

British Socialist Equality Party addresses students on Iraq war

Our correspondent
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A newly formed Socialist Society at the Royal Holloway, University of London in Egham, Surrey in the southeast of England held a forum on January 21 under the title, “The justifications for the war against Iraq and America’s current wave of imperialism”.

Speakers from several organisations were invited, including the Socialist Equality Party (SEP), the Labour Party, the Stop The War Coalition and others. In the event, three speakers were present—Mike Ingram from the SEP and representatives from Alliance for Workers Liberty and Socialist Appeal. Both of the latter organisations operate as a faction in the Labour Party.

The Socialist Society has been formed by a group of mainly first-year students seeking to create a forum for the discussion of progressive ideas on a campus dominated by the right wing Young Conservatives. The Labour Society on the campus collapsed last year when its members walked out in protest at the war against Iraq.

Speaking first in the discussion, Ingram thanked the organisers for the invitation and said that the formation of such discussion groups “is an important indication that people opposed to the war against Iraq find themselves having to consider the wider political issues involved.”

He continued: “It is widely recognised that the official justifications for the war and subsequent occupation of Iraq are a cynical fraud. To this day no weapons of mass destruction have been found and not a shred of evidence has been produced to show any link between the secular regime of Saddam Hussein and Al Qaeda. The simple reason for this is that in both cases there is no such evidence.

“The more recent claims that the war was about the liberation of the Iraqi people are equally transparent. As the title of this meeting suggests, the war was an act of imperialist plunder on the part of the US, aimed at securing control of Iraq as part of a global drive for world hegemony.”

Ingram said it should not be necessary to debate these issues at the meeting. “What is more important to discuss are the broader political questions that arise from this,” he said.

Referring to the invitation extended to a Labour councillor, who was unable to attend, Ingram said, “There can be all kinds of differences among organisations that consider themselves socialist, representatives of the working class or even just antiwar, as to the best way to oppose the imperialist drive of the US, but the Labour Party does not fall into this camp.

“When speaking of New Labour we are not speaking of a tendency within some generally defined opposition camp, but the enemy. It is the Labour Party in government that pursued the war in blatant disregard for the democratic rights of working people in Britain and throughout the world, who had made their opposition clear in

numerous mass demonstrations.

“The Labour government shows the same disregard for the opinions and interests of ordinary working people in relation to domestic policy as it did in its decision to go to war. This is most recently expressed in the proposals for university top-up fees. Tony Blair has managed to earn himself the dubious honour of being even more unpopular than Margaret Thatcher. At the height of the preparations for war, Deputy Prime Minister John Prescott was busy preparing legal action against firefighters who were striking for a living wage.

“I don’t know the political opinions of the individual who was invited. He may consider himself to be an opponent of the war, but here too a point must be made. You cannot proclaim yourself to be antiwar and remain a loyal member of a party that is waging war. There are certain things in politics that cannot be squared and this is one of them.

“The Socialist Equality Party rejects any discussion about reclaiming the Labour Party or cultivating a left opposition within it. The nature of the Labour Party as a capitalist formation has been determined. Many of those participating in the mass antiwar demonstrations recognised the need for a new party. The question is what type of party.

“We believe that the only social force upon which a genuine opposition to imperialism and war can be constructed is the international working class. Only in this way can any serious challenge to US imperialism be waged.

“As a section of the International Committee of the Fourth International, we fight for the building of a world party, advancing a perspective for the unity of the international working class, for social equality and for the political independence of the working class and a complete break with Labour and all those parties that stand with one or both feet in the camp of capitalism.

“Whether at meetings such as this or through our central organ, the *World Socialist Web Site*, we fight for this unifying political outlook among workers.”

The Socialist Appeal speaker went through the various justifications for the war advanced by the Labour government, citing the many refutations that have been widely publicised in recent months. At the end of his remarks he turned to the points raised by Ingram on the Labour Party, declaring himself to be a Labour Party member and trotted out well-worn arguments that Labour was the only mass party of the working class and therefore could not be ignored.

He cited as a justification for working within the Labour Party the fact Socialist Appeal had been instrumental in achieving a vote of 40 percent of the recent conference for an antiwar motion. He then said without any embarrassment that the only reason the vote was lost was

because of the trade unions. The irony is that the Socialist Appeal's entire argument for maintaining that Labour remains a workers party is its link with the trade unions—which are proclaimed to be the unalloyed mass organisations of the working class.

