The conflict in Lebanon and the standpoint of the working class

Chris Marsden
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Below is the report given by Chris Marsden, national secretary of the Socialist Equality Party (Britain), to public meetings this past week in London and Manchester.

I do not need to paint a terrible picture of the situation unfolding in Lebanon. The mass media cannot but show scenes that make this superfluous—of mutilated bodies, most of them women and children, and cities reduced to rubble. Moreover, as readers of the *World Socialist Web Site*, you will all be well aware of the wanton destruction Israel has wrought in both Lebanon and the Occupied Territories.

The essential issue that must be clarified is how this must be opposed.

Millions of people in Britain are disgusted at the complicity of the Blair government in lining up behind Washington to back Israeli aggression. Tens of thousands of them assembled last Saturday in London to register their opposition and urge an immediate ceasefire.

But the perspective for opposing the devastation of Lebanon advanced by the Stop The War Coalition (STWC) is worthless. The centrepiece of their campaign has been a letter to Prime Minister Tony Blair complaining of his "total subservience to the foreign policy of the US administration" and the fact that "our country is being humiliated and our isolation from world opinion underlined once more."

It concludes, "We therefore call on the government to change its position and join the vast majority of the world's states, the UN secretary-general and the Archbishop of Canterbury in calling for an immediate and unconditional ceasefire in the Lebanon to save lives and prevent the destruction of that country."

What does this call amount to and on what political assumptions is it it based?

It essentially blames Lebanon on the caprice of the Bush administration and Britain's support for Israel on the personal failings of Blair. And it asserts that if only wiser counsel held sway, like that of Kofi Annan, other world leaders, religious figures, and the various British politicians and civil servants who have expressed their own feelings of national humiliation, then sanity will be restored.

The Socialist Workers Party, which acts as the left wing of the official antiwar movement, has essentially the same message. It makes a feint of a revolutionary and anti-imperialist perspective by "expressing our solidarity with the fighters of Hezbollah and our hope ... that they succeed in defeating the Israeli assault on Lebanon."

But their task is to build "the widest possible movement against this war" based on "the unity of all those who oppose the Israeli offensive, irrespective of the many political disagreements that may exist among them about the Middle East and about other issues."

Despite the dangers of cliché, this is indeed a case of history repeating itself as farce. In 2003, the Stop The War Coalition (STWC) came to the head of a mass movement of millions and told them the same message—to rely on the United Nations, Europe, Labour Party dissidents, the trade unions, Liberal Democrats, Christian and Muslim leaders. They could at least base their claim on the stated opposition to the war of major European powers such as France and Germany, and cite votes by 216 MPs, including 39 Labour dissidents, opposing war.

But that dwindled to a handful even before war began, followed by the Trade Union Congress's decision to disown the antiwar movement. TUC General Secretary Brendon Barber's spokesman said that he had turned down an invitation to address an antiwar rally because he was "not prepared to be part of any movement aiming to topple Tony Blair."

The TUC's July 26 statement on Lebanon says nothing about Blair's support for war, supports Annan's "calls for restraint by all parties" and "strong criticism over both the capture of Israeli soldiers by Hamas and Hezbollah and Israel's disproportionate use of violence."

So once again we are urged to rely on the UN.

As for the Labour Party, despite reports that half the cabinet is opposed to Blair's too overt support for Washington no one has yet advanced an alternative position. And what of the Labour Party branches? Given their moribund character, who would know?

Both the UN and the European powers have never let their calls for a ceasefire interfere with their abasing themselves before Washington whenever an actual decision to do something is involved. The UN Security Council failed to pass any resolution condemning Israel, but it did pass a resolution against Iran over its nuclear programme under Chapter Seven of the UN Charter that allows for enforcement by military means. The EU foreign ministers could not even call for an immediate ceasefire due to Britain's and now Germany's backing for the US line.

At the weekend France, which has made the most of claims to be in favour of a ceasefire, agreed a UN Security Council Resolution with Washington that is a pro-Israeli diktat prefacing the transformation of Lebanon into a US-dominated protectorate.

