

Contributions to the ISSE/SEP conference: Jerome White and Helen Halyard

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The following are contributions made to the International Students for Social Equality/Socialist Equality Party Emergency Conference Against War by Jerome White, WSWS writer and 2006 SEP candidate for US Congress in Michigan, and Helen Halyard, assistant national secretary of the SEP. 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.

I would like to speak in support of the section of the resolution entitled, “The political independence of the working class and the struggle for socialism,” and in particular point 32 that says, “workers and youth internationally must base themselves on the struggle for the political independence of the working class, in conflict with those parties and tendencies that seek to direct, in one way or another, popular opposition into the safe channels of the political establishment.”

This is precisely the character of the leadership of the official antiwar movement in the US. United for Peace and Justice—one of the main antiwar protest organizations and a coalition that includes the Communist Party, the Greens, the International Socialist Organization and scores of other left and liberal groups—brought an array of Democratic politicians onto the stage of their January 27 protest in Washington, including Ohio Congressman Dennis Kucinich, who is running for the 2008 Democratic presidential nomination, Representatives Maxine Waters and Lynn Woolsey of California, Representative John Conyers of Michigan, and Jesse Jackson. The chief role of this organization has been to sow illusions in the Democratic Party and the viability of stopping the war by pressuring this big business and pro-war party.

After first claiming the Democrats could be persuaded to halt funding for the war the coalition recently sent out an email hailing as a victory the passage of the supplementary funding bill by the Democratic-controlled congress. It joined the Democrats and the media in claiming that the bill—which provides Bush with all the money he needs to continue the war—is really an “anti-war” measure because it includes a worthless nonbinding withdrawal deadline that would allow the US occupation of Iraq to continue indefinitely. Nevertheless, the email from UFPJ gushes, “Congratulations! Because of the persistence and hard work of the antiwar movement, the Iraq debate in Congress has shifted from ‘if’ to ‘when’ we pull out of Iraq. As the new Congressional majority and the President move into a clearer confrontation around the war in Iraq, the antiwar movement must seize this moment to press our demand: ‘End the War and Bring All the Troops Home Now!’”

The time for “pressure is critical,” the email continues, because the House and Senate were now debating a compromise bill. “[W]e must insist that what comes out of the conference committee sets a firm end date for our military presence in Iraq. As weak as these bills are, the

compromise version must not be weakened behind closed doors. We will not tolerate political machinations when US and Iraqi lives are at stake.”

The UFPJ and all of its affiliated organizations are joining the Democrats in perpetuating a massive fraud on the American people. They collaborated with the so-called “Out of Iraq” caucus in the House of Representatives to draft a bill that will have absolutely no impact on stopping the war. Instead it is designed to provide the Democratic Party—which is just as committed to defend the geopolitical interests of American imperialism as the Republicans—with an “antiwar” veneer in order to contain opposition to the war within the capitalist two-party system.

A similar role is being played by the ANSWER coalition (Act Now to Stop War and End Racism). While there were no representatives from the Democratic Party, the AFL-CIO or Hollywood present at their March 17 demonstration in Washington, the essential message from the speakers’ platform was that those present needed to put more pressure on the Democratic Party to give it the backbone to stand up to the Bush Administration and end the war.

Despite their radical phrases the Communist Party, the International Socialist Organization, the Workers World Party and the other middle-class radical protest organizations that politically dominate the official antiwar movement are playing a politically destructive role by reinforcing illusions in the Democratic Party and liberal reformism right at the point when the aspirations and sentiments of tens of millions of people are clashing with the pro-war and pro-capitalist politics of the Democratic Party.

It is clear that the Democratic Party is consciously seeking out alliances with these radical organizations in order to provide itself with a “left” cover. On the other hand these organizations, having been left out of mainstream politics for decades, now feel that the election of a Democratic majority in Congress, and the possible election of a Democratic president next year, will give them a chance of “getting a seat at the table” and influencing the Democrats.

A recent article about the protest movement in the liberal *Nation* magazine referred to the ongoing courtship between the radicals and the Democratic Party. “At the Jan. 27 peace march in Washington, an unlikely group of students paraded together,” writer Sam Graham-Felsen notes. “It was a lineup that would have been unthinkable four years ago: College Democrats, young socialist radicals, black and Latino students wearing Make Hip-Hop Not War T-Shirts, representatives of the student wing of a DC think tank and a reborn Students for a Democratic Society (SDS). ‘The fact that College Dems and the ISO were marching together without killing one another—that’s a huge change,’ says David Duhalde, whose organization is a member of the National Youth and Student Peace Coalition. While radical groups have tempered their tone and tactics, mainstream progressive student organizations have become less cautious and more willing to engage in direct action—and all sides, for the first time in years, are eager to work together. ‘We’ve realized the war is more important [than our differences],’ said Duhalde.”

