

London meeting: European elections “a sea change in political life”

Paul Mitchell
18 June 2004

The International Committee of the Fourth International’s intervention into the European elections, which focused on the standing of a slate of candidates by the Partei fur Soziale Gleichheit (PSG) in Germany, concluded with a public meeting in London on June 13.

Although the results had not been announced, chairman Julie Hyland, a member of the *World Socialist Web Site*’s International Editorial Board, told the meeting that the elections were characterised by two processes: widespread abstentions, combined with a powerful protest against the ruling parties in most countries. This had already been seen in the local elections in England held June 10, which saw Prime Minister Tony Blair’s Labour Party crashing into third place nationally.

Elaborating on the political significance of Blair’s defeat, Chris Marsden, national secretary of the Socialist Equality Party in Britain and *World Socialist Web Site* International Editorial Board member, said that it was the most developed form of the mass repudiation of the political criminals who led the Iraq war since the defeat of Aznar’s Popular Party in Spain earlier this year.

The slump in Labour’s vote confirmed the thoroughgoing character of the transformed relationship between the working class and its old organisations. Processes that have been maturing for years have now assumed a finished expression, he added.

Marsden explained that although it had been many years since workers believed that Labour was a vehicle for socialism, even in 1997 and 2001 there were many who still saw Labour as more progressive than the Tories. Now feeling betrayed by Labour, these layers used the elections to make this known.

In the elections, Labour slipped to third place in terms of share of the vote, the first time a party in government had done so. The party lost more than 460 councillors and control of seven councils, mainly in its industrial heartland.

Marsden said Blair’s hopes of a Labour revival were based on a presumed softening of public opposition, following the so-called transfer of sovereignty in Iraq and Labour’s domestic economic “success”.

On both scores, Marsden suggested, the government was building castles in the air.

The roots of the violent eruption of American imperialism have a more profound cause—the desperate attempt by the US to resolve the contradiction between world economy and the nation state by exerting its hegemony over all other imperialist powers.

In its drive for world hegemony, however, Marsden pointed out, the US bourgeoisie had miscalculated the depth of opposition by the working masses of Iraq and the entire world. This was having a devastating effect on the Bush administration, the Blair government and British imperialism.

Marsden explained how Blair saw his central task as accommodating US aggression, even if it meant alienating his European partners. He acted as a pro-American power broker and an alternative voice to the German-French axis within the European Union.

Blair is the political creature of a financial oligarchy that looks to US

military might as the guarantor of its right to plunder the globe and will not brook any retreat on Iraq or on right wing economic and social policies, Marsden said.

The elections, he continued, have confirmed that there is no government in Europe today that enjoys less popular support than Blair’s. From its inception the antiwar movement in Britain took the form of a mass political mobilisation against the government that fed on the bitterness felt about falling living standards and gutted social provisions.

After a quarter century of constant attacks, there is no other European country in which the old welfare state has been so effectively destroyed as it has in Britain, Marsden said. Consequently nowhere else has the divorce between the working class and its old institutions taken a more finished form.

Events, Marsden concluded, have demonstrated that it is not possible to implement policies shaped exclusively by the demands of the oligarchy and still maintain a viable social base for democratic government. Marsden said comments by political commentator Polly Toynbee in the *Guardian* on June 4 fully expressed the divorce between the political establishment and the working class.

In an article entitled “Voting’s too good for ‘em”, Toynbee contrasted the “noble” Labour politicians, such as Foreign Secretary Jack Straw, with an electorate she described as “wallowing in willful ignorance and bitter prejudice.” Toynbee, Marsden explained, is the model of the narrow, self-satisfied and prosperous petty bourgeois layer on which the government rests, expressing its hostility to the mass of the population.

Marsden noted that the majority of the population survived only because of cheap credit facilities. He described how British households and businesses now owe banks and other creditors as much as the total external debt of Africa, Asia and Latin America put together.

Once the bubble bursts, the simmering social and political resentments expressed in the election results must take on ever more explosive forms, Marsden emphasised. Such a development of the class struggle must take the form of a political rebellion against the old workers’ organisations and must be animated by an independent political perspective and leadership, he added.

Marsden explained that the central aim of the International Committee of the Fourth International was to provide a programme on which the working class could take forward the struggle against militarism and the destruction of its living standards. Only by educating a wide layer of socialist workers and youth, who are capable of leading millions more in the struggle against capitalism, could there be an end to national divisions.

The European Union could not overcome national divisions, prevent war or offer an alternative to Washington. From its very beginning the EU project had been determined by the economic and political requirements of the dominant sections of the European ruling elite. All sections of this elite were agreed on the need to create a vast internal market with an abundant supply of cheap labour, where expensive social provisions were eliminated, and there was unrestrained exploitation of Europe’s workers

by the major corporations.

Europe also shared an interest with US imperialism in a renewed drive for colonial conquest. The readiness of so-called anti-war critics such as Germany's Gerhard Schroeder and French President Jacques Chirac to ally themselves with Bush proved first of all that they wanted only to be junior partners in such criminal adventures, and secondly, that the ruling elites would always unite against any common threat from the workers and peasants.

Marsden insisted that the United Socialist States of Europe was the only means of uniting Europe in a progressive and harmonious fashion and creating a powerful counterweight to American imperialism that would inspire the peoples of the world.

