Australia: SEP public meetings discuss Iraq war

Our reporter
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The Socialist Equality Party (Australia) held two successful public meetings in Sydney and Melbourne this week. The purpose of the meetings, entitled "The Iraq war and the international working class," was to draw out the significance of the imperialist attack on Iraq, and the necessity for an internationalist and socialist perspective.

The meetings drew a diverse crowd of workers and students, as well as SEP supporters and readers of the *World Socialist Web Site*. The Sydney meeting, held on May 30, was chaired by Linda Tenenbaum, assistant national secretary of the SEP.

In her opening remarks, Tenenbaum noted that 14 months after the occupation of Iraq had commenced, all of the purported justifications for the war had collapsed. Far from liberating the Iraqi people, the occupying forces had been revealed as torturers and thugs. The extraordinary debacle faced by the US and its allies in Iraq was a product of deep-rooted contradictions in the global capitalist system.

James Conachy, staff writer for the WSWS and leading SEP member, then provided a comprehensive overview of events inside Iraq since the eruption of the national uprising in March. Conachy explained that the US provoked the uprising when it shut down the newspaper of radical Shiite cleric Moqtada al-Sadr, and arrested his deputy. At the same time, US forces laid siege to the predominantly Sunni town of Fallujah.

"As was later made clear in the statements by American commanders," Conachy said, "the intention of the assault on Fallujah was to inflict such death and destruction on its people that it would become a symbol, not of resistance, but of what happens to those who stand in the way of US imperialism. The same Nazi-like conception of reprisal and terror lay behind the crackdown on the movement led by Moqtada al-Sadr."

But this attempt to terrorise the Iraqi people into submission had badly backfired. The repression only fuelled resistance, resting on the most oppressed layers of Iraqi society. "The class composition of those fighting the occupation is undeniable," Conachy explained. "Above all, it is the working class and urban poor. It is this social layer that has suffered the greatest under both the once-US-backed Baathist regime and the 13 years of US wars, bombing raids and economic sanctions. It is also the class with everything to gain, and nothing to lose, from the defeat of the occupation."

Conachy emphasised that the national uprising had decisively exposed the Bush administration's lie that the Iraqi resistance was solely composed of isolated "Baathist remnants" and foreign terrorists. The close cooperation and solidarity between the Shiite and Sunni resistance belied the self-serving arguments that civil war would engulf Iraq if the US forces were to pull out.

The main speaker at both the Sydney and Melbourne meetings was SEP national secretary Nick Beams. Beams is a leading authority on Marxist political economy and a member of the WSWS International Editorial Board.

Beams began his report by emphasising the significance of the internecine warfare now engulfing the US political establishment, with bitter recriminations exchanged over the disaster in Iraq. "It would take a master dramatist of the calibre of Shakespeare to undertake an artistic depiction of the intrigues and conflicts now unfolding in Washington," the speaker said. "Shakespeare himself would soon find his bearings, recognising in the present-day cast of characters many of the social types he brought to life.

"And if the name of Shakespeare comes to mind as we consider the scene in Washington it is because there are certain parallels between his time and ours. He wrote in a period of great turmoil and political upheaval in the old state structures, arising from the impact upon them of vast economic changes following the discovery of the New World and the opening up of new trading ventures.

"No less today, the crisis of the Bush regime is rooted in the vast changes taking place in the very structure of world capitalism—in many ways the culmination of processes which began in Shakespeare's time—but which have now come into conflict with the old political framework."

Beams went on to explain the historic significance of the revelations of torture inside US-run prisons in Iraq and Afghanistan. The publication of the photographs from inside Abu Ghraib prison, he said, had ripped off what Leon Trotsky once called the "pacifist mask" of US imperialism.

"The torture of the prisoners is not an isolated incident, but a product of the war itself—the lies upon which it was founded, and the designation of the enemy as somehow less than human—subhuman or Untermensch, as the Nazis would have put it," Beams said.

The speaker went on to demonstrate the parallels between the present course of US imperialism and the expansionist foreign policy of Germany in the 1930s. In both cases, what underlay the wars of aggression was a desperate attempt to overcome the contradiction between the nation-state system and the international character of production through the aggressive assertion of global

hegemony.

