Contributions to the ISSE/SEP conference: David Walsh and Joanne Laurier

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The following are contributions made to the International Students for Social Equality/Socialist Equality Party Emergency Conference Against War by David Walsh, SEP member and arts editor for the WSWS, and Joanne Laurier, 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 Draft Resolution is a very good one, in my view. I think it spells out the present situation and the responsibilities that arise from it in a compelling and concrete fashion. We have had a discussion here about the impact of world economic and political development, and I think we ought to see the situation in this country in this light.

The American and world population face a tremendously grave situation. In this country all the official institutions and parties, which played such a foul role in 2001-2003, are once again lining up to facilitate new acts of military, colonial aggression.

The politicians warn about "the Iranian threat," the media obediently passes on the lies, the liberal establishment in the *New York Times* and the Democratic Party decries the "haste" with which things are being rushed into, but agrees that "America's national interests" are at stake and something must be done.

The official left, very critical of the right-wing politicians and also critical of the impotent liberals, explains that it would be madness, however, to break from the Democrats because sticking with them is the only practical and realistic course.

And various "socialist" and "Green" tendencies remain firmly with the left-liberals because to do otherwise would be to "isolate" them and a "broad" coalition needs to be built, we are told, to bring the dangers to an end.

These various social elements are firmly interconnected and interlocked. They may despise and attack each other, but they play politically complementary roles. They form the left and right wings of one political apparatus. The victim in this process is the working population, which is excluded, cheated and exploited. These are objective, class questions. One or another figure or publication or tendency may be more attractive than the average, but it's always necessary to ask: Will he or she or it have any impact on the condition of broad layers of the population? Does this point a way forward?

The Marxist tendency is the only element in society genuinely independent of this apparatus. It represents and advances the interests of the working class. A study of its history, an assimilation of its theory and program, participation in its activities, is the only means by which a student or worker genuinely opposes the existing order.

Radical phrases, demagogy, curses, threats, acts of individual protest and so forth may be personally satisfying for some, but they do not contribute to the political development of the only social force capable of bringing capitalist rule to an end, the working class.

The political situation is always very complicated. If its truth were obvious on the surface, Marxist social science would be superfluous.

What are some of the main features of the present situation? The Draft Resolution discusses them. The American ruling elite, the most predatory and criminal ruling elite on earth, has lurched to the right, propelled by the relative economic decline of the US. It has embarked on the mad course of world domination.

It has sought to take advantage of the political and economic momentum provided by the collapse of the Soviet Union to roll back social gains, re-colonize the impoverished countries and bring the entire world under its sway. The events of September 2001 provided the American establishment with a pretext for putting into practice many long-desired policies, including the overthrow of the Iraqi regime.

The period of extended reaction has reached its limit. The elections in 2006, the state of the polls, the disarray of the Republican Party and the religious right, the signs of crisis on every side, the expressions of popular discontent—every indicator suggests a new social atmosphere. We contribute to that with every ounce of our strength on a daily basis.

Of course this is largely unformed and instinctive, the politically conscious portion of this feeling is still relatively slight. Masses of people feel an antipathy for Bush and the people around him. They know the war is filthy and wrong, that the people presiding over it are the same ones pushing them around at work or destroying their jobs, profiting from healthcare and gouging them at the gas pumps. But for the most part these general impressions are not yet worked up into political conclusions.

People in the US hope for the best. They hope things will pass away, that someone will respond to their distress. The Democrats are elected to power—to end the war, to stop the erosion of decent jobs, to put some kind of limits on the rich, who are running wild, stealing everything and putting it in their pockets.

But the Democratic Party is a capitalist party; it represents corporate and financial interests. It cannot and will not remedy any of the deepest distress of the population. Preserving and extending the position of American capitalism on a world scale is its chief and overriding concern as well. While it postures, with the help of the *New York Times*, as an opponent of Bush and Cheney, and of course there are sharp tactical differences, it won't break from this orbit.

The present situation is untenable. The population voted to end the war, and it gets more war. Not only that, the social gap is accelerating, and the Democrats have not even proposed the most timid means of closing it. Healthcare, education, housing—these are increasingly disastrous for people. Personal bankruptcies, foreclosures, food banks strained to the limit, divorces, domestic violence—all signs of personal and social distress.

People watch and read in dismay. The Tillman case, the family of a national war hero accuses the government of a criminal conspiracy. The wounded at Walter Reed are treated poorly. The US, the home of the Declaration of Independence and the Gettysburg Address, is now

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identified with torture and secret prisons and military psychopaths.

