

Julie Hyland from the SEP in Britain addresses WSWS-SEP conference

“Blair-Bush alliance is an expression of the reemergence of naked imperialism and colonialism”

24 March 2004

Today, we are publishing the remarks of Julie Hyland, a Central Committee member of the Socialist Equality Party in Britain, the British section of the International Committee of the Fourth International, and member of the WSWS Editorial Board, to the conference on “The 2004 US Election: the Case for a Socialist Alternative,” held by the World Socialist Web Site and the Socialist Equality Party on March 13-14 in Ann Arbor, Michigan.

A summary account of the event was published March 15, and the opening report to the conference by WSWS International Editorial Board Chairman and SEP (US) National Secretary David North was posted March 17. Presidential candidate Bill Van Auken’s remarks were posted March 18, and vice-presidential candidate Jim Lawrence’s remarks were posted March 19. In the coming days, we will continue our coverage of this important political event, with remarks by other international delegates and contributions from the conference floor.

I’m very pleased to bring the warmest fraternal greetings of the Socialist Equality Party in Britain to this conference, the discussion at which represents a significant development in the class struggle not only in the US but internationally.

The statement before you stresses the international importance of the forthcoming elections. And we can be sure that no one is following it more closely than the current occupant of Number 10 Downing Street. Never has the phrase “murderers chained to a single cart” appeared more apposite than in relation to the fates of George W. Bush and Prime Minister Tony Blair.

Indeed, so politically intertwined have the pair become that the British media is full of speculation as to what will happen to Blair, should Bush go. More than any other political leader, Blair has tied his political fortunes in with Washington—to such an extent that there is concern whether he can make the transition to a Kerry presidency should the need arise.

There are numerous problems with such speculation, not least the fact that a Kerry victory would not produce the type of fundamental shift in policy that the British media would, for their own reasons, like to portray. As the *World Socialist Web Site* has pointed out, the official choice on offer in November will be between two wealthy, Yale-educated scions, both of whom are committed to the so-called war on terror with all its reactionary consequences at home and abroad.

Moreover, Blair managed to make the transition from the Democratic administration under Clinton—whom he had described as a very close friend—to Bush and the Republicans almost seamlessly, despite the

criminal means through which Bush’s victory was secured.

But Blair and his supporters will certainly be most concerned by the breadth and scope of popular hostility towards the Bush administration that will be manifested in these elections, and the various means through which the American bourgeoisie seeks to thwart and ultimately behead it.

Nowhere was a government’s decision to back the war against Iraq so bitterly contested as in the UK. Blair’s support for the US-led attack led to the largest-ever anti-war protests in British history as part of the international wave of protests last February.

The official end of hostilities has not ended public disquiet. On the contrary, Blair’s belief that a quick victory in Iraq would cause all dissent to be quickly dissipated in the euphoria of a “job well done” has come to nothing, as Britain and the US are dragged ever more into a quagmire of civil strife and popular opposition to their occupation.

At the same time, the fiction of Iraq’s weapons of mass destruction, on which the Blair government based its justification for war, has been comprehensively exposed, further underscoring the criminal character of the US and British actions.

The government has now been forced to convene a fourth inquiry in less than a year, this time into the intelligence supplied by the security services in the run-up to war. But from the start, the latest inquiry, headed by Lord Butler of Brockwell, is even more discredited than the others. Lord Butler’s record in covering up for previous governments—for example, during the Scott inquiry into the illegal sale of arms to Iraq—is well known, and at least one of those participating alongside him has links to a company with extensive contracts in Iraq. Moreover, its remit is so limited that it is bound to uncover nothing of any import, and even the right-wing opposition Conservatives have now refused to participate in it, as have the Liberal Democrats.

Just consider how events have unfolded in the year since the invasion. First, there was the exposure that the Blair government lied in its claims, made in its first so-called security dossier issued in September 2002, that Iraq was seeking to get nuclear material from Africa.

Then it was shown that the second intelligence dossier of February 2003 was found to be heavily plagiarised from a 12-year-old PhD thesis, and its claims that Iraq had chemical, biological and nuclear weapons that could be deployed against British targets to devastating effect within 45 minutes were lies. Blair has subsequently admitted that the dossier’s claims that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction in fact referred to battlefield weapons—that is, ordinary ammunition.

Then there was the apparent suicide of Britain’s leading Iraq weapons

expert, Dr. David Kelly, after he was “outed” as the source of reports that there was widespread disquiet within the intelligence services over Blair’s claims regarding Iraq—a claim that was subsequently confirmed in the whitewash inquiry that followed.

And more recently, it has been confirmed that Britain did spy on the United Nations and its Secretary General Kofi Annan in the run-up to war, undoubtedly at US urging, as part of its effort to dragoon it behind a preemptive strike.

