

Britain: public meetings discuss Hurricane Katrina, the Iraq war and the struggle for socialism

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The Socialist Equality Party in Britain held meetings last week in London, Sheffield and Manchester focusing on the political implications of Hurricane Katrina and the war in Iraq. The following is the text of the speech given by Chris Marsden, SEP national secretary and WSWS editorial board member.

The events surrounding Hurricane Katrina have been burnt into the memory of millions of workers far beyond the shores of the United States.

News footage of desperate and poverty-stricken residents of New Orleans left to their fate for days on end have taken on emblematic significance—exposing not only the casual indifference of the Bush administration towards the suffering of the poorest and most vulnerable, but the terrible reality behind the great century-old myth of the American dream.

Our American comrades have explained that these events have revealed the terrible impact of decades of cuts in social spending, which have exacerbated the already pronounced social inequalities that are tearing society apart. They have called for this to be the point of departure for a political reorientation of the American working class based upon a programme that begins with the understanding that the profit system has failed and must be replaced by one based on production to meet the needs of the vast majority of society.

Moreover, the *World Socialist Web Site* has drawn the political connections between social and economic policies carried out in order to enrich a super-rich financial oligarchy within the US and the predatory war of conquest waged against Iraq. And we have linked the struggle against militarism and colonialism directly with the development of a socialist political movement in America.

In order to explain the significance of our perspective, I would like to draw attention to the broader political discussion on Katrina's aftermath amongst political pundits in the US.

There are of course numerous right-wing commentators who remain unashamed and unabashed by what took place in New Orleans. Republican web sites are filled with overtly racist comments—all but welcoming the destruction of New Orleans, which they view as a crime ridden and immoral hole in which shiftless, work-shy blacks were allowed to exist on welfare benefits that should have been done away with years ago. I will say more on this later. But another debate has opened up that is motivated by fear that the political course advanced by the SEP will find a popular response.

There are some liberal commentators involved in this debate, but it was instigated by right-wing Republican David Brooks, who writes an op-ed column for the *New York Times*.

Brooks devoted several of his columns to Katrina and has taken part in debates with other journalists on the issue. The column that began things on September 1 was entitled, "The storm after the storm."

Brooks's second storm is his description of the "political turbulence that has followed in the wake of several natural disasters in American history."

He comments that "floods wash away the surface of society, the settled way things have been done. They expose the underlying power structures, the injustices, the patterns of corruption and the unacknowledged inequalities."

He notes that following the Johnstown flood in Pennsylvania in 1889, after an initial bout of anti-immigrant hysteria, "public fury turned on the Pittsburgh millionaires whose club's fishing pond had emptied on the town. The *Chicago Herald* depicted the millionaires as Roman aristocrats seeking pleasure while the poor died like beasts in the Coliseum.

"Even before the flood, public resentment was building against the newly rich industrialists. Protests were growing against the trusts, against industrialization and against the new concentrations of wealth. The Johnstown flood crystallized popular anger, for the fishing club was indeed partly to blame. Public reaction to the disaster helped set the stage for the progressive movement and the trust-busting that was to come."

Later Brooks writes on the great Mississippi flood of 1927. Basing himself on the historian John M. Barry in his book *Rising Tide*, Brooks states that "the disaster ripped the veil off the genteel, feudal relations between whites and blacks, and revealed the festering inequities. Blacks were rounded up into work camps and held by armed guards. They were prevented from leaving as the waters rose. A steamer, the Capitol, played 'Bye, Bye Blackbird' as it sailed away. The racist violence that followed the floods helped persuade many blacks to move north.

"Civic leaders intentionally flooded poor and middle class areas to ease the water's pressure on the city, and then reneged on promises to compensate those whose homes were destroyed. That helped fuel the populist anger that led to Huey Long's success. Across the country people demanded that the federal government get involved in disaster relief, helping to set the stage for the New Deal."

Huey Long was a famous populist Democrat who combined scathing verbal attacks on the rich and calls for reforms funded through wealth taxes with corruption in his own government.

Brooks concluded his piece, "What's happening in New Orleans and Mississippi today is a human tragedy. But take a close look at the people you see wandering, devastated, around New Orleans: they are predominantly black and poor. The political disturbances are still to come."

He returned to this theme on September 4 and placed the reaction to Katrina within a broader political context.

He wrote, "And the key factor to understanding why this is such a huge cultural movement is this: Last week's national humiliation comes at the end of a string of confidence-shaking institutional failures that have cumulatively changed the nation's psyche."

“Over the past few years, we have seen intelligence failures in the ability to prevent Sept. 11 and find WMDs in Iraq. We have seen incompetent post-war planning. We have seen the collapse of Enron and corruption scandals on Wall Street. We have seen scandals at our leading magazines and newspapers, steroids in baseball, the horror of Abu Ghraib.”

He continues later, “Each institutional failure and sign of helplessness is another blow to national morale. The sour mood builds on itself, the outraged and defensive reaction to one event serving as the emotional groundwork for the next.”

Of course Brooks has nothing progressive to offer as an alternative—in fact he advocates forced assimilation of poor blacks into white communities so they can be given the example of their betters! But as a staunch Republican, his views are significant because they articulate the dawning recognition of a looming disaster facing America’s ruling elite.

Brooks debated these questions on America’s public broadcasting service with a number of other newspaper columnists, none of whom had anything more interesting or perceptive to say than he, but all of whom predicted that political change would come as a result of Katrina.

Whatever change they may envisage, if they are hoping for an attempt by the ruling elite to win back popular support with even the most minimal reformist palliatives then they will be disappointed.

As with every other event that has exposed the isolation and lack of a popular social base of the political elite in the US, Katrina has prompted demands for a deeper right-wing offensive on behalf of big business.

In this three factors have come together.

The first is a desire to make a financial killing through property speculation in the rebuilding of New Orleans.

The second is hostility to any calls for public spending programmes that might necessitate increased taxes on the rich.

And the third is the whipping up of racism as a means of ideologically justifying both of the above.

It should be noted here that the combined cost of damage from Hurricane Katrina and Hurricane Rita is estimated at \$200 billion, of which half was uninsured. There is no chance that the US ruling class will contemplate covering such losses from taxes, especially when they mostly impact on the poor. Better to blame them for their plight.

And more than property is at stake here. Survivors of Hurricane Katrina are often ineligible for Medicaid benefits. One report states that one in every five people seeking Medicaid coverage at hurricane shelters has been “screened out” of applying, and one third of processed Medicaid applications from these shelters have been denied coverage. A survey by the Kaiser Family Foundation and Harvard University found that among evacuees in Houston shelters, 55 percent under age 65 and without children were uninsured. Many reported having serious health problems as a result of hurricane flooding, going without necessary health care, and suffering from chronic conditions such as heart disease, diabetes and high blood pressure.

Leading representatives of the Bush administration are openly discussing the fact that New Orleans must never again be a predominantly black and poor city and should be reconstructed accordingly. More important still is the statement by former Republican education secretary and “drug czar” William Bennett that the crime rate could be reduced through the abortion of all African-American children. He added that his “hypothetical proposition”—a “thought experiment about public policy”—had come to him whilst watching the aftermath of Katrina.

In a similar vein, the *Wall Street Journal* published a lengthy editorial comment by Charles Murray—the author of the pseudo-scientific tract *The Bell Curve*, which claims wealth and poverty are rooted in genetic differences, especially between racial groups. He argued that the images from New Orleans “show us the face of the hard problem: those of the looters and thugs, and those of inert women doing nothing to help

themselves or their children. They are the underclass.”

Murray again bases himself on lies. The vast majority of the lurid claims of rape, murder and looting turned out to be fabricated. Of just six bodies recovered from the Superdome, for example, four died from natural causes, one overdosed and the other was a suicide. During the week-long period in which people were held in the most unbearable conditions, two arrests were made in the Superdome for attempted sexual assault. Aside from flood victims, the number of violent deaths overall was typical for the New Orleans area.

