

WSWS/SEP international conference

Discussion on war and internationalism

25 July 2003

The World Socialist Web Site and Socialist Equality Party held an international conference entitled “Political Lessons of the War on Iraq: the way forward for the international working class” on July 5-6 in Sydney, Australia.

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].

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.

Below we present an edited version of the introductions to the first three resolutions.

Peter Symonds, a member of the WSWS International Editorial Board, moved the first resolution, “End the US-led occupation of Iraq”.

The US claims that its military is bringing peace, prosperity and democracy to Iraq are absurd. Washington has installed Paul Bremer III as administrator in Baghdad with absolute powers akin to the viceroys who ruled over the British raj in India. He sits in Hussein’s heavily fortified Republican Palace issuing a stream of regulations, orders and edicts that no one in Iraq has the power to challenge—much like his dictatorial predecessor.

Bremer has issued an order dictating which laws will and won’t apply, a regulation mandating registration of the media, a notice making it a crime to speak or write against the occupation authority. He has set import and export regulations. He has put off the writing of a constitution and delayed national elections. He unilaterally suspended local municipal elections being staged by the US military’s civilian affairs experts when it became clear that anti-US candidates were likely to win.

The gulf between the military occupation and ordinary Iraqis is immense. Even the few Iraqis who work with Bremer say, as one newspaper recently explained, that the US officials are “living in an air-conditioned fantasy world”. A Kurdish politician declared: “I told Bremer that Baghdad was a paralysed city. He and his staff don’t really know what it is like, because if they go out at all, it is in air-conditioned cars... They are ill-informed and ill-advised.”

Electricity and clean water—or the lack of them—are major sources of anger. The *Washington Post* reported on Thursday that the city got eight hours of electricity, the previous day even less and for a few days last week none at all. As a result there is no air-conditioning, no refrigerators, no street lighting and, as one report put it, “lakes of raw sewage” because the treatment plants are not working. A number of substations and other facilities have been invaded by angry crowds who have insisted, at gunpoint, that electricity be turned on to their neighbourhood. A

shopkeeper made the point to the media: “They brought thousands of tanks to kills us. Why can’t they bring in generators or people to fix the power plants? If they wanted to, they could.”

The US authorities blame sabotage. But the real saboteur has been Washington. Two US-led wars and the decade of economic sanctions in the 1990s have left Iraq’s basic infrastructure in a state of near collapse. Vital spare parts including for power stations, water, sewage and irrigation pumps, construction and so on—that is the components for modern civilisation—were branded as “dual use” and banned. As a result, the electricity grid has been patched, and repatched to keep it going—and then this year bombed again. It is no mystery as to why there is no power in Baghdad.

In late May, Bremer boasted that water quality in the city of Basra was “better than it has been in years.” But aid agencies warned recently that water samples taken from the city’s treatment plants showed “alarmingly low levels of residual chlorine and a high level of bacterial contamination”. WHO and UNICEF officials are warning about the danger of epidemics of waterborne diseases. WHO has recorded 73 cases of cholera since late April—68 of them in Basra.

These are just indications of the deep social crisis into which Iraq has been plunged. Hospitals, schools, government departments, agriculture, factories, the judiciary and courts—the whole fabric of modern society has been torn apart. A representative for the UN’s World Food Program recently described it as an unprecedented crisis. Prior to the war, 60 percent of the population was dependent on food aid. Now, with very few jobs or businesses functioning, the figure is 100 percent. He said that the emergency food operation underway was the largest in the program’s 40-year history.

The preoccupation of the US occupation is not with this social catastrophe but with organising the economic plunder of the country—above all the oil. A recent article in the *Wall Street Journal* pointed to concerns being raised in US corporate circles that the oil may not flow quickly enough to pay for Iraqi reconstruction. A group called the Coalition for Employment Through Exports has proposed the novel idea that funds be advanced through US export agencies based on future Iraqi oil exports—in other words, that the US occupation mortgage Iraqi oil. Not surprisingly the key movers in this grouping are corporations like Halliburton and Bechtel, which have been handed lucrative reconstruction contracts in Iraq by the Bush administration. Even the *Wall Street Journal* felt compelled to warn that this open looting operation “could be politically explosive among the Iraqi public, sensitive to the perception that Americans are pillaging their national bounty.”

All of this underscores the ridiculous character of the claims by the Pentagon and the Bush administration that the growing number of attacks on US troops are simply being carried out by Hussein loyalists. Anger is clearly growing among all segments of society—including those that suffered the most under Hussein. Attacks on allied troops have occurred in the Shiite south of the country. A recent article cited statements from leaders of the so-called Marsh Arabs—the group that fought a bitter and

protracted guerrilla war against the Iraqi army for over a decade—warning that they will fight the US occupation unless an interim Iraqi government is put in place.

Despite all of Washington's denials, Iraq is rapidly becoming a quagmire for the troops who were ordered into the country on the basis of lies and demagoguery. It is a war of repression against an entire people in which mass arrests, torture and murderous reprisals will become the norm, as in Vietnam. Yet such is the recklessness of the right-wing cabal in Washington that already new military adventures and disasters are being prepared—threats are already being made against North Korea, Iran and Syria."

The second resolution, "Australian troops out of Iraq and the Solomon Islands" was moved by WSWS editorial board member, Mike Head.

Meeting as we do in Sydney, this conference has a basic political responsibility to unequivocally condemn the Australian government's ongoing participation in the invasion and occupation of Iraq and to unconditionally oppose the planned neo-colonial intervention by both the Australian and New Zealand governments against the people of the Solomon Islands.

Within three months of the taking of Baghdad, the Howard and Clark governments are joining hands to apply the same methods of imperialist thuggery to the South Pacific. This highlights the fact that the turn to unrestrained militarism is not the product of this or that right-wing politician, but of a deeper economic, social and political crisis.

The Liberal-National Party government in Australia is from the conservative side of parliamentary politics, while Clark heads a Labour Party-led coalition. But they are united in seeking to ride on the Bush administration's coat tails in order to pursue their own colonial aspirations and divert social unrest at home.

The rapidity of this quest for unchallenged hegemony over the Western Pacific further exposes the cynical calculations behind Canberra's eager involvement in the assault on Iraq. No government—not even Blair's in Britain—more enthusiastically retailed Washington's lies about "weapons of mass destruction" and Iraqi links to terrorism. Howard's support was a down payment for using similar methods in the Asia-Pacific region, operating under licence from the US.

A crude media campaign has begun to justify intervention, not just in the Solomons but throughout the region. Today's Sydney *Sun-Herald* carries a two-page map of the islands surrounding Australia, from the Philippines to Fiji, under the headline: "A paradise for terror gangs".

Imagine sitting in Honiara, the Solomon Islands capital, and reading the opening paragraph: "Crime gangs. Self-styled freedom fighters. Even tribes of headhunters. And now, as if our Pacific neighbours didn't pose enough of a danger, there is the threat of world terrorism exploiting their vulnerabilities."

What evidence is presented? All there is, buried deep in the article is the following: "Last year there were reports that the Australian Federal Police and their Solomon Islands colleagues had tracked two groups of suspicious Pakistani nationals travelling through the capital, Honiara—one in a chartered plane."

Australian ruling circles are stupidly boasting that by joining the Iraq war, Howard has become the strongman of the Pacific. This is what the *Bulletin* news magazine had to say about Australia's alleged new stature in Fiji:

"Australia is now indisputably the No.1 foreign power in Fiji ...island leaders like [Fijian Prime Minister Laisenia] Qarase are ... more receptive, aware of the new *realpolitik* that sees Australian power significantly enhanced by its role in Iraq and closer relationship with the United States. In a region of 'big-man' politics, Howard also has fresh stature; having been dubbed 'man of steel' by the biggest man of all [US President Bush]."

These are truly grotesque delusions of grandeur. The naked drive for colonial-style domination will provoke opposition at home and throughout the Asia-Pacific region. There was no debate in parliament on this operation—because Labor, the Democrats and Greens have enthusiastically backed it—but public opposition will develop.