The Alliance for Workers Liberty speaker said it was necessary to base the struggle against the occupation of Iraq upon “the emerging working class movement in Iraq.” He cited as an example their collaboration with the “Unemployed Union of Iraq, set up by a group called the Worker Communist Movement of Iraq,” rather than “the ragtag followers of Saddam Hussein.”

In the subsequent discussion it became clear that what he was speaking about was an adaptation to the various wings of the Iraqi Communist Party, which has endorsed the interim government established by the occupying powers.

One of the students in the audience asked if it would be correct for the troops to leave Iraq now given the appalling security situation in the country. Ingram said that this question often came up in this situation:

“People say, well I opposed the war and I don't think the occupation is correct, but if the troops leave there will be a humanitarian catastrophe. What has to be understood is that there is a catastrophe already taking place in Iraq. We don't get reports of Iraqi casualties but it is clear that Iraqi men, women and children are being killed by the occupying powers on a daily basis. The Socialist Equality Party demands the immediate withdrawal of all US and British occupation forces and the convening of a democratically elected constituent assembly to form a new Iraqi government committed to utilising the country's resources in the interests of the mass of working people in Iraq.”

The Alliance for Workers Liberty speaker objected to this, saying that it was not enough to demand the withdrawal of troops. His organisation was working with tendencies there to develop demands to be placed upon the interim government in order to expose it in the eyes of the Iraqi people.

Ingram stated that such a position would only legitimise the occupation. “The final and greatest betrayal in a long list by the Iraqi Communist Party was its endorsement of the interim government. The prerequisite for the development of a workers' movement in Iraq is its rejection of the occupation and the realisation of its own strength in alliance with the international working class.”

Much of the remaining discussion focused on the political situation in Britain and the way forward after the antiwar demonstrations. In answer to a Socialist Appeal supporter who said that millions of workers still voted Labour despite its support for the war, a student in audience said that this was not the case. “In the main working people just don't vote any more. It's not that they support Labour. The problem is they don't support anyone.”

Ingram pointed out that this should be seen as a stage in the development of political consciousness. “In the past one of the main arguments that confronted socialists in Britain was along the following lines: ‘We agree with what you say but the way you go about achieving it is too extreme and unrealistic. Labour is a socialist party and the question is to get them into office to implement your programme.’ Today this is not the case. No thinking person would seriously argue that the Labour Party should be regarded as a socialist party. So a very real obstacle to the fight for an independent socialist perspective in the working class has been removed. The question is how do you go forward from this? We believe there are no shortcuts. The development of a political movement of the working class will

only emerge from a persistent struggle for the development of a broad based socialist consciousness through examining the political lessons of the last century. It is for this reason that we concentrate our efforts upon political education.”

In response to this the Socialist Alliance representative claimed that workers did not learn from books but through action and the important thing to discuss is how we develop further activities following on from the antiwar demonstrations. One of the students objected, stating that he had been on all of the antiwar demonstrations, and that each one had been smaller than the last. When the Socialist Alliance accused him of taking a demoralised position, he said that he did not think the antiwar feeling had gone away and that it was expressed very strongly by the 300,000 people who turned out in London to oppose Bush's visit. But many people realised that demonstrations didn't stop the war, or the subsequent occupation and something more is required.

A question was asked about the role of the media and its transformation into a propaganda outlet for the government. The speaker was concerned as to how the socialist opposition countered the massive resources of the media giants and said that he thought the Internet would play an important role in this.

In reply Ingram spoke of the experience of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) with the *World Socialist Web Site*. “For years socialist parties were confronted with a fundamental problem. Whatever the power of our ideas, the ability to make these known was limited largely to the distribution of newspapers, attendance at meetings etc., within the country in which we worked. With the emergence of the Internet it became possible to address this problem and this is what the ICFI did with the launch of the *World Socialist Web Site* in 1998.

“Today the WSWS has grown to be the most widely read socialist web site. It allows us to publish articles from around the world on a daily basis in several languages. More importantly, the WSWS is emerging as a centre for international politics, advancing a single world outlook for the international working class and an international socialist perspective. The WSWS will play a crucial role in the fight for the international unity of the working class and the development of a new world party and is increasingly recognised as a powerful counterweight to the official media.”

The Socialist Society will follow up the meeting by providing individual parties, including the SEP, an opportunity to address more broadly their perspective.



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