Such criminal and corrupt behaviour was integral to the war against Iraq. It hardly needs repeating how central Blair’s support was in lending legitimacy to what otherwise would have been seen openly as a unilateral and illegal act of aggression by Washington. Notwithstanding the backing of the Spanish and Italian governments for the war, the fact is that Britain was the only significant power represented in the so-called “coalition of willing,” with much of the rest comprising eastern European states brought and paid for by Washington.

Blair took this stand not only in the face of popular opposition, but also of significant dissent within sections of the ruling class concerned that the prime minister was tying Britain’s fate too closely with Washington in a reckless, and ultimately destabilising venture.

It was revealed recently that virtually every legal adviser in Britain’s Foreign Office had serious reservations about the legal foundations of the government’s case for war, whilst Admiral Sir Michael Boyce, the Commander in Chief in Iraq, has said he had insisted on “unequivocal” legal cover for the war before allowing British soldiers to fight—leading to the requisite one-line affirmation coming through from the Attorney General just five days before hostilities officially commenced.

Given these events, it is worth recalling the calculations involved in Blair’s backing for Bush.

It was popular during the anti-war protests to portray Blair’s line as the outcome simply of his toadying to Washington, his role as Bush’s poodle. Blair’s truly cringeworthy Uriah Heep persona notwithstanding, this is a somewhat one-sided, if not false, characterisation. It serves to divert from the fact that whilst the British government is supremely conscious of its subordinate position as regards its more powerful ally, its stance on Iraq was bound up with its efforts to aggressively assert its own predatory interests.

In the first instance, the Blair government had an eye to the immediate gains British capital could accrue from sharing in the spoils to be made from Iraqi oil and rebuilding contracts.

A more important consideration, however, was the recognition that Britain’s alliance with Washington enables it to punch above its weight on the global arena, especially in relation to its major European rivals.

In this sense, Blair’s policy towards Iraq can be seen as a continuation of Britain’s longstanding balancing act between Washington and Brussels. But it is also an expression of the fact that this traditional policy is breaking down. US imperialism’s aggressive drive to establish itself as the world’s only hegemon requires that it be able to impose its will not only on weak and underdeveloped countries such as Iraq, but also, and above all, on its powerful imperialist rivals in western Europe and Japan.

Donald Rumsfeld’s contemptuous reference to France and Germany as “old Europe” made explicit US imperialism’s intentions to divide the European continent so as to carve out its own sphere of influence in direct opposition to its long-time allies. This goal remains unchanged despite the subsequent craven capitulation of Gerhard Schröder and Jacques Chirac.

Given this explosive assertion of American power, Blair essentially concluded that the British bourgeoisie had no alternative but to side with Washington if it was to have any chance of influencing the future course of world developments, even if it meant alienating its European partners and making his own government’s stated objective of European integration much harder, if not impossible.

This is bound up with a third factor. Though much diminished, Britain

remains an imperial power with large appetites. The collapse of the Soviet Union has inaugurated a new scramble for colonies and a redivision of the world, in which the UK is determined not to be left behind.

Blair recognised that with its Iraq policy, the Bush administration was setting a precedent for this revival of imperialist ambitions that the British bourgeoisie could utilise for its own ends. He acknowledged as much quite openly last week in a speech to his Sedgefield constituency.

Referring to the lessons from Iraq, he said that people had to realise that a “new type of war” was being developed, one that was based on a modern view of “self-interest.” If people believed that this new type of war could be judged illegal under international law, then that law would just have to be changed, he said.

Blair insists that a “rethink” is now necessary, as the new global world order currently under construction “forces us to act even when so many comforts seem unaffected, and the threat so far off, if not illusory.”

Blair’s speech was fundamentally a reiteration of the basic themes of US foreign policy, dressed up in a pseudo-liberal mask—a defence of preemptive war and regime change.

The prime minister has been arguing for this consistently, citing previous US and British imperialist adventures in the Balkans as his precedents. And he was at least truthful when he said that the trampling on democratic rights of the world’s peoples and the assertion of the absolute right of the major powers to do as they see fit is the way things were going long before September 11.

Blair’s alliance with Bush is in this fundamental sense an expression of the reemergence of naked imperialism and colonialism and the drive of a criminal elite to free itself of any restraint.

This doesn’t stop on the questions of foreign policy. The other major issue that unites Bush and Blair is their vehement hostility to the working class and desire to smash up whatever remains of the social gains and democratic rights won during the past century.

Both are committed to extending an already unprecedented redistribution of wealth from the poor to the super-rich. Income inequality has grown under Labour, as Blair has continued where his Tory predecessors left off. More than two thirds of the population earn less than the national average of £25,000 per annum. Such skewed figures can only be accounted for by the fact that a tiny minority monopolises most of the wealth.

