Wellington and Sydney WSWS/ICFI meetings discuss Iraq war and the US, Australian elections

Our reporters
7 September 2004

The International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) and the *World Socialist Web Site* conducted successful public meetings in Sydney, Australia and Wellington, New Zealand in the past two weeks. Entitled "The Iraq war and the 2004 US Elections", the meetings were addressed by Nick Beams, national secretary of the Socialist Equality Party (Australia), and David North, chairman of the WSWS international editorial board and national secretary of the SEP (US).

The meetings were held to assess the international political and historical significance of the upcoming US presidential elections, and to discuss the need for the working class to adopt an internationalist and socialist perspective against war and social reaction. Both events were well attended by young workers and students, readers of the WSWS and supporters of the SEP.

The Wellington meeting, held on August 29, was chaired by the *World Socialist Web Site*'s New Zealand correspondent, John Braddock. He noted that this was the first such event in New Zealand conducted under the auspices of the WSWS. It marked an important step, Braddock said, in the development of the ICFI in that country.

In Sydney on September 5, SEP assistant national secretary Linda Tenenbaum opened the proceedings. She pointed out that since Australian Prime Minister John Howard had announced the federal election a week earlier, the meeting also marked the opening of the Socialist Equality Party's Australian election campaign. It was entirely appropriate that the SEP's campaign begin with a discussion on the Iraq war and the US elections, she declared, because these were the most critical issues confronting working people in every part of the world. The SEP, Tenenbaum said, shared a common international perspective and program with the SEP in the United States and all the sections of the ICFI.

The chairperson then announced the candidates for the SEP in the Australian election: Nick Beams and Terry Cook in the senate in New South Wales; in the House of Representatives, Mike Head in the western Sydney seat of Werriwa, and James Cogan for Kingsford-Smith; in Melbourne, Peter Byrne in the northern seat of Batman.

The keynote speaker at the Sydney and Wellington meetings was David North. In his comprehensive and wide-ranging report, North began by noting that the presidential election was being followed around the world with intense interest. This was motivated by a growing awareness of the global consequences of the ruthlessness and criminality that marked official politics in America.

The recently concluded Republican convention provided a graphic demonstration, the speaker explained, of the extent to which basic concepts of democracy had become entirely alien to the American ruling class. The election of John Kerry would do nothing to alter either the disintegration of bourgeois democracy or the barbaric trajectory of US imperialism. Both the Democrats and the Republicans shared the strategic goal of global US hegemony, with the two parties only disagreeing on the tactical means of how best to achieve this world domination.

Underlying the deepening crisis of the two-party system, North said, was a protracted economic crisis that had seen the decline in US strength relative to its imperialist rivals. This had paralleled the vast changes in the social structure of America.

Using a series of graphs, North illustrated the staggering rise of social inequality over the past three decades. "The extreme levels of wealth concentration and social inequality underlie the breakdown of bourgeois democracy in the United States," he explained. "The vast expansion of police state measures undertaken by the government during the past three years arises not from the so-called 'terrorist threat,' but from the extreme sharpening of social and class tensions within American society."

These contradictions had revolutionary implications. "We are entering into a new period that will be characterised by a growing coincidence of revolutionary class struggle on a world scale. The challenge facing the Marxist movement today is to imbue this world movement with consciousness of its essentially international character, to reanimate it with socialist convictions, and to educate it on the basis of the lessons of the past century. This is the perspective upon which the International Committee of the Fourth International, the *World Socialist Web Site*, and the Socialist Equality Party is basing its intervention in the 2004 election."

In his report, Nick Beams provided an overview of the historic implications of the Iraq war, and the series of crimes committed by the Bush administration and its allies. He drew out the contemporary relevance of the Nuremberg trials of the Nazi war criminals after World War II. As the western prosecutors made clear, the primary charge against the defendants was that they had planned and waged a war of aggression, which was defined as a crime, irrespective of "political, military, economic, or other considerations".

At the centre of Beams' report to the Wellington meeting was a detailed analysis of the predatory nature of the US-led occupation. A series of measures enacted by the now dissolved Coalition Provisional Authority opened up the Iraqi economy to the interests of the US, and carved up Iraq's natural resources for exploitation by major corporations. The speaker highlighted a Christian Aid report issued in June, which described the unrestrained theft of billions of dollars of Iraqi oil money by the occupation authorities.

In Sydney, Beams concentrated on clarifying the program and perspective of the SEP, and the basis of its intervention in the Australian election. He explained that Australia, like the US and other countries around the world, was seeing "the rapid decay of all the norms, standards and institutions of bourgeois democracy."

That the established political parties refused to even mention the Iraq war in their campaigns was significant and revealing. "This is the

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expression of a wider phenomenon. The policies of the ruling classes all over the world are creating one disaster after another. Yet the needs, aspirations, concerns, democratic strivings and interests of the broad mass of the population can find no outlet within the present political set-up.

