

# Contributions to ISSE/SEP conference: David North and Patrick Martin

9 April 2007

*The following are contributions made to the International Students for Social Equality/Socialist Equality Party Emergency Conference Against War by David North, chairman of the editorial board of the WSWS and national secretary of the SEP (US), and Patrick Martin, SEP member and WSWS writer.*

*The conference was held March 31-April 1 in Ann Arbor, Michigan.*

*The contributions were made in the discussion on the main resolution (See “End the occupation of Iraq! No to war against Iran! For an international socialist movement against war!”)*

*Further contributions on the resolution as well as international greetings and a report on the work of the ISSE will be published in the coming days.*

The most important task before this conference is a careful evaluation of the development of the war in Iraq and its broader significance. It is necessary to base the work of the ISSE on a precise understanding of the relationship between the war and the future development of social and political crises within this country and internationally.

As you will recall, when the war began four years ago the campaign was dubbed by the Bush administration “shock and awe.” The choice of this title reflected the delusion that prevailed within broad sections of the ruling class when the war began—that the United States was going to give a display of military power that would not only stagger the Iraqis, but impress upon the entire world the invincibility of American imperialism. And there were certainly many in the media and throughout the political establishment internationally who bought into this fantastic delusion that military force would now be sufficient to reorganize the world in the interests of Wall Street and the giant corporations in the United States.

The SEP and the *World Socialist Web Site* had from the start a very different view of the war. We anticipated that, despite the initial military successes, it would not be long before the underlying problems and weaknesses inherent in the global position of American imperialism would manifest themselves. And that is what has happened. Four years after the beginning of the war, the delusions have been shattered by the failure of Washington’s Iraq adventure. All the different elements of the crisis swirling in and around the Bush administration are related to this overriding military and political fact.

In 1990, on the eve of the first Gulf War, the first Bush administration announced the beginning of a “new world order”—the conception that with the collapse of the Soviet Union, history had ended. Henceforth, there would exist no rival to US imperialism. As Francis Fukuyama proclaimed, the new and final stage of history would be one dominated by liberal democracy under the aegis of American capitalism. Over 15 years later, what is left of that perspective? The failure in Iraq is not only a military setback. It is fundamentally the failure of this global perspective, and it is the end of an entire historical epoch.

Let us consider the trajectory of world history over the past 60 years. After the Second World War, the United States had emerged as the most powerful imperialist country in the world, and it set about to reorganize and rebuild a global capitalist system that had been shattered by the events

of the previous three decades—the First World War, the Great Depression and the catastrophe of the Second World War. Capitalism was to be stabilized and reconstructed by the power of the United States.

It must be acknowledged that American imperialism did realize major successes in the implementation of its global strategy in the aftermath of World War. Two factors were at work here. First, the United States enjoyed overwhelming economic superiority over all its old European and Japanese rivals.

This superiority found concentrated expression in the central role played by the US dollar in the international financial system. The financial power of the dollar was a greater factor in securing the global primacy of the United States than its immense military arsenal.

Second, the treacherous policies of the Stalin regime in the Soviet Union—ruthlessly committed to the containment and suppression of revolutionary challenges to imperialism—played a key role in the political re-stabilization of the global capitalist system after 1945. The interaction of these two factors provided the crucial political and economic foundation for the dominant global position of the United States.

But Washington was not invincible. Even at the height of its power, American imperialism confronted political challenges in the form of the struggles of the masses throughout the world, which placed limits on its ability to dictate and achieve whatever it wanted. Moreover, the economic underpinnings of American dominance were substantially eroded even by the end of the 1960s. The 1970s and 1980s were decades of deepening crisis for American capitalism.

The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 created the impression that American imperialism had emerged victorious from the Cold War and had been granted an entire new historic lease on life. At the time, very little attention, except in our own movement, was given to the underlying problems and crisis of the world imperialist system itself.

