

# Students for Social Equality hold rally and meeting at University of Michigan

A correspondent  
14 April 2004

Students for Social Equality (SSE) held a rally and public meeting at the University of Michigan on April 12 to mobilize students, teaching staff and campus workers to oppose the bloody violence now being unleashed against the Iraqi people and to demand the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of all US troops. The SSE is affiliated to the Socialist Equality Party.

The rally, which was organized on short notice and held at the Diag, a central meeting point outside the university's main library, attracted up to 50 students who listened intently during the 40-minute demonstration.

Leading SSE member Joe Tanniru opened the rally, declaring: "We are here to say loudly and firmly that this policy is not our policy, that these actions are not our actions, and that this government, which purports to act in our interests does not. We are here to say to the government of the United States, to the American people, who increasingly oppose this war, to the US soldiers who are being forced to kill and be killed, and to the people of Iraq, who are waging a desperate struggle against a colonial power—that we oppose this war!"

Tanniru explained that, contrary to White House and media claims that the resistance represented an isolated minority, a mass insurgency was under way in Iraq. This movement transcended religious and sectarian divisions and was determined to end the US-led occupation.

"The American military is responding to this uprising with overwhelming force," he continued, "to intimidate and cower the Iraqi people into submission, and kill a great number of them. Perhaps Brigadier General Mark Kimmitt expressed the thought and outlook of the American ruling establishment best when he said of the opposition in the predominantly Sunni city of Fallujah that they have two choices 'submit or die.'"

Tanniru repeated the three main reasons given by the Bush administration to justify its invasion of Iraq: weapons of mass destruction, alleged connections between Al Qaeda and the Hussein regime, and to "free the Iraqi people of a brutal dictator and pave the way for democracy."

He said that all of these justifications had been exposed over the past year as boldfaced lies, and that "the revolt of the Iraqi people is giving the lie to the last of the administration's justifications for the war: that it was a war waged for democracy and freedom." The truth was, he continued, that the war was unleashed to seize Iraqi oil and establish US control over the Middle East. "It is, in short, a war of empire."

Tanniru outlined some of the basic principles on which opposition to the war should be developed: the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of all US and foreign troops; the prosecution of the Bush administration for war crimes; and the redirection of the vast resources now being used to subjugate Iraq to be used instead to raise the living standards of working people in the US and the rest of the world and lay the basis for genuine worldwide cooperation and social equality.

Millions of people around the world have demonstrated their opposition to the policies of colonialism and war over the past year, Tanniru said.

"This movement must continue and must achieve a coherent and articulate voice, a voice of opposition. We cannot allow the political establishment to determine the acceptable limits of public debate. It is to the furthering of this end that we have called this rally."

SSE member Alex Wolfe told the rally that the Iraqi masses were engaged in a legitimate and broad-based struggle against the occupying forces, and that divisions were fading between Sunni and Shiite.

US military forces, he said, were being directed to carry out the sort of reprisals and atrocities that were used by the Nazis during World War II, crimes that were prosecuted in the Nuremberg Trials.

"We have seen over the past year what Iraq, run by the US, looks like. It is a country where there is over 50 percent unemployment, spiraling crime and the organized looting of public funds by politically connected corporations such as Halliburton and Bechtel. We cannot allow the massacre of Iraqis and coalition troops to continue with barbarous objectives. The Iraqi uprising has confirmed the correctness of the slogan: 'All US troops out of Iraq.'"

One other student told the rally that he was deeply concerned about the hundreds of Iraqis killed by American troops, and said the immediate goal should be to unite University of Michigan students and show them that they had a role to play in the antiwar movement.

Jerry White was the final speaker at the rally. White is the Socialist Equality Party candidate for the 15th Congressional District in Michigan; he is running against Democrat John Dingell, who has been in Congress since 1955.

White said that massive military repression against the Iraqi people over the past weeks had produced a "widespread feeling of revulsion throughout America and deepened antiwar opposition." But this sentiment, he noted, could "find no expression through official political channels, including the 2004 presidential election itself."

"There is deep and legitimate hatred against the war and the criminal lies of the Bush administration. But what is John Kerry saying? Has he denounced the mass murder being carried out in the name of the American people? Has he really supported the troops by demanding that they be immediately withdrawn from Iraq and taken out of harm's way?"

"Forced to address the recent events there during a speech on the economy last week, Kerry declared, 'No matter what disagreements over how to approach the policy in Iraq—and we have some—we're all united as a nation in supporting our troops and ultimately in our goal of a stable Iraq.'"

"What cowardice! Kerry, who got his political start as head of a group called Vietnam Veterans Against the War, knows full well that the 'support' that most troops stuck in Iraq want is to get home.

"The Democratic Party's main criticism of the Bush administration is that the latter has failed to commit sufficient resources to the occupation. This is what John Dingell, the congressman representing the Ann Arbor district, has stated."

"And what of the 'stability' Kerry wants in Iraq?" White asked. "The

same stability the US has sponsored with its backing of Israeli repression, the dictatorships that rule Saudi Arabia, Egypt and other countries, and when it supported Saddam Hussein.”

White said that the US invasion of Iraq was not “a matter of a mistaken policy” but part of a wider imperialist strategy to try and overcome the deep-going economic problems confronting American capitalism. “The US is seeking to use its military might to dominate the oil-rich Middle East and prevent the emergence of any formidable economic and military challenge to its policy of world domination,” he said.

