

An exchange with readers on Iran's nuclear programs

8 March 2006

The following correspondence was sent in response to the World Socialist Web Site Editorial Board statement on January 21 entitled "The political issues behind the Iranian nuclear confrontation".

I am a long-time reader who stands totally, utterly behind everything you represent. Your web site has singlehandedly been responsible for a massive improvement in my capacity to understand all critical current events, and to understand how to advance the interests of the international working class in relation to them. I have been reading your web site since January of 1998 (the very beginning,) and I cannot live without it. It truly is the single best (and truly "progressive") alternative out there to the vile mix of sensationalism, inanities, irrelevancies and blatant, contemptible lies in the interests of the financial elite that the corporate-controlled media bombards us with on a daily basis.

There have been—as always—countless not merely good, but really great articles on your site recently, but I want to particularly thank you for "Independent journalist who attacked Harold Pinter turns on *World Socialist Web Site*." Your principled opposition to the barbaric US-led NATO assault on Yugoslavia—a position based on a serious study of history, a true compassion for oppressed peoples, and a profound understanding of modern Marxist theory (that is, Trotskyism)—made as clear as day for me the fundamental difference which exists between the stance of the International Committee of the Fourth International on the one hand, and the myriad ignorant middle-class radicals and liberals who supported that particular act of imperialist aggression, on the other. The (intentionally?) blind, moralizing liberal Hari lamely argues that he is against at least 70% of what the Great Power states do; but as you so rightly point out, he supports them in the most critical of instances—when they launch their wars overseas for control of resources, new product markets and cheap (but skilled) pools of labor. In calling that war by its right name—imperialist—and by defending Harold Pinter for also having the bravery and intellectual integrity to label it as such, you deserve a ton of credit. Thank you.

However, I have one important question for you. This concerns your stance on what seems, unfortunately, to be an inevitability: Washington's launching of some kind of military assault against Iran. Your articles on this matter have been, unsurprisingly, excellent, but in two of them I detected something which at least seemed like a possible contradiction. In the January 13 article "US, EU set to refer Iran to the UN Security Council", author Peter Symonds writes: "The *World Socialist Web Site* gives no political support whatsoever to the reactionary ruling theocracy in Iran. Nevertheless, Iran has every right to arm itself against the danger of imperialist aggression." Both parts of this statement seem to be correct and consistent with a genuinely socialist standpoint on the danger of a looming conflict between Washington and Teheran; in other words, while socialists cannot embrace the theocratic and fundamentally pro-capitalist regime in Teheran, that country—threatened by the most powerful military machine in the world—is entitled to do what it can to defeat the aggressor.

Yet, in the similarly excellent "The political issues behind the Iranian nuclear confrontation" of January 21, your editorial board stated that,

"The working class, however, cannot give any support to the building of an Iranian nuclear weapon." Does this statement contradict the one from the January 13 article which I just quoted? When you say "Iran has every right to arm itself against the danger of imperialist aggression," do you mean the ordinary people of that country doing all they can, including through the use of physical force and violence, to defeat the attackers? Would your understanding of Iran having "every right to arm itself against the danger of imperialist aggression" mean that you would accept that country doing everything in relation to undertaking its own military defense up to (but not including) the acquisition of nuclear weaponry? I must admit I'm a bit confused on this point.

In any event, I wanted to congratulate you for having such a consistently fantastic site and to request your assistance in clearing up this one point.

AW

Orlanda, Florida

Dear AW,

Thank you for your appreciative email to the *World Socialist Web Site*.

In relation to Iran, the particular passage to which you refer in the January 13 article provoked a discussion on the WSWWS Editorial Board which clarified the issue. While opposing the predatory activities of the US and other imperialist powers in the Middle East, the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) does not in any way support the ambitions of the Iranian bourgeoisie to obtain nuclear weapons. The Editorial Board statement of January 21 was written to elaborate our position.

The ICFI's starting point is its strategy of world socialist revolution, which has nothing in common with the wretched manoeuvres of any section of the Iranian ruling class. In considering any issue, we base ourselves on what strengthens the unity of the working class, promotes its political education and consciousness and enhances its determination to fight for a socialist future. The struggle of workers in countries like Iran against imperialist aggression is above all bound up with the fate of the socialist revolution in the US itself.

The threat to build and use nuclear weapons against the US, or its allies such as Israel, even in retaliation against military attack, only plays into the hands of the most reactionary elements in Washington and directly undermines the unity of workers in North America and the Middle East. One only has to recall the way in which the Bush administration exploited the September 11 terrorist attacks on New York as the pretext for its bogus "war on terrorism" to recognise the political dangers.