This did not stop the press from reporting every salacious claim made. The aim was to demonise the poor of New Orleans, detract attention from the actions of the federal government and justify the militarisation of the city, including implementing a shoot-to-kill policy. Interestingly, at the time of the Johnstown flood in 1889 the US media had also reported baseless stories in which immigrants—mainly Hungarians at that time—were said to have roamed the streets in gangs, cutting off dead women’s fingers to steal their rings.

Despite the fact that the reports on New Orleans have now been thoroughly discredited, Murray continues to repeat them because it suits his viciously anti-working class agenda. In his article he insisted that New Orleans again proved that no social welfare measures could improve the lot of the poor because it was the result of their own “self-destructive” behaviour.

“Job training? Unemployment in the underclass is not caused by lack of jobs or of job skill, but by the inability to get up every morning and go to work. A homesteading act? The lack of home ownership is not caused by the inability to save money from meager earnings, but because the concept of thrift is alien. You name it, we’ve tried it. It doesn’t work with the underclass.”

It is this viewpoint, widely held by the ruling elite, that lies behind the ruminations of Bennett, because if you can’t do anything about poor blacks—and poor whites, one might add—then the best thing to do must be to stop them being born.

When Brooks attempts to deal with the undermining of support for government institutions, he can barely make an honest reference to the impact of the Iraq war. His columns spoke only of the impact of suicide bombings and intelligence failings. But like the elephant in the room, the Iraq war cannot be ignored.

It is undeniable that angry reaction to Hurricane Katrina fed into and fuelled mounting hostility to America’s continued presence in Iraq. This produced the largest antiwar demonstrations in Washington since the invasion, as well as major protests in San Francisco and Los Angeles, on September 24.

Yet, once again, the response of the ruling elite is to insist that there can be no retreat and to launch a number of military offensives in Iraq. Why, despite the mounting opposition it faces, is the Bush administration so inflexible?

Because neither the war in Iraq nor the offensive against jobs, services and democratic rights is merely the product of a conspiracy by a handful of right-wing neo-conservatives. Rather it is the outcome of the decay of American capitalism.

The war in Iraq was motivated not by the strength of US imperialism, but its deep crisis. In seeking to assert the military dominance of American capitalism over the Persian Gulf and its oil reserves, the US elite has sought to offset the protracted economic decline of US capital when set against its major economic rivals in Europe and Asia.

This policy of military plunder abroad is intimately tied to one of social plunder at home—that is directly responsible for the disaster in New Orleans.

The Iraq war is by no means the first expression of US militarism, but it takes place under conditions where there has been no political attempt to maintain a strategy of “guns and butter”—that, is to stabilise social and

political relations at home through a programme of social reforms.

War is always politically dangerous for the ruling elite. However successfully it is prepared by the whipping up of patriotic sentiment, there is always a backlash once the full economic and social costs become apparent—October 1917 in Russia demonstrated that this can assume revolutionary dimensions.

When war is combined with the systematic gutting of social provisions and constant demands for wage cuts and speedups, the mix is explosive. As far as American capitalism is concerned, however, no other course is open. Its struggle for global markets is predicated firstly on its military superiority over its rivals and secondly on the hiking up of the exploitation of the working class in an effort to maintain a competitive edge.

There is no possibility of securing a democratic mandate for such an agenda. In its stead comes the whipping up of reactionary elements based on religion and other cultural issues, together with an unprecedented militarisation of society.

The objective character of these developments also finds political expression in the absence of any opposition to the Republican administration from within the Democratic Party, or what is left of the trade union movement.

History will not simply repeat itself. Whereas the flood of 1927 contributed to the rise of the Democratic Party and the New Deal, Hurricane Katrina bodes ill for the future of its modern-day incarnation. The Democratic Party is as committed as the Republicans to pushing the right-wing economic and social nostrums whose devastating consequences were so graphically revealed in New Orleans.