White said that American students and working people had no interest in sacrificing their lives and livelihoods for this neo-colonial agenda being advanced by the White House. On the contrary, he concluded, working people were “coming into direct struggle against the ruling elite, which is responsible for the war and the growing social inequality in America. That struggle, however, must find a new political channel. That is the purpose of my campaign and that of SEP presidential candidate Bill Van Auken. We call on all of you to support this campaign to build a new political movement of working people against war and for social equality.”

Postgraduate student Dan Brooks told the *World Socialist Web Site* reporters after the rally that he came to the demonstration to voice his support for the withdrawal of troops. “I’m also concerned about the fact that American troops have killed over 600 people in reprisal for the death of four US contractors. This is completely disproportionate.

“I opposed the war from the beginning. For me the situation in Iraq is a disaster, and America has no special right to be there or to be in charge over the rights of the Iraqi people,” he said.

“I’m not going to vote for Kerry,” he added. “It doesn’t seem as if Kerry’s position will differ all that much from Bush, and if he gets into office, I don’t think there is going to be any real change.

David Alonso from Spain said that he wanted more people “brought together against the war.” “In Spain there was great opposition to the invasion of Iraq, and in the end this was fruitful because it meant the government was voted out. This shows that it is necessary to develop a strong opposition against the government,” he said.

“A country like the US, where there is no representation of the opposition to the war, makes me sad. To some extent, there is a lack of hope that you can do anything in the US, but this pessimistic attitude can change. People who come to rallies like this are important and must begin to develop a movement that shows that not only are we against war but we are also for peace,” he said.

At 7 p.m. that evening, the SSE held a meeting at the Michigan League to further discuss developments in Iraq and the political program required to develop a viable opposition to imperialist war. Patrick Martin, a member of the *World Socialist Web Site* editorial board, addressed the gathering, explaining the widespread character of the Iraqi resistance and the response of the US ruling elite and mass media to it.

“It is ludicrous to dismiss the rebellion in Iraq, as the Bush administration routinely does, as the work of a handful of Saddam loyalists, Al Qaeda terrorists and Shiite extremists. This is a mass popular revolt, involving hundreds of thousands in both the Sunni- and Shia-populated areas of the country, and uniting Iraqis across religious sectarian lines in a common nationalist movement against the occupation.”

He cited several press accounts of the fraternization of Shia and Sunni Iraqis, including a huge rally on April 9 of 200,000 people, mainly Shiites, at the biggest Sunni mosque in Baghdad. This demonstration went virtually unreported in the US media.

The dimensions of the uprising had transformed the position of the US occupation forces, creating real military difficulties for the Pentagon. If resistance continues at the level of the first two weeks in April, he said, this would require a massive counter-mobilization involving as many as 500,000 American troops, something that the present volunteer army was

incapable of supplying.

“That is why an editorial this weekend in the *New York Times*—a newspaper which initially opposed the invasion of Iraq and criticized the Bush administration’s policy—suggests that the American public would support an effort to ‘bolster the desperately straitened military with a draft’ if Bush would only make the case for it.”

Martin noted that in a speech that day, Democratic presidential candidate John Kerry had called for the establishment of national service for young people: “Of course, he sought to present this as a reform, a measure tied to increased federal aid to pay for college tuition, in return for which young people would agree to two or three years of service. What would begin by requiring work as a teacher or on public infrastructure could easily become a requirement of military service in case of need.”

Martin traced how the massive antiwar upsurge of early 2003 was channeled into the Democratic Party, through the campaign of Howard Dean for the presidential nomination. “Thousands of youth, college students and middle-class people angered by the launching of war against Iraq turned their energies to supporting a candidate who claimed to oppose the war. But the outcome of this effort was the elimination of the issue of the war from the 2004 presidential campaign, as both parties support the continued occupation of Iraq, and the selection of a Democratic presidential candidate, Senator Kerry, who criticizes Bush largely from the right, calling for more troops in Iraq, pushing back the June 30 deadline for handing over sovereignty, and now a plan for national service, which is the first step to restoration of the draft.”

Martin cited Kerry’s recent statements, warning of the dangers of a “failed Iraq.” He noted press accounts of Kerry’s network of foreign policy advisers, who were described by the *Los Angeles Times* as “more hawkish than most Democrats,” including former Clinton administration officials Richard Holbrooke and Sandy Berger; Senator Joseph Biden of Delaware, the most pro-war Democrat on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee; and Republican senators like Chuck Hagel and John McCain. All of these supported the US military intervention in Bosnia and Kosovo as well as the bombing of Serbia and Iraq by Clinton.

Martin pointed to Kerry’s history as the leader of Vietnam Veterans Against the War, coming to national prominence in a televised appearance in April 1971 before a Senate committee. “Kerry spoke passionately about the atrocities carried out by US forces in Vietnam,” he said. “Now he is only a few months away from being in a position to order American soldiers to carry out similar atrocities against the people of Iraq.

“This demonstrates that the issue is not one of individuals, as the advocates of ‘Anyone but Bush’ claim, but rather of the system which is the cause of such wars—American imperialism. Our task is not merely to replace Bush with another representative of the ruling elite, but to build an independent political movement of the working class that is opposed to the entire system of imperialism which both the Democrats and Republicans represent.”

The meeting concluded with further discussion on the record of the Democrats, the international reaction to the uprising in Iraq, the recent Spanish elections, and the deepening opposition to the Howard government in Australia over its refusal to withdraw Australian troops from Iraq.



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