There are bitter memories throughout the Asia-Pacific region of the dirty role of Australian imperialism, which first rose on the back of British colonialism and then, after World War II, served as a junior partner to US imperialism. From Vietnam, which was carpet-bombed relentlessly, to the tiny island of Nauru, which was mined ruthlessly for phosphate, Australia has left a trail of destruction.

Both in the long and short term, Australian capitalism bears major responsibility for the impoverished conditions of the Solomon Islands and other Pacific countries. It benefited from Britain's colonial plunder of the region for almost a century. Since formal independence was granted to the former British and Australian colonies during the 1970s and 1980s, Australia and New Zealand have dominated the region economically, exploiting the natural resources.

It was the pressure of the 1997 Asian financial crisis, triggered by the international markets, and the subsequent economic restructuring demands backed by Canberra, that set off the communal conflict in the Solomons in 1999. A full four years later, Canberra and Wellington have seized upon the catastrophe to intervene. This is after starving the Solomon Islands of economic and welfare aid for the past three years—in order to produce a breakdown.

The dispatch of 2,000 military and police personnel to the Solomons has no more to do with uplifting the living standards and protecting the basic rights of its people than the Australian-led intervention in East Timor, which was hailed, not only by the Labor Party, the Australian Democrats and the Greens, but by all the radical protest groups as well.

Almost exactly three years on, the Timorese people remain among the poorest in the world, while Australian-based companies have retained their grip over the vast wealth of the Timor Sea gas and oil fields.

The Howard government's claim to be initiating a new era of "cooperative intervention" in the Pacific is a sham. The crisis-wracked governments of the Pacific Islands Forum may have formally backed Australian-led intervention in the Solomons, but they were left with little choice. If they refused, they would have been cut off foreign aid, just as the Solomon Islands has been over the past three years. It has not taken long for the façade to crack, with a Vanuatu government spokesman already denouncing Australia's "colonial attitude".

The truth is that Australian ruling circles have never given up the vision of an Australian empire, from Papua New Guinea to Fiji. It was one of the primary reasons for the federation of Britain's Australian colonies in 1901. These dreams have been dusted off in the wake of the Iraq war. As the *Australian Financial Review* editorial of July 2 put it: "It is time to review longer-term proposals shelved or discarded earlier, when the region felt its future was secure: a federation for the smaller Pacific states; dollarisation and liberalisation of migration."

No wonder the French government has offered to send some of its 2,000 Pacific-based troops to join the Solomons intervention. Having refused to let go of its own South Pacific colonies in New Caledonia and Tahiti, it recognises the Australian push as a threat from a rival colonial power.

Of course, the Howard government quickly rejected the French offer. The reason? With French involvement, the operation would be too transparently "colonial". France's colonial record was, according to Australian Foreign Minister Alexander Downer, a "slightly sensitive issue". Murdoch's *Australian* agrees. Its July 5 editorial warned that a deployment of French troops "would look to many Pacific people suspiciously like an exercise in colonial vanity".

But the Australian-led intervention will be no less provocative. This resolution indicts the Howard government for its embrace of militarism

and colonialism, which will have catastrophic consequences for the Australian people, as well as their neighbours. War, repression and economic looting will not protect the population from the threat of terrorism; it will only generate hostility and bloodshed.

Australian soldiers will soon find themselves confronting a hostile population, as they did in Vietnam. Australian people will find themselves reviled throughout the Asia-Pacific region and more exposed to the danger of terrorism, not less. Already, the Department of Foreign Affairs lists more than 100 countries around the world as “not safe” for Australians to visit.

K. Ratnayake, a member of the WSWs International Editorial Board, brought greetings to the conference from the Sri Lankan SEP and moved the resolution: “For the international unity of the working class”.

The International Committee has stressed that a new political perspective for the working class cannot be developed without drawing the lessons of the twentieth century. What is the main strategic experience of the working class in the past century? Without forging its international unity on the basis of the struggle for socialism, it cannot successfully confront the vicious attacks and impending catastrophe being prepared by imperialism.

