market and a currency, which is able to challenge the supremacy of the US dollar.

The election of the Bush government, its reaction to the events of September 11th, and its war against Iraq have now completely transformed relations between the two former Atlantic partners. The Iraq war not only demonstrated the ruthlessness with which the Bush administration was prepared to pursue its interests in the Middle East, it also revealed the readiness of Washington to sideline NATO and actively use its influence to divide its traditional European allies. The so-called “European house” is being constructed under entirely new conditions.

The Bush government cold-shouldered France and Germany when both countries expressed objections to the US-British led war. Then Washington sought to use its European allies, such as Spain and Poland, to deepen divisions between what Donald Rumsfeld referred to as “old” and “new” Europe. The Bush policy led to the deepest rifts between European nations to be experienced in modern European development. Great Britain, Italy and Spain and Poland supported the war while Germany, France and Belgium were opposed to a war against Iraq on the terms laid down by the Bush administration.

It would be a big mistake, however, to believe that the French and German governments had any principled opposition to the Iraq war. Both are imperialist powers with their own longstanding interests across the globe. In the run up to the war the French government was in the process offering support and had actually decided to send an aircraft carrier to the Gulf to assist the Americans. Then in autumn of last year, German chancellor Schroeder announced, in the middle of a flagging election campaign, that the German government was not convinced of the need for a war against Iraq. The French government then altered its stance, sided

with the Germans and also declared its opposition to an Iraq war.

Schroeder may have said no at this stage but German government practice looked very different from the theory. Not only did the government of social democrats and Greens do nothing to practically oppose the American invasion, it was instrumental in the conduct of the war. Germany was crucial as a base of operations for the assault on Iraq. American troops and airforce used bases in Germany and German airspace for their assaults and troop movements against Iraq. And German troops were posted to defend American bases in Germany from German antiwar demonstrators.

At the same time, in the course of the war, a new factor of enormous political significance emerged. On the 14 and 15 of February the largest-ever demonstrations against war took place throughout the world. The biggest delegations on the demonstrations came from European countries and in particular those countries whose respective governments had backed the war. In fact, if German and French politicians had been serious in their opposition to the Bush war then they would have made an appeal to these demonstrators, but one of the remarkable factors about these protests was the virtual absence of any mainstream political speakers.

The European bourgeoisie now confronted pressure on two fronts: aggressive and arrogant politics from Washington, aimed at dividing the European powers, and a broad movement against imperialist war inside Europe itself.

The first act by the European bourgeoisie after the American-British invasion was to immediately do its best to patch up its differences with the US. In a disgraceful act of subservience both countries voted at the United Nations in favour of the US-British occupation of Iraq. In so doing they supported post facto the war itself.

Nevertheless, the Iraq war has made very clear to the leaders of a number of key European states—in particular Germany and France—that it is urgent for Europe to push ahead with its own foreign and military policy. The existing relation of forces—developed trade relations between the US and Europe, and, in particular, the overwhelming superiority of the US military—means that the European bourgeoisie has to adopt a step-by-step approach in its moves to growing independence.

European governments also drew the conclusion from the mass antiwar demonstrations that they must avoid at all costs awakening popular sentiments which could lead to the remobilisation of millions in Europe—this time directed against the rightwing, anti-social perspective of the European ruling class.

Despite the mass protests, Bush was able to proceed with his war because of the cowardliness and compliance of the European powers. But while the demonstrations of February faded in size due to a lack of an alternative perspective, it would be very wrong to conclude that the broad masses of Europe have nothing more to say.

Over the past weeks and months large demonstrations involving tens, even hundreds of thousands, have taken to the streets in France, Italy, Germany, Austria and other European countries to protest policies carried out by various governments. These governments are composed of a variety of political forces—social democratic, liberal, and conservative—but they share a very similar political agenda—the radical dismantling of the social welfare and health systems established since the Second World War.

