WSWS/SEP international conference

Discussion on political program, social conditions and democratic rights, and the WSWS

29 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 **"** appeared on July 14-16 and greetings from international delegates have been published during the past week.

On July 25 the WSWS published an edited version of the introductions *to the first three resolutions. Below we present the edited introductions to the remaining three resolutions. This concludes our coverage of the conference.*

WSWS editorial board member and SEP assistant national secretary, Linda Tenenbaum, moved the resolution: "For the political independence of the working class"

The conception of the political independence of the working class embodies, in the most fundamental sense, the most critical lessons drawn from the experiences of the international working class throughout the past 100 years.

What precisely does it mean? That the working class must end its subordination to the capitalist class and to all political programs that, in one form or another, defend the profit system. That the working class, as an international class, must end its subordination to the nation state, in which the profit system is rooted, and eschew all forms of nationalist politics. It must break out of the political stranglehold of all those agencies of the bourgeoisie—in the form of the Labor party, the trade unions, the Greens, the radical protest outfits—who work to block it from pursuing its own independent class interests and its own independent program: that is, the program of socialist internationalism: for international unity, genuine social equality, justice and humanity, and an end to imperialist war.

In the course of the Iraq war, the Labor party, the unions and the so-called "opposition" parties—the Greens and Democrats—proved themselves to be utterly worthless. They told the anti-war movement to give support to the United Nations, or to France and Germany.

Labor's difference with the Howard government was purely tactical: that the invasion of Iraq should have been conducted under the auspices of the United Nations. The Greens and Democrats were concerned that participation in the war would not serve the "national interest," which, they argued, could be better served by deploying troops in the South Pacific. It did not take long for Howard to follow their advice.

The issue for all of them was: how best to serve "Australia's" interests—that is, the interests of Australian capital, of their "own" national state. And this was replicated throughout the world. This was the perspective, to the extent that there was one, which dominated the global anti-war demonstrations. It proved completely incapable of putting a halt to the war.

What lessons need to be drawn from this experience?

Just prior to this conference we received an interesting letter from a member of the Socialist Alliance—a coalition of the various middle class protest organisations that has emerged in the past couple of years. I'd like to read a few paragraphs.

"I have been reading the WSWS for a few years. I think it contains some of the best-written socialist analysis of current and historical events available anywhere and so try to keep up with it as much as possible. That is not always easy, as there is so much new material every day."

The letter-writer continues: "I think it is a shame that SEP Australia has chosen not to participate in the Socialist Alliance process because, as WSWS clearly shows, you have a great deal to contribute to the socialist movement.

"I think as current events clearly show, there is no time for dabbling in left politics. We need to get this question of what type of party we build right. I think there is no more space for monolithic parties, where differences are smothered like in the Stalinist tradition. Political consciousness of the general public is too high for that.

"We need to acknowledge and draw strength from the diversity of opinions we hold. However nor can we stay in the Trotskyist mode of operation where every difference becomes the most important question in the history of the movement and invariably leads to a split.

"There's been enough division. Surely enough unites the left to work out a programmatic compromise based on the principle of working for a socialist transformation of society.

He concludes: "I hope the Socialist Alliance can avoid both these pitfalls by creating a unified movement and party, while respecting the diversity of its constituent parts. While it is still small, I think that its combination of these two elements means that it has the potential to grow far faster than any or even all of its constituent parts alone and sooner rather than later build a party that can actually put socialism on the political map."

A full answer to the positions advanced in this letter would take a

© World Socialist Web Site

considerable amount of time. But what is the nub of it?

First of all, our correspondent congratulates the *World Socialist Web Site* for the "best-written socialist analysis" anywhere. But why is it the best analysis? How is the WSWS able to develop every day an assessment of political events that probes and reveals the real dynamics of class relations, the fundamental tendencies underway within society, and to advance an alternative perspective? Precisely because it fights on the basis of an independent program for the working class.

This year marks the 50th anniversary of the International Committee of the Fourth International, which was founded in November 1953. Throughout the past 50 years of political struggle, the ICFI—the Trotskyist movement—has continuously differentiated itself from all the parties and programs of the bourgeoisie and its petty bourgeois agencies. It is this process that is contained and expressed in the political analysis on the WSWS and that provides the basis of its extraordinary prescience and depth.

Secondly, our letter writer contends that unity is strength. But to what unity is he referring? With whom does he want the SEP to unite? With the Greens, because they are part of the whole fraternity to which the Socialist Alliance is oriented. With the radical outfits that supported, for example, the Australian government's invasion of East Timor. With organisations whose entire existence is bound up with manoeuvring and jockeying for influence within the framework of Australian national politics—pressuring the unions, pressuring the Labor Party. In other words, organisations whose role has been to subordinate the working class, to the extent that they have any relationship with it whatsoever, to the existing institutions, parties and organisations of the Australian national state.

Socialism cannot be "put on the political map" by such means. The past 100 years testifies to this. Far from unity with such parties and programs representing strength, it is precisely such "unity" that has been the fundamental weakness of the workers movement.

