

WSWS holds public meetings in Australia on Asian tsunami disaster

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The *World Socialist Web Site* held two successful public meetings in Australia during the past week to discuss the global political issues raised by the Asian tsunami. Wije Dias, general secretary of the Socialist Equality Party of Sri Lanka, addressed the meetings in Sydney and Melbourne, and was joined in Sydney by WSWS International Editorial Board chairman David North.

Chairing the meeting in Sydney, SEP national secretary Nick Beams noted that broad sections of the population in every country had responded with concern to the tragic events of December 26—a stark contrast to the politicians representing the major powers, who had offered paltry and insulting terms of assistance to the hundreds of thousands of victims, revealing in the process their complete indifference and contempt for the masses. Beams said the most crucial task confronting the working class was to discuss the historical and political issues raised by the disaster and on that basis to elaborate a political alternative for the international working class.

Addressing the Sydney meeting, WSWS International Editorial Board member Peter Symonds pointed to the absence of a tsunami warning system in the Indian Ocean, and demonstrated how the huge death toll from December's tsunami was entirely preventable. In the Pacific Ocean, a hi-tech warning system had been in place since the early 1960s, "capable of rapidly analysing the data and on the basis of computer modelling to issue warnings to areas likely to be hit."

A good example of current technological capacity was the system in Japan: "Some 3,500 earthquake sensors and 180 seismic stations across the country are connected to a network of tidal stations and 80 deep-sea sensors and 24-hour monitoring. A computer program loaded with the results of 100,000 simulations checks the chances of a tsunami and sends out warnings within three to five minutes. Alerts are immediately flashed on TVs and emergency authorities are notified by both landline and backup satellite communication. A series of huge breakwaters and floodgates has been built to protect major harbours and installations."

"None of this exists in the Indian Ocean even though scientists have repeatedly advised about the dangers and urged the construction of a tsunami warning system. As a result, the populations around the coastlines of the Bay of Bengal were caught completely unprepared."

The main speaker, Wije Dias, provided a detailed political overview of the impact of the tsunami on the island nation of Sri Lanka where more than 40,000 people had lost their lives. (His full report will be published tomorrow.)

In opening his Sydney address, Dias noted that February 4 was the 57th anniversary of Sri Lanka's so-called independence from British colonial rule. Yet the devastating effects of the tsunami underscored the country's economic backwardness, its continued economic and political subordination to the great powers and the conditions of abject poverty faced by the workers and oppressed masses throughout the island.

Dias outlined a principled Marxist response to the tsunami disaster, including the party's attitude to humanitarian relief efforts: "We appreciate their work tremendously. However, our main task is to provide the perspective and the program to overcome the drudgery and oppressive social and political conditions that keep the masses enslaved under the moribund capitalist system. As to relief work, we must develop the awareness among the working people that it is the responsibility of the state and the government to provide for the needs of those who are hit by the tsunami."

He elaborated a series of demands, including the immediate allocation of land and houses to all those displaced, monetary compensation to the victims for their loss of income, and a public works program to rebuild all hospitals, schools, roads and communications systems. "The funds must be made available by transferring the money allocated to the war effort and taxing the rich in proportion to the extent of their wealth."

The final speaker in Sydney was WSWS IEB chairman David North. "A great deal has been said about the powerful force of the tsunami: leaping across nations, bringing death and destruction, and that one can only shrug one's shoulders

in despair and say “that’s fate”. North rejected the retrograde ideological outlook implicit in such conceptions.

It was necessary, North insisted, “to restate the foundations and basic conceptions of the socialist movement”. He recalled that in the first half of the twentieth century, the dustbowl conditions which existed in the United States were answered through vast public works programs. “There was a confidence that the means existed to overcome these problems: that where droughts and deserts had existed, irrigation systems could be created.”

North said the visionaries of the socialist movement “argued and believed that man had the capacity to utilise science in a manner which would transform the planet. In these conceptions the socialists were basing themselves on the intellectual spirit initiated, not only in the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century, but even further back, in the Renaissance, which began in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. So why should we really be arguing these points today? The reality is that man has the power and the capacity to deal with all of these problems. The great obstacles to their resolution lie not in nature, but in society.”

“A tsunami,” North pointed out, “is only a qualitative intensification of the disasters which take place day after day. How many thousands of people die each day from AIDS in Africa? How many thousands of young people die throughout the world each day because they don’t have access to clean water and die of dysentery and other primitive diseases which should have been abolished long ago?”

The speaker concluded with a defence of socialism against all forms of irrationality and the blind pursuit of personal wealth, “When the media mouthpieces for big business proclaim that socialism is dead, what are they actually saying? They are saying it is absurd to believe that there is any alternative to principles of social organisation based upon the private accumulation of wealth and the pursuit of profit. There is no alternative to that. You can’t even think about it. It’s impossible. And in proclaiming the death of socialism they’re proclaiming the death of the principle that social planning, the utilisation of reason, of intellect, of science, to conquer all forms of irrationality in our social existence, is inconceivable. Socialism is about the utilisation of science, of man’s insight into the laws of nature and human development, to harness all the forces of nature and of man’s ingenuity, to create a society of true equality, which is the other great principle of the socialist movement.”

At both meetings, audience members addressed a series of questions to Dias concerning the effects of the tsunami, the nature and purpose of aid money donated by the major powers and the perspective of the Socialist Equality Party.

In reply to an audience member who asked whether natural disasters could assist the revolutionary mobilisation of the working class, Dias referred to Leon Trotsky’s book *The Young Lenin*, which reviews an early political dispute between Lenin and various Russian radicals and populists. One such radical, Vodovozov, claimed Lenin failed to participate in relief efforts along with the populists because he believed the famine was fulfilling a progressive historical mission, laying the foundation for Russia’s industrialisation.

Trotsky replied: “Vodovozov’s reminiscences on the subject represent not so much Ulyanov’s [Lenin’s] views as their distorted reflection in the minds of liberals and populists. The idea that ruination and decimation of the peasants could promote industrialisation of the country is too absurd in itself. The ruined peasants became paupers, not proletarians, the famine fed the parasitic not the progressive trends of the economy. The very tendentiousness of Vodovozov’s story however, gives a fair idea of the heated atmosphere of those old controversies.”

Marxists never believe that out of devastation, revolution can emerge, Dias explained. But such devastation had led the masses to look more directly at the nature of the rule they were living under. “In such a situation the task of the Marxists is to analyse and explain to the masses that there exists a socialist alternative to this decadent capitalist system. Only through that intervention can the consciousness of the working class and oppressed masses reach up to the level of forming their own state power.

The meetings raised collections of more than \$1,000 to assist in the development of the work of the SEP and the WSW in Sri Lanka.



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