

Nick Beams addresses Sydney WSWS/ICFI meeting

The Iraq war and the Australian elections

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We are publishing below Nick Beams' report to the World Socialist Web Site and the International Committee of the Fourth International public meeting in Sydney on September 5. Beams, who is a member of the WSWS International Editorial Board and national secretary of the SEP in Australia is contesting a Senate seat in New South Wales in the forthcoming Australian federal elections.

One of the methods by which the United States has sought to provide some ideological underpinnings for its ever-increasing policy of foreign conquest and colonialism is to demonise its opponents as a kind of reincarnation of Adolf Hitler.

In the first Gulf War in 1990-91 Saddam Hussein was characterised in this way, followed by the Serbian president Slobodan Milosevic in the war against Serbia in 1999. However, any objective examination of the events of the past decade and a half, culminating in the invasion of Iraq, reveals that the real revival of Hitler-style aggression is being carried out by the US and its allies.

It should be recalled that the chief indictment against the Nazis, as the chief US prosecutor Robert Jackson made clear in his opening address at the Nuremberg Trials, was that they waged a war of aggression. A basic provision of the charter governing the conduct of the trials, Jackson pointed out, was that "to plan, prepare, initiate, or wage a war of aggression ... is a crime."

Moreover, he continued, "no political military, economic, or other considerations" could serve as an excuse or justification for such actions, save the exercise of the legitimate right of self-defence.

Jackson insisted that the trials were not "victors' justice" but were based on far-reaching principles. "[L]et me make clear," he said, "that while this law is first applied against German aggressors, the law includes, and if it is to serve a useful purpose it must condemn aggression by any other nations, including those which sit here now in judgment."

The chief prosecutor for the United Kingdom, Sir Hartley Shawcross, commenced his opening remarks by citing the following quote from Hitler: "I shall give a propagandist cause for starting the war, never mind whether it be true or not. The victor shall not be asked later whether he told the truth or not."

Over the past 18 months all the lies which gave the modern-day propagandists cause for starting the war of aggression against Iraq have been exposed. As one conservative American writer noted recently, the efforts of US administration officials, editorialists, television pundits should be "regarded as a case study in the manipulation of mass opinion—comparable, though of course different, to what took place in the mass dictatorships of the 1930s" (Scott McConnell, "Duped by the necons," *The Australian*, July 16, 2004).

The only basis on which the US and its allies, Australia and Britain, could avoid the charge of committing a war crime, on the basis of the precepts established in the trial of the Nazis, was if it could be shown that in some way they were acting in self-defence. But not all the resources of the most powerful governments and armies in the world have been able to

produce any weapons of mass destruction, or any evidence of a link between the Saddam Hussein regime and Al Qaeda.

And the claim that "regime change" was justified because Saddam Hussein was a tyrant who murdered his own people, and that war was necessary to establish democracy and freedom for the Iraqi people and bring a new era of peace and prosperity to the Middle East has been exposed by all the events which have followed.

In the aftermath of the war, however, notwithstanding the exposure of the lies on which it was based, the desperate claim has been advanced that even though no weapons of mass destruction were found the war was nevertheless justified because "everyone" believed at the time that they existed and were ready to be deployed. But these assertions are contradicted by the facts.

In February 2001, the CIA delivered a report to the White House that said: "We do not have any direct evidence that Iraq has used the period since Desert Fox to reconstitute its weapons of mass destruction programs." In a press conference on February 4, 2001, Secretary of State Colin Powell stated that Saddam Hussein "has not developed any significant capability with respect to weapons of mass destruction." National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice stated in a CNN interview on July 29, 2001: "... let's remember that [Saddam's] country is divided, in effect. He does not control the northern part of this country. We are able to keep arms from him. His military forces have not been rebuilt."

Prime Minister John Howard maintains that even though Iraq has been shown to have had no weapons of mass destruction "everybody believed at the beginning of last year that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction" (John Howard, Interview with ABC News Radio August 17, 2004).

That is a lie as well. In fact, the chief UN weapons inspector Hans Blix specifically told Howard on February 11, 2003, that he was not impressed by the so-called intelligence provided to the UN inspectors who had visited most of the sites named by Colin Powell in his now infamous address to the UN Security Council on February 5, 2003, and that "in no case had we found any convincing evidence of prohibited activity."

It is necessary to examine the use of lies and falsification, not from a moral standpoint, but to draw out the political significance of what has taken place. According to the doctrines of liberal bourgeois democracy, which are continually brought forward against the arguments of the socialists, the present order, whatever its imperfections, does at least contain restrictions on the powers of the state. After all, it is argued, even where a government has practised lies and deception it is still possible for the people to vote it out.

It is hard to think of a more important democratic issue than that with which we are presently confronted: the governments of the US, Britain, and Australia launched a war on the basis of state-organised lies and deception. According to liberal democratic theory, these governments should now be made accountable. But what do we find? First of all a series of official reports have been prepared in all three countries which show that although the so-called intelligence was false, no one, least of all

the leaders of the governments involved, is to blame.

Now we have elections in the US and Australia. But instead of the war being at the centre of the election campaign, it is not even on the agenda.