The strength of the working class emerges the more it politically differentiates, separates and demarcates itself from the policies and programs of the bourgeoisie. To carry this through requires a continuous and unrelenting struggle against all forms of national opportunism, which itself requires the highest level of political consciousness. And what does that entail? Above all, an historical approach to political phenomena, an understanding of the basic laws of historical development and their relation to the present state of class and international relations. It is this understanding that informs the analysis presented on the WSWS and makes it such a critical instrument. Every day it advances and delineates the independent attitude of the international working class, in contradistinction to other social classes, to every major political development.

Thirdly, our correspondent reveals one of the other major preoccupations of the radical "left"—an overriding concern with numbers. Anything goes, so long as it builds up the numbers. Whoever will join the coalition and augment its size will, by virtue of that fact, bring added "success".

But, again, this conception of party building is not borne out by an examination of history. The problem, quite frankly, has not been the absence of large parties, but the program, perspective and orientation that has guided them.

In his opening report to the Ann Arbor conference in March, the chairman of the WSWS editorial board, David North, observed: "History never poses any problem for which it does not also provide the solution. There is not only the predatory imperialist response to the problems of world economic development. Lodged objectively within these global processes is the potential for the international social solution.

"Here we come to the historical significance of the mass demonstrations that have occurred throughout the world during the past months. These demonstrations, which have developed almost spontaneously, independent of and in opposition to all the traditional political forces of the bourgeois establishment, can only be understood as the preliminary expression of the emerging internationalist and socialist response to the crisis of the world capitalist system"

One of the key characteristics of all the demonstrations was the presence of an enormous political vacuum. In no country were they led by any of the old political parties. They emerged largely spontaneously. This was certainly the case in Australia, where the huge protests that erupted were not led by the Greens or the Labor Party or the unions or the radical organisations.

Why? Because the demonstrations themselves represented, in embryo, the emergence of a new international consciousness. The millions who participated are beginning to see themselves as part of an international movement. Yet all of the old parties and organisations are rooted in the nation state. In that sense, this new emerging movement has already gone beyond them—and the programs on which they have been based. This movement, which will erupt into the open again—and sooner rather than later—raises both the possibility and necessity of an international socialist perspective.

The only organisation that can, by virtue of its history and its program, provide such a perspective is the ICFI and its international organ, the *World Socialist Web Site*. That is the significance of the series of conferences and meetings that we have been conducting throughout the world. Their purpose is to develop the political axis on which this new mass international movement must be based.

Terry Cook, from the WSWS editorial board and the Australian SEP, introduced the resolution: "War, the social crisis and the assault on democratic rights"

It is an old saying, but nevertheless a truism, that the policy of war abroad is always accompanied by war on the rights and conditions of the working people at home.

The program being carried out by the US and Australian governments amounts to nothing less than the destruction of all the gains and reforms won by American and Australian workers in the past fifty years. Such a program cannot be imposed on masses of people democratically.

The already existing levels of social inequality in both countries are truly staggering. One has to ask: what will be the social consequences of the state of affairs in Australia in which the richest 20 percent of households own more than half the total household wealth, and where the average worth of those families is more than 40 times higher than the poorest 20 percent?

The situation in the US and Australia is only an expression of a global process. It is now common to be confronted with figures like those published recently by the United Nations showing that the world's top three billionaires alone possess more in assets than the combined Gross National Product of the most impoverished countries, comprising 600 million people. One can only imagine the levels of human misery, poverty and deprivation required to produce just one of these billionaires.

There does not exist in any corner of the globe any broad constituency among ordinary people for the destruction of permanent jobs, the privatisation of essential services, and the slashing of welfare and social expenditure, resulting in the destruction of public health, aged care and education.

As with the drive to war, it is not possible for the ruling classes to openly declare their domestic agenda or to win popular support for it. That is why they resort to undemocratic and extra-parliamentary measures.

It is necessary to warn that the assault on fundamental democratic rights in Australia, while not yet at the level of the US, is nevertheless well advanced. Howard, like Bush, is utilising the threat of terrorism—which his government's own policies and actions have helped to exacerbate, to push through legislation that immeasurably strengthens the powers of the state.

The new draconian provisions of the recently introduced ASIO

© World Socialist Web Site

Terrorism Act give, for the first time, the police and security services the power to detain and interrogate anyone without charge and hold them incommunicado—possibly indefinitely.

Less known are the measures taken by the government for a new military force for domestic use known as the Reserve Defence Force, comprising of 1,000 personnel drawn from the Army Reserve. Defence Minister Robert Hill admitted that the new force would not only be used in the event of "terror alerts," but also to give assistance to civil authorities during civil emergencies, in other words in the case of widespread social unrest, demonstrations, protests and strikes. The force will have the right to carry firearms in public places. If it acts under the terms of the call-out legislation passed in 2000 before the Sydney Olympics, it will have the right to shoot to kill, search premises without warrants, seal off areas and detain people, and issue orders to civilians.

Such measures have nothing to do with counter-terrorism or defending the Australian people. They will be directed against the working class and political opponents of the government and the ruling elite.

From the time of ASIO's introduction under the Chifley Labor government as part of the post-World War II security reorganisation, one of the agency's main functions has been to spy on and harass working class and leftwing organisations.