Perspective counts, not only for the workers’ movement, but also for the bourgeoisie. The policies pursued by the American ruling elite over the past 15 years have been based on a dramatically incorrect assessment of the global situation. It is this that has created the conditions for the catastrophic miscalculations that have now become so apparent to broad sections of the ruling class itself. Certainly, the attacks of the Democratic Party on the Bush administration are not motivated by opposition to the general aims of the administration, but rather the tactics that have been pursued and have now ended in dramatic failure.

But the question is, what are the consequences of that failure? It is important to emphasize the implications of a correct approach to the analysis of the world situation, and I stress—the world situation.

What distinguishes our movement, the Fourth International, from all others, is its appreciation of the dominant significance of world politics over national considerations. What are the global implications of the failure of the grand scheme of American imperialism to establish through war its global hegemonic position? I think that we must expect that the disaster in Iraq will lead, sooner rather than later, to economic and political convulsions within the United States and internationally. The US,

no longer able to function as the stabilizer of world capitalism, has become the source of its greatest instability.

It is important to begin working through systematically the world situation. Let us pose just a few questions about the present state of the world.

What will be the impact of the Iraq debacle on relations between the US and Europe, and between the US and Asia? What are the implications of the attempt by Russia to reassert its strategic interests? How will the US respond to the growing power of China? What are the implications for China-Japan relations?

We see on a world scale an extraordinary potential for global conflict. At the same time, when you examine relations within these countries and regions, you must ask, what will be the impact of this convulsive world situation on internal class relations within countries? In every area of the world, one sees the potential for social conflict, a tension that is continually exacerbated by the international conflicts. And nowhere is this more true than in the United States itself.

There is another factor that should be considered. The 20th century was largely a period in which America was a rising power. This had a profound effect on Americans' understanding of the world and their assessment of the social system that existed.

But now, what are Americans witnessing? More and more it becomes clear that American capitalism is a society in decline, its global influence is receding. The impact of the failure of the Iraq war, which was never popular in the first place, is devastating. And this sense of decline and crisis must encourage a more critical attitude toward conditions in the US itself.

The issue here is, how do we perceive the development of political conditions in the US and internationally in the wake of the Iraq catastrophe? It may be the case that since the election, the Democratic Party has accelerated or escalated its verbal criticism of the Bush administration, but all this in the end amounts to very little. The Democrats can't bring the war to an end, nor can they, even if they wanted to, provide any serious response to the increasing social distress in the United States. Were the Democrats and their allies to come to power, they could not and would not retreat from the global interests of American imperialism.

The staggering social inequality in the US must inevitably give rise to a movement of the working class, because what this inequality expresses in objective terms is a colossal increase in levels of social exploitation, and that must give rise to a change in political conditions. The basic truth of Marxism—that it is the tectonic forces of socioeconomic processes that in the final analysis determine politics—will find expression in the US and internationally, and that is the basis upon which we develop the political line of the SEP and the ISSE.

We anticipate and foresee events in the US reflecting ever more directly the very advanced stage of the crisis of the world capitalist system. The laws of history apply to the US as they do to every other country. The strategy that we have to elaborate is an international strategy. The strategy that we bring is that the struggle against war today is a global struggle that requires an international unification of the working class and youth on the basis of an international socialist program.

I would like to respond to two specific questions that have been raised in the resolution and the discussion today, then make a more general comment about the main issue that has emerged, that of political perspective.

First, on the question of identity politics. Our opposition to identity politics is very important in combating the influence of the Democratic Party, which may well seek to disguise its reactionary pro-war politics by running the first woman candidate or the first black candidate for president in 2008.

We should point out in that context that for the last ten years, the US

secretary of state has been, successively, a woman (Madeleine Albright), a black man (Colin Powell), and a black woman (Condoleezza Rice). During that time, the US government has launched three wars and it is preparing a fourth. We must reiterate that it is class, not race or gender, which is the fundamental division in society.

Second, the question of the events of September 11, 2001. We have consistently criticized and rejected the official cover-up of 9/11, but we don't regard the struggle to clarify the American people as primarily a *forensic* question, in the way that the 9/11 Truth movement does. It is a *political* question.