In calling the election last Sunday Howard insisted the central issue would be “trust”—Howard is apparently so steeped in lies that he may as well continue. But when Latham gave his reply on behalf of the Labor Party the war in Iraq and the systematic, state and media organised campaign of lies which preceded it, did not even rate a mention. The greatest issue of “trust” was whether Howard was going to serve out a full term or hand over to Costello.

This situation is not simply a product of the particular individuals. It is the particular, Australian expression, of a universal process—the rapid decay of all the norms, standards and institutions of bourgeois democracy.

In the last election, the political atmosphere was poisoned by the “children overboard” lies and the campaign against refugees. In this election, the systematic campaign of lies used to launch a war of aggression against Iraq has been wiped off the agenda. Just 18 months ago we witnessed the largest demonstrations in the history of this country—part of the international opposition against the launching of the war against Iraq. Yet the war is no part of the election campaign.

This is the 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.

The working class cannot develop its response through any of the existing political mechanisms. David North has explained the attitude of the SEP towards the Democratic Party in the United States. The attitude of the SEP towards the Australian Labor Party is motivated by the same principles. The return of a Labor government in the October 9 election will not represent an advance for the working class. That is why the SEP will not advocate a vote for Labor, either directly or via the preference system.

It might perhaps be argued that while the Democratic Party in the United States is a capitalist party, the ALP was, after all, founded by the trade unions and was sustained by the working class and that therefore a different approach should be adopted.

Such an argument, however, completely ignores the vast changes in the political landscape over the past 20 years. The Labor Party was founded by the unions and for decades it was seen by wide sections of the working class as fighting for its interests. Some Labor members considered themselves socialists and the party, at certain periods in its history, even proclaimed that it had a socialist objective, insisting that while in Russia a revolution might have been necessary, in countries like Australia socialism could be achieved on the parliamentary road.

Notwithstanding its claims to represent the working class and even, at times, its claims to fight for socialism, the ALP throughout its history has been a bourgeois party. It has never advanced a challenge to the capitalist order and, at times of acute crisis for the ruling class has been called into office. But inasmuch as it enjoyed the support of wide sections of the working class and was seen to advance their interests, if not through socialism, then at least by means of reforms to the capitalist system, it was necessary for socialists to develop tactics to expose its real role. Those tactics consisted of offering support for the return of Labor governments and the placing of demands upon the Labor leaderships.

Such tactics, however, were not fixed for all time. They were developed

under specific conditions, which no longer exist.

Over the past two decades the world capitalist economy has experienced sweeping changes which have transformed the political situation confronting the working class. The globalisation of production, made possible by revolutionary advances in technology, has meant that capital has, to an ever-greater extent, been able to escape the clutches of the nation-state. Consequently, the program of Labor reformism, based on using the political power of the state to extract certain concessions from capital, has collapsed.

This was acknowledged by none other than the present leader of the Labor Party Mark Latham in his book *Civilising Global Capitalism* published in 1998. The distinguishing feature of the “old economy,” Latham wrote, was “the way in which the relative immobility of capital brought it under the clear jurisdiction of nations.” But, he continued, that was no longer the case and consequently the old program of Labor reforms and social welfare was no longer viable. It had to be replaced by a system of “individual responsibility.” These conceptions are the ideological underpinning to Latham’s rhetoric about the “ladder of opportunity”.

At the same time Latham insisted that it was still possible for the national state to maintain certain leverage because, while capital was highly mobile, it required the services of skilled workers, especially in hi-tech areas, who were immobile, residing in definite localities and countries. The fallacy of this argument, which was clear at the time it was advanced, has been exposed by one of the most striking economic processes of the recent period—the extent to which hi-tech labour can be transferred around the world. It matters not where a computer programmer lives, the fruits of his or her labour and transferable globally.

All that remains of Latham’s “civilising” program is the operation of the free market, and the destruction of what remains of the old social welfare system under the banner of individual responsibility. This is what has made Latham so attractive to sections of the ruling elites. They were behind his elevation to the leadership of the Labor Party. It did not arise from some upsurge of support from below.

In order to clarify the political axis of the SEP intervention into the election, I should like to examine some of the positions of the various radical tendencies, all of which, in one way or another, are advancing the return of a Labor government.

Consider the editorial in the September 2 edition of the *Socialist Worker*, the paper of the International Socialist Organisation.

“There is so much at stake in this election. A Howard win will mean a further shift to the right in society, demoralising people who have resisted Howard’s attacks and want to see real change. But a Latham win will be a blow to everything Howard has stood for, especially George W. Bush’s re-election campaign and the occupation of Iraq.”

Let us examine these claims. Sections of the radical protest movement eagerly seized on Latham’s off the cuff remarks in a radio interview last March that under a Labor government Australian troops in Iraq would return by Christmas. This provided evidence that the election of Labor would make a real difference and deal a blow to Bush.

