

Opening report to meeting of the WSWS International Editorial Board

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Published below is the opening report by World Socialist Web Site International Editorial Board (IEB) Chairman David North to an expanded meeting of the WSWS IEB hosted by the Socialist Equality Party (Australia) and held in Sydney from January 22 to 27, 2006.

On behalf the International Committee of the Fourth International, I would like to welcome you to this open meeting of the International Editorial Board of the *World Socialist Web Site*. Let me state at the outset that this meeting is of a different character than the international school that was held in Michigan last August. The lectures that were presented in August were devoted to an examination of the historical foundations of the Fourth International, and the central focus of the lectures was on the first few decades of the twentieth century.

In the course of this week, our focus will be on the present rather than the past, on contemporary politics rather than history. In August we examined the historical experiences out of which the Fourth International arose; the next few days will be devoted to analysing the present political situation and clarifying the international perspectives upon which the work of the *World Socialist Web Site* is based.

Any serious attempt at a political prognosis, at an estimate of the potentialities within the existing political situation, must proceed from a precise and accurate understanding of the historical development of the world capitalist system.

The analysis of the historical development of capitalism must answer the following essential question: Is capitalism as a world economic system moving along an upward trajectory and still approaching its apogee, or is it in decline and even plunging toward an abyss?

The answer that we give to this question has, inevitably, the most far-reaching consequences, not only for our selection of practical tasks, but for the entire theoretical and programmatic orientation of our movement. It is not a subjective desire for social revolution that determines our analysis of the historical condition of the world capitalist system. Rather, the revolutionary perspective must be rooted in a scientifically-grounded assessment of the objective tendencies of socio-economic development. Detached from the necessary objective socio-economic prerequisites, a revolutionary perspective can be nothing more than a utopian construction.

How, then, do we understand the present stage of capitalism's historical development? Let us consider two irreconcilably opposed conceptions. The Marxist position is, as we know, that the world capitalist system is at an advanced stage of crisis—indeed, that the outbreak of the world war in 1914, followed by the Russian Revolution in 1917, represented a fundamental turning point in world history. The convulsive events of the more than three decades between the outbreak of the first world war and the conclusion of the second world war in 1945 demonstrated that capitalism had outlived its progressive historical mission, and that the objective prerequisites for the socialist transformation of world economy had emerged. That capitalism survived the crisis of those decades was, to a very great extent, the product of the failure and betrayals of the

leaderships of the mass parties and organizations of the working class, above all the Social-Democratic and Communist parties and trade unions. Without their betrayals, the restabilization of world capitalism after World War II—drawing on the still substantial resources of the United States—would not have been possible. Indeed, despite the post-war stabilization, the global opposition of the working class and oppressed masses in the old colonial regions to capitalism and imperialism persisted; but its revolutionary potential was suppressed by the old bureaucratic organizations.

Finally, the betrayal and defeats of the mass struggles of the 1960s and 1970s cleared the way for a capitalist counter-offensive. The economic processes and technological changes that made possible the unprecedented global integration of the capitalist system shattered the old working class organizations, based on national perspectives and policies. The collapse of the Stalinist regimes in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe—based on the bankrupt anti-Marxist program of a nationalistic pseudo-socialism—was the outcome of this process.

Despite the rapid territorial expansion of capitalism in the 1990s, the historical crisis persisted and deepened. The processes of globalization that had proved fatal to the old labor movements raised to an unprecedented level of tension the contradiction between the globally integrated character of capitalism as a world economic system and the nation-state structure within which capitalism is historically rooted and from which it cannot escape. The essentially insoluble character of this contradiction—or, at least, its “insolubility” on any progressive basis—finds daily expression in the mounting disorder and violence that characterizes the present world situation. A new period of revolutionary upheaval has begun. That, very briefly, is the Marxist analysis.

What is the alternative perspective? Let us consider the following counter-hypothesis:

What the Marxists, to use Leon Trotsky's florid phrase, termed the “death agony of capitalism” was, rather, its violent and protracted birth pangs. The various socialist and revolutionary experiments of the twentieth century were not merely premature, but essentially utopian. The history of the twentieth century should be read as the story of capitalism overcoming all obstacles to the inexorable triumph of the market as the supreme system of economic organization. The fall of the Soviet Union and the turn of China to market economics represented the culmination of this process. This decade and, in all likelihood, the decade that follows will continue to witness the rapid expansion of capitalism throughout Asia. The most significant element of this process will be the emergence of China and India as mature and stable world capitalist powers.