The resolution before this conference states, “It is necessary to oppose all those who argue for a false ‘unity’ that is based on attempts to pressure the ruling class and its representatives.”

In the name of the “unity” of the antiwar movement, the International Socialist Organization [ISO] and similar organizations are openly collaborating with the Democratic Party. One of those “antiwar” organizations cited in the *Nation* is a group called Campus Progress, which was formed by the Center for American Progress—a Washington, DC think tank. The Center for American Progress is headed by John D. Podesta, former chief of staff to President Bill Clinton, and is manned by several other former officials in the Clinton administration. The organization, which the *Nation* notes “had long been quiet on the war is now becoming a major player in the student movement,” providing antiwar speakers, hosting movies and giving students on campuses across the country grants and training to help them organize antiwar actions. “They’ve even hired two full-time organizers to mobilize students,” the article notes. In other words, the ISO and others are collaborating with a Democratic Party operation—manned by former Clinton administration officials who prepared the way for the invasion of Iraq and whose web site includes such pacifistic goals as “Confronting Iran,” “Refocusing the war on terror” and intervening in Africa under the cover of stopping genocide in Darfur.

In the aftermath of the elections that swept the Republicans out of office last November, the Democratic Party has moved quickly to try to head off a movement to the left by masses of people who want an end to the war, the attacks on democratic rights and the growth of social inequality. With the help of their “left” apologists they are posturing as opponents of the war in order to exercise control over the emerging movement and keep it within the confines of what is acceptable to US imperialism—in other words, in order to dissipate and crush that movement.

The “antiwar movement” as it is presently constituted cannot articulate the needs and desires of masses of working people and youth. Writing about this phenomenon in 1971—a period of mass upheavals in the US and internationally against the war, racial discrimination and trade union struggles—Cliff Slaughter, a leader of the Socialist Labour League in Britain and still at that time a Marxist, referred to the ‘recognized’ protest movements in the US as “the left arm of the whole conservative superstructure,” rather than the “expression of organized revolt.” If this was true in the 1970s it is even truer today. The official protest movement is quite literally an arm of the political establishment, which reflects tactical divisions within the ruling elite itself. The struggle against war, which involves a struggle against the profit system itself, requires a thorough-going break with the Democratic Party and reformist politics and the development of a powerful political movement of the working class advancing its own independent demands.

The Democratic Party cannot satisfy the aspirations of the masses of people. It is an imperialist party that defends the interests of American capitalism. Within the middle class radical circles the Socialist Equality Party is denounced as “sectarian” and we are condemned for opposing the “unity” of the left. We are not against tactical alliances under certain conditions, but we oppose unprincipled ones that cover up the role of the Democratic Party. Such alliances only retard the development of a genuine mass movement of the working class. We are not for unity with the Democratic Party or the social democrats in Europe or bourgeois nationalists like Hugo Chavez. The unity of the working class that we seek can only be forged by freeing workers from the ideological tutelage of petty-bourgeois politics—that is, the politics of the intermediary layers of society who, while being oppressed by capitalism, are not seeking the overthrow of the profit system but only to make it more livable, particularly for themselves.

Political ideas and parties express different classes and social layers. In one way or another, our political opponents capitulated to the powerful

pressures of American and world imperialism, abandoned the struggle to bring socialist consciousness to the working class and became the representatives of other interests, whether it was the Stalinist bureaucracy in the USSR, the trade union bureaucracy or some other formation. With the collapse of these anti-working-class bureaucracies, these groups were convinced of the invincibility of American imperialism. The best they can hope for now is to find some other means of influencing the powers that be.

In this regard a special note needs to be made in relation to the Greens, who have presented themselves as an alternative to the two major parties. The Greens are not a working class or socialist party. They are reformists who seek to influence the Democrats and Republicans. This was made clear in a recent interview in the *Green Pages* with Ralph Nader, the party’s 2000 presidential candidate, who ran as an independent in 2004. Nader made it clear his presidential campaigns were not based on the struggle to break masses of people from the political influence of the Democratic Party, but rather on helping the Democrats maintain their political hold over workers and young people looking for a political alternative. The Democrats, Nader complained, “didn’t pick up the issues we were spreading all over the country in 2000 which would have made it easier for Gore to win by a bigger margin than he actually did win the election. In 2004, Kerry started out right. He basically said, ‘I’m going to take away Nader’s votes by taking away his issues,’ which is exactly what I wanted him to do. Unfortunately, he then fell into the hands of his political consultants and a number of people who thought they could make a short-term profit by starting 527s and offering their services by going after our ballot access and our petitioners.”