A recent report showed that the combined wealth of Britain’s wealthiest 300 people increased by 28 percent over the last year, to £147.3 billion. There are now 29 billionaires in Britain, 10 more than in 2003—one billionaire per 2 million people—a ratio that the report noted proudly marked “a far higher penetration than in America” with its one to every 3 million.

The same report gushed that more than a fifth of Britain’s richest 300 were wealthy foreigners, who pay no tax whatsoever. And that a sixth hold most of their wealth in cash and liquid assets. Not so surprising when you consider that foremost amongst these are the exiled Russian billionaires Roman Abramovich and Boriz Berezovsky, whose fortunes were made by plundering the assets of the former Soviet Union. In other words, this increase in billionaires does not arise out of any real improvement or buoyancy in the British economy as such, but rather expresses how through his big business, anti-working class policies Blair has sought to position the country as a kind of protectorate for the super-rich.

Small wonder then that Blair recently dismissed calls to increase the top rate of tax on the grounds that even if he did so, the rich would simply not pay it. He certainly has the measure of his backers.

Colonial conquest abroad and undeclared civil war at home are the favoured policy of the criminal, financial oligarchy that determines political life in Washington and London.

It is this social polarisation, the glaring contradiction between the

interests of the rulers and the ruled, that lies behind Blair's boast that he is indifferent to public opinion. His efforts to free his government from any means of democratic control express the interests of an elite that is determined to ensure that there can be no check on its activities, which are diametrically opposed to the interests of the mass of the population.

His insistence that those who hold power are not answerable to the people amounts to a justification for quasi-dictatorship—a setup that the government is currently seeking to legally constitute under the guise of the war on terror.

At the same time, Blair faces no real political opposition. The Trades Union Congress refused to back the anti-war protests, insisting that in times of war it was necessary to support “our boys.” It is absolutely hostile to any struggle against the Labour government, which it continues to portray as the lesser evil to the Tories.

In reality, it is often necessary to remind people that Blair is supposed to lead a workers' party, one that in the non-too-distant past claimed some connection to socialism. It is necessary because the role that Labour has played in power since 1997 very much underscores the role that the Democrats would be called on to play should popular hostility force Bush out of office.

Blair has the measure of his erstwhile critics. His recent speech at Sedgefield was very much directed towards those on the so-called left who had criticised his policy in Iraq. He was telling them that, notwithstanding certain differences they may have over this or that policy, they must recognise the more fundamental issues involved and come to his defence.

His appeal was based on the type of pitch that has been made by the Democrats in the recent selection process to rally around John Kerry. And it had the desired response. The *Guardian* described Blair's self-serving piece of sophistry and blatant lies in defence of his neo-colonialist agenda as one of the most “thoughtful” and “coherent” speeches ever made by the prime minister. “[I]ntellectually demanding,” the paper continued, “it deserves the respectful attention of all who take politics seriously.”

What conclusions must be drawn from this? It underscores the fact that there no longer exists any real commitment to democracy within ruling circles. The perspective of attempting to pressurise one or another section of the bourgeoisie to the left is a dead end.

Seven years ago, after 18 years of the most right-wing government in British history, working people in the UK were anxious for change. What they got was Blair and his New Labour government. Here in the US, you have a real groundswell for getting rid of Bush, which Kerry is benefiting from. But that will not stand the test of time. Blair was hailed in 1997 and is reviled today. The anti-Bush sentiment is being used to deaden critical faculties and to drive opposition behind the Democrats. But the social and political antagonisms contained within this oppositional mood anticipate not simply the fate of Bush, but of Kerry himself.

The political straitjacket of the two-party system that has confined the American working class is objectively finished. It is our responsibility, and it is the essence of our campaign, to make that consciously understood so as to finish it for once and for all.

In conclusion, it is very important that you fully appreciate the significance of the campaign that you are undertaking. Not simply in relation to the November elections, but as regards its more fundamental preparatory character.

A crucial aspect of this campaign consists of this: If you look at the various antidotes or alternatives to US imperialism that are offered up across the globe, they are all of a generally reactionary character—whether it be the United Nations, or imperialist powers such as France and Germany, or the demoralised and thoroughly divisive perspective of individual terror that we have seen so bloodily enacted most recently in Spain.

In contrast, our perspective bases itself on the only progressive social

force that can defeat US imperialism—that of a politically-conscious American working class.

We are convinced that this will act as a powerful attractive force for the tens of millions internationally seeking a way of defeating US imperialism. If it is appropriate then, in the context of this elections, to speak of a special relationship, then it consists of the one being forged by our campaign in seeking to unite American workers with their class brothers and sisters across the globe.



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