Moreover, if this hypothesis is correct, we may assume that within 20 years or so capitalism will enter—in accordance with the paradigm of W.W. Rostow—its “takeoff” stage in Africa and the Middle East. Countries such as Nigeria, Angola, South Africa, Egypt, Morocco and Algeria (and/or perhaps others) will experience explosive economic growth. Thus, during the next half century—perhaps even in time for

academic observances of the 200th anniversary in 2047 (only 41 years from now) of the publication of Karl Marx's and Friedrich Engels' *Communist Manifesto*—the global triumph of world capitalism will be completed and secured.

Does this hypothesis offer a realistic basis for the understanding of contemporary global processes? If it does, then there is little that is left of the Marxist revolutionary perspective. We would not be obliged to renounce our concern for the conditions of the working class. Indeed, there would be no shortage of conditions to be concerned about. We would attempt to formulate a program of minimum demands to improve the conditions of the world's poor and exploited. This, however, would be, to some extent, an exercise in social philanthropy. For erstwhile Marxists would be obliged to recognize the utopian character of the revolutionary project—at least for the historically foreseeable future. And they would be compelled to revise substantially their understanding of the past.

But is the hypothesis—of a globally triumphant capitalism—realistic? Is it reasonable, in light of all previous historical experience, to imagine a set of conditions that would allow the world capitalist system to resolve, or at least contain, the many potentially explosive problems already visible on the economic and political horizon before they threaten the very existence of the existing world order?

Do we consider it likely that geo-political and economic conflicts between the major world powers, within the framework of the imperialist system, will be resolved on the basis of negotiation and multi-lateral agreements before these disputes reach, and even pass beyond, the point at which they profoundly destabilize international politics?

Is it probable that disputes over access to and control of raw materials critical for economic development—especially, but not limited to, oil and natural gas—can be settled without violent conflict?

Will the innumerable struggles for regional influence—such as that between China and Japan, or China and India for a dominant position in Asia—be resolved without resort to arms?

Is it likely that the United States can continue to pile up current accounts deficits to the tune of trillions of dollars without fundamentally destabilizing the global economy? And can the world economy absorb without significant financial turmoil the impact of a major economic crisis in the United States?

Will the United States be prepared to retreat from its hegemonic aspirations and accept a more egalitarian distribution of global power among states? Will it be prepared to yield ground, on the basis of compromise and concessions, to economic and potential military competitors, whether in Europe or in Asia?

Will the United States graciously and peacefully accommodate the rising influence of China?

On the social front, will the staggering rise in social inequality throughout North America, Europe and Asia continue without generating significant and even violent levels of social conflict? Does the political and social history of the United States support the view that the American working class will accept for years and decades to come, without substantial and bitter protest, a continuing downward spiral of its living standards?

These are the sorts of questions that must be answered before concluding that world capitalism has entered upon a new Golden Age of expansion and stability.

Those who would answer all the above questions in the affirmative are placing heavy bets against the lessons of history.

In the course of the coming week, these questions will be addressed. But there is one indicator of the state of world capitalism to which special attention must be given. The historical development of capitalism was linked to the rise of bourgeois democracy. A definite relationship existed historically between the ascent of capitalism and the expansion of

democratic rights. The origins of the United States are forever linked with the proclamation of “inalienable rights” and the promulgation of the Bill of Rights. If the historical trajectory of capitalism is still in its ascendant stage, why does the state of political democracy appear so fragile, above all in the United States?

On Martin Luther King Day, Al Gore, the former vice president of the United States and the presidential candidate who received the most votes in the 2000 elections, gave a speech in which he described the state of American democracy. This speech received the most cursory coverage and was not widely commented on in the major American newspapers. But the picture he gave of the state of democracy in the United States was utterly chilling. Permit me to quote a few of the most important passages. He said:

“For example, as you know the President has also declared that he has a heretofore unrecognized inherent power to seize and imprison any American citizen that he alone determines to be a threat to our nation, and that, notwithstanding his American citizenship, that person imprisoned has no right to talk with a lawyer—even if he wants to argue that the President or his appointees have made a mistake and imprisoned the wrong person.

“The President claims that he can imprison that American citizen—any American Citizen he chooses—indeinitely for the rest of his live without an even arrest warrant, without notifying them about what charges have been filed against them, without even informing their families that they have been imprisoned. No such right exists in the America that you and I know and love. It is foreign to our constitution. It must be rejected.

“At the same time, the Executive branch has also claimed a previously unrecognized authority to mistreat prisoners in its custody in ways that plainly constitute torture and have plainly constituted torture in a widespread pattern that has been extensively documented in U.S. facilities located in several countries around the world.

“Over 100 of these captives have reportedly died while being tortured by Executive branch interrogators and many more have been broken and humiliated. And, in the notorious Abu Ghraib prison, investigators who documented the pattern of torture estimated that more than 90 percent of the victims were completely innocent of any criminal charges whatsoever. This is a shameful exercise of power that overturns a set of principles that our nation has observed since General George Washington first enunciated them during our Revolutionary War. They have been observed by every president since then—until now. They violate the Geneva Conventions and the International Convention Against Torture, and our own laws against torture.

“The President has also claimed that he has the authority to kidnap individuals on the streets of foreign cities and deliver them for imprisonment and interrogation on our behalf by autocratic regimes in nations that are infamous for the cruelty of their techniques for torture. Some of our traditional allies have been deeply shocked by these new, and uncharacteristic patterns on the part of Americans. The British Ambassador to Uzbekistan—one of those nations with the worst reputations for torture in its prisons—registered a complaint to his home office about the cruelty and senselessness of the new US practice that he witnessed: ‘This material we’re getting is useless,’ he wrote and then he continued with this—‘we are selling our souls for dross. It is in fact positively harmful.’

“Can it be true that any president really has such powers under our Constitution? If the answer is ‘yes’ then under the theory by which these acts are committed, are there any acts that can on their face be prohibited? If the President has the inherent authority to eavesdrop on American citizens without a warrant, imprison American citizens on his own declaration, kidnap and torture, then what can’t he do?

“The Dean of Yale Law School, Harold Koh, said after analyzing the Executive Branch’s extravagant claims of these previously unrecognized powers: ‘If the President has commander-in-chief power to commit

torture, he has the power to commit genocide, to sanction slavery, to promote apartheid, to license summary execution.’

“The fact that our normal American safeguards have thus far failed to contain this unprecedented expansion of executive power is, itself, deeply troubling. This failure is due in part to the fact that the Executive Branch has followed a determined strategy of obfuscating, delaying, withholding information, appearing to yield but then refusing to do so and dissembling in order to frustrate the efforts of the legislative and judicial branches to restore a healthy constitutional balance.”

The situation described by Al Gore is nothing less than the breakdown of constitutional democracy and the descent of the United States into dictatorship. The description is accurate, but what is entirely missing in Gore’s speech is any explanation as to why and how this terrible situation has come to pass.

If, as its apologists and defenders claim, capitalism is robust and moving along an upward trajectory, why are the institutions of democracy and supposedly popular government in the United States in a state of unprecedented crisis?

The main task to which we will devote ourselves this week is to provide an outline of the main features of the rapidly developing crisis of the world capitalist system.

Lenin wrote in 1914 that “The splitting of a single whole and the cognition of its contradictory parts . . . is the *essence* (one of the ‘essentials,’ one of the principal, if not the principal, characteristics or features) of dialectics.”

In accordance with this theoretical approach, the reports that we will hear will examine from various sides and aspects the development of global crisis. Among the subjects with which we will deal are: the state of world economy; the political, economic and social crisis in the United States; the impact and consequences of the expansion of capitalism in China; the struggle for critical resources and the intensification of inter-imperialist and major power conflicts; the crisis in the Indian sub-continent, with special emphasis on the danger of a renewal of civil war in Sri Lanka; the present situation in Iraq and the future of the US “war on terror”; the desperate situation in Africa; the political and social divisions in Israel; and the significance of recent “left” trends in Latin American politics. We shall also devote some time to an examination of the present crisis of international culture.

It is our hope and expectation that these reports will contribute to a development of the international perspective upon which the daily analytical work of the *World Socialist Web Site* is based.



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