The war against Iraq, Beams explained, was driven by the need to exclude America's European and Russian rivals from controlling Iraq's oil industry. This strategy had bipartisan support in the US, with the Democrats and Republicans only differing on tactical matters. The speaker highlighted the reactionary positions of John Kerry on the Iraq war, and the significance of the support the Democrat nominee has received from various radicals, such as Noam Chomsky and Michael Moore.

In opposing the eruption of US imperialism, Beams emphasised that war could not be separated from the social and economic system that gave rise to it. What was required was the development of an independent political movement of the international working class against capitalism. The struggle of the masses in both the advanced capitalist countries and the oppressed nations was the most decisive factor in the historical process. The outcome of the coming political upheavals depended, above all, on the construction of a revolutionary leadership grounded in the political lessons of the twentieth century. That was the task to which the SEP and WSWS were dedicated.

Both meetings concluded with a number of questions and a lively discussion. In Melbourne, issues raised included why the Abu Ghraib photographs had been published in the media, the US takeover of Iraqi oil and the threat of state-sponsored provocations in the lead up to the US and Australian elections.

In Sydney, Bob Gould, a well known anti-war activist in the 1960s and long-time political opportunist, demanded to know whether the SEP would advise the working class to favour the Labor Party in the coming election. He argued that because opposition leader Mark Latham supported the withdrawal of Australian troops from Iraq, Labor, as the "lesser evil" of the two major parties, should be supported by the SEP.

Coming after a comprehensive analysis of the international significance of the Iraq war, Gould's preoccupation with the Australian election highlighted the narrow, nationalist basis of his politics.

In his response, Nick Beams made clear that the SEP would not provide the Labor Party with any form of support. All of the parties of the political establishment were bourgeois parties, he explained. The differences between the government and Labor on questions of foreign policy and Iraq were tactical, and not principled. Labor leader Mark Latham's call for Australian troops to be withdrawn by Christmas was not motivated by any genuine opposition to the war in Iraq. Rather, he explained, Labor argued that Australia's "national interests" would be better prosecuted with the deployment of more troops in East Timor, Solomon Islands, and other areas in the immediate region.

The perspective of "lesser evilism" defended by Gould had had disastrous effects on the Australian, and international, working class, Beams said. The political trap and dead end of Laborism and trade unionism could only be overcome through the establishment of the political independence of the working class.

Another audience member asked about the SEP's previous position on the question of the Labor Party. Beams noted that in the past, masses of workers had actively participated in the running of the Labor Party, which was believed by many to be fighting for socialism. In these circumstances, the Socialist Labour League, predecessor of the SEP, had given critical support to Labor in elections, and placed a number of demands on the leadership.

All of these tactical measures were designed to expose the Labor "lefts" and to demonstrate the necessity for workers to build a new party based on a revolutionary and internationalist program. The Trotskyist movement had supported the Labor Party "as a rope supports a hanging man," as Lenin had once put it.

The experiences of the working class with right-wing federal and state Labor governments had fundamentally altered the relationship between the working class and the Labor Party. As one young person in the audience noted in response to Gould, illusions that the Labor Party represented some kind of progressive alternative were largely confined to those layers of the generation that first became politically conscious in the 1960s. Young workers and students did not share this conception.

Linda Tenenbaum explained that these altered political relationships expressed deep-rooted shifts in the global economy. Globalisation had shattered the Labor Party's perspective of national reformism and the social basis of the trade union bureaucracy's domination of the workers' movement. The SEP, as the Australian section of the International Committee of the Fourth International, was now directly engaged in the struggle to win the leadership of the working class.

A number of Iraqi migrants attended the meetings. One, a factory worker originally from Karbala, spoke with the WSWS following the Melbourne meeting. "I left Iraq in 1991 and stayed in a refugee camp in Saudi Arabia as I opposed the government," he said. "All of my family is in Iraq and I went there eight months ago. All of the destruction is terrible. All communications are destroyed.

"I thought that Iraq did have WMD. But who gave the weapons to Hussein? Many people were initially happy when the US came. But they are not happy now. America is destroying everything. They know that the US is there for the oil. The US continually intimidates people. I know of one man who simply went to the supermarket and was shot dead.

"If America were a free country it would not do all of this. I see the US doing the same things as Hussein. If they were there to protect the people they wouldn't need to torture or hurt the Iraqi people. We have continually told them to leave Iraq, as we would like to rebuild the country."