In fact, Latham’s remarks were not a statement of policy. That had been determined at the ALP’s national conference in January which decided on support for the occupation. It was even argued, by foreign affairs spokesman Kevin Rudd among others, that Australia had an obligation to support the occupation under international precepts governing the conduct of wars. A perverted logic was in operation: even though the war was illegal, the occupation had to be supported according to the precepts of international law.

Latham’s comments on troop withdrawal generated a deal of publicity and sparked the intervention of members of the Bush administration, starting with Bush himself, to demand that Australia not “cut and run”, but stay and finish the job. In response to these attacks Latham made it

clear that Labor would not say anything which could be regarded as critical of Washington, telling Labor MPs on June 17 that the issue of withdrawal of troops from Iraq was now of “scant interest” to anyone outside parliament.

On July 12 he went further with a speech on Iraq and the war on terror to the Australian Institute of International Affairs. From the beginning he insisted that this was “not a time when the normal rules of domestic politics should apply” and that “the war against terror must be above the partisan considerations of politics.” Given that both the Bush and Howard administrations insist that the occupation of Iraq is the frontline of the “war on terrorism” Latham made it clear that Labor supports its continuation.

Latham insisted that Labor had joined the “war on terrorism” when it offered bipartisan support for invoking the ANZUS Alliance after September 11, and had supported the deployment of Australian military forces to Afghanistan. And in a guarantee for the future he made clear that should another attack occur on the US and an identifiable source were established “we would be prepared to support similar action.”

There was another speech that day, much shorter, but as important as the foreign policy address. This was the announcement that former Labor leader and Defence Minister in the Hawke and Keating governments, Kim Beazley, was returning to the Labor front bench as defence spokesman. The return of “Bomber Beazley”, as he is sometimes known because of his enthusiasm for the military, was a signal to the Bush administration that Labor had heeded the criticism over the previous months.

Two days later in an interview on ABC radio in Bendigo Latham waxed enthusiastic about his new front-bench appointment.

“Kim Beazley is a great expert and has a lot of experience on defence matters. He comes in as our Shadow Minister for Defence. Even Mr Howard has praised Kim Beazley’s contribution in that area. He said he would have him in a war Cabinet. Well, I want to have him in my Cabinet, in a Labor Party Cabinet, because of his expertise. But also he is only of the key decision makers in the 80s and 90s when the [American] Alliance was at its best. His record in that regard is important. That is the Labor way and that’s how we’ll do it in the future.”

Some weeks ago the SEP received a circular letter from the national convenors of the Socialist Alliance concerning the upcoming federal election and the prospect of collaboration in the campaign. The Socialist Alliance, it claimed, was the only socialist organisation standing in the election “with a clear opposition to the policies of this government and any intentions of continuity by the ALP.”

The election policy of the Socialist Alliance is to give preferences to the Greens and then to the Labor Party and to advocate the return of a Labor government. “Another three years of Howard,” according to the Socialist Alliance, “would mean more hardship, less democracy and more submission to ... imperialism.”

But that is exactly the situation which confronts the working class under a Latham-led Labor government. The return of Labor will not, in any way, mean an advance for the working class.

The character of a Latham-led Labor government is not a matter of conjecture. It can be established from an examination of the historical record, which the Socialist Alliance tries to cover up with this claim that it is opposed to any “intentions” of the ALP to continue the policies of Howard.

The real situation is the reverse. The Howard government is the continuity of the program initiated under the Hawke and Keating governments of the 1980s and 1990s.

Labor came to office in 1983 and implemented the “free market” program of financial deregulation which the Liberals, led by Malcolm Fraser with Howard as his Treasurer, were unable to carry out. It was the Labor government which began privatisation, cuts to university education, the introduction of HECS fees and the destruction of trade unions. It was

the Labor government which deployed troops to break the pilots’ strike. It was during the Labor government’s 13-year rule and its Accord that wealth was redistributed up the scale to the highest income earners.

The Labor government, led by Hawke, was one of the very first to offer military support to the Bush I administration as it launched the Gulf War in 1990-91. And there is no doubt that had Labor been in office it would have been among the first to pledge support to the Bush II administration in the war against Iraq.

The protest politics of the Socialist Alliance are summed up in an article in the June 30 edition of the *Green Left Weekly* entitled, “Elections ’04: Throw Howard Out!” According to this article, to challenge the US-Australia alliance, and end participation in the “war on terror” “we need to build a visible, militant mass movement capable of forcing whichever of the pro-corporate parties gets elected to act.” In other words, all the socialist rhetoric aside, protest, provided it is sufficiently large and militant can bring about real advances.

In the end, all the arguments of the radicals come down to the promotion of the theory of the “lesser evil”. Yes they will acknowledge that the Labor Party carries out the demands of the ruling elites. But it represents a “lesser evil” when compared to the Liberals under Howard. In order to combat the dangers facing the working class from a Howard government, it is necessary to work for the return of a Labor government.

The greatest danger facing the working class, however, 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.

The real danger facing the working class is that it is unable to advance its own independent response to war, to mounting social inequality and attacks on democratic rights. It is to meet this danger that the SEP is intervening in this election—to initiate a discussion not over votes, protests, slogans but ideas and the necessary perspective to meet the great challenges, and dangers, which lie ahead.



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