ASIO was used extensively, along with other security agencies, to spy on opponents of the US-led war on Vietnam and to infiltrate anti-war and socialist organisations. When the Whitlam Labor government came to office in 1972 it did not open the ASIO files to expose these activities**,** even though ASIO had carried out extensive surveillance of Labor Party members of parliament.

Not surprisingly, the new measures have been introduced with the bipartisan support of the Labor Party, as have all the attacks on democratic rights and social conditions.

As in the past, the attack on democratic rights has been prepared by the assault on the rights of the weakest and most disadvantaged in society—immigrants, refugees, the unemployed and welfare recipients.

The same ruthless and brutal treatment that the Howard government has meted out to refugees and asylum seekers—such as its use of the navy to turn back boats laden with hapless men, women and children, or the incarceration in concentration camps of those who do manage to reach Australian territory—will be used against an insurgent working class.

We have stressed on the *World Socialist Web Site* that the complete prostration of the Democrats in the United States to the theft of the 2000 election by Bush demonstrated that no section of the ruling class was prepared to defend even the most limited forms of democracy. The same conclusions can be drawn in Australia from the cowardly actions of the Labor Party and the other so-called "opposition parties".

The struggle to defend democratic rights is inseparably bound up with the fight to unite the international working class on the basis of a socialist perspective for the abolition of the profit system and the re-organisation of society on the principles of social equality and human solidarity.

In closing I would like to refer to a passage from the book *Perestroika versus Socialism* written by David North.

North writes: "Precisely because the imperialist epoch is characterised by the most extreme sharpening of class antagonisms, the bourgeoisie loses its interest in all but the most superficial and formal aspects of democracy. Indeed, it is ready to dispense with even these should the need arise.

"Thus, the only reliable foundation for the defence of democratic rights in modern capitalist society proves to be not the institutions of bourgeois democracy, but the independent struggle of the working class. As Rosa Luxemburg explained so well at the turn of this blood-soaked century, it is not the socialist movement that is bound to bourgeois democracy; but rather the fate of democracy that is bound to the socialist movement."

The resolution "Support and develop the WSWS" was moved by WSWS editorial board member, Richard Phillips

One of the most crucial factors in the illegal military invasion and occupation of Iraq was the mass media. No lie was too crude and no falsification too twisted to be presented as a god-given reason for the onslaught. Not since the Nazi big lie techniques in 1930s Germany has there been such a barrage.

The great American satirist Mark Twain made many perceptive comments about the media and politicians during his life. One of these was a piece of advice for journalists, which went something like this: "When in doubt, tell the truth." One can only wonder what he would say about the mountain of lies presented by the mass media in the lead up to the war.

This media campaign, which was part of an international process, did have an impact. According to a poll conducted in the US by Knowledge Networks in mid-June, seven out of ten people in America believe that the Saddam Hussein regime was involved in the September 11 attacks against the US and 52 percent believe that the US government has found evidence in Iraq linking Hussein with Al Qaeda.

While these figures indicate that there is much confusion, the mass media distortions saw a tremendous turn to the Internet by masses of people who wanted to find independent news sources and to coordinate protest action against the war. This, in turn, saw an extraordinary increase in the political authority and global reach of the *World Socialist Web Site.*

This development not only vindicates the decision of the International Committee of the Fourth International five and a half years ago to establish the WSWS, but places before us tremendous political responsibilities.

The WSWS emerged out of the ICFI's assessment of the tumultuous economic and social changes of the 1980s and 90s and the need to politically prepare for the emergence of a new international workers' movement outside the domination of the discredited labour bureaucracies.

The WSWS was based on an understanding that the most essential element in the development of an international revolutionary party of the working class was the struggle to overcome the generally low level of class-consciousness and historical knowledge.

The WSWS was established to take up this challenge. This would be achieved, we argued, through the revival of a genuine socialist culture—to foster a critical attitude to every aspect of bourgeois society, a hostility to all forms of exploitation and injustice and for the development of a deep commitment to social equality and international solidarity.

From the outset, the site made the daily analysis of major world events and the political exposure of important social phenomena its central focus. Through the site, we consciously set out to reach those people around the world thinking critically and seeking alternatives to the old organisations and the dominant intellectual climate.

Five years and a half years later, to chart the growth of the WSWS is to reveal how it has developed in a constant interaction between the sharpening of the international class struggle and the fight for the revival of Marxist culture in the working class.

The growing authority and reach of the WSWS is a reflection of the striving of the most conscious layers of the population for a coherent world outlook, an understanding of history and a clear political perspective and orientation.

We have made significant gains, but it is necessary to point out that these must be considered only as the beginning of what we must do. The conditions are rapidly developing that will produce tremendous class battles and political and programmatic demands that we must fulfill.

The essential task before us therefore is to further develop the WSWS. The challenge is to take forward every aspect of the site—from the development of new writers, researchers and translators, to the broadening of the scope of its articles and its coverage on every level.

The *World Socialist Web Site* will play a vital role in the development of

© World Socialist Web Site

a new revolutionary upsurge. It provides the framework for a new international revolutionary party capable of leading the coming struggles.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site