This groveling before the corporate-controlled parties has its roots in the political origins of the Green movement itself. The Greens were founded by former left radicals in Europe who blamed the working class for the defeats of revolutionary upheavals in the post-World War II period, such as the May-June 1968 General Strike in France. Instead of condemning the political parties—the Stalinists, social democrats and revisionists—who had betrayed these struggles, the forerunners of the Greens rejected the revolutionary role of the working class and the socialist project itself.

One such figure was Jacques Camatte, a French writer who had been active in the 1960s radical movement in Italy, who argued that “revolution” was impossible because the working class had been integrated into capitalism. Any future progress, he said, would involve struggle between humanity and capital itself, rather than between classes. Camatte and his co-thinkers also denounced the progressive role that Marx attributed to science and the development of industry and technology. They argued that the major conflict in society was not between the development of the productive forces and the social relations of capitalism but between man and the productive forces themselves. Far from being a positive revolutionary force, Camatte claimed that science was the “goddess and servant of capital” and a “mechanism ... that will assimilate human beings and nature into the structure of capital.” His conclusion was that people had to “go back to nature” and embrace primitivism. As a leader of the Greens in Illinois once lamented, “It all went downhill after man’s domestication of animals.”

The Greens express the confusion and frustration of a section of middle class shop owners and businessmen who, having been undermined by large industry and globalization, look to the political establishment to return to the days of free competition between small producers and nationally regulated economies. Such a reactionary utopia has nothing to do with the working class whose interests lie, not in attempting to turn the clock backwards, but in liberating the productive forces from the grip of the wealthy elite and using mankind’s productive capacity to end poverty and inequality and meet the needs of modern mass society.

Far from having any independence from capitalism, the Greens have proven to be a valuable instrument for the bourgeoisie and a trap for

young people and workers moving to the left. In Europe they gained support from those coming into opposition to the pro-capitalist politics of the social democratic and Stalinist parties, only to betray their interests. Once in power, the Greens did the bidding of their own ruling elites, including in Germany when they joined a coalition government that waged war against Yugoslavia and dispatched German forces to Afghanistan. In the US, the American Greens have been moving even further to the right, proclaiming that the protection of the environment is completely compatible with corporate profit.

None of these parties that defend the old political order are capable of responding to the needs and desires of the masses of working people. We, the Socialist Equality Party and the International Students for Social Equality, must base ourselves on the inevitable social upheavals that will be produced by the political disaster American imperialism has met in Iraq and the long-term decline of US capitalism. We intend to provide these struggles with the only viable political program that can provide a way forward for the working class, i.e., international socialism.

The question has arisen as to our long-term strategy, and its relation to our current activities. Our long-term strategy is the abolition of capitalism and the establishment of a socialist society. There are no easy answers to the problems and the conditions of oppression that face millions all over the world, whether you are talking about the fight against unemployment, the struggle against imperialist war, the fight against the attacks on democratic rights. There are no answers outside the independent mobilization of the working class.

The working class is the only class within capitalist society, because of its relationship to the means of production, which is not tied to the defense of the nation state. Working people have an enormous potential to change society and control the means of production and it is our task to make them conscious of that. This requires learning the lessons of previous struggles, as other speakers have said. We must draw lessons from the strategic experiences of masses of people in the course of the twentieth century.

When I came into political life it was during the course of the massive civil rights struggles in the United States that radicalized tens of thousands of black youth and brought them into opposition to conditions of poverty, unemployment and racism. They participated in this movement in order to change the conditions of both racism and economic oppression.

The petty-bourgeois leadership that led the movement for civil rights separated the struggle against racism from its source in the existing economic system of capitalism. They said it was possible to change things, not by putting an end to the system, but by reforming it. The impact of this perspective is clear. Who were the beneficiaries of the policy of affirmative action?

During the past 30 years there has been an enormous stratification in the black population, with a tiny layer enriching itself and becoming very active in the existing political structures. This layer includes extremely right-wing political figures—Condoleezza Rice, Clarence Thomas and Colin Powell—while the conditions for black workers and youth in the inner cities remains the same and in some cases are worse than in an earlier period. This inequality is the product of the perspective that one can fight against inequality without addressing the social conditions that have created inequality.

The issue of practical vs. impractical solutions has been raised at this conference and in answering this it is critical to understand that the only practical solution to the problems is the independent political mobilization of the working class. Any attempt to find a shortcut to these problems will lead inevitably to betraying the historic interests of masses of working people.

We say in the resolution, “In fighting for this program, workers and youth internationally must base themselves on the struggle for the political independence of the working class, in conflict with those parties and

tendencies that seek to direct, in one way or another, popular opposition into the safe channels of the political establishment.” This is an extremely important conception and one that has to be assimilated along with the other sections of the resolution in the development of a political movement of the international working class that has to be based on the historical experiences of the working class.



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