All of this accumulates. Employees are escorted to the door of profitable companies for earning too much, perhaps $12 an hour. The conditions in the workplace are reaching the boiling point. A recent study by the Employment Law Alliance found that 44 percent of Americans, and a higher percentage in the Northeast and Midwest, have worked for a supervisor or employer who they consider abusive. Employer abuse includes "making sarcastic jokes/teasing remarks, rudely interrupting, publicly criticizing, giving dirty looks to, or yelling at subordinates, or ignoring them as if they were invisible." Sixty-four percent in the same poll said that they believe an abused worker should have the right to sue to recover damages. This little study provides a telling glimpse at American social reality.

Pensions and benefits are eviscerated everywhere. A handful of speculators decide on the fates of millions. It becomes increasingly expensive and difficult in the US, the 'richest country in the world,' even to get married and set up a separate household. Consumer confidence is down, the stock market volatile. An off-duty policeman, one of Chicago's finest, viciously beats a defenseless female bartender and it's caught on video. This is to say nothing about the stupidity and conformism of the media, and the emptiness of most cultural products.

High office is essentially sold to the highest bidder. Today is a big day for the presidential candidates, as they report how much they've collected in the first quarter. Hillary Clinton is expected to have between $30 million and $40 million.

In a recent comment, veteran British journalist Godfrey Hodgson wrote, "The quarter ending on 31 March 2007 promises to blow away all previous records for political fundraising in the US. Never has so much been raised, so early. And never has money dominated coverage of a presidential campaign, almost to the point of extinguishing discussion of such less exciting matters as the collapse of the housing market, the politicization of the federal-justice system, prospects for healthcare and the war in Iraq.

"A few days ago two *Washington Post* journalists, after diligent research, reported that Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton had raised over US$1 million in a single evening twice in three days: once in the lush technology-manured pastures of the San Francisco Bay Area and Silicon Valley, and then among the lawyers and the lobbyists in a gigantic Washington conference hotel ...

"'It's obvious,' a blogger ironized, 'there is no reason to have an election. The candidate with the most money wins the election. Cancel the election; set a date—say the end of July 2008—and whoever has the most money is the winner. That is how it will end up anyway, and we don't have to put up with politicians telling us how they have a new way of doing things.'"

In Congress, the Democrats become specialists in passing and sometimes not even passing nonbinding, meaningless resolutions, which commit them to do nothing at some time in the unspecified future, with loopholes allowing them to do not even that much at this vague future moment. The media explains how 'aggressive' their offensive is against Bush, but this too will only create confusion for so long. The dead bodies continue to pile up. And the jobs and housing values disappear. People wish for the best, but it doesn't come about. Patience runs thin.

A situation is emerging in which a considerable portion of the population will be ranged against the entire political-media establishment and those who apologize for it.

"Governments," said Trotsky, "... are the product of the struggle between different classes and the different layers within one and the same class, and, finally, the action of external forces—alliances, wars and so on. *To this should be added that a government, once it has established itself, may endure much longer than the relationship of forces which produced it. It is precisely out of this historical contradiction that revolutions, coup d'états, counterrevolutions, etc., arise*" (emphasis added).

The explosiveness arises out of the fact that the government—and its official opposition—may endure much longer than the relationship of forces that produced them. A certain set of relationships brought Bush to power, or allowed him to come to power, and brought the Democrats to power in Congress. Both sets of relationships have changed, even since November. The population is moving to the left. The recent Pew Research poll simply confirmed that American views on everything from religion to militarism to homosexuality are shifting to the left.

Only 35 percent of the population identify themselves as Republicans, a considerable drop in only a few years. A recent article, "Republicans Fear 2008 Meltdown," suggested: "This painful cycle has some high-level Republicans braced for the likelihood that last fall's rout, in which Democrats won the House and the Senate, may be a prelude to a 2008 knockout that would leave the GOP without control of Congress or the White House for the first time since 1994."

A recent poll of young people age 14 to 29 found that Iraq was their most pressing concern. The same poll found that antiwar sentiment was on the rise: 42.5 percent agreed completely that "America should have never been involved in Iraq," while only 15.3 percent of participants completely disagreed with the statement. The survey also exposed dissatisfaction with President Bush; only 21.7 percent of those polled completely agreed with the statement: "President Bush has done a good job since being elected in 2000."

The survey also revealed, "Many young Americans are ambivalent about US politics." When asked to choose support of either Democrats or Republicans, 31.4 percent of participants selected the "none of the above" option.