The absence of any significant and principled opposition within the official Labour movement has left criticisms of Blair to be dominated by representatives of the establishment, of whom a large number are retired, feeling safe in articulating the grievances of those who are not. They have done so largely on the basis identified by the STWC and to which they now tailor their propaganda—hurt national pride and a belief that Blair is not best serving the interests of British imperialism.

Some of these criticisms have been savage. Sir Rodric Braithwaite, a former ambassador to Moscow who also served as chairman of the Joint Intelligence Committee, writing in the *Financial Times*, said that Blair should resign immediately. He called him a "frayed and waxy zombie straight from Madame Tussaud's" programmed by the CIA "to spout the language of the White House in an artificial English accent." Blair has "reduced the Foreign Office to a demoralised cipher," he wrote, and his "total identification with the White House has destroyed his influence in Washington, Europe and the Middle East itself."

This position articulates the views of a section of the establishment, particularly the Foreign Office, looking at the debacle of Afghanistan, Iraq and Lebanon and realising that things are going to get even worse. But their position finds barely any expression in either the government or

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Parliament as a whole.

Many Labourites fear the depth of hostility that Blair has generated. He is more hated now than Thatcher. But all Chancellor Gordon Brown, Blair's main challenger for leadership, can summons the courage to do is to keep quiet on Lebanon. He dare not speak in favour for fear of being irredeemably tarnished in the eyes of the electorate. He dare not speak against because he is just as closely tied to Washington, Murdoch and the neo-cons as his rival.

Blair will not quit any time soon and his departure in itself—though welcome—would not change things fundamentally anyway. All that most of his critics want is for Blair to take his distance from Washington. None of them call for a break with US policy.

British imperialism is faced with an unprecedented and worsening crisis. It has been plunged into a political crisis that poses incalculable dangers, but from which there appears no way out.

The raging of the former diplomats and sections of the Tory backbenchers is centred on complaints of political impotence, the damage to Britain's standing, and the fact that the vast body of experience they represent is not being taken account of by Blair. However, they are reacting not merely against the failings of one man but to the fundamental character of contemporary political life.

Blair appears deaf to the entreaties of those who believe they stand for the national interests of the British bourgeoisie because he is a representative of a global financial oligarchy that is able to determine the course of world affairs—an oligarchy whose predatory designs on the riches of the world find consummate expression in the policy imperatives of both Washington and Number 10.

But the fact that sections of the bourgeoisie feel that they have been excluded from the political process does not make them allies of the millions of working people seeking to oppose the decimation of Lebanon and Gaza. It is not a question of taking sides with his critics seeking to safeguard the political fortunes of British imperialism in the Middle East and internationally, but of charting an independent course.

The strategy of the working class must be dictated by the nature and scale of the tasks at hand. It cannot be one that is supposedly acceptable to the greatest numbers, but which in fact looks to sections of the bourgeoisie and its institutions to oppose the United States.

And in formulating this strategy, it must be understood that the bitterness generated amongst sections of the establishment over their exclusion from the decision-making process is only the palest manifestation of a far more significant product of the rule of the financial oligarchy. The closing down of all the traditional forms of democratic accountability that has lent Blair both a presidential aspect and the appearance of a US puppet is directed first and foremost at insulating government from the views, needs and aspirations of the working class.

Democracy is incompatible with an economic and political agenda based on the further enrichment of an already fabulously wealthy and parasitic layer through a combination of colonial-style plunder and the constant erosion of workers' living standards. The struggle against war and the defence of the democratic rights and social gains of working people must be conducted through the methods of class struggle and by a new party that advances the independent political interests of the working class.

In a 1938 article, "A fresh lesson on the character of the coming war," Leon Trotsky wrote:

"A new partition of the world is on the order of the day. The first step in the revolutionary education of the workers must be to develop the ability to perceive beneath the official formulas, slogans, and hypocritical phrases, the real imperialist appetites, plans, and calculations."

Such a clarification remains the starting point for the political education of working people today and of the re-forging of the international workers movement on socialist foundations.

World Socialist Web Site has sought to lay bare the essential nature of the period that we have now entered into and its political implications. The Bush doctrine of "preemptive war" marks the turn by the US to war as an instrument of foreign policy, aimed at securing is hegemony over the Middle East and the rest of the world.

This marks a new stage in world politics—the break-up of the post-World War II framework of international law and a return to the most naked and brutal forms of imperialist politics.

This also finds expression in the actions of the European powers that have aligned themselves with the US war drive. Blair may have assumed the role of the most craven apologist for Bush, but his policy of appeasement is the order of the day throughout Europe.

Appeasement is firstly dictated by military weakness—Europe's leaders are in awe of American power and fear that opposition would only provoke Washington to pursue an avowedly unilateral course. But it is also determined by their own imperial ambitions and a desire to secure a share of vital oil and gas resources in return for supporting Washington.

That is why no section of the ruling class, in Britain or the rest of Europe, can be entrusted with opposing the US-inspired assault on Lebanon, or averting the growing danger of a wider war in the Middle East.

Neither the US, nor the British government, will retreat on Lebanon in the face of mere protest, because so much is invested in it.

The conflict is not the result of an independent move by Israel, in which it has utilised "disproportionate" violence. It was conceived of by Washington and the violence being utilised is entirely *in proportion* to its real aim—of reducing the entire Middle East to a colonial protectorate of the US, with Israel as regional enforcer. The goal of imperialist conquest cannot be accomplished without destroying every last vestige of resistance amongst the peoples of the region, Arab, Iranian, Afghan—and including the Jewish working class.

There are always parallels to be drawn with the actions of the Nazis in the 1930s. I would like to add one of my own.

Between 1933 and 1936, the Third Reich had begun a programme of rearmament in preparation for enacting an expansionist foreign policy. On March 12, 1938 Austria was occupied by the German army, and on the following day it was annexed to the Reich. The next target was Czechoslovakia.

The Shofar web site explains how this was conceived of by Hitler and Minister of War Wilhelm Keitel.

On April 22, 1938 the two discussed the pretexts which Germany might develop as an excuse for a sudden and overwhelming attack—an "incident" of their own creation, including the supposed assassination of the German Ambassador in Prague. The plan was known as the Green Case and had been circulated in secret to Germany's armed forces.

On May 30, 1938 Hitler issued the revised military directive for Case Green.

It reads:

"1. Political Prerequisites.

"It is my unalterable decision to smash Czechoslovakia by military action in the near future. It is the job of the political leaders to await or bring about the politically and militarily suitable moment...

"The proper choice and determined and full utilization of a favourable moment is the surest guarantee of success. Accordingly the preparations are to be made at once.

"2. Political Possibilities for the Commencement of the Action.

"The following are necessary prerequisites for the intended invasion:

"a. suitable obvious cause and, with it

"b. sufficient political justification,

"c. action unexpected by the enemy, which will find him prepared to the least possible degree.

"From a military as well as a political standpoint the most favorable

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course is a lightning-swift action as the result of an incident through which Germany is provoked in an unbearable way for which at least part of world opinion will grant the moral justification of military action."

Does this remind anyone of anything? It might today be renamed the Olmert doctrine, or the Shalit gambit.

We have already drawn attention to the report in the *San Francisco Chronicle* July 21 that Israel's military response to the capture of its soldiers by Hezbollah commandos—and by extension the Israeli Defence Force's earlier action in Gaza—was planned more than one year ago.

It shows that detailed foreknowledge of events was shared by Israel not only with the US government, but its media. They all knew that every word they spoke, every line printed claiming that Israel was mounting a defensive action, was a lie.

Now in the latest edition of the *New Statesman*, its editor John Kampfner writes that "Blair knew the attack on Lebanon was coming but he didn't try to stop it, because he didn't want to."

He continues somewhat obliquely, "I am told that the Israelis informed George W. Bush in advance of their plans to 'destroy' Hezbollah by bombing villages in southern Lebanon. The Americans duly informed the British. So Blair knew."