In the course of the Editorial Board discussion, reference was made to the stance of the Marxist movement in the lead-up to World War I. The Second International had to consider its attitude to the military threats being made by the Austro-Hungarian Empire against the Serbian kingdom. Serbia had the undoubted right to national self-defence and unity, but the exercise of that "right" would necessarily have provoked a European war and inevitably set back the developing European revolution. While opposing the predatory ambitions of the Austro-Hungarian Empire in the Balkans, European socialists, including those in Serbia itself, also

opposed the intrigues of Serbian nationalists.

Leon Trotsky explained in *War and the International*: “If the International Social Democracy together with its Serbian contingent, offered unyielding resistance to Serbia’s national claims, it was certainly not out of any consideration of the historic rights of Austria-Hungary to oppress and disintegrate the nationalities living within her borders; and most certainly not out of consideration for the liberating mission of the Habsburgs. Until August 1914, no one, except the black and yellow hirelings of the press, dared to breathe a word about that.

“The Socialists were influenced in their course of conduct by entirely different motives. First of all, the proletariat, although by no means disputing the historic right of Serbia to strive for national unity, could not trust the solution of this problem to the powers then controlling the destinies of the Serbian kingdom. And in the second place—and this was for us the deciding factor—the international Social Democracy could not sacrifice the peace of Europe to the national cause of the Serbs, recognising, as it did, that, except for a European revolution, the only way such unity could be achieved was through a European war.”

While Austro-Hungary and Serbia in 1914 and the US and Iran in 2006 are not exactly analogous, the approach is what is important. Those means are permissible that strengthen working class unity and its revolutionary fighting capacity. Those that promote confusion, disorientation, disunity and prevent the development of socialist consciousness in the working class have to be rejected and opposed.

As in the case of Iraq, the WSWS is unequivocally opposed to any imperialist aggression against Iran—whether in the form of air strikes or outright military invasion—and defend the right of the Iranian people to resist, including through the force of arms. But we are not politically indifferent to the methods used. The WSWS has repeatedly condemned the reactionary and senseless sectarian attacks carried out in Iraq on Shiite and Kurdish civilians and the murder of foreign captives simply because of their nationality. Such actions play directly into the hands of Washington and its political puppets in Baghdad, fuelling fratricidal conflict in Iraq and deep divisions in the international working class.

Similar considerations apply to the construction and use of nuclear weapons by the Iranian regime, which bases itself on xenophobia and communalism. Confronted with a deepening social crisis at home, Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad has deliberately stirred up nationalism and anti-Semitism to shore up the theocracy. As in the case of India and Pakistan, any testing of an Iranian nuclear bomb would inevitably be associated with an outpouring of reactionary and divisive nationalism.

At any rate, if a section of the Iranian bourgeoisie is seeking to build nuclear weapons, its purpose is not to defend the Iranian people from imperialist aggression, but to further its ambition to elevate Iran as a regional power and to leverage a more advantageous relationship with the major powers, above all Washington. Like their counterparts in Israel, India and Pakistan, the advocates of a nuclear arsenal in the Iranian ruling elite want to throw their weight around in the region, heightening the danger of a nuclear arms race and nuclear conflict.

Moreover, such weapons would not enhance the ability of Iran to withstand a concerted US military assault. With or without nuclear arms, the Iranian military is no more capable of defeating the US military in conventional war than its Iraqi counterparts. In fact, far from deterring such an attack, the building of an Iranian nuclear device is likely to be used as the pretext for US aggression.

There is no doubt that the danger of US military aggression against Iran, as well as other countries such as North Korea and Syria, is real. But the answer is not to be found in threatening or actually using nuclear weapons against millions of innocent civilians. Above all, the working class in the Middle East, Asia and elsewhere has to adopt a revolutionary socialist strategy aimed at nothing less than the abolition of the capitalist order that gives rise to imperialist oppression.

As the WSWS statement of January 21 concluded: “The threat of nuclear war is not an answer to imperialist aggression, but a recipe for a nuclear holocaust in the Middle East and beyond. The only realistic answer to the predatory policies of imperialism and the danger of nuclear war is the program of revolutionary class struggle.”

If you have further questions, please do not hesitate to write.

Sincerely,

Peter Symonds

World leaders are working to make the universe an uninhabitable place by piling the stock of dangerous weapons. This tendency is to be curbed with the force of people around the globe. The earth resources are for the betterment of humanity, not for the destruction. World leaders could only be forced to work on these lines once the mass public opinion is changed. This is a gigantic task and endless efforts from all quarters are required. The simple principle of equality and social justice among the masses is to be ensured. An international court should decide the issue with all the pros and cons and any no one should have the right or power to deviate from the decision of court.

ZH

Islamabad, Pakistan

Dear ZH,

Your general sentiments certainly reflect the fears and concerns of many people around the world. But you should recognise that pressuring world leaders to establish peace, equality and social justice is not simply a gigantic task, but an impossible one. They are the political representatives of a social order that is based on inequality and injustice and that necessarily leads to war. While it is still a gigantic task, the reorganisation of society internationally on the basis of socialist principles—putting the social needs of humanity ahead of profits—is the only viable alternative.

