

Report to the ISSE/SEP Conference: On internationalism and the political situation in Australia

17 April 2007

The following is a report on the political situation in Australia delivered to the International Students for Social Equality/Socialist Equality Party Emergency Conference Against War by Laura Tiernan, a member of the ISSE and SEP in Australia.

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

The remarks were made in response to the discussion at the conference and the resolution adopted by the conference, "End the occupation of Iraq! No to war against Iran! For an international socialist movement against war!"

Further reports and international greetings will be published in the coming days.

Comrades, I'm pleased to bring greetings from the Socialist Equality Party in Australia and from the International Students for Social Equality Steering Committee in Sydney, which is currently leading the work of our international student movement in Australia and New Zealand.

We too are convinced that we stand on the cusp of enormous political and social upheavals internationally, a period for which the Fourth International alone has prepared. The most critical task before us is to ensure that our perspective accurately reflects the fundamental tendencies of economic, social and political development and on that basis to elaborate the independent political tasks of the working class.

I would just like to make a number of points in support of the resolution and discussion at this conference.

First, in relation to the international character of the growing opposition to war and social inequality, this opposition is unable to find any outlet through the official political channels and institutions, all of which are deeply rooted in the defence of the nation-state.

On February 17, 2003, a statement by the WSWs drew attention to the objective significance of the global anti-war demonstrations held on the weekend of February 15 and 16.

"The demonstrations of February 15-16 were, in the first instance, an expression of massive popular opposition to an invasion of Iraq," we wrote. "But the historical significance of the events of this past weekend transcends even this immensely important issue.

"What we have witnessed and participated in over the past two days is the birth of a new *international* social movement of opposition to imperialism. Underlying this development are profound objective processes. The global integration of capitalist production, spearheaded by transnational corporations, has laid the foundation for the global coordination of social struggles of the working class.

"Just as the unparalleled development of world economy transcends the barriers of the national state, the class struggle as an objective historical process tends naturally to sweep across national borders. With ever-greater consciousness, the working class will define itself in international rather than national terms." (See "An event of world historical significance".)

In 2003 there was still the belief within broad sections of the population that the Iraq war—like the stolen election before it—represented some sort of aberration from the normal course of development. The masses of workers and youth sought a correction, hoping that popular pressure would force the United Nations, or various European powers, to act as a brake on the eruption of US militarism. Of course, this perspective failed miserably. Four years later, there is a developing sense among working people that the escalating war in Iraq and the growing tensions produced by social inequality are manifestations of a crisis that is systemic in character.

As David North stressed in the discussion yesterday, the emergence of a revolutionary movement of the American working class will be the outcome of contradictions of capitalism that are global in character. Its emergence is not something that we can determine precisely, but it is inevitable. We are seeking, through this conference, through the daily political analysis provided by the *World Socialist Web Site*, and through the building of the ISSE, to provide the political, theoretical and cultural foundations and direction for this emerging global movement.

I would also like to speak in support of point 11 of the resolution, which states, "Humanity is threatened with the eruption of violence on a global scale not seen since the bloodiest days of the First and Second World Wars. The global ambitions of the United States represent no less a danger to peace than those of imperialist Germany in the first half of the 20th century. The fundamental cause of war is to be found not in the ambitions of the American ruling class, but in geopolitical and economic tensions that arise inevitably out of the reactionary capitalist nation-state system. The United States is not alone in its expansionist geopolitical interests. Competition for resources between different capitalist powers—including the US, Japan, Australia, Russia, and the European powers—has brought with it an extreme heightening of inter-imperialist antagonisms. The ruling classes of historically-oppressed countries, including China and India, are striving for a more dominant world position, while more minor powers have their own regional interests and ambitions. All of this combines to intensify the danger of a global conflagration. The threat of a new world war can be answered only by the unified global struggle of the international working class, directed toward the establishment of a democratic and egalitarian world socialist society."

The eruption of US militarism, accompanied by the flouting of the most basic precepts of international law, is the most destabilizing and explosive factor in world politics. A new period of inter-imperialist rivalry has been unleashed that is transforming political relations in every single country.

Australia is no exception. There has not been a more slavish supporter of the Bush administration's so-called "war on terror" than the Australian government led by the non-entity John Howard. Howard's was the first government to commit troops in support of the US invasion of Afghanistan and maintained a troop presence in Iraq even as other

members of the “coalition of the willing” dropped like flies. The fact that Bush has repeatedly held up Howard’s support as evidence of solid commitment from the “international community” underscores just how isolated and desperate American foreign policy has become.

Over the past four years, Australian society has become increasingly militarized. We’ve seen the introduction of a battery of anti-terror laws used to arrest and imprison so-called terror suspects, stripping them of basic legal protections; the stoking of anti-Muslim and anti-immigrant racism aimed at channeling the fears and insecurity of more backward social layers in a right-wing direction, as evidenced in the race riots at Cronulla Beach in December 2005; the promotion of new high school curricula promoting patriotism and war; and a multi-million dollar PR campaign aimed at recruiting young people into the Australian Army. The Howard government last year announced the largest expansion of funding to the defence forces since Vietnam, but no one wants to join. Hence the discussion in ruling circles about the need for some form of conscription.

