Families of Guantanamo Bay detainees address public forum in Sydney

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The families of David Hicks and Mamdouh Habib, two Australian citizens held without charges for nearly two years by the Bush administration in the Guantanamo Bay prison camp, addressed a public forum at the Sydney Trades Hall on Saturday September 20. Attended by around 150 people, the meeting provided them an opportunity to speak out against the wholesale abuse of democratic and human rights being committed by the Bush administration, with the complicity of the Australian government and political establishment. The forum was organised by the Canterbury-Bankstown Peace Group and Actively Radical TV, both of which have connections to the Socialist Alliance and Democratic Socialist Party (DSP).

David Hicks, a 28-year-old convert to Islam, was seized in Afghanistan by forces of the pro-US Northern Alliance in early December 2001. After 10 days he was handed over to the US military and transferred to Guantanamo Bay. In July this year, Hicks was named as one of six Guantanamo detainees who may be brought before a US military tribunal and could face the death penalty. His detention is being justified by the Bush administration on the grounds that he was in Afghanistan as an "illegal combatant"—a definition that has no standing under Australian law or the Geneva Conventions. He is being held in solitary confinement, subjected to regular interrogations and has been denied any direct access to legal counsel.

Mamdouh Habib, 47-years-old and a father of four, was seized by Pakistani police on October 5, 2001, while traveling from the city of Quetta to Karachi in order to fly back to Australia. With the full knowledge of Australian authorities, he was sent incommunicado to Egypt for five months and then transferred to Guantanamo Bay.

The Australian government, which supported the US invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, has rejected all appeals that it intervene to secure the release of Hicks and Habib. It continues to applaud the US military's abrogation of due legal process in the name of "defending democracy" and "combating terrorism".

Terry and Beverly Hicks, David Hicks' parents, traveled from Adelaide, South Australia, to take part in the Sydney forum. Terry Hicks outlined his experiences during his recent trip to Pakistan, Afghanistan and the United States, carried out in order to research his son's fate and to help win his freedom. Hicks denounced the "demonising" of his son as a terrorist by the US and Australian governments and sections of the media. He reviewed the evidence he has accumulated that indicates David Hicks had no connection with Osama bin Laden's Al Qaeda terrorist network and could not have taken part in any fighting against American troops.

Terry Hicks denounced the Australian government as "weak", for not having "pushed hard enough for our citizens". He said "here are two Australian citizens who haven't been charged, been there for 22 months and they don't lift a finger". He emotionally recounted how he has had no contact with David since March and how government officials were attempting to "appease" his family by promising to arrange a phone link-up—that still had not taken place. He concluded by declaring his intention to "keep fighting, keep pushing... to do anything I can to get David and the others released."

Maha Habib, the wife of Mamdouh Habib, spoke briefly to thank those attending for their support and to express her hope that the trauma her family was enduring "never happens to anyone else". Stephen Hopper, Habib's lawyer, explained in some detail the circumstances leading up to Habib's seizure in Pakistan and spoke against the distortions and lies that have appeared in the media about him. Hopper exposed the claim that Habib had been seized attempting to cross into Afghanistan—he was arrested 700 kilometres from the border. He also exposed the claim of the Australian government that Habib's detention and possible torture in Egypt was justified on the basis that Habib held dual Australian-Egyptian citizenship. Habib had, in fact, been required to apply for a visa the last time he entered Egypt. The lawyer made clear that Habib was in Pakistan for the express purpose of investigating whether his family could migrate there.

Hopper referred to the "dehumanising" of Muslims and Arabs since September 11. "Next," he said, "we will be saying we need to put these people in internment camps for the security of the community". He explained that the Guantanamo detainees were "not criminals" but were being detained on the grounds that "they were combatants of some sort". Therefore, he stressed, "what should apply is the Third Geneva Convention", which governs prisoner-of-war status. Hopper noted that "if there is a doubt about whether they are prisoners-of-war... it should be taken before a tribunal or court to determine that". Instead, the Guantanamo detainees were being held indefinitely without any charges or basic legal rights.

