

Richard Phillips from the SEP in Australia addresses WSWS-SEP conference

“The great issues before workers require global perspective”

22 March 2004

Today, we are publishing the remarks of Richard Phillips, Central Committee member from the SEP in Australia, 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.

Let me say in opening that it is a tremendous privilege to participate in this historic event and to bring fraternal greetings from the Socialist Equality Party in Australia.

SEP members in Australia recognize the decisive importance of our intervention in the US elections and the discussion this weekend. We also look forward to a visit by the candidates and will do everything possible to develop the campaign on an international level.

Like millions of others throughout the world, there is a deeply felt sentiment by Australian workers that their lives and the future of their families will be shaped by events in the US in the next period. Our task must be to raise this elementary understanding to a higher level of political consciousness—this is a strategic question—and I agree with all those speakers who have stressed those sections of the election statement on internationalism and the political independence of the working class. There is an inseparable unity between the struggle for the political independence of the working class and the international unification of the working class and our election statement provides a powerful explanation of this.

It is now almost one year since the invasion of Iraq. At that time we were told that Iraq was bristling with biological, chemical and even nuclear WMDs and this necessitated an immediate military assault. For those involved in the mass antiwar demonstrations last year this was an obvious lie, the real reasons for the Iraq invasion were not weapons of mass destruction, but oil.

Over the last 12 months the lies and fabrications used to justify the war have been demolished from a range of high-level sources in Britain, the US and elsewhere. One of the more recent exposures came two weeks ago in Australia when a parliamentary committee released its report on “The accuracy of intelligence on Iraq’s Weapons of Mass Destruction.”

Although the 147-page analysis constituted a whitewash of the government, it revealed much more than perhaps it had intended, including the fact that “intelligence” on Iraq had been manipulated in the

US, Britain and Australia to justify the invasion.

Moreover, it admitted that there had been a clear divergence between the Australian government’s WMD claims and its intelligence agencies. In fact, for two years between February 2000 and September 12, 2002, two of Australia’s leading intelligence agencies—the Defence Intelligence Organisation (DIO) and the Office of National Assessments (ONA)—maintained serious doubts that Iraq had WMDs. But on September 13 the ONA, an agency closely connected to the prime minister’s department, suddenly changed its line and began to claim that Iraq did have WMDs and that Saddam Hussein had not abandoned attempts to acquire nuclear weapons.

While the parliamentary report made the rather ludicrous claim to not have any idea why there had been a shift in the ONA’s reportage after September 12, the reasons for the change in line is documented in the report’s chronology. It followed an intensification in Washington’s propaganda asserting that Iraq possessed WMDs and came after Bush’s September 12 address to the UN when he declared that unless the General Assembly endorse a US-led invasion of the poor and virtually defenseless country, it faced irrelevancy, statements slavishly repeated by the Howard government in Australia.

One of the most significant aspects of the report included a statement that a pre-emptive attack on Iraq could only be justified under international law if WMDs were found. Although it doesn’t say directly, the parliamentary committee hints that because Iraq had no WMDs or even WMD programs, the US-led invasion, and Australia’s participation in it, was illegal. Translated from the extremely careful language of the parliamentary investigation into plain English, the report underlines the fact that the attack on Iraq constituted a war crime as defined by the precedents established at the Nuremberg Trials of the Nazis after World War II.

What has been the response to this report? No demands were made by the Australian Labor Party and the so-called opposition parties for Prime Minister John Howard or his government to resign for lying to parliament over the Iraq invasion. Moreover the government, with Labor’s backing, has announced another inquiry into its intelligence agencies, the results of which will not be announced until after the forthcoming election in October or November this year, and headed by a former head of the ONA itself.

The illegal and unprovoked invasion of Iraq also rapidly exposed the so-called opposition of France and Germany and other imperialist powers. Having embraced Washington’s “global war on terror” rhetoric, they dropped their differences with the US and endorsed the occupation. They recognized that the old methods of postwar diplomacy could no longer overcome the economic problems they each confronted and that new

methods—preemptive military action and direct neocolonial conquest—were now required.

Among the first to embrace this perspective was the Howard government in Australia, now regarded as one of the most slavish supporters of the Bush administration. This was not a sudden decision by Canberra but part of an ongoing orientation by the Liberal National Coalition government. In 1999 Howard told the media that he wanted Australia to begin operating as a US “deputy” in the region. Australia had the responsibility of being a US deputy, he told one newspaper at the time, because “we occupy that special place—we are a European, Western civilization with strong links with North America, but here we are in Asia.”

In other words, unwavering support for Washington is the means through which Australian capitalism ensures backing for its neocolonial ambitions in the Asia-Pacific region. This orientation secured US support for Australia hegemony over East Timor and its oil resources in 1999, and last year, a few months after sending over 2,000 troops to join the invasion of Iraq, Australian state forces occupied the Solomon Islands. Australians were told that the Solomon Islands, a group of islands in the South Pacific with a population of only 430,000 people, was a “failed state” and could become a breeding ground for terrorists unless Australia took control.

While Howard’s uncritical support for the Bush administration is opposed by some sections of Australia’s ruling elite who are concerned that this may disrupt and antagonize political and business relations in Asia, the government’s line has prevailed. Differences raised by Labor, the Greens and Democrats prior to the war were purely of a tactical character and entirely unprincipled.

