

Victorian election:

A socialist answer to war, environmental disaster and social inequality

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Nick Beams delivered the report below to the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) meeting held on November 21 in Broadmeadows for the Victorian state election. Beams is the national secretary of the SEP in Australia and a member of the International Editorial Board of the World Socialist Web Site.

The weekend of February 15, 2003 saw the largest antiwar demonstrations in history as tens of millions of people all over the world took to the streets to protest against the impending invasion of Iraq by the United States and its allies Britain and Australia.

Such was the strength of this internationally co-ordinated series of demonstrations that the *New York Times* commented that there were now two global powers: the United States and world public opinion.

Nevertheless, despite the significance of the protests, the invasion went ahead. And as the occupation continued it appeared, at least to short-sighted observers, that the movement in opposition to the war had disappeared. This conclusion seemed to be confirmed with the return of Bush in the 2004 US presidential election.

Australian foreign minister Alexander Downer, who dismisses opponents of the war as “bourgeois left-wing anti-American pseudo intellectuals” drew particular comfort from Bush’s victory. It proved that “people aren’t as silly as some of the commentators [who are] driven more by ideology than the mainstream of the community, which is driven by the greatest of all ideologies and that’s common sense.”

Short-lived comfort, because this month’s mid-term US congressional election was characterised by massive opposition to the war in Iraq. All attempts to focus on local issues failed, and the election turned out to be a referendum against the war.

But now we see the re-emergence of the same fundamental problem as in 2003. Notwithstanding the massive vote against the war, the immediate prospect is an intensification of US military operations. The main question being discussed in US ruling circles is not the withdrawal of troops but whether more troops should be sent in and for how long.

However sharp the differences may be within American ruling circles, all factions within the Democratic and Republican Parties are united in their insistence that the war on Iraq cannot end in a defeat. Such a result would weaken the position of the US not only in the Middle East but globally. The differences are over how best to prosecute the war and, at the same time, divert the antiwar movement at home.

The most likely outcome of the deliberations within the Bush administration will be an increase in the number of US troops. There have been increasing calls, both publicly from Republican presidential aspirant Senator John McCain, and privately, for a major increase in US forces to enable “one last push” to secure Baghdad. This means the launching of a major, bloody offensive against the impoverished Shia population of Baghdad’s Sadr City.

The Democrats have made abundantly clear that they are looking for a bipartisan policy on Iraq that will secure the objectives of US imperialism. The new Democratic House Majority leader Steny Hoyer explained in interviews at the weekend that he would support an increase in troops, and repeated criticisms made by many Democrats in the past that not enough troops were sent into Iraq in the first place.

As well, there will be no cut off of funds for the troop commitment. “We are not going to de-fund the troops in the field, period,” Hoyer said. This means the Bush administration can continue the war for as long as it wants. And there will be no moves to impeach Bush or any other members of his administration.

Hoyer’s comments echoed remarks by Harry Reid, the leader of the Democrats in the Senate. “Working together we must craft a new way forward—one that allows Iraq to be stabilized, and our troops to begin to come home. On Iraq, and elsewhere, Democrats pray the president will work with us, because we’re ready to work with him.” “Stabilizing Iraq” has nothing to do with the situation confronting ordinary Iraqis. It means ensuring that US interests are met.

Not only will there be no withdrawal from Iraq, plans have been laid for an attack, if not an invasion, on Iran.

According to an article by journalist Seymour Hersh in the latest issue of the *New Yorker* magazine, one month before the election Cheney told a national security meeting that a Democratic victory would not stop the Bush administration from pursuing military action against Iran. The White House, Cheney insisted, would simply circumvent any legislative restrictions imposed by Congress.

According to a Pentagon consultant who spoke to Hersh, there has been discussion in administration circles that the only way to achieve victory in Iraq is to attack Iran. For the advocates of military action “the goal in Iran is not regime change but a strike that will send a signal that America still can accomplish its goals. Even if it does not destroy Iran’s nuclear network, there are many who think that thirty-six hours of bombing is the only way to remind the Iranians of the very high cost of going forward with the bomb—and of supporting Moqtada-al-Sadr and his pro-Iranian element in Iraq.”

In an article entitled “Operation Comeback” in the latest *Foreign Policy* magazine, Joshua Muravchik, a member of the American Enterprise Institute, issues some advice to his fellow neo-conservatives: “Prepare to bomb Iran. Make no mistake, President Bush will need to bomb Iran’s nuclear facilities before leaving office.... The global thunder against Bush when he pulls the trigger will be deafening, and it will have many echoes at home.... We need to pave the way intellectually now and be prepared to defend the action when it comes.”

In this morning’s *Financial Times*, columnist Gideon Rachman recalls an interview some two years ago conducted by the comedian Ali G,

otherwise known as Sacha Baron Cohen, in which he asked James Baker, now preparing a report for Bush on Iraq, whether perhaps given the similarity of names there might be a mistake and Iran could be bombed instead of Iraq.

The Muravchik article, Rachman notes, is almost as surreal as the Ali G interview. But this is not comedy or satire. It would be easy, he continues, to dismiss Muravchik's views as the ravings of a discredited sect. But the prospect of bombing Iran has been seriously discussed in both British and French diplomatic circles.

How have we reached this point? We now confront a situation in which invasions, wars, bombings, even the possible use of nuclear weapons, are now entirely within the scope of political action considered by the US and other governments. Or to put it another way, we have been, in a sense, thrown back to an era when the waging of aggressive war was considered a perfectly legitimate political option.

In this region, for example, hardly a week goes by without the Australian government despatching troops to one or other country in the South Pacific.

So far as the US is concerned, the turn to militarism is a never-ending process. The more deeply embroiled it becomes in military action, the more the escalation of military action is seen as the only way out. The fact that there is no significant opposition to this program within American ruling circles—only differences on tactics—demonstrates that the drive to war has deep roots within the very structure of world capitalism.

Militarism is not simply the product of the Bush administration itself, or the so-called neo-cons. It arises from the position of American capitalism within the world capitalist order. The declining imperialist power, the United States, now seeks to maintain its position through military means. But this means that all the other capitalist great powers, as well as those striving to reach such a position—China and India—as well as lesser capitalist powers, such as Australia, must develop their foreign policies within the framework of intensifying rivalries and conflicts. Nothing resembles so much the period prior to World War I as the present epoch.

How is the fight against war to be waged? It can only be undertaken on the basis of a program that strikes at the very cause of war itself—the international capitalist system. A global economy organised on the basis of private profit and rival nation-states means that the struggle for markets, for profits, for raw materials, for spheres of influence, will inevitably, at a certain point, give rise to military conflict with the most disastrous consequences for humanity.

War can only be prevented through the development of a mass political movement of the working class based on the perspective of international socialism—the overturn of the capitalist profit system and the planned use of economic resources to meet human need. This perspective is not some kind of far-off or distant goal. It must become the great organising perspective for the struggle against war. This is the perspective on which our election campaign is based.

Let me approach the question of perspective from another angle: the global environment. This has been much in the news in recent days because of the issuing of the Stern report, commissioned by the Blair Labour government in Britain.

According to the findings of this report: “The evidence shows that ignoring climate change will eventually damage economic growth. Our actions over the coming decades could create risks of major disruption to economic and social activity, later in this century and in the next, on a scale similar to those associated with the great wars and the economic depression of the first half of the 20th century.”

How has this happened? The Stern report finds that the social relations of capitalism itself are to blame.

“Climate change,” it states, “presents a unique challenge for economics; it is the greatest and widest-ranging market failure ever seen.”

But what conclusions are drawn? Certainly not the abolition of

capitalism and the private profit system. On the contrary, according to Stern the very market system responsible for this situation must now be utilised to resolve it. One is reminded of the old saying about putting Dracula in charge of the blood bank.

A moment's consideration shows why. Take the response of Prime Minister Howard. He said he was in favour of measures to control carbon emissions, but not at the expense of Australia's competitive position within international markets. But that is precisely the position of every other capitalist power. Measures must be taken ... they agree. But overriding that verbal agreement is the material struggle for markets, profits and resources.

We have run into the same contradiction that has given rise to war throughout the 20th century: the conflict between world economy, the integrated global character of the productive forces and the need to consciously control those productive forces according to a worked out plan, and the division of the world into a system of rival, conflicting capitalist nation states engaged in the struggle of each against all.

Many people, especially young people, are concerned about the future of the planet: as well they should be. But the answer to these problems will not be found with the Greens, because they are wedded to the very capitalist system that has created the crisis in the first place.

One of the arguments advanced by Greens' supporters against a socialist perspective is the assertion that action on the environment must take priority over all other considerations ... practical measures, they insist, must take priority over considerations about changing the social system. But the overturn of the capitalist market and profit system is the only viable basis, the pre-condition, for the development of a rational global plan that will ensure the preservation and enhancement of the natural environment.

Pressed on this point, Greens supporters will often advance the claim that the problem lies with inherent greed in human beings, or that the earth's population must be drastically reduced in a kind of 21st century holocaust.

Let us consider another burning issue—jobs and, more broadly, the living standards and social position of the working class. At the start of this election campaign, Ford announced the slashing of hundreds of jobs. Many more are threatened, not only in the car and components industries but across the range of manufacturing. And not just in manufacturing. The digitisation of many activities in the so-called service industries means that jobs that once appeared to be immobile can be outsourced to anywhere in the world.

The globalisation of production has created, in some ways for the first time in history, a truly international labour market. And, as has happened so often in the past, this vast change has initially advantaged the capitalist owners of the means of production.

Every day workers all over the world are under the threat that if they do not increase productivity and take wage cuts, their jobs will be outsourced. No wonder that, as a whole series of statistics demonstrates, one of the chief sources of profit today is the decline of the share of labour in national income.

How can the working class deal with this? Are there any lessons that can be drawn from the past? At the beginning of the Industrial Revolution, the hand loom weavers confronted the introduction of new technology with machine-breaking. One can understand why. But the working class only began to go forward when it based itself on the new developments in the productive forces, and when it built its organisations and organised its struggles in line with those developments. That has been the case throughout the history of the international workers' movement.

Today, the globalisation of production presents the working class with new challenges. And, as throughout its history, it cannot look back—in any case there never was a “golden age”—but must consciously base itself on the possibilities contained in the new processes of production themselves.

Because these are truly immense.

The globalisation of production has forged the objective unity of the working class at a level never achieved before. This does not mean the problems are automatically resolved ... far from it. The occasion, as Abraham Lincoln remarked in another context, is piled high with difficulties. The task is to rise to the occasion.

The objective conditions for meeting this challenge are already in existence—or rapidly coming into being. The working class in China, in Vietnam, in Europe, in the United States, in Australia, confronts the same transnational corporations, banks and financial institutions which, in whatever country they are operating, carry out a constant battle to remain “internationally competitive.”

The working class can only advance on the basis of an international socialist perspective that seeks to utilise the vast advances in the productive forces made possible by new technology and the processes of globalisation to take forward the social and economic interests of humanity as a whole, rather than the accumulation of profits for a few.

The achievement of this task requires the construction of an international organization, striving to consciously unify the working class on the basis of this perspective. That is the goal of our movement, the Socialist Equality Party and the International Committee of the Fourth International. We urge you to give it your most urgent consideration and join the world party of socialist revolution.



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