

Blair and Bush plan further crimes in the Middle East

Statement by the Socialist Equality Party (Britain)

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The visit by Prime Minister Tony Blair to Washington on Friday, April 16, exposed the political reality behind the myth of his “special relationship” with President George W. Bush. After months in which Blair has advanced himself as a voice of reason, a check on America’s unilateralist impulses, and a bridge between Europe and America, he was shown to be nothing of the sort.

Despite Bush’s eulogy to Blair as “stand-up kinda guy,” the prime minister was humiliated and made to look small.

Blair has repeatedly claimed that US support for a just settlement of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was the most concrete gain he had secured in return for his support for war against Iraq. Instead, a distinctly uncomfortable Blair was called upon to echo Bush’s claim that Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon’s attempt to seize control of over half of the West Bank in return for the removal of a few thousand settlers in the Gaza Strip was a “part of a process to get us back into the road map.” He then spent the remainder of the press conference professing his absolute unanimity with Washington on Iraq and offering himself as a front man in brokering a deal with the United Nations that would enable additional troops to be brought from Europe and Africa to police the occupation.

It was all meant to be so different. Before Blair’s visit, Britain’s media was filled with speculation over how he would make clear his opposition to Bush’s endorsement of Sharon’s “unilateral separation” plan and his flouting of international law in denying Palestinian refugees the right of return.

There were reports that the British high command in Iraq was unhappy with the brutal and disproportionate response of US troops to the ongoing insurgency. And it was assumed that an embattled Republican administration, facing an imminent pullout of Spanish troops, would be more than ever susceptible to British pressure for a more multilateral, pro-UN axis to the post-war administration of Iraq.

But if anyone was called to heel in the Rose Garden, then it was Bush who did the calling and Blair who obeyed his master’s voice. Instead of Blair being encouraged by the difficulties facing Bush to assert a modicum of independence, it had the opposite effect. As far as Blair was concerned, Bush’s crisis was his own and must be resolved at any cost.

The British media’s verdict on Blair’s performance was fairly uniform. Most commentators expressed their disappointment at a lost opportunity and concluded that Blair had been weakened by the experience. Few, however, offered any explanation that went beyond an exposition of the prime minister’s personal failings.

There is indeed a strong element of personal self-interest driving Blair to back up Bush regardless. There are few occasions in history where the personal fates of two political leaders have become so intertwined. Blair is justified in his belief that any humiliation suffered by Bush, whether in Iraq or domestically, will hit him just as hard. He staked his entire reputation on his support for Washington’s illegal and unprovoked war

against Iraq, in the face of overwhelming public opinion and opposition. Unless the uprising by the Iraqi people is crushed, Washington and London will be driven out and their claim to have carried out a popular and democratic change of regime will be exposed as a lie—just as their claims of Iraq’s threat to world peace have been.

Blair has already seen the scalp of Prime Minister Jose Aznar taken as a result of mass anti-war sentiment in Spain. This occasioned a headline in the *Economist* magazine that read, “One down, two to go.”

He is also anxious to safeguard the Bush presidency because of his wholesale adoption of untrammelled and unrestrained pro-big-business economic and social policies associated with the “American model.”

Blair is a man who must wake up every morning embarrassed by the fact that he still heads a party with the name Labour in its title. There is nothing vaguely social democratic about New Labour. It is a right-wing vehicle whose policies echo those of Bush, Italian Premier Silvio Berlusconi and the little-mourned Aznar. If Bush falls, Blair fears his own domestic policies will also be questioned—not because the Democrats offer any real alternative, but because the American people would have delivered a blow to the myth of the omnipotence of the right wing.

It is historically unprecedented that a Labour leader has made no attempt to register support for a Democratic presidential candidate. But not only has Blair pointedly failed to meet with Senator John Kerry, there have also been no statements of support or offer of assistance extended to him by Labour.

However, pointing out these considerations on Blair’s part fails to explain why his orientation to Washington is the dominant position within ruling circles in Britain.

Blair is the representative of a definite foreign policy strategy. British imperialism lost its preeminent world role to the US at the beginning of the twentieth century. But the full nature of its eclipse by its transatlantic rival was made clear in the aftermath of the Second World War. America became the dominant Western superpower, and no other European power or combination of European powers, within the context of the Cold War, was in a position to challenge it. Britain’s last attempt to do so during the Suez crisis in 1956 ended in abject humiliation.

The perceived wisdom in ruling circles was that it was imperative for Britain to maintain a strategic alliance with the US by offering itself as America’s greatest friend in Europe, and in this way strengthening its hand against its major European competitors, Germany and France.

Blair came to power under conditions in which the ability to pursue this delicate balancing act between Europe and America had been objectively undermined by the collapse of the Soviet Union. Hitherto, the US had felt restrained from too aggressively asserting its hegemony by the existence of the Soviet Union as an alternative world power, and also as a example that there could be a social and political alternative to Western capitalism. Therefore, it was ready to compromise with Europe and Japan to preserve

a united front within the NATO framework.