Labor, the Greens and Democrats all endorsed UN resolution 1441 and the UN weapons inspection regime, with Labor declaring that it supported Australian participation in the invasion of Iraq if it had Security Council backing. Labor support for the war has even further alienated these organizations from the working class and broad masses of the population.

I’d like to further underline some of the points made in the election statement explaining how Washington’s “war on terror” is being used to advance an unprecedented assault on democratic rights and legal principles established over hundreds of years.

Perhaps one of the most striking examples is Guantanamo Bay, where presumption of innocence, habeas corpus and other basic principles have been junked and replaced with arbitrary indefinite detention, solitary confinement, torture and the violation of Geneva Conventions. Testimony now being published from recently released British prisoners has further exposed the conditions in this legal and physical hellhole. These techniques, however, will not be just confined to the US, but reflect the sort of methods that are increasingly being adopted by other bourgeois governments.

The detention of hundreds of war prisoners in Guantanamo Bay has not only exposed the criminal character of Washington’s “war on terror” but has undermined all sorts of illusions. This includes illusions held by wide layers of the population in Australia that their government would somehow defend its own citizens if imprisoned overseas. But as events have shown over the last two years, the detention of David Hicks, Mamdouh Habib, two Australians held in Guantanamo Bay, still remain there because of the Howard regime. In fact, the Howard government is the only government in the world that has not called for the release of its citizens from the prison. And worse than this it has publicly declared on numerous occasions that the US government can do what it likes with Hicks and Habib. As Foreign Minister Alexander Downer declared after Hicks was detained: “We are an ally of the United States and we agree with them.” What happens to Hicks, Downer said, “was entirely a matter for the US.”

There is no evidence that Hicks, who has been held for over two years, is a “terrorist,” a member of any specific organization or that he was

associated in any way with the September 11 terror attacks. US Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld constantly states that Guantanamo Bay prisoners were captured on the battlefields; Mamdouh Habib was arrested in Pakistan and before September 11.

The prime minister’s collaboration in the violation of Hicks and Habib’s basic rights are an indication of the treatment political opponents of the government can expect within Australia in the future.

As the election statement stresses, these anti-democratic measures are a reflection of the fact that capitalism confronts a systemic social and economic crisis for which it has no progressive solution. Its only response is state repression. Most importantly, the election statement establishes that the defense of basic democratic rights requires nothing less than a social revolution against the profit system. The document establishes this as an objective necessity.

I would like to make some comment on the Labor party’s complicity in these attacks on basic democratic rights in Australia. In December last year the ALP elected Mark Latham as a new Labor leader. His elevation, which was promoted by Rupert Murdoch and the corporate media, represented a far-reaching shift to the right by this organization. The ALP, which is a bureaucratic shell and regarded with disdain by wide sections of the working class, is now attempting to outflank Howard from the extreme right.

Last year Latham claimed to be an opponent of the Bush administration and Australia’s participation in the US-led war against Iraq. At the height of the antiwar movement he told parliament that the US president was “flaky and dangerous” and denounced Howard for “sucking up” to the US.

This criticism, however, evaporated immediately when he was appointed ALP leader in December. Two days after his election Latham met with the US ambassador and pledged his total support for the US alliance, which he said was fundamental to Australia’s national interests. Just to make sure everyone got the message, he conducted one of his first press conferences standing in front of the Stars and Stripes flag. All previous criticisms of Bush, he said, had been made in the “heat of debate” and should now be forgotten.

A day later he directed Labor MPs to vote with the Howard government to pass amendments to anti-terror laws which make it a crime, punishable by five years in jail, to protest against intelligence organization ASIO’s new detention and interrogation powers.

A week later Latham established the Homeland Security portfolio, a new position that is modeled on the Bush administration’s namesake and will draft proposals for the integration of 11 different police and spying agencies.

In the last two weeks, the ALP has endorsed new laws giving Attorney General Phillip Ruddock the power to ban any organization he claims to be terrorist and jail its members for up to 25 years. This occurred the very week that the parliamentary committee documented how the Howard government manipulated intelligence on WMDs.

And what has been the ALP’s attitude towards the detention of Australian citizens in Guantanamo Bay? About a month ago Latham suggested the adoption of retrospective laws to enable Hicks and Habib to be prosecuted in Australia.

This means it proposed the introduction of new legislation to create new offences designed specifically to fit whatever conduct the US alleges the two men have committed. This extraordinary proposal, which reverses about four centuries of legal principle, even surprised the government.

Finally, while numerous government lies and many illusions have been exposed over the last year, new sets of falsehoods have been cultivated to block the development of those who have been politicized and tie them to the old political organizations or trap them in new ones.

One of these is the “Anyone but Bush” campaign, which has been discussed here this weekend. Those advancing this perspective claim that

defeat of the Bush administration and its replacement with Kerry is the central task. As other speakers and the document explains, this is an illusion and denies the fundamental crisis of American capitalism that brought Bush to power and saw every imperialist power embrace the so-called “war on terror.”

The last year has also highlighted the inability of political protest by itself to prevent imperialist war. The great issues confronting millions of working people can only be resolved on the basis of a global perspective and through the construction of an international working class movement, animated by a socialist perspective. As the historical record demonstrates, the ICFI and the *World Socialist Web Site* are the only vehicles representing this perspective. This is clearly recognized by the many new comrades and supporters in attendance here. This conference is an indication that of the great social eruptions in the coming period and the great responsibilities we all face to politically train and develop the new forces that come forward. The discussion this weekend and the election program we will take forward in the election campaign is vital preparation for the coming mass struggles.



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