The details of 9/11 are important, but historical perspective is more important. Moreover, we don't deny the existence of Al Qaeda or radical Islamic fundamentalism, and we categorically oppose both their reactionary ideology and terrorist methods.

Turning to the more general question of perspective discussed in the opening report and again in the contribution by David North, I'd like to raise the lessons of the movement against the war in Vietnam in the 1960s and early 1970s. The Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) was then a mass student organization, which grew phenomenally in response to the crisis of the Democratic Party.

Let's recall the events of 1968, when antiwar politics had much wider scope within the Democratic Party than it does today. There was the presidential candidacy of Eugene McCarthy, the New Hampshire primary, the announcement by Lyndon Johnson that he would not seek reelection, the candidacy of Robert Kennedy, Kennedy's victory over McCarthy followed by his assassination, and then the Democratic Convention in Chicago in August 1968, where Hubert Humphrey was nominated on a pro-war platform, and the police attacked and beat antiwar demonstrators.

In the fall of 1968 SDS grew enormously, enrolling hundreds of thousands of students. But the leadership of SDS was in the hands of Maoists who rejected an orientation to the American and international working class and subordinated the antiwar struggle to the Chinese and Vietnamese Stalinists.

Where did such a perspective lead them? Could anyone today credibly propose that Hu Jintao or Vladimir Putin represents the world revolutionary vanguard? The former Maoists have today by and large become liberal Democrats and will undoubtedly rally to the campaign of Hillary Clinton if she is the party's nominee.

It's important to point out that in the late 1960s and early 1970s the politics of the Maoists had a superficial plausibility. Relatively few American college students were from the working class. Moreover, that period was the high point of income equality in the United States, at the end of the post-World War II boom. American workers were closer in income levels to American bosses than to the masses of workers in India or China.

One consequence of the sharp social polarization of the last three decades is that this is no longer true. Where American CEOs once made 20 times the average worker's pay rate, now it is over 450 times. It is no exaggeration to say that American workers are today objectively closer to their class brothers and sisters in the former Third World countries than to American bosses. The Trotskyist movement upheld this basic truth of international working class unity even in the period when it might have seemed abstract. Today it is far more concretely obvious.

There is another difference between the 1960s and the present. Those of us who grew up in that decade experienced the impact of genuine mass social movements of the time—civil rights, labor, antiwar. The younger generation coming of age today has not yet experienced such movements, but you will. That's what we're preparing for. And we prepare, not by devising clever tactical alliances, but by upholding principles, fighting for them and winning support as the mass movement emerges.

Finally, I'd like to call your attention to the perspectives document of the International Committee published in 1988, which contains an

important analysis of the lessons of the wave of struggles that erupted worldwide in 1968-75. These were not limited to the United States, but, as the document says, “The period between 1968 and 1975 was marked by the greatest revolutionary movement of the international working class since the 1920s.”

It included the French general strike of May-June 1968, the coming to power of the Social Democrats in Germany, the “hot autumn” strike wave in Italy, the miners’ strike in Britain that brought down the Tory government, the collapse of military and fascist dictatorships in Greece, Portugal and Spain, upheavals in Latin America, and anti-Stalinist movements in Czechoslovakia and Poland. All of this culminated in the breakdown of the postwar financial system in 1971 and the collapse of the Nixon administration in 1974.

If these vast worldwide events were the consequence of the defeat of American imperialism in Vietnam—a war from which the US was ultimately able to extricate itself—what must be the implications today of a defeat in Iraq and Afghanistan under far more explosive conditions in world relations, and with the US in a far worse financial and economic position? The 1988 perspectives resolution drew important lessons from the experience of 1968 to 1975, which world capitalism survived because of the betrayals of Stalinism, social democracy and the various Pabloite revisionist tendencies. Today we must carry forward these lessons in building a revolutionary leadership for even greater struggles of the international working class.



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