

SEP public meeting in Wellington

The New Zealand Labour government and the “war on terror”

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On September 28, the World Socialist Web Site held a public meeting in Wellington, New Zealand entitled “Five years since September 11: Causes and consequences of the ‘war on terror’” (see report). The meeting was addressed by Nick Beams, Socialist Equality Party (Australia) national secretary, and John Braddock, New Zealand correspondent for the WSWS. The following is Braddock’s address to the meeting. Beams’s speech will be published tomorrow.

There is no doubt that among the mass of ordinary New Zealanders there is deep-seated opposition to the entire project undertaken by the Bush administration that has culminated in the invasion of Iraq. There is, moreover, a certain anxiety that it is going to lead to something even more terrible, with a looming confrontation with Iran.

Throughout the campaign for this meeting, the number of Bush supporters we have come across can be counted on the fingers of one hand.

Yet at the same time, we have encountered a definite insistence among many that here in New Zealand, the Helen Clark-led Labour government has “clean hands” in relation to these events. We have been told that Clark has kept New Zealand out of Bush’s war on terror; that her government has not participated in Iraq; that whatever troops have been sent overseas have been sent as “peacekeepers”, and so on.

It is necessary to be blunt here. This viewpoint carries dangerous illusions in the nature of the Clark government and the policies it has pursued both abroad and at home.

In domestic politics over the past month, there has been an entirely contrived political diversion in the form of a series of scandals, which has seen Labour lash out with stinging moralistic attacks on opposition leader Don Brash. Because of his private affairs and shadowy links with the Exclusive Brethren church, Brash has been labelled by Clark as the “most corrosive and destructive figure in New Zealand politics”. Having set Trevor Mallard onto the case to whip up a feeding frenzy over Brash’s private life, she then used the ensuing furore to contend that Brash was not fit to raise questions to do with honesty and veracity in any political forum.

Why is it that Clark moves with such alacrity to apply such terms as “cancerous”, “corrosive”, “destructive” and “dishonest” to this somewhat pathetic local political opponent, while George Bush—whose sheer brazen criminality and influence on contemporary world events is immeasurably greater—is left entirely alone?

The answer is not to be found in matters to do with political courage or considerations of international influence. It lies in the fact that Clark does not criticise the Bush administration because she is in accord with it.

The current US administration can best be compared with that of the German Nazi party under Hitler in the period leading into World War II. It is a government that was not elected, but installed in office through a

stolen election, and which came to power with a well worked-out agenda to pursue class war policies against its own people and military aggression abroad.

Like the Reichstag fire, 9/11 became the casus belli that allowed Bush to adopt the policy of pre-emptive war, a concept that was declared a war crime at Nuremberg sixty years ago.

The US first invaded Afghanistan then, on the basis of lies about the connections between Al Qaeda and the Hussein regime and even more lies about weapons of mass destruction, it sent the most powerful armed force of modern times against Iraq, dismembering the country and setting the scene for the deaths of tens of thousands of innocent civilians.

We have recently witnessed America’s client state, Israel, open up another front in this war with its invasion of Lebanon, bringing with it atrocities such as the bombing of the village of Qana in which 60 civilians, many of them children, were killed and which resembled the infamous bombing of Guernica by the fascists during the Spanish Civil War.

On all of this we have complete and sustained silence from Labor Prime Minister Clark.

More than this, when prompted about her attitude to the mass killing of civilians in Qana, Clark dismissed any question of US complicity, saying, “I think that the US is as acutely aware as anyone of the horrific toll of civilian deaths”.

A week after Israel launched its first missile and bomb attacks and deployed troops into southern Lebanon, New Zealand Foreign Minister Peters had a 30-minute meeting with US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice in Washington. Yet the unfolding military aggression did not arise in the discussion. Peters emerged from the meeting saying he and Rice had used it to commit themselves to strengthening the US-NZ alliance. Rice confirmed that she wanted to “move forward” and take the relationship beyond the 20-year impasse over nuclear policy.

For the next two weeks, Clark maintained almost total silence while Lebanon’s infrastructure was destroyed, civilians targeted and thousands forced to flee their homes, only finally releasing a press statement which focussed on condemning the deaths of the four UN workers.

Let us briefly review the Clark government’s record on the “war on terror”.

In the wake of 9/11, as the US was preparing to invade Afghanistan, the Labour government—with the support of its coalition partners, the Alliance—offered to send SAS troops to support the invading forces.

The SAS are not “peacekeepers”. They are highly-trained killers, who performed their jobs so effectively that they received a rare US presidential citation, presented to the unit’s commander in a special White House ceremony. The SAS troops are no longer there, but Clark has promised the US that they can be called upon should their “special

expertise” again be required.

During a trip to Washington by Clark in March 2002, shortly after the SAS deployment, an effusive Colin Powell—then US Secretary of State—declared that the US and New Zealand were now “very, very, very good friends”. The local media went into raptures with one commentator breathlessly counting up the number of times Powell had repeated the word “very”.

The SAS was replaced after two tours of duty by the army’s so-called “Provincial Reconstruction Team”, which is still operating in Bamiyan province. While the government and the media would have it that this is an entirely benign deployment, used to construct schools and hospitals, the reality is that Afghanistan remains subject to a military occupation, enforced by 18,000 US-led troops and ruled by the US-installed puppet regime in Kabul. The 2004 presidential elections in Afghanistan, which Clark enthusiastically endorsed, were a mockery of democracy. New Zealand is there for one essential purpose: to assist in the imposition of this illegitimate neo-colonial regime.

According to a report in the *New Zealand Herald* in early 2005, the New Zealand forces were responsible for providing logistical support for the bogus elections, including transporting ballot boxes, and the location and destruction of “illegal munitions”. One of its key tasks was the disarming of the militias of “a few rogue commanders”—namely, those opposed to the US-backed Karzai regime.

On the question of Iraq, Clark initially made an off-the-cuff remark to the effect that if Al Gore had become president of the US instead of Bush, the invasion would never have taken place. Under the threat of economic sanctions, she was promptly brought to heel, and soon reversed her position.

When Australian Prime Minister Howard visited Wellington in January 2004, Clark took the opportunity to emphasise that while there was a “difference of opinion” between herself and Howard over the “timetable and the means” of the operations against Iraq, there was “not daylight” between the two leaders on the basic objective—which was to see Iraq “effectively disarmed and contained”.

This position goes to the heart of the lies that were constructed to prepare for the war itself. Given that it has now been proved what was clear all along—that Saddam Hussein’s weapons of mass destruction were non-existent—Clark was complicit in peddling to the New Zealand public the lies of Bush and his ally John Howard that they used to prosecute the war.

Whatever the “differences” Clark professed, Labour made two material contributions to the war in Iraq. One was to send its frigates on rotating tours of duty in the Gulf region; the other was to deploy a troop of army engineers, who operated alongside British troops in Basra.

While these deployments were again depicted for domestic purposes as non-military “peacekeeping” exercises, they were not perceived as such by others. As far as Washington was concerned, they provided vital political support just as the Bush regime was becoming increasingly isolated internationally. Secondly, the military engineers were certainly not perceived as neutral by the Iraqis, who eventually began targeting them, along with the British troops under whose command they were operating, with mortar attacks. Clark only withdrew the unit, as a precautionary measure after it was clear they had served their purpose.

It would be wrong to draw the conclusion, however, that the Clark government has supported the Bush administration simply to accommodate pressure from Washington.

The New Zealand ruling elite, like its Australian counterpart, has definite economic and strategic interests in the Pacific, which it wishes to defend and pursue. By siding with the Bush administration’s “war on terror” and using it to mount its own campaign over “failed states” and purported terrorist threats in the Pacific, New Zealand has earned itself a *quid pro quo* from Washington to assert itself militarily in the region.

This project actually began in September 1999 when the National Party government received the unanimous backing of all political parties in the parliament for its decision to contribute troops to the Australian-led military intervention in East Timor.

Clark and Alliance leader Jim Anderton claimed that the troops were being sent to secure the “independence” of East Timor. Greens leader Jeanette Fitzsimons gave her “full support” to the decision, as did Richard Prebble, leader of the right-wing ACT party, who went on to warn that “our armed forces are going to need support not just for the next few days but possibly for years”.

This venture had nothing to do with securing peace and independence in East Timor, but with oil, territorial positioning and “regime change”.

In July 2003, Clark then sent troops and armed police to the Solomon Islands as part of an Australian-led South Pacific “security” force. The decision marked a revival of this country’s colonial legacy in the Pacific. The last time such an expedition was mounted was to suppress the 1929 Mau rebellion against New Zealand rule over Samoa.

Now, in 2006, the troops have returned to both these impoverished countries to put down incipient rebellions and install client governments more amenable to Australian and New Zealand interests.

A fresh turn in New Zealand foreign policy was initiated after last year’s elections, when Winston Peters, leader of the right-wing populist NZ First Party, was installed as foreign minister. Over the past 12 months Clark and Peters have overseen the re-establishment of defence ties with the US.

The ANZUS pact, which was used as the basis for the involvement of New Zealand troops in the Vietnam War and has never been formally dissolved, is now set to be reinvigorated under conditions where the US is preparing to widen its offensive. The looming war against Iran is another matter Clark has nothing to say about.

The Clark government’s turn to militarism abroad has been accompanied by the implementation of anti-democratic measures to intimidate the population within New Zealand. We have seen the passage of the 2003 Anti-Terrorism Act and the use of previously unused, or rarely used, laws to charge demonstrators with flag burning and, more recently, sedition. The Clark government still persists in going to court to defend the Security Intelligence Services over the Ahmed Zaoui case, despite all the evidence that he is a legitimate refugee.

These measures are necessary because, like its counterparts in the US, Britain, Australia and elsewhere, the New Zealand ruling elite is presiding over the most extreme social divisions in its history, with an ever-widening gap between rich and poor. The sharpening of these contradictions and mounting attacks on the social position of ordinary people—as indicated by the recent month-long lockout of 600 Progressive Enterprises supermarket workers—means an even more concentrated use of police state methods.

The International Committee of the Fourth International, the world Trotskyist movement, is committed to the building of an international movement of the working class, outside the existing political set-up, to oppose militarism and the social order that gives rise to it. We urge all of you at this meeting to study our program, follow the *World Socialist Web Site* and consider becoming part of this movement.



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