The Stalinist bureaucracy in the Soviet Union, based on the national reformist program of “socialism in one country”, opposed the program of international socialism, paving the way for the tragic defeats of the working class in Germany, Spain and elsewhere in the 1930s. Stalinism extended to the imperialist powers a free hand to divide and pit the working people of one country against those in another during World War II. The betrayal of the Russian Revolution by this bureaucracy ultimately culminated in the collapse of the Soviet Union itself—a tragic but powerful confirmation of the unviability of national reformism and its role as a deadly trap for the working class.

Mankind has now entered a new period of the globalisation of capitalist production. As WSWs chairman David North pointed out in his opening report to the WSWs and SEP conference held in Ann Arbor on March 29: “For all the tragedies, the twentieth century was not lived in vain. In the course of the century, the objective conditions matured to a degree that makes the harmonious unification of mankind is possible.

“Even within the framework of capitalism, the emergence of transnational corporations signifies the triumph of global economic integration over nationalism. The nation state is no longer in any meaningful sense the basic unit of the economic life. The entire process of production proceeds on the basis of highly integrated systems of international production. The scale and speed of the financial transactions which fuel this process cannot be controlled by any system of national regulation.”

These profound changes have led to two opposing tendencies. On the one hand, a ferocious struggle for markets, natural resources and cheap labour between the major powers that threatens a catastrophe for humanity. On the other, the objective strengthening of the united strivings of the world working class, as revealed in the mass global demonstrations of February. Our task is to harness these strivings and arm them with the perspective of international socialism.

In this context, it is critical to review the bitter experience of the masses in the Indian sub-continent, particularly in India and Sri Lanka. Fifty-five years of rule under the national bourgeoisie has created a cauldron of ethnic and communal strife, poverty and illiteracy. Its nationalist and communal politics have led the masses into a disastrous blind alley.

In India, tens of millions rose up against British imperialism in the independence struggle that erupted after World War II, setting aside religious and ethnic differences. In response, the British colonial rulers conspired with the leaders of the Indian National Congress and the Muslim League to divide the insurgent masses on a communal basis. India was partitioned and two separate countries established in 1947—one as

Hindu, the other Muslim, in order to maintain the domination of imperialism and the national bourgeoisie. Some 10 million people—both Hindu and Muslim—were killed in 1947 in the resulting carnage.

The ruling elites in India and Pakistan continue to use religious differences to divide and weaken the working class and derail political opposition within their own countries. The Hindu chauvinist Bharatiya Janatha Party, which currently rules India, brought the subcontinent to the brink of war in the middle of last year. Its reckless adventurism could have resulted in a nuclear conflagration between India and Pakistan, bringing unimaginable consequences in the region and worldwide.

After independence, the Stalinists and the various radical organisations praised the nationalist program of the Indian National Congress as a progressive and viable perspective for the working class and oppressed masses. But it was this same party that opened the door for international financial capital in 1991, as the Indian economy plunged into crisis under the impact of globalisation. The result is that officially at least 30 percent of the people live below the poverty line while deaths due to hunger are increasing. More than 140 million people are unemployed and the rate of illiteracy is 30 percent.

The Sri Lankan ruling class has a similar record. In 1948, they were handed power by the British and immediately set about implementing racial discrimination against the Tamil population, disenfranchising the Tamil plantation workers. This assault was aimed at breaking the unity of the Sinhala and Tamil speaking working class that had been fought for by the Trotskyist movement. The Lanka Sama Samaja Party’s betrayal of Trotskyism in 1964 became the catalyst for the strengthening of communalist politics, in the form of the Sinhala-chauvinist JVP and the Tamil separatist LTTE. When the LTTE launched its struggle for a separate state in 1983, the Sri Lankan ruling class responded with a brutal war against the Tamil people. At least 64,000 people were killed in this war.

Now the Colombo regime and the LTTE are engaged in discussions to end the war through the devolution of power along Sinhala and Tamil ethnic lines. In response, the Muslim communal parties are demanding their own separate administrative district. These so-called solutions will only create the conditions for increased communal violence and further state repression.

In the advanced countries as well as in the colonial and semi colonial countries all attempts to divide the working class on national, ethnic, religious, racial or sexual grounds must be opposed. Such divisions only assist in weakening the working class. They work to undermine and thwart the progressive tendencies towards international unification that have the potential of advancing the culture of all humanity to a new and higher level.



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