While sections of the European bourgeoisie had their differences with the Bush administration over the issue of the Iraq war, it has to be said that on the issue of stripping away the rights of the working class in order to maximise profits, the US remains the role model. The imposition of “American conditions” throughout the continent is the main domestic priority for the European ruling class.

This upsurge of growing popular discontent throughout Europe was the backdrop to the discussions, which took place among EU leaders in Thessalonika recently. The subject of debate was establishing a new

constitution for Europe.

Despite the bluster by EU heads of state about “transparency” and “democracy”, the 200 pages of documents involved in this latest draft for a constitution will do nothing to tackle the enormous social problems and the erosion of democratic rights which has taken place recently in Europe. The constitution itself was drawn up by the so-called Convention, a panel of bureaucrats elected by nobody. One critic of the constitution, Luxemburg Prime Minister Claude Juncker, commented: “I have been involved in European politics for 20 years. I have never experienced such a lack of transparency,... so at odds with the democratic aspirations involved in formulating the document.... I have never seen a darker darkroom than the Convention”.

Under conditions where the European elite is pursuing social and political policies aimed at encouraging social inequality and misery it did not waste a word on these issues in Porto Carras. Instead the bureaucrats and political leaders spent their time in Greece discussing how they could build bigger walls around and inside Europe to keep out refugees and foreign workers.

They were in basic agreement on new plans to tighten up even further refugee and migrant movement into the European Union and voted in favour of a plan similar to the repressive and reactionary proposal worked out recently by Tony Blair and the Labour government. Against a background of EU discussion and debates aimed at identifying immigrants as the source of Europe’s problems, it was not particularly surprising that in the same week Italian government minister, Umberto Bossi, went a step further and openly proposed that the Italian government keep out immigrants by shelling the ships that transport them.

The other main topic of discussion at Thessalonika was the development of an independent European security policy. Here again the US served as a role model. Arising from its deliberations in Greece the European Union is now also demanding its right to wage pre-emptive wars EU—such as the Bush war against Iraq.

EU leaders also discussed proposals to elect a foreign minister and develop its own foreign policy, but, as is the case with many aspects of the new constitution, the security proposals represent a hopeless compromise. According to the draft text, any decisions on important issues of foreign policy must be agreed unanimously. Bearing in mind the split which went right through the centre of Europe—on support or opposition to the Bush-led war against Iraq—there is no chance of Europe being able to develop a coherent alternative to the militarism of the Bush administration.

Instead, working people in Europe will be called upon to foot the bill for increased military spending and the sort of adventurous colonial-type intervention currently being carried out by France and Germany in the African state of Congo.

There is no doubt that European attempts to challenge US military and political dominance is a key factor in the recent decision by France and Germany to send troops to the Congo. Named “Operation Artemis”, the operation represents the first-ever military intervention by EU powers operating independently of NATO.

In an interview with the German journal *Die Zeit*, the EU’s chief diplomat Javier Solana declared, “For the first time, we can show how far we have advanced militarily today. And we demonstrate that ‘Where there is a will, there is also a way.’ Naturally, NATO could also do this. However, neither the Americans nor NATO had any interest. So we will do it, without any recourse to NATO.”

Maybe Bush was not interested in the Congo but his administration is certainly interested in Africa. Washington is now discussing sending troops to Liberia and Bush himself is visiting Africa next week. At the end of the nineteenth century Africa was one of the key continents where the European imperialist powers fought out their differences. Now over a century later similar conflicts are emerging—this time made additionally explosive by the aggressive expansionism of US imperialism.

The European intervention in the Congo—supported incidentally by all the main political parties in Germany, including the social democrats and Greens—must be denounced as a thoroughly reckless and predatory military adventure. It is an intervention, which will undoubtedly develop its own dynamic and incorporates dangers and consequences, which are completely unpredictable. It is already certain that before long before French and German soldiers will become entangled in heavy fighting. In their rush to demonstrate the military independence of Europe, however, the decision-makers in Paris, Berlin and Brussels are blind to all the risks.