At what point does all this set masses of people into motion? That depends on many factors. But it must. Inertia is a significant factor. People put up with a great deal, they grin and bear it, they grit their teeth, they trudge on as long as they can. And then they don't any longer.

We have to be prepared for this and the different set of political circumstances that will generate. All sorts of Lefts will become prominent. The Bill O'Reillys and Ann Coulters and Sean Hannitys and Christopher Hitchenses will be shown the door, or fade into relative obscurity. Amy Goodman and David Corn and Marc Cooper or others like them will suddenly be more prominent. Perhaps Alexander Cockburn and Noam Chomsky and Howard Zinn and Michael Parenti and Norman Solomon. And these are people much more sensitive to where the danger lies—on the left, from us.

A new situation will create new contradictions, but it will be a new situation and the stagnation will begin to break up.

If you want to be skeptical about the American population or the working class in any country, no one can prevent you, but it's wrong and it will cut you off from the deeper realities of the situation. A social eruption is building up. Those who consistently and determinedly argue against the possibility, who scorn "leftist" and "sectarian" opposition to the Democrats and the Greens and the trade union bureaucracies, have a social interest in the existing situation. They are comfortable themselves in the universities, law offices, magazine editorial boards, union offices, etc.

"The democratic petty bourgeois," declared Marx and Engels in 1850, and we are here speaking of the *Nation*, the Greens, MoveOn.org, *CounterPunch*, the ISO and dozens of others, "far from wanting to transform the whole society in the interests of the revolutionary proletarians, only aspire to a change in social conditions which will make the existing society as tolerable and comfortable for themselves as possible."

We stand, on the other hand, for the working class establishing its political independence and revolutionizing society. These are two diametrically opposed perspectives, and a great deal depends in the

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coming period on our ability to clarify their opposition.

The question of art and culture has been raised. We pay a good deal of attention to these questions for reasons we have often spoken about. We see the revival of a socialist political culture as indispensable to the emergence of a broad-based revolutionary movement in the international working class.

But the question can be made more concrete here. Imperialist war and imperialist society, on the one hand, and culture, on the other, stand in direct opposition to one another. In 1938, Trotsky and André Breton, in a manifesto also signed by the painter Diego Rivera, commented: “We can say without exaggeration that never before has civilization been menaced so seriously as today. The Vandals, with instruments which were barbarous, and so comparatively ineffective, blotted out the culture of antiquity in one corner of Europe. But today we see world civilization, united in its historic destiny, reeling under the blows of reactionary forces armed with the entire arsenal of modern technology. We are by no means thinking only of the world war that draws near. Even in times of ‘peace,’ the position of art and science has become absolutely intolerable.”

These words clearly have immense significance today. We have experienced decades in which, while the US ruling elite has increasingly waged wars abroad, it has declared war on critical thought and art and culture at home. Militarism, religious bigotry, philistinism, kitsch—all this has been encouraged at the expense of genuine insight into reality and human problems. The result has been the creation of an official cultural wasteland. Insofar as art develops, it has to do so increasingly in the form of a conscious opposition to every major institution of American and global capitalist society.

Suppression of artistic thought is not unique to the American ruling class. An outburst of militarism and chauvinism will always be accompanied by attacks on the artists. We see that today in Sri Lanka, where filmmakers have come under fire from the military, and India, where they have come under attack from the Hindu chauvinists.

In Sri Lanka the military is attempting to suppress the artists both because they reveal the consequences of the horrific civil war and the state of Sri Lankan society, but more generally because the artists treat the “enemy” as human beings. Militarism demands lies, the demonization of people. Militarism and art are mutually exclusive. Art tells the truth about social life and all aspects of the human situation.

The American ruling elite would like art to disappear. It has done nearly everything in its power to make the National Endowment for the Arts disappear. The budget of the NEA, which is supposed to fund thousands of groups in the US, was $125 million in 2006.

To give some comparisons: the war in Iraq is expected to cost $8.4 billion a month in 2007, or some $280,000,000 a day. So in less time since we met yesterday, the Pentagon has spent more on destruction in Iraq than the US government spends on culture in a year. In its 40-year history, the National Endowment for the Arts has awarded grants totaling some $3.9 billion, i.e., what the war in Iraq costs every two weeks or so.

The socialist movement has a specific responsibility to oppose militarism, chauvinism and defend all that is valuable in historic culture and encourage a new generation of younger artists to take up both intellectual-artistic and social responsibilities.

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