The Democrats cannot respond to Katrina and the mounting social crisis more generally by advancing a series of popular measures, as did Roosevelt with the New Deal. The defence of capitalism, which constitutes the fundamental aim of the Democratic Party, is no longer compatible with the advancing of social and democratic reforms. Rather, the unprecedented growth of social inequality finds political expression in the decay of bourgeois democracy.

This has revolutionary political implications within the United States and internationally.

In the aftermath of the Second World War, the strength of US imperialism provided the essential underpinnings for the economic and political stability of world capital. Now, however, the United States has become the most destabilising factor in world politics.

In the first place, Iraq and Katrina presage the re-emergence of major social and political struggles in the US. Class conflicts are too acute to be contained within the old two-party framework. The AFL-CIO—America's trade union federation—for decades operated on the front line in policing social unrest. Today it has been reduced to a discredited rump. This lays the foundations for a turn by the American working class towards socialism.

Secondly, America's attempts to resolve its own crisis are made at the direct expense of its imperialist rivals. This provokes not only inter-imperialist antagonisms, but class antagonisms. In the struggle for markets, every attack on wages and social conditions in the US must be emulated and bettered in Europe. The European social model also gives way to naked class confrontation.

Thus we can see that the ground is being laid for a global shift to the left by the international working class, which can only find political fulfilment in the development of an international socialist movement.

It is not always immediately apparent when a decisive political change has occurred. But if one examines carefully its diverse manifestations a clear tendency emerges.

In February 2003 mass international antiwar demonstrations took place involving 10 million people worldwide.

In March 2004, this assumed a directly political form when one of Bush's leading allies, Spain's ruling right-wing Popular Party (PP) of

Jose Maria Aznar, was unceremoniously dumped against the backdrop of mass protests at its lies attributing responsibility for the Madrid terror bombings to the Basque separatist group ETA.

The vote revealed a broad, deep and intense popular hostility to both the war and the government's social and economic policies—a sentiment by no means limited to Spain. It punctured the false image projected by the media of a broad popular consensus in support of the right-wing policies of Aznar, President Bush and Blair. It laid bare an important political reality: the fact that each of these governments rests on an extremely narrow social base of support.

Just one year later, in April, Berlusconi's right-wing coalition suffered landslide losses, losing in 11 of the 13 regions in which elections were held.

And, one month later, in France and Holland there was a massive popular vote against the European constitution, which threw the ruling elite across the continent into crisis. This vote represented an unambiguous declaration of opposition to the entire course of European social and political development.

The re-election of Bush and Blair in May and November appeared to put a break on the leftward political shift by the working class. But the return to power of the warmongers testified more to the absence of any vehicle through which to express social opposition than any stabilisation of the situation confronting London and Washington.

This is proved by the reaction to Hurricane Katrina.

It can now be seen that the imperialist order has never recovered from Iraq. Indeed the quagmire faced by the Western powers there has become inseparable from a political crisis of rule that has developed domestically.

The barbaric and illegal war against Iraq fatally undermined the political standing of US imperialism and the illusions in the supposed glories of the profit system that had been so strenuously fostered in the aftermath of the dissolution of the USSR.

After Iraq, the claims that we were witnessing "the end of history" and the unchallenged hegemony of liberal democracy based on free enterprise looked like a sick joke. Capitalism, even in the advanced Western economies, stood exposed as a system based on brutality and the trampling of democratic norms, not to say the constant diminishing of living standards. Katrina exposed the true social impact of the unrestrained capitalist free market for American workers.

Nothing illustrates the political significance of these developments better than the German general election result. Blair and the entire British media had banked on a victory for Angela Merkel and the Christian Democrats. With France's Jacques Chirac in trouble, and Schröder out of the way, Britain would be able to push through its pro-US, pro Iraq, neo-conservative economic agenda in Europe.

Instead everything has been thrown into crisis.