The forum was also addressed by Jeremy Styles, secretary of the New South Wales Civil Liberties Council, and Tim Anderson, a civil rights advocate who was falsely imprisoned for seven years on framed-up charges of involvement in the bombing of the Hilton

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Hotel in Sydney in 1978. Styles and Anderson denounced the Bush administration and the role of the Australian government. Both conveyed their view that the release of Hicks and Habib would be dependent upon public protest and pressure to compel the Australian government to insist on their return to Australian jurisdiction. Styles specifically warned that the "politicisation of the US Supreme Court" made it unlikely that any remedy would come from the American courts.

Speaking from the floor, *World Socialist Web Site* editorial board member Richard Phillips moved a four-point WSWS and Socialist Equality Party resolution that had been distributed in leaflet form prior to the forum. The resolution condemned the US government's illegal detentions and the military tribunals. It denounced the Australian government for its uncritical support and indicted the Labor Party, trade unions and the other official parliamentary parties for refusing to unambiguously demand the release of Hicks and Habib. It declared support for the stand of the Hicks and Habib families and resolved to take forward a campaign to free all the Guantanamo Bay detainees.

Phillips urged those in attendance to support the resolution in order to affirm the necessary political basis for the campaign to secure the release of Hicks, Habib and other detainees. He stressed that what was at stake in the denial of Hicks and Habib's rights were the democratic rights of the entire Australian population. Highlighting the complicity of the Labor Party in the two men's detention, Phillips detailed to the forum the recent revelation that New South Wales Labor parliamentarian Alan Ashton had concealed from the public a police report sent to him in September 2001. New South Wales police had reported just weeks before Habib was seized in Pakistan that there was "no information on hand to support . . . concerns that [Mamoud] Habib had a predisposition to carry out an act of violence towards any persons or government body".

Despite clear indications of support in the meeting for the content of the resolution, Marlene Obeid, the forum chairperson, chose not to allow either a discussion or a vote. She ignored calls from the audience and the speakers on the platform for the resolution to be put. As the meeting was being closed down, Jeremy Styles announced, on behalf of the speakers, that they all supported the resolution and that it had been "carried by general acclaim". At that point Obeid declared: "It is carried" and left the stage.

The reluctance of forum organisers to permit, let alone encourage, any open discussion or debate on the WSWS-SEP resolution, points to the political orientation of Socialist Alliance and the DSP—to the Labor Party and the trade unions, the very organisations responsible for the conspiracy of silence that has allowed the Howard government to conceal from the Australian population the truth of what has been happening to David Hicks and Mamdouh Habib.

Below is the WSWS-SEP resolution moved by Richard Phillips at the September 20 "Justice for Hicks and Habib" forum.

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World Socialist Web Site *and Socialist Equality Party resolution*

This public meeting, held on September 20, 2003 in Sydney:

1. Unequivocally condemns the US government's illegal imprisonment of David Hicks, Mamdouh Habib and other detainees in Guantanamo Bay. Their detention for almost two years in solitary confinement, subject to constant interrogation by the US military and without access to their families or legal counsel, is a flagrant breach of the Geneva Conventions and basic democratic rights.

The military tribunals now being organised to try David Hicks and other prisoners constitute a travesty of justice and have nothing to do with the law. They are nothing but kangaroo courts, controlled entirely by the Bush administration. They are designed to impose guilty verdicts and to justify the government's so-called war against terrorism.

2. Denounces the Australian government for its uncritical support for the continued detention of Hicks and Habib. The Howard government has cooperated in every way with Washington to ensure the two Australians remain in Guantanamo Bay. Its refusal to lift a finger to secure the release of these citizens flows directly from its backing for the illegal and criminal US-led wars on Afghanistan and Iraq.

The Howard regime has embraced the Bush administration's assault on fundamental legal and democratic rights in order to justify its own political agenda. This involves the revival of neo-colonialism in the Pacific region and a full-scale assault on the democratic rights of its citizens at home, including the implementation of wide-ranging powers of arrest and detention for ASIO, Australia's secret police.

Howard has only been able to implement these measures because there has been no attempt by the Labor Party, trade unions or any of the official parliamentary parties to directly challenge the US and Australian governments or to unambiguously and publicly demand the release of Hicks and Habib.

3. Supports the courageous stand taken by Terry Hicks and Maha Habib, and their families, to defy the government and media lies about David and Mamdouh, to expose the truth about the two men's plight, and to demand their immediate release.

4. Resolves to take forward the campaign for the immediate release and repatriation of David Hicks and Mamdouh Habib and all other prisoners at Guantanamo Bay.

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