"The burning issue confronting the working class is to find a way out of this impasse. This is the significance of the election campaign of the SEP in the United States and the intervention by the SEP in the Australian elections. Our campaigns are above all about the development of ideas and discussion, to undertake the re-orientation of the working class on the basis of an internationalist socialist strategy."

Beams explained that the fight for the political independence of the working class precluded any form of support for the Labor Party, the Greens, or any other bourgeois party. Against the positions of the radical protest groups such as the Socialist Alliance, the speaker argued that the election of a Labor government would not in any way advance the interests of the working class.

"The greatest danger facing the working class ... does not come from either the Bush or Howard regimes. The greatest danger facing the working class is that it remains politically trapped within the confines of the rotting parliamentary system, that it does not develop its own independent political response to the great upheavals caused by the breakdown and decay of the capitalist system which is plunging mankind into one disaster after another."

Following the two reports, audience members at both meetings asked the speakers a number of questions, covering a wide range of important issues. These included the ICFI's positions on Islamic fundamentalism, anarchism, Maoism, fascism in the US, and the issues of strategy and tactics in the struggle against imperialism.

In Sydney, David North was asked about the appearance of the extreme right-wing Democrat Senator Zell Miller at the Republican Convention, and the factional divisions within the Democratic Party. In his detailed reply, North assessed the history of the Democratic Party and its relationship with the American working class.

In the course of his reply, North declared that the outcome of the upcoming election remained uncertain, and explicitly warned that there was a real danger that the contest would be resolved by undemocratic means. The possibility could not be excluded, he said, that, in the event of a Kerry victory, the Bush administration would simply refuse to leave office. North stressed that should this happen, the Democrats would immediately adapt themselves to the Republicans' anti-democratic attacks, and mount no popular challenge. In all likelihood, their response would be to resort to the courts. But in any Supreme Court judgment on this question, at least three justices would support the Bush administration remaining in office. North warned that, irrespective of the result in November, there would be a rapid development of political opposition to both the Republicans and Democrats, and a vast change in the political situation in the US.

At the conclusion of the Sydney meeting, the audience donated over $4,000 to the SEP's Election Fund, and several people volunteered to assist the party's campaign. Audience members also purchased the Marxist literature on sale, including copies of the SEP (US) election statement.

WSWS reporters spoke to a number of people at the Sydney meeting. Mohammed Ali, a Fiji-born accountant, learned about the meeting when he had earlier met WSWS campaigners. "My impression is that neither Bush or Kerry can be trusted," he said. "The general public of the US has shown its sentiments against the war in Iraq. If the Socialist Equality Party does take the lead, I'm pretty sure they'll have a considerable amount of support from the American general public... I have learned quite a lot about American politics through David North. He has opened up the ears and minds of all the audience today.

"I think the Iraq war is totally unjustified. The whole world has been betrayed by the fact that the world leaders have not told the truth about the war. It was orchestrated by a handful of people at the top of the Bush administration, therefore they do not enjoy the confidence of the man on the street in the US."

Hayley, a public servant, said that she found two issues in the reports most striking. "The first is that it did clarify in my own mind that in the elections, both in the US and Australia, neither of the major parties are very different from each other. The election of either of them will not make a huge difference to the majority of people.

"The second thing was that for a few years I've known about the polarity of incomes but seeing the graphs that David North showed, there has been a definite change in the distribution of wealth. As the graphs showed, it was something like 3 percent of the wealth for the poorest 20 percent and 80 percent for the richest 5 percent. It was good to have it so clearly demonstrated."

Hayley agreed with the SEP election campaign not calling for the return of a Labor government but for the need to develop socialist consciousness among working people. "It's not going to cause immediate political change as of October 9 but it's going to raise awareness, because ultimately the task for this party at the moment is education. Standing in the election and explaining these things is a good way of starting."

Anouk, a media student, said the meeting was a "real eye-opener". "I was interested in the graphs that David North displayed, showing how the wealth has been monopolised over the years and concentrated increasingly in the hands of the few. That was just one aspect of the meeting.

"I read the WSWS every day, but the quality of the meeting was even better than I expected. This is the best meeting that I have been to. It was very good to hear David North speak because I have read a lot of his articles but never heard him speak before. I thought the way that everything was put into historical context was good."

Asked what he thought of the SEP's opposition to the "left" groups supporting the election of a Labor government, Anouk said these groups were opportunist. "I've always regarded Labor and Liberal as a two-party system, like the Democrats and Republicans in the US, which exists to keep out any independent alternative or perspective. A lot of these other parties do not even see these fundamental problems as systemic, which is a principled point of difference with the SEP. Giving preferences to Labor—what is that going to achieve other than to keep that rotten, decaying political system intact?"

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