One must assume that Kampfner only makes this claim because his sources are impeccable.

These reports indicate an important fact. It is not Israel that is equivalent to Germany in the 1930s. That role should be assigned to the United States. In waging war against Lebanon, Israel is implementing a far more all-encompassing American plan to create—in the words of Condoleezza Rice—a new "Middle East."

Israeli strategy has been devised by the same Washington neo-cons that determine US policy and is inexplicable outside of this reality. Israel relies on the US, not only for its armed forces and economic survival, but ultimately to ensure its position as an undisputed regional power.

As long ago as 1996, neo-cons including Richard Perle, Douglas Feith and David Wurmser proposed a plan by the Institute for Advanced Strategic and Political Studies "Study Group on a New Israeli Strategy Toward 2000" to the incoming Likud government of Binyamin Netanyahu.

It called for an end to peace negotiations based on giving land to the Palestinians that threatened Israel's national sovereignty:

"First and foremost, Israel's efforts to secure its streets may require hot pursuit into Palestinian-controlled areas, a justifiable practice with which Americans can sympathize.... Israel has no obligations under the Oslo agreements if the PLO does not fulfill its obligations. If the PLO cannot comply with these minimal standards, then it can be neither a hope for the future nor a proper interlocutor for present. To prepare for this, Israel may want to cultivate alternatives to Arafat's base of power."

Under the heading "Securing the Northern Border" it said that "Syria challenges Israel on Lebanese soil. An effective approach, and one with which America can sympathize, would be if Israel seized the strategic initiative along its northern borders by engaging Hezbollah, Syria, and Iran, as the principal agents of aggression in Lebanon."

The key task was to "focus on removing Saddam Hussein from power in Iraq—an important Israeli strategic objective in its own right—as a means of foiling Syria's regional ambitions."

They also called for "reestablishing the principle of preemption."

In January 1998, these same layers famously sent a letter to then President Bill Clinton advising a second war against Iraq—a new Middle East strategy that should aim "at the removal of Saddam Hussein's regime from power."

The letter warned that "if Saddam does acquire the capability to deliver weapons of mass destruction" (a phrase that subsequently became all too familiar) "a significant portion of the world's supply of oil will all be put at hazard."

It concluded, "We believe the US has the authority under existing UN resolutions to take the necessary steps, including military steps, to protect our vital interests in the Gulf. In any case, American policy cannot continue to be crippled by a misguided insistence on unanimity in the UN Security Council."

In 2003 the neo-cons got their wish of a war against Iraq, and on the very basis for which they had argued.

In April 2003, in the immediate aftermath of the Iraq war, Feith and others called for an immediate war against Iran and US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld ordered contingency plans for war against Syria.

Bush vetoed the plans. Iraq was a major undertaking and a new war was not possible. But the elimination of Syria and more importantly Iran remained a necessity if US hegemony in the Middle East was to be fully realized.

One would do well to listen to what the neo-cons are saying now if one wishes to understand what is happening in the Lebanon. They make clear that Israel's offensive is only the first chapter in a war that can and will only be concluded in Iran.

James Phillips, a member of the board of editors of *Middle East Quarterly*, the leading conservative journal of Middle Eastern policy studies, testified before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in May on "US Policy and Iran's Nuclear Challenge."

He urged the creation of a "coalition of the willing" to "seek to isolate the Ahmadinejad regime.... If Tehran persists in its drive for nuclear weapons despite these escalating pressures, then the United States should consider military options to set back the Iranian nuclear weapons program.... There is no guaranteed policy that can halt the Iranian nuclear program short of war."

William Kristol, editor of the *Weekly Standard*, calls Hezbollah's attacks on Israel "Iran's proxy war." He wrote a piece on July 24 titled, "It's Our War: Bush should go to Jerusalem—and the U.S. should confront Iran."

He states, "Regimes matter. Ideological movements become more dangerous when they become governing regimes of major nations. Communism became really dangerous when it seized control of Russia. National socialism became really dangerous when it seized control of Germany. Islamism became really dangerous when it seized control of Iran.... No Islamic Republic of Iran, no Hezbollah. No Islamic Republic of Iran, no one to prop up the Assad regime in Syria. No Iranian support for Syria."