Sincerely,

Peter Symonds

“However, a few crude Iranian nuclear weapons would not seriously deter US aggression. In fact, the construction and testing of an Iranian nuclear weapon would only heighten the danger of a military strike or all-out war by the US and its allies, with devastating consequences.”

I can’t disagree more with these two sentences. It would be suicide for Israel if the US attacked Iran after nuclear missiles had already been developed. That’s why the rush is on for military action by US and Israel **now**. The only way Iran can hope to avert an attack is by developing nuclear weapons. If Iran had no nuclear program, the US could always accuse them of safeguarding terrorists or any other pretext for attack. The most important fact is that Iran has oil, and without nuclear weapons, it is my feeling they will go the way of Iraq.

If it’s bad for states that don’t have them to get them, why do you not instead expend energy calling for states that already have them to get rid of them? Because it’s not realistic to expect them do so? Well if that’s the case, neither is it realistic to assume that it is in any states interests not to have nukes. The US cannot attack another nuclear armed state without the assured mutual annihilation of either itself or its allies. Has the US ever entered a conflict with a nuclear armed state? No. Has it ever invaded countries without nuclear weapons? Yes, and very many times.

So I think it would be best for you to drop whatever idealistic notions you have about why weak states should not go nuclear. The US could not attack a nuclear-armed North Korea without sacrificing South Korea and Japan in the process. A nuclear armed Iran would take out Israel in a heartbeat if it were attacked with nuclear weapons. So if you were the president of Iran, what would you do? Drop your nuclear ambitions and put hope in the goodwill of the US that it will not invade your country? Do you seriously think US threats would subside if the nuclear question was resolved, and that they would not dream up another pretext for invading your country? Do you think there is anything you could do as a

non-nuclear power that would thwart an attack on your country when you know that the US is bent on doing so?

I think the Peter Schwarz piece on France is much more insightful and realistic.

Please reconsider your opinions.

CH

Dear CH,

It is ridiculous to imagine that backward Iran, even with a handful of nuclear bombs, is any match militarily for US imperialism or is ever likely to be. It is even more absurd to suggest that the bourgeois regime in Tehran could ever wage a consistent struggle against imperialism. All of its manoeuvres over the last two decades or so have been aimed at enhancing Iran's position as a regional power and reaching a political accommodation with the major powers, including the US. Those in the ruling elite who have ambitions to build an Iranian nuclear device are simply seeking new means to advance those same aims.

Even if Iran were able to build and test a few nuclear weapons, it is more likely to act as a pretext for aggression than any deterrent. If threatened with nuclear weapons, any US administration would respond with overwhelming and devastating force. It remains the only imperialist power that has used nuclear weapons to kill hundreds of thousands of civilians and to terrorise an entire population. The ruling elite in the US would have no compunction in obliterating Iranian military installations, missile sites and cities. The recent statements by French President Jacques Chirac makes clear that none of the major nuclear powers would hesitate to do the same if their vital interests were threatened.

To answer your list of hypothetical questions: Obviously the WSWS Editorial Board places no faith in the goodwill of the Bush administration as any acquaintance with our record demonstrates. Of course, Iran's nuclear programs are only a pretext for the US to advance its ambitions for economic and strategic hegemony in the resource-rich Middle East and Central Asia—as we have explained again and again.

How do we propose to combat US militarism? The WSWS Editorial Board statement has already supplied the answer. The only viable perspective for defeating US aggression is the development of a revolutionary counter-offensive by the international working class based on the struggle for socialism, in particular in the United States itself. You either have not seriously considered such a strategy or reject it outright and as a result are led to the most pessimistic of conclusions.

Your proposal for “weak countries” such as Iran and North Korea to build nuclear weapons and to use them to annihilate millions of innocent civilians in Israel, South Korea, Japan and presumably, if possible, in the United States itself is frankly reactionary. “Taking out” Tel Aviv or Seoul or Tokyo with nuclear weapons differs only in scale from the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. Al Qaeda justified its killing of thousands of innocent civilians in New York as retribution for the crimes of US imperialism in the Middle East. You propose to reply to a US military attack by incinerating millions of innocent people, and thus inviting a devastating US response.

For the working class, such an eventuality would not only be an immense human tragedy, but a political catastrophe—sowing deep hatreds and distrust between sections of the international working class that would take years, if not decades, to mend. Even the threat of such action plays directly into the hands of the most reactionary elements of the ruling class in the US, Japan and other countries, enabling them to whip up xenophobia and anxieties to divide workers. It cuts directly across the only practical response to the threat of nuclear war: a political struggle to unify the working class in the Middle East, the United States and internationally to abolish its root causes, which lie in the profit system itself.

Sincerely,

Peter Symonds



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact