

SEP public meeting in Montreal assesses fundamental changes in world and Canadian politics

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17 March 2006

The Socialist Equality Party (Canada) held a successful public meeting last Sunday in Montreal. WSWs readers and SEP supporters came from Ontario and Quebec to hear a detailed analysis, from a Marxist and internationalist standpoint, of the profound changes that have taken place in the world situation in the three years since the US government launched its bloody invasion of Iraq and their profound impact on Canadian politics.

The main report to the meeting was delivered by David North, chairman of the WSWs International Editorial Board and national secretary of the SEP (US). North began by recalling the triumphant mood that prevailed within the US ruling elite three years ago as it sought to advance its agenda for global domination by launching a colonial-style invasion of oil-rich Iraq. Yet, notwithstanding the brutality of US imperialism, Iraq could not be transformed into a colonial protectorate of Washington. On the contrary, the entire Middle East region has been destabilized.

North cited a survey conducted in a number of countries in which people were asked about US foreign policy. An overwhelming majority, including a significant percentage within the US itself, said they had a negative opinion of the American government and believed that its so-called war on terror was motivated by a desire for oil and global hegemony. For the world's peoples, what America brings to mind is not democracy, but words such as Abu Ghraib, Guantánamo, rendition and torture. Such an extraordinary change in popular consciousness in the space of just a few years will have far-reaching political consequences.

When the war erupted in March 2003, the speaker recalled, the US establishment became drunk with the conviction that Iraq would be a military cake-walk. North then cited a statement published by the WSWs on March 21, 2003 that exposed the lies of the American government, demonstrated the real character of the US invasion of Iraq as an imperialist war of plunder, and outlined the basic contradictions of world capitalism that underlay this bloody eruption of US imperialism. "Whatever the outcome of the initial stages of the conflict that has begun", that statement concluded, "American imperialism has a rendezvous with disaster."

This analysis, North said, proved to be astonishingly accurate. What has to be considered, though, are the implications of this crisis for the world political situation, and above all, the international working class. It would be a grave error to believe that the US ruling elite will draw from its fiasco in Iraq the conclusion that the use of military force is not an option. On the contrary, more extreme policies will be developed, as can be seen from Washington's current threats against

Iran.

The drive to war is objectively rooted in the profound crisis of world capitalism which finds expression in the unprecedented growth of social inequality. North cited figures about the social stratification of American society that show an extraordinary concentration of wealth in the hands of a tiny few.

In the last fifteen years, the four lowest quintiles of the US population, or a full 80 percent of Americans, have seen a decline in their share of the country's wealth, while the top fifth of the US population has seen its share of the national wealth swell from 76.5 percent in 1979, to 82.1 percent in 1999, and 85.8 percent in 2003. Yet even this layer of the 20 percent richest Americans is itself greatly stratified, with the top one percent enjoying a massive increase in their share of the wealth—from 37.8 percent in 1979, to 47.8 percent in 1999, and 57.5 percent in 2003. This is the picture of a ruling class being transformed into an oligarchy and aristocracy of wealth—a process that is international in character.

Under conditions of such extreme inequality of revenue, North explained, democracy has become hollow. What the masses think and want has no effect on the policies of the state. This inability to exert any form of influence on the course of society has created a broad sense of alienation among working people, along with a profound sentiment of moral outrage that must find political expression.

What is the prospect for change? The great strength of Marxism, the speaker stressed, is its understanding of the objective forces shaping society. The basic cause of the war in Iraq was the attempt of the US ruling elite to impose its own solution to the essential contradiction of capitalism—between the growth of the world economy and the outmoded nation state system—by asserting one national state, America, as the world's undisputed power.

This very contradiction, North noted, gave rise to two world wars in the first half of the last century. If one were to ask, the speaker continued, what is the likelihood of seeing within the next ten to fifteen years the eruption of a major world war involving the use of nuclear weapons, one would have to say it is highly probable.

Surveying the planet's major points of conflict, North cited the rise of China as an engine for world economic growth and a major military and political power, setting it on a collision course not only with America, whose ruling elite has declared preventive wars as its new strategy, but also with the ambitions of Japan in the same region. One also had to consider the implications of India's growth as a regional power and its decades-long conflict with Pakistan, both countries nuclear-armed. North finally noted the breakdown of the old

transatlantic alliance, with Europe's ruling elite openly questioning America's global hegemony and making its own plans for political and military integration as a counter-weight to US military power. Any one of these conflicts, it was pointed out, had the potential of triggering a global conflagration.

"We are entering a revolutionary epoch", North said in conclusion. "The basic contradictions that gave rise to World War I and World War II remain with us today. They cannot be resolved outside of the rebuilding of an international socialist movement."

The next speaker was Keith Jones, national secretary of the SEP (Canada). Jones began by noting a major shift to the right in Canadian politics with the coming to power of the Conservatives, under neo-conservative ideologue Stephen Harper, following a federal election that saw a concerted media campaign in support of a Conservative victory.

The Canadian establishment's endorsement of Harper's Conservatives, Jones pointed out, is all the more significant given that the Liberals, Canada's traditional governing party, carried out in the last twelve years the greatest social spending cuts in Canadian history, coupled with huge tax cuts for the rich.

It is the Liberals, the speaker reminded the audience, that adopted the so-called Clarity Act—an anti-democratic piece of legislation that makes the federal parliament the arbiter of the legitimacy of any future referendum vote in Quebec for the province's secession from Canada and threatens a seceding Quebec with ethnic partition. It is also the Liberals who sent the Canadian military into Afghanistan, in a clear signal that Canada's ruling elite would not stand by as the world is being re-divided among the major imperialist powers.

However right-wing their policies were, Jones noted, the Liberals came to be seen by Canada's ruling class as not aggressive enough in gutting the living standards of working people at home and building up the military to assert the interests of Canadian capital on the world stage. The recent federal election thus saw a major push by the establishment aimed at bringing to power a majority Conservative government that would implement this class war agenda.

Harper's Conservatives barely won enough seats to form a minority government. Yet this has not stopped the new prime minister from stocking his Cabinet with leading figures from the former Ontario Tory government of Mike Harris—the government most openly associated in recent Canadian history with the policies of deregulation, privatization and outright dismantling of social programs.

Harper's first major speech as Canada's new Prime Minister, Jones pointed out, was devoted to praising the military and asserting Canada's sovereignty over the Arctic region in opposition to US claims. There was a clear attempt to reshape Canadian nationalism into a more martial mold. Harper has made a major expansion of Canada's armed forces a centerpiece of his government agenda. While boosting the Canadian military presence in Afghanistan, the Conservatives want to put aside old taboos about Canada's military as a peace-keeping force and revive the country's militarist traditions of the First and Second World Wars.

In domestic policy, Jones explained, the Conservatives are putting great emphasis on decentralization, which is portrayed as "an opening" to the demands of Quebec's elite for more autonomy. The SEP (Canada), the party's national secretary stated, opposes all factions of the Canadian ruling elite in their wrangling for increased powers and advocates rather the unity of French, English and immigrant working people in a common struggle against capitalism. Yet, the speaker explained, it should be understood that

decentralization is being promoted by Harper's Conservatives as a means to dismantle what remains of the Canadian welfare state.

Nowhere is this more evident than in health care where provincial governments—in Quebec, Alberta, British Columbia—have announced, with the overt or implicit blessing of the federal government, major policy changes that will lead to the privatization of major swaths of the public system and the establishment of a two-tier system in which the rich will readily have access to quality health care while the public system will dramatically deteriorate. Jones went on to illustrate how the Canadian elite is determined that all aspects of social life be subordinated to markets: 55 percent of Canadian firms said in a recent survey that they would roll back pension benefits.

The policies of militarism and social reaction being promoted by the Canadian ruling class, Jones insisted, have and will continue to encounter widespread popular opposition. Despite the press build-up and repackaging of Harper as a supposedly moderate figure, the Conservatives came to power with the support of little more than one Canadian in five and didn't win a single seat in the major urban centers of Montreal, Toronto and Vancouver.

The greatest danger for Canadian working people, Jones warned, lies in the treacherous role of the traditional national-oriented labor organizations such as the social-democratic New Democratic Part (NDP) and the trade unions. This was demonstrated in the recent federal election campaign with the NDP assisting the Conservative bid for power by endorsing its portrayal of the election as a referendum on Liberal corruption, and the Quebec trade unions supporting the Bloc Quebecois, a right-wing bourgeois formation that advocates Quebec independence.

The demand for an independent capitalist Quebec, Jones stressed, is a political trap for the working class. Globalization raises the objective necessity of organizing the working class as an international class. The SEP in Canada, Jones concluded, is fighting along its sister parties in the US and around the world, to build a new party based on three fundamental principles: the political independence of the working class, the struggle for the international unity of the working class, and the necessity for a socialist reorganization of society to meet human needs rather than the profits of a few.

A question period following the reports saw a wide-ranging and lively discussion on issues such as the likelihood of Canadian involvement in Iran, the significance of art and culture for the political education of the working class, the class nature of left-talking figures in Latin American politics such as Hugo Chavez, and the role of the *World Socialist Web Site*. A significant amount of Marxist literature was sold prior to and following the meeting and several long-time WWS readers inquired about becoming members of the SEP.



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