This theme was taken up by the second speaker at the London meeting—Uli Rippert, national secretary of the PSG in Germany and also a member of the International Editorial Board of the *World Socialist Web Site*. Rippert headed the PSG slate in Germany for the European election.

Rippert said the unity of the working class was not just about solidarity in strikes and demonstrations, but the development of a perspective in the working class based on assimilating the lessons of the twentieth century and the role of the Fourth International in it.

The war in Iraq had deepened the crisis of the Bush administration in the US and made an enormous impact in Europe. Although the European powers argued with the US over the plunder of Iraq—about who should benefit and how it should be done—they all agreed that US imperialism was the master. And when the US suffered a setback, as in the battle for Fallujah, then all the imperialist powers realised they were in deep trouble.

Rippert pointed out how the sixtieth anniversary of the Normandy landings in World War II and the funeral of former US President Ronald Reagan's were transformed into occasions for the American and European bourgeoisie to declare their common interests.

It would be wrong to conclude, Rippert said, that in their declarations of unity they have overcome their differences. These differences have very deep and objective roots that cannot be overcome with one glass of champagne.

The project of European unification, Rippert reminded his audience, was very much an American project from its inception in the 1950s. The US promoted the collaboration of France and Germany in a bid to open up the European market, build its car industries and prosecute a joint struggle against the Soviet Union during the Cold War. American money helped support the development of less developed areas.

Rippert said that the EU project had changed following the breakup of the Soviet Union. The EU more and more resembled a police state as it pushed through social cuts and the contradictions that gave rise to two world wars have not been resolved, he added. Each nation had its own ideas on unity—the British want to torpedo French and German collaboration, Germany seeks to dominate Europe and France was trying to curb Germany.

Rippert told the audience how a German trade union leader recently launched an unprecedented and ferocious attack on the French government for being nationalist and self-interested, but then implored the German government to do likewise. He gave an example of how acute the social crisis had become in Germany. As part of its Agenda 2010 "reforms" the government has removed the link between unemployment pay and wages. An unemployed worker would now only receive a means-tested social security benefit. Savings and possessions would have to be sold and family and relatives relied on for survival. They could even be sued for not supporting their relatives financially—whether a child or a parent, or even a grandparent, Rippert added.

The expansion of the EU to include 10 eastern European states on May 1 offered the ruling class a lever to drive down the wages and living conditions in the West even further. With the accession of the new members the EU population had expanded 20 percent, but the GDP had

only increased 5 percent. Average income ranged from 200 euros a month in Lithuania and 510 euros in Hungary, compared to 2,000 euros in Germany.

Rippert noted the real support for a socialist party to get on the ballot in Germany. At same time, he explained, there was still enormous political confusion about a Marxist perspective and the Fourth International's insistence that it was totally different from other parties.

Marxism was based not on the invocation of a utopia, but on a scientific understanding that social struggles are driven by deep objective contradictions in the economic foundations of society, he said.

It is not just that the working class was an exploited and downtrodden class, but that it was the only revolutionary force capable of solving society's problems. The Fourth International was different from other parties, Rippert added, because it insisted on the need to educate the working class to be conscious of its tasks and act as an independent political force.

This conception was under attack from the attempt to found a new party in Germany, he explained. Promoters of the new party have declared that it would not be an "explicitly left socialist party, but rather a broad unity" in which there would be no place for "abstract left radicalism" which had "only the revolutionary transformation of capitalism as a perspective".

Describing the revolutionary transformation of capitalism as "garbage", promoters of the new party looked to Social Democracy of the 1970s as a model and have declared that the organisation would not be based on any special principles.

As Rippert commented, there have been all kinds of formations in the past, but this is probably the first time that a party starts off saying it has no principles. The call for a new party was a desperate attempt by sections of the social democracy and the Stalinists to prevent the working class from breaking from the labour bureaucracy, he said.

Rippert then explained the significance of the Socialist Equality Party election campaign in the US. Once possessing the economic power to keep the working class under control, the US had now become the centre of the world crisis. The country that once helped rescue European and world capitalism was now the centre of global instability. The collaboration between the US and European parties of the Fourth International would be of enormous importance over the coming period.

Rippert concluded his report by saying the Fourth International was confident that the *World Socialist Web Site* provided the analysis on which a new world party would be built.

Following the two reports, there were several questions from the audience. In reply to a question about the role of the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP), Marsden said that its role was to shift politics to the right. The UKIP was a Thatcherite party that advocated withdrawal from the EU and the repeal of European Human Rights legislation because it provided limited protection to workers. UKIP's 14 percent of the vote in areas where it stood posed the greatest threat to the Conservative Party, Marsden added.

The speakers also replied to questions on the nature of the Labour Party and the Respect-Unity coalition. The high vote for Respect in the London (City and East) ward was a sign that the Socialist Workers Party-led organisation looked to the Muslim organisations to deliver a bloc vote, Marsden said. Rather than breaking from such organisations as the Muslim Association of Britain, it was bolstering their limited influence and tying workers and youth to them. The low vote for Respect in other industrial areas showed the party was unable to articulate a broader programme that appealed to the working class. Respect was also seeking to channel the antiwar movement back towards the labour bureaucracy through its largely discredited "left" representatives.

Lindsey German of the Socialist Workers Party had called for a second preference vote for London Mayor Ken Livingstone, who was recently readmitted back into the Labour Party after his expulsion. It was pointed

out that Livingstone was widely booed at a recent demonstration against the Iraq occupation.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact