

David North addresses public meeting in Sydney on political implications of Iraq war

Our reporters
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The *World Socialist Web Site* and Socialist Equality Party (SEP) held a well-attended public meeting in Sydney on Wednesday to oppose the escalating US-led wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the preparations for new illegal wars of aggression against Iran and other countries targetted by Washington. The featured speaker was David North, chairman of the WSWs International Editorial Board and national secretary of the SEP in the US.

The meeting examined the underlying economic and political crisis of the United States, and outlined a socialist perspective to unite youth and working people against militarism and war. The audience included members of Students for Social Equality, workers attending their first SEP meeting, as well as regular WSWs readers, some of whom travelled from interstate to hear North speak.

Chairing the meeting, Nick Beams, a member of the WSWs International Editorial Board and national secretary of the SEP in Australia, said: "Every day brings further news of the deepening catastrophe in Iraq and, ominously, further indications that the United States plans in the not-too-distant future, an offensive against Iran."

The announcement that US Vice President Dick Cheney, one of the chief architects of the Iraq war, was to visit Australia this month for a two-day briefing of the Howard government's cabinet national security committee was another ominous sign of preparations for even wider US-led military aggression.

Beams announced that the SEP would be standing candidates in the March 24 New South Wales election and the federal election due later in the year. At the centre of the party's campaign would be the development of an independent socialist policy against militarism and war.

The opening speaker, James Cogan, a WSWs staff writer, warned that the coming weeks and months might be the bloodiest of the war. US President George Bush's so-called "Baghdad security plan"—a massive military operation involving over 85,000 American and Iraqi government troops to establish occupation control over Iraq's capital—was already underway.

"Occupation forces are being flung into bitter urban fighting to destroy an array of opponents of the American presence in the country. In particular, moves have begun against the large Shiite Mahdi Army militia that has its stronghold in the densely-populated working class district of Sadr City in north-eastern Baghdad."

Cogan said the media had shamelessly given credibility to Bush's claims that the mobilisation of 21,500 more troops sought to "advance liberty across a troubled region" and create a "functioning democracy".

It was necessary to simply, and bluntly, state the truth: "The US invasion and occupation of Iraq is a war crime of historic dimensions, carried out by the American capitalist elite and its international allies to seize control over the second largest oil reserves in the world."

The US occupation had plunged Iraqi society into a "living hell" with its economy and infrastructure reduced to rubble, mass unemployment, rampant food shortages, a dysfunctional health system and millions of

children not attending school.

Cogan emphasised the veracity of the study that found that 655,000 people—one in forty of the Iraqi population—had died, either directly attributable to the bombs and bullets of the US forces or through the economic ruination of the country, the collapse of any semblance of governance and civil society, and the murderous sectarian conflict triggered by the US occupation.

Cogan said the methodology of the study, conducted by the John Hopkins University and published by the respected *Lancet* medical journal, was the same as that used to calculate that over 400,000 people have been killed or died from starvation in the course of the civil war in Sudan's Darfur region over the past four years. US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice had cited the latter figure when she declared that "genocide" was taking place in Sudan.

After citing the growing US military casualties, Cogan said: "Amid the carnage, one undeniable truth stands out: the Iraqi people continue to defy the US occupation and continue to fight for the expulsion of foreign forces from the country—including the 800 Australian troops assisting the US military oppress the Iraqi people.

"This is why more American troops are being sent. Not to safeguard a 'democracy' from a minority of opponents, but to intensify the repression of the majority. The US plan for Iraq is not a society in which the masses determine the country's future or how its oil wealth is distributed, but an American client state that delivers lucrative profits to US energy corporations and provides a base for further aggression in the region, with Iran looming as the most likely next target."

Cogan said the basis existed for a unified struggle of the Iraqi working people against the US-led occupation and the communalist Sunni, Shiite and Kurdish leaderships. All sections of the population faced mass repression, horrific social conditions and the destruction of their secular democratic rights.

"The greatest impulse for a unified struggle of the Iraqi people will be provided by the re-emergence of a powerful and politically independent antiwar movement internationally. The basis for such a movement also exists. The escalation of the war in Iraq has been made in complete defiance of the will of the American people and under conditions of mass opposition to the war.

"On January 22, the *World Socialist Web Site* and the International Committee of the Fourth International, of which the SEP is the Australian section, made an appeal to workers and youth to build an international mass working class movement against the American-led wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. I encourage all of you to take up the challenge posed in this statement and dedicate 2007 to uniting and coordinating the struggles of working people internationally against militarism, repression and social inequality."

David North, the main speaker, focussed his remarks on the deep political and constitutional crisis being produced in the United States by the Bush administration's decision to flagrantly defy the results of last

November's Congressional elections by escalating its aggression in the Middle East.

North said people across America and around the world had welcomed the November vote, often with some emotion, as a powerful rejection of the war. "It was as if the people had finally stood up and made their voices heard... It was like a political earthquake, as if the entire political and moral legitimacy of what this government was doing in Iraq had been repudiated."

But popular expectations that the result would see a shift in policy were soon proven false. Vice President Cheney stated in a nationally broadcast interview that the policy of the White House was not determined by public opinion. When the interviewer, taken aback by the crassness of the statement, pointed out that this had not been an opinion poll but an election, Cheney brushed the objection aside.

North said this response had vast implications in the context of American history. It was a rejection of the very concept that there had to be a link between the actions of the government and the will of the people. North quoted the founding document of the American republic, the Declaration of Independence, which insisted that governments derive their power from the "consent of the governed". The declaration enshrined the right of the people to "alter and abolish" the government if it failed to uphold the "inalienable rights" of "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness".

North said the Bush administration's defiance of the election result was the culmination of a process that went back to the impeachment of President Clinton, which was a bid to overturn the results of his 1996 election, the US Supreme Court-sanctioned theft of the 2000 election, the still officially uninvestigated events of September 11, 2001, and the launching of war based on complete lies.

This assault on the entire political and constitutional foundations of the United States could not be explained as arising from the personal idiosyncrasies of George Bush and his entourage. The changes had to be traced back to more profoundly historically rooted socio-economic and geo-political processes.

North said he would attempt to sum up the most important elements of this transformation. Its source lay, first of all, in the protracted decline in the world position of American capitalism. North stressed the world historical significance of the loss of US global hegemony and the resort to military means to try to offset it.

"If the most important factor in the fate of world capitalism in the twentieth century was the rise of the United States to the position of global economic pre-eminence, then the most important and explosive factor in the beginning of the twenty-first century is the breakdown of this dominant position.

"In the twentieth century, without the vast natural, industrial and financial resources of the United States, European capitalism could not have extricated itself from the bloody catastrophes of the First and Second World Wars. The post-World War II reconstruction of global capitalism was largely the achievement of the United States. But for all its resources, the United States could not render itself immune from the fresh contradictions generated by the new world economic order."

North briefly traced the re-emergence of European and Japanese capitalism, and the breakup of US economic dominance from the late 1960s and early 1970s. He noted that as little as 15 years ago, the dissolution of the Soviet Union had been interpreted by significant sections of the American ruling elite as an opportunity to employ military force to offset and counteract the consequences of its increasingly serious economic weaknesses.

The first Gulf War of 1990-91 had signalled that the US not only no longer felt constrained by the existence of the Soviet Union, it had no significant military opponents to place restraints on the unbridled use of its military power. What certain American analysts came to call the

"unipolar" moment had arrived. From that point on, there had been a pattern of increasingly reckless and self-aggrandising policies

As early as 1992, the National Security Policy proclaimed a strategy to prevent the emergence of any country or combination of countries that could challenge US supremacy. Within this strategy, exceptional importance was assigned to the Middle East and Central Asia, where the breakup of the USSR had opened up the former Soviet Central Asian republics and their large reserves of oil and natural gas for imperialist exploitation.

Long before the September 11 terrorist attacks, the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq had been conceived as the first decisive steps in a military strategy to establish an unchallengeable US hegemony in this entire decisive resource-rich region, and block the rise of its European and Asian rivals, including China.

But the Iraq war had decidedly not gone according to plan. As a result, Washington confronted a defeat and a political crisis "immeasurably more serious" than in the Vietnam War. The thinking of the American ruling elite had found clear expression in a statement made by Brent Scowcroft, a former adviser to the first president Bush. Scowcroft initially opposed the Iraq invasion, regarding it as a mistake, but now considered that an American withdrawal, "would be a strategic defeat for American interests with potentially catastrophic consequences both for the region and beyond".

Scowcroft had warned that despite the "seemingly intractable problems" in Iraq, "What is at stake is not only Iraq and the stability of the Middle East but the global perception of the reliability of the United States as a partner in a deeply troubled world. We cannot afford to fail that test."

These considerations were the basis for Bush's defiance of the elections and preparations for the escalation of the war. "When one looks at the plans for war against Iran, after the catastrophe in Iraq, it does seem that this is madness. It appears that madmen have taken over the direction of world politics. But madness itself is a reflection of objective processes...

"This is a madness which is derived from the decline in the global position of American capitalism, one which cannot be resolved peacefully within the framework of the national-state system, a system that requires that every state fights desperately to secure its own interests in a hostile, dog-eat-dog, state versus state world."

The second source of the eruption of US militarism lay in the ever more glaring inequality of US society. Over the past 25 years, a new aristocracy had risen, amassing colossal fortunes, largely through the mechanism of Wall Street, without making any contribution to the development of production. For the rest of the population, society was becoming poorer and poorer, with the removal of all restraints on the exploitation of labour on a global scale.

This enormous enrichment of privileged layers had created a social constituency for imperialist barbarism and the destruction of democratic rights. North quoted passages from well-known political and legal commentators seeking to justify the executive government dispensing with the "inalienable rights" embodied in the US Constitution, in the name of "protecting citizen's lives".

Among them was federal appeals court judge Richard Posner, who had written a book referring to the US Constitution as "an old piece of parchment" and justifying torture "as an exceptional method of counter-terrorism interrogation". North pointed out that the Constitution, which judges were sworn to uphold, formed the very basis of the American nation.

North contrasted Posner's dismissal of the Constitution as a piece of parchment with President Abraham Lincoln's insistence, even in the face of insurrection by the southern states, on using constitutional foundations to abolish slavery in the South.

"Now we have here an expression of the political and moral disintegration of an entire social layer, and one which is deeply rooted in

the profound changes in the global position of the United States and in its social structure.

“The actions of the government represent, if thought through carefully and logically, a negation of the whole foundation of the American state. They have set into motion explosive charges. These great legal and constitutional issues are expressions of relations between masses of people and social classes. The American ruling class, whether it likes it or not, is chopping off the limb upon which it is perched. It is blowing up the foundations of its own historical, political and moral legitimacy.”

North said the ruling elite was setting into motion a revolutionary crisis. What had emerged was a “pre-revolutionary period of American and world history”. This posed historic opportunities and responsibilities before the Fourth International, the world Trotskyist party.

Under these conditions, the WSWS and the ICFI had established the International Students for Social Equality (ISSE). “We are determined to provide the political leadership to the forces preparing to come forward against the war in Iraq and the global eruption of militarism.”

After a collection of more than \$1,700 for the SEP’s election fund, there was a lively question and answer session. Questions included the likelihood of the reintroduction of conscription, the possible consequences of a US attack on North Korea, and whether there was a constitutional right to oust a government.

Answering the question on conscription, North warned that its reintroduction was very likely. American forces were already overstretched and any move against Iran would, in short order, produce calls for the return of the draft. Vast sections of youth would face the prospect of being dragged into a bloodbath. North emphasised that there were long traditions in the working class of opposition to conscription and that the ISSE would be in the forefront of a worldwide campaign against its return.

An American citizen in the audience initially expressed outrage that the US government was being accused of launching wars to pursue an agenda of world domination. He said that such allegations, if true, would shake his entire self-belief as an American and his faith in its whole system of government.

North reviewed the history of American intervention in Afghanistan and Iraq, including its previous support for Osama bin Laden and Saddam Hussein. He also emphasised that everything presented at the meeting and published on the WSWS was grounded on facts that could be publicly verified. He pointed to the contrast with the lack of any frank and open discussion in the American media, which never called into question the motives of the Bush administration.

North also explained that in some ways the sentiments expressed by the questioner confirmed the analysis presented at the meeting. Americans took the US Constitution seriously. There were profound democratic traditions in the United States that the ruling elite was now tearing apart, at its own peril. North predicted that the horrors and tremendous shocks produced by the Iraq war would see vast changes in political thinking as millions of Americans realised they had been massively misled.

Interviewed after the meeting, Sam, a Sydney University student, said it was important to consider the issues North had raised about the US Constitution.

“As was said, the whole existence of America as a nation and its reputation as a global hegemon hangs on the importance of maintaining the credibility and integrity of the constitution. Yet that is being undermined—not only implicitly, but explicitly, as David North gave examples of. I think that’s scary because it’s as though these leaders are testing our power. The response of the population as a whole to these kinds of attacks on our lives and our countries and their political foundations is important.”

Rose-Ann, a 15-year-old high school student, came to the meeting after reading a flyer handed out in a local shopping centre. She described the meeting as a “real eye opener”.

“The speakers explained the way that propaganda can influence people. What you hear in the media often doesn’t make sense. Like the war in Iraq. What’s the real reason for it? It’s about oil. Another example is September 11. The real reason for it has never been told. The meeting went through the way that authorities can manipulate laws and use them against their own people to achieve their aims.”



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