Finally, in briefly reviewing European development since the end of the first stage of the Iraq war it is necessary to say a word or two about the current president of the EU. On July 1, Italian president and fraudster Silvio Berlusconi took over the rotating seat of the European parliament. He has immediately created a media uproar with his comments this week comparing a German deputy to a Nazi, but it has to be emphasised that prior to taking up the post of president other European leaders did not utter a word of criticism.

They resembled the three wise monkeys—seeing nothing, hearing nothing and saying nothing. There can be no more devastating indictment of the “democratic aspirations” of modern Europe than the official political collusion with the presidency of Berlusconi. Now Berlusconi has upset the apple cart with his latest provocation, but rest assured European leaders, including Schroeder, will do their utmost to paper over the incident and ensure business as usual. Predictably Schroeder has now said he accepts the apology of the Italian president. Berlusconi denies that he ever made an apology and the Berlusconi owned newspapers in Italy are presenting the whole affair as a victory for their strongman president against the Euro-bureaucrats.

Let us recall that Berlusconi has been the subject of no less than 13 separate court cases in Italy for embezzlement, bribery and corruption. In order to stem the flood of cases against him Berlusconi recently pushed a law through the Italian parliament awarding an amnesty from prosecution for all leading Italian politicians. His next move is to extend the law to all parliamentary deputies - allowing him and his cronies to carry on with their racketeering even when voted out of leading positions. Even Bush could learn a trick or two from Berlusconi, who has passed a law stipulating that fiddling the books is no longer a crime in Italy.

In fact, nothing could sum up more graphically the dilemma of the European bourgeoisie than the Berlusconi presidency. Berlusconi was one of the main backers of Bush in the Gulf war and his provocative comments against a German deputy only serve to emphasise the tensions and divisions which emerged recently inside Europe. For their part European leaders are desperate to overlook his misdemeanours in the interests of unity.

There is, however, a more profound reason for the readiness of Europe to do business with Berlusconi. In an interesting article the Italian philosopher and European parliamentary deputy Gianni Vattimo recently warned against the Berlusconi presidency. Berlusconi, Vattimo wrote, was a virus who threatened to infect the European body politic. Vattimo was concerned that European democracy did not possess the antibodies to be able to repel the Berlusconi threat.

He then went onto explain that Berlusconi was one of the main allies of the US administration in Europe and was intent on imposing American conditions in Italy and the continent as a whole—the destruction of the welfare state, the privatisation of education and pensions, etc. The problem is, as I have already pointed out, this is not just Berlusconi’s programme—it is also the policy of Schroeder in Germany, of Chirac and Raffarin in France, and indeed of the bourgeoisie throughout Europe.

These then are the priorities of the European bourgeoisie after the Iraq war: the right to be able to carry out their own colonial military interventions; the destruction of the welfare state and social rights; and an intensified and racist campaign against foreign workers.

Working people in Europe have to draw the political lessons from the experiences of this year. In combating US aggression not the slightest confidence can be placed in the United Nations or the European bourgeoisie. The development towards a united Europe and the overcoming of national backwardness has a profoundly objective basis but recent events have only served to confirm that the European bourgeoisie is utterly incapable of progressively uniting the continent.

Nearly a century ago Leon Trotsky addressed these questions in his pamphlet *What is a peace programme?* In its efforts to develop a united policy, Trotsky wrote in the middle of the First World War, the European bourgeoisie was only capable of “partial compromises and half measures”. This prognosis is confirmed today. Not only is the European ruling class condemned to a politics of “partial compromises and half measures”, its moves towards adventurous, colonial-type interventions in Africa threaten Europe and the world with a new military conflagration. The progressive reunification of Europe on the basis of equality, democracy and socialism, and the prevention of new imperialist war, remains the task of the European working class.

A perspective for such a socialist Europe has nothing to do with anti-Americanism. Quite the opposite! It would constitute a powerful counterweight to US imperialism. In fact, such a perspective would represent a powerful pole of attraction for the US working class itself and assist American workers in their own urgent project of “regime-change” in Washington.



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