The support extended by the Howard government for the illegal occupation of Afghanistan and Iraq has involved a definite quid pro quo. In return for military and logistical support in the Middle East, the Bush Administration has offered its backing for a new era of military interventions by Australian imperialism in the South Pacific.

On December 31, Howard announced that the Australian people have to prepare for a 20-30 year period of military operations in the Pacific.

Australia now has troops stationed in East Timor, has effectively taken over the Solomon Islands, and is engaged in threats and bullying against a number of Pacific islands including Fiji, Vanuatu, and resource-rich Papua New Guinea.

Once again the major powers are jockeying to secure resources and strategic territory in the Pacific region. Central to this is the perceived threat China poses to US and Australian interests. China now has significant investment and diplomatic ties in the Pacific, and the recent Japan-Australia Security Declaration, signed following Cheney’s trip to both countries in February, is aimed at isolating China politically and militarily.

Where are these conflicts heading? In World War II, the “Pacific theatre of engagement” as it is known in the military textbooks, saw some 10-20 million people killed, including more than 56,000 American military personnel. It was a war that ended with the dropping of the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki on August 6th and 9th 1945.

This is the road upon which the Australian government, with full backing from the Labor Party, the Greens, and the entire coterie of petty-bourgeois radical protest organizations, has embarked.

Yesterday this question was asked: Can a movement based on such a high political and theoretical level have anything other than a negligible influence in the realm of actual power? In other words, can our program really cut a path to the working class? In fact, although we answer in the affirmative to this question, based on a scientific appraisal of the world situation, it can also be posed the other way around—what is the alternative political conception and where does it lead? The example of the various radical groups in Australia such as the Pabloite Democratic Socialist Party and Socialist Alliance provides a striking example of where the search for opportunist shortcuts, based on a rejection of the revolutionary potential of the working class, leads.

In Australia, while there is overwhelming opposition to the war on Iraq, when it comes to Australia’s military operations in the Pacific, these are largely seen as peacekeeping or humanitarian missions. And the responsibility for this rests directly with the radical organizations that in 1999 organised “troops in” demonstrations calling on the Howard government to send warships to East Timor to protect the Timorese people against a campaign of violence by Indonesian militia organized in the TNI.

At the time, *The Australian Financial Review*—the leading mouthpiece of

finance capital—published an editorial thanking the Australian “left” for finally ending the taboo on military deployment that had existed since the days of Vietnam.

The SEP was the only party that opposed Australia’s military intervention. Howard dispatched troops and warships, and of course this had nothing to do with protecting the East Timorese people and everything to do with seizing control of the substantial oil reserves in that country against the encroachment of other foreign powers such as Portugal.

All of the radical groups argued that imperialist intervention was necessary as the only realistic and immediate remedy to protect the East Timorese from the Indonesian militia. Now, eight years later, we can see the outcome of their so-called realism—an absolute social disaster in East Timor in which Australian troops are now gunning down anti-occupation protesters.

It is not our task or responsibility to provide immediate answers to the crimes produced by capitalism. There are no short cuts. We are building a movement that aims at finally doing away with the fundamental cause of war—the capitalist system—and we aim to train and educate a new generation to carry out this task based on the many bitter experiences of the 20th century.

I just want to conclude by referring to the case of David Hicks. When you read the account on the WWSW by Richard Phillips of last week’s Military Commission hearings it is like reading a description of a Nazi show trial. It is really staggering and it is having a profound impact on political consciousness.

Throughout the 20th century, America was held up as proof that capitalism could provide prosperity and democracy. Now it provides neither, and is viewed by masses around the world as a source of enormous danger. Cheney visits Sydney and the entire central business district goes into lockdown mode, the vice-president whisked from the plush interior of the Shangri-La Hotel to the Prime Ministerial residence over Sydney Harbour Bridge, surrounded by a cavalcade of bullet proof cars, police and military personnel.

During the elections we had a phone call from a young housewife who said she was very concerned because at her children’s school there is an American flag being displayed in the library, and she had requested the principal remove it because she said it sets a bad example. It encourages children to think that criminal behaviour is okay. She raised Iraq and the trial of David Hicks. This was a working class woman, who had never before been involved in politics. She got our phone number from the party’s election statement which she received somewhere. She was not being nasty. There was none of this anti-Americanism involved, and in fact she spoke at length and with great empathy about the conditions of ordinary people in America.

There is a growing understanding—and I think this is true globally—that there are really two Americas. Last November’s US mid-term elections were followed very closely in Australia. Had you asked people in Australia five years ago what a mid-term election is, most would not have known the answer. But this time it was watched, and there was a belief that at last the voice of the American people was making itself heard and that the policies of war would be repudiated. Workers in Australia felt a certain confidence as a result of the election results. We fielded a candidate in the Victorian elections at the time, just a brief three-week campaign, and we noted a definite political shift. Now of course the outcome was very different from what workers had hoped for, and the Democratic Party has no intention of ending the war, but the reaction in Australia does indicate again the global character of the opposition to war and social inequality.

The coming social upheavals in the US will be the outcome of intensifying global contradictions, and the emergence of the American working class as an independent political force will in turn transform the

political situation in every single country.

The struggle by the SEP in the US for the political independence of the working class from the Democratic Party and from all of its liberal apologists and radical defenders has vast international significance.



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