The 1990s saw a growing tendency towards America's assertion of its role as a global hegemon within a now unipolar world. This was already evident when Blair took office in 1997, and he responded by seeking the closest possible relations with the Clinton administration. He still could combine this with an orientation towards Europe, particularly under conditions in which the Clinton administration continued to place its faith in its ability to dominate multilateral institutions such as the UN rather than dispense with them.

The coming to power of Bush in the stolen presidential election of 2000 was a sea change for British imperialism. The Bush administration represented an extreme right-wing tendency within the US bourgeoisie that had concluded it was time to assert American might in a direct challenge to Europe and Japan, and that was not prepared to work through the old post-war mechanisms.

Blair drew the necessary conclusions. More than any other world leader, he bowed before Bush's threat in the run-up to the war against Iraq. "You are either with us or against us." Though not formally abandoning Britain's economic orientation towards Europe, Blair insisted that the need to maintain good relations with Washington over-rode all other considerations.

This primary political calculation was dressed up in all sorts of caveats and high-sounding rhetoric. It was deemed essential in order to combat the threat posed by terrorism and "failed states" in a globally interdependent world. America, whatever its failings, was still "the world's most powerful democracy" and could be used as a force for good. The fact that Blair was considered a loyal ally gave him the standing necessary to act as a voice of reason and conciliation that would be listened to by Washington. He could argue against the hardline unilateralists within the Pentagon and the White House and help strengthen the "multilateralists," as typified by Secretary of State Colin Powell.

There is every reason to believe that Blair actually believed most of this hyperbole and that others within ruling circles in Britain and even Europe also hoped it was true.

Aside from such delusions, Blair could in any event base himself on new and powerful elements within the bourgeoisie whose considerations were of a far more pragmatic character: forces who are not particularly concerned with whether or not an alliance with Washington served the interests of Britain—as some unified entity with a single national interest—but whether it served their own.

Typifying this layer is Rupert Murdoch, whose News International stable is the main backer for Blair in Britain, and who is one of the chief supporters of Bush in the US. He speaks for a super-rich oligarchy that has risen to preeminence in the last two decades and that dictates the policies of governments all over the world—nowhere more directly than in the US and Britain.

The old voices within the circles of power have been eclipsed by Blair and his immediate coterie, not because of a superior vision but because of their greater readiness to translate the demands of the oligarchy into government policy. To this end, Blair has been willing to marginalise the civil service and replace it with his own team of advisers. He has drafted businessmen directly into government, whilst sidelining his own party and even his cabinet.

More fundamentally, during the run-up to the Iraq war, he proclaimed his absolute indifference to public opinion and declared that his policy was dictated by what he considered morally correct. This vainglorious boast of personal infallibility only hides the degree to which Blair has no independence from the oligarchy.

It is only by understanding the real base of support for Blair's government that one can understand his readiness to accept every diktat emanating from the White House. Blair's government, like Bush's, operates as a conspiracy against the interests of the broad mass of working

people, at home as well as abroad. Its policies are shaped exclusively by the drive of a semi-criminal financial elite to seize control of the world's resources and thereby add to their already fabulous wealth.

It was an interesting coincidence that just two days after Blair's visit to Washington, Britain's *Sunday Times* published its annual list of the richest people in the UK. The wealthiest of these was the Russian oligarch Roman Abramovich, with £7.5 billion. Many others were either foreign capitalists or people who had accrued their fortunes by exploiting the destruction of the welfare state and the privatisation drive under successive Conservative and Labour governments. Collectively, their fortunes had risen by 30 percent in just 12 months, at a time when the bulk of the working class is suffering increased hardship and debt.

These layers look to Blair to ensure continued British participation in the occupation of Iraq, support for any other militarist adventure decided on by Washington, and a continuation of the anti-welfare, low-corporate-taxation regime that safeguards their riches. They are backed up by numerous hangers-on drawn from the upper echelons of the middle class who share a desire for self-enrichment and contempt and fear of the masses below. It is from these forces that the Blair government is staffed. Hence, the deafening silence from Labour's backbenches in response to the US repression in Iraq and to the carte blanche provided by Washington to Sharon.

Outside the immediate environs of the Labour Party, no section of the ruling class offers any alternative to Blair's policies. From within official political circles, there is no one who offers a principled alternative to Blair's war-mongering and anti-social domestic agenda. It is this absence of opposition, rather than any inherent strength or broad political support, that enables Blair to remain in power.

The dangers this poses to the working class were made manifest by the obscene spectacle that took place on the White House lawn. Blair has already shed the blood of thousands of innocent men, women, and children in Iraq and transformed Britain into a playground for the rich. He has now made clear that he will stick by Bush in his plans to bloodily suppress the Iraqi masses and in whatever other criminal imperialist adventure he decides to undertake—whether in the Occupied Territories or elsewhere in the Middle East.

This must act as a wake-up call to working people, alerting them to the necessity to build an independent political leadership to challenge Blair's government and take up a successful struggle against militarism and war.



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