The more confident and overt the CDU became in detailing its policy objectives, the more opposition grew. With Katrina as an international background, the more workers concluded that the last thing they wanted was to see Germany take the same path as the US. It is only thanks to the efforts of the SPD, the Greens and the Left Party that in the end the German and international bourgeoisie rescued the situation and got the right-wing government they wanted in the form of a grand coalition between the CDU and the Social Democrats.

What this brief review illustrates is that this leftward shift in the working class is a European-wide phenomenon. Indeed, the wrangling over the makeup of the next German coalition coincided with a national day of action involving more than 1 million French workers on October 4, directed against the free-market policies of the Chirac/Villepin government.

Official politics moves ever further to the right, while the masses are moving to the left: This is a recipe for social and political conflict.

The impact of this will be felt most keenly in Britain. Not only is the

British government most implicated alongside Washington in the Iraq war. But nowhere has the philosophy of the neo-cons—one in fact jointly pioneered by Reagan and Thatcher—been put into practice as completely as it has here by Blair.

On this question, Polly Toynbee of the *Guardian* for once has something interesting to say.

She wrote on Hurricane Katrina, “But before we get too piously smug about America, just imagine a flood crashing through the Thames barrier and drowning London and Essex. What would we see? Essentially the same thing, even if mayor Ken Livingstone did evacuation well. The middle classes would escape to friends and relatives. The poor who have no networks beyond other poor people would collect in camps. They would be as pitifully helpless and there would be millions of them too. In New Orleans people couldn’t get away for lack of the price of a taxi out of town. In London too, floods would expose what is hidden to well-off Britain because we also live strictly segregated lives. Housing-estate ghettos are never entered by the 75% homeowners, places hidden even in the next street.

“Poor London victims would also have nothing more than the clothes they stood in. Nationally 27% of people have no savings, not one penny; 25% of the poorest have at least £200 in debts, which would track them down to their refugee camps; 12% of households (many more individuals) have no bank account—even for those with basic accounts, banks never lend so much as a bus fare to those who most need it. A quarter of households have no insurance; they would lose everything.

“Those with no debts could borrow up to £1,000 from the social fund, but it would be clawed back from their benefits within the year. With their jobs swept away, single adults would live on the jobseekers allowance of £56.20 a week (less £20 deducted for the social fund loan). For London the proportion reduced to penury would be far higher than national figures: half of London’s children live under the poverty line.

“So don’t look across the Atlantic and preen over our European values, welfare state and beneficent government. We may do better, but the UN report puts us closer to the US model than to Europe’s.”

Not much needs to be added to this dismal picture, except to stress that it is not that we have to wait until a hurricane hits London for a disaster to unfold. The antecedents of the catastrophe in America are not to be found in a meteorological study of weather patterns, but through an examination of social, economic and political relations.

And both political and social relations are ever more unfavourable for the government. The *Financial Times* editorialised on September 22, under the extraordinary title “The bankruptcy of British politics.” It complained of a loss of nerve by the government in carrying through an even more right-wing agenda, and of the absence of a viable opposition that could take over.

An article by one of its feature writers continued that “international developments are proving far less benign for Mr. Blair than he might have hoped. The failure of the German centre-right to win a decisive election victory this week may have deprived Mr. Blair of any chance of securing structural reform of the EU budget in December—meaning that his EU reform drive has already peaked.

“Far more troubling for Mr. Blair is the uncertainty on the ground in Iraq. This week’s stand-off between British special forces and the Iraqi police shows how treacherous the terrain there is becoming for UK troops.”

This is the backdrop to the extraordinary overreaction by security at the Labour Party conference when 82-year-old Walter Wolfgang was manhandled from the hall for daring to shout “Nonsense!” during Foreign Secretary Jack Straw’s defence of the Iraq war.

The treatment of Wolfgang was only the tip of iceberg. Despite securing its third term in office the Labour conference took place under conditions of a self-created siege. It is a peculiarity of British political life that the

hostile reaction to the conservative right elsewhere in Europe here must take the form of a movement against the nominally social democratic party. But such is the extent of Labour’s embrace of Thatcherite economic and social nostrums that it is far to the right of Germany’s Christian Democratic Union or Chirac’s Gaullist RPR.

And the depth of public hostility to Blair’s party is such that it was re-elected on a massively reduced majority and saved from defeat only by the absence of any real alternative. Despite his posturing, Labour is aware of this—hence the treatment of Mr. Wolfgang.

One must also note that after being expelled, Wolfgang was refused re-entry and had his conference pass confiscated by the police under the Terrorism Act 2001. He was not alone in receiving such treatment. The *Mail on Sunday*—one of the few conservative papers that remains resolutely hostile to New Labour—revealed that more than 600 people were detained under the Terrorism Act in Brighton during the Labour Party conference.

These included hundreds of delegates to the conference, peace activists, visitors and peaceful protesters. Police records confirm that none of those detained were suspected of involvement with terrorism, none were arrested and none were charged with any offence. Yet their names and details will be kept on file. One of those arrested was 80-year-old peace activist John Catt whose crime, as the police stop and search form recorded, was “carrying placard and t-shirt with anti-Blair info.” Two others are reported to have met the same fate. One pensioner was bundled into a police van while walking his dog before breakfast and driven home after he was told by officers that his shirt was “offensive.”

As in America, Labour’s response to rising popular opposition will be a further lurch to the right. Blair and Chancellor Gordon Brown have united in order to proclaim their joint commitment to deepening a Thatcherite economic agenda based upon extending privatisation into the National Health Service and education in particular. They insist that there will be no Iraq pullout and have rejected out of hand mealy-mouthed calls from the trade unions for a modification of the antiunion laws to allow limited secondary action.

One passage in Blair’s conference speech deserves special attention. Speaking of his desire to reorder society to instil respect and trailing the latest draft Terrorism Bill, Blair complained that he felt stifled because “The whole of our system starts from the proposition that its duty is to protect the innocent from being wrongly convicted.... But surely our primary duty should be to allow law-abiding people to live in safety.”

Perhaps I can quote another 82-year-old man here—the life-long Labour supporter, popular author and lawyer John Mortimer. Announcing that he would no longer vote Labour, Mortimer commented, “So what he [Blair] is saying is that safety can’t be achieved if you are having fair trials.”

He continues, “Tony Blair ... appears to be in favour of summary convictions handed out by the police without the necessity of any trial at all in a large number of cases. So centuries of the constitution in which we take so much pride are dismissed and ... we can already hear the sinister midnight knock of the door by a policeman come to deliver a conviction.”

When someone of Mortimer’s advanced years—and I say this with all due respect—declares such hostility to the Labour Party, then this indicates the extraordinary degree to which its transformation into a right-wing vehicle has stripped it of all popular support.

Two fundamental conclusions must be drawn from what is a major turn in the international political situation.

The first is that whatever the ideological confusion resulting from the degeneration and collapse of the old workers’ movement—and however often the ex-liberals, disillusioned radicals and neo-conservative pundits have insisted that socialism is dead—the class struggle will have its day.

Socialism is not merely a happy utopia to be proselytised by the faithful few. It is an objective necessity—the only possible alternative to a descent into military barbarism, social brutality and dictatorial forms of rule that is

produced by the irresolvable contradictions of the capitalist system.

From this a second conclusion must be drawn: The failure of the reformist nostrums of the past and the disenfranchisement of the working class by the very parties and organisations it once built demand a new political turn.

The Socialist Equality Party is the British section of the International Committee of the Fourth International. Only through the building of this world party, based upon the perspective of socialist internationalism, can the working class become a conscious political factor, capable of refashioning the world.

Without the building of this party, there is no road forward for working people. It is because of the disenfranchisement of working people that the ruling class—though afflicted by a deepening crisis—is able to continually deepen its offensive. And government assumes the form of a conspiracy against the broad mass of the electorate, through which its views are ignored and its social and democratic interests trampled upon.



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