He concludes with the suggestion that "we might consider countering this act of Iranian aggression with a military strike against Iranian nuclear facilities. Why wait?"

Newt Gingrich, writing in the *Guardian*, declared, "The third world war has begun: Hezbollah's attacks on Israel are part of a global crisis of civilisation." Iran, he continued, was "at the epicentre" of this threat.

Michael Ledeen, writing in the *National Review* on July 13, urged that the war should now be taken over by the US military and expanded across the entire region. "The only way we are going to win this war is to bring down those regimes in Tehran and Damascus, and they are not going to fall as a result of fighting between their terrorist proxies in Gaza and Lebanon on the one hand, and Israel on the other. Only the United States can accomplish it. There is no other way."

We must add to the list one of the world's most prominent neo-cons, Prime Minister Tony Blair. His speech last week to the Los Angeles World Affairs Council called for a "complete renaissance" on foreign policy to combat "Reactionary Islam."

Amidst his routine platitudes concerning calls for a just settlement of the Palestinian question and for a political struggle for democratic values, there was nothing of substance to distinguish his actual agenda from his US co-thinkers who have now discovered a so-called "Shia arc," or as he described it, "the arc of extremism that now stretches across the region" to

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replace Al Qaeda as the central focus of the supposed war on terror.

He asserted, “We will continue to do all we can to halt the hostilities. But once that has happened, we must commit ourselves to a complete renaissance of our strategy to defeat those that threaten us.”

He continued, “The point about these interventions, however, military and otherwise, is that they were not just about changing regimes but changing the values systems governing the nations concerned. The banner was not actually ‘regime change’ it was ‘values change’.”

Thus, by sleight of hand, does Blair embrace and excuse the illegal policy of regime change as his own explicit goal. His references to Syria and Iran make clear who will now be targeted next. But his formulations are such that nowhere and no one are safe.

The ravings of the neo-cons often sound so insane that it is easy to ridicule them. But this would be wrong. Their insanity expresses the underlying logic of contemporary social and political relations.

On March 29, 2003, the *World Socialist Web Site* held a conference in the United States, “Socialism and the Struggle against Imperialism and War: The Strategy and Program of a New International Working Class Movement.”

In his opening remarks, David North made the following observation to explain our strategy for opposing war based on the independent political mobilisation of the international working class:

“But history never poses any problem for which it does not also provide the solution. There is not only the predatory imperialist response to the problems of world economic development. Lodged objectively within these global processes is the potential for an international social solution.”

North then drew attention to the significance of the mass protests against the war that had mobilised over 10 million people. He stated, “These demonstrations, which have developed almost spontaneously, independent of, and in opposition to, all the traditional political forces of the bourgeois establishment, can only be understood as the preliminary expression of the emerging internationalist and socialist response to the crisis of the world capitalism system.”

Let us also remind ourselves that the *New York Times* was moved to comment at the time, “The fracturing of the Western alliance over Iraq and the huge antiwar demonstrations around the world this weekend are reminders that there may still be two superpowers on the planet: the United States and world public opinion.”

The past three years has dramatically confirmed our analysis that the Iraq war was a fundamental turning point heralding a new period of revolutionary social and political struggles. In the intervening period, the chasm between the developing left-wing and anti-imperialist sentiment amongst workers and youth and the rightward careening institutions of official politics has become greater than ever before.

Those who are reduced at the moment to watching angrily what is unfolding in Lebanon want to do something about it, but find no political vehicle through which to act.

The basis is being created for the emergence of a revolutionary movement of the working class. But the change from protest to revolutionary action is only possible through the sustained efforts of Marxists to raise the political consciousness of workers and young people so that it is in line with the objective situation. What it needs therefore is a programme, a perspective and the international political party to lead it. That is what is represented by the International Committee of the Fourth International and the Socialist Equality Party here in Britain.

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