

Opening remarks to the conference

# The political foundation for a movement against war

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*The following are the opening remarks by Joe Kay, a member of the ISSE Steering Committee in the US and a writer for the WSWs, to the ISSE/SEP Emergency Conference Against War. The remarks motivated a resolution passed by the conference and published here.*

I want to welcome you all here to the International Students for Social Equality/Socialist Equality Party Emergency Conference Against War, and to extend a special welcome to our friends and comrades from outside the United States. There is a group of delegates from different parts of Canada, as well as members of the ISSE and SEP from Germany and Australia. The presence of these delegates serves to highlight the fact that this is an international conference. We are here to represent a movement that is international at its very core, and we will be speaking to and on behalf of an international audience.

I want to begin this conference by outlining what I consider to be its main significance and its principal aims. The time we have this weekend is in fact quite short, and we can only go over a limited amount of material and raise a limited number of issues. However, we hope that by the end of Sunday we will have accomplished a great deal—and in particular, that we will have passed a resolution outlining the political foundations for a renewed offensive of the international working class and student youth against war. You all have before you a draft of this resolution, and the purpose of my remarks is to motivate this resolution.

The conference is of great significance. We are gathered here not simply to speak on behalf of ourselves. We are here to give voice to the outrage and opposition felt by millions, billions of people around the world, who look on with horror at the devastation wrought by imperialism, or who are themselves the direct victims of war and militarism. Within the framework of existing political structures and institutions internationally, the interests and views of the vast majority of the world's population find no expression. We are here to give conscious expression to these interests and views, and to elaborate a political program that can end war.

We are holding this conference on a somber occasion. It has now been four long years since the US invasion of Iraq. Four years—this is quite an expanse of time. It is as long as the US Civil War, World War I, US involvement in World War II, the Korean War. It is an historical period of immense significance.

The resolution you have before you begins with a recognition of this unhappy anniversary. Like every anniversary, this is a time to take stock of what has transpired during the previous period, to draw lessons and make an evaluation of the invasion and its aftermath, as well as the attempts by the population in the US and internationally to put an end to the war.

On March 21, 2003, the American military launched a brutal attack on a defenseless country, killing thousands in the initial onslaught. The *World Socialist Web Site* wrote on March 22, 2003: “The US bombardment of

Baghdad ... is a horrific, brutal and cowardly attack. It is being carried out for predatory imperialist aims—above all, the seizure and control of oil wealth—against the defenseless population of a nation that represents no threat to the American people. March 21, 2003 is a shameful day in US history.

“In the first day of the campaign of ‘shock and awe’—the modern equivalent of the Nazi blitzkrieg—as many as 3,000 lethal bombs and cruise missiles rained down on Iraqi cities, principally Baghdad, a metropolis of some 5 million people. American military officials have indicated that they intend to unleash in the opening phase of the current war 10 times the destructive power employed 12 years ago in the initial stage of the first Persian Gulf War.”

This was only the beginning of the carnage. Over the past four years, as the US military has sought to establish its control over the Iraqi population, we have seen unending death and destruction. We have witnessed the leveling of entire cities and unending colonial repression; we have witnessed the barbarity of Abu Ghraib, of mass arrests and torture; we have witnessed the escalating toll of sectarian violence unleashed and encouraged by the occupying forces. And what we have been able to perceive from outside Iraq is only a glimpse of the horror experienced by those who have been the targets of the American ruling elite. Thanks to the censorship of the American military and the complicity of the media, the daily consequences of the war go largely unreported.

The resolution takes note of the only scientific estimate of Iraqi casualties as a result of the invasion—655,000 through June 2006. This would be more than 750,000 today. It is difficult to comprehend a number of this magnitude. This is a crime of extraordinary proportions. It is I think sometimes possible for us to forget or lose sight of the nature of this crime. The US government, which claims to speak in the name of the American people, has carried out this operation that has killed three-quarters of a million people. In addition to the Iraqi deaths, 3,400 US and coalition soldiers have been killed in this enterprise.

Recognition of the brutality of this war is only the beginning. Indeed, we are not here simply to protest this war or deliver reports on how terrible it is, or how criminal is the American government. We are not here simply to demand an immediate end to the war, though of course we do make this demand.

More importantly, we are here to elaborate a political program through which this war can be ended. Indeed, that this is the central purpose of this conference is what distinguishes it from the various conferences and protests held by myriad organizations and protest groups. If there is any lesson that we can draw from the previous four years experience, it is the utter futility of appealing to the political establishment—and in the US, this means the two-party system—to put an end to the war.

In considering how we must respond to the war in Iraq—as well as the war in Afghanistan, the threatened war against Iran, and the entire eruption of American militarism—we must ask ourselves whether or not this war is the expression of deeper causes. If we acknowledge that all the official reasons given for these wars have been lies, one must then ask: What are the real reasons?

We need to proceed scientifically. If one wants to cure a disease, one must first comprehend what caused the disease. Only in this way can one treat the disease itself; the disease will not be cured simply by denouncing it. While opposition to the war is important, and the expression of this opposition is important, the essential question is what will be the perspective that guides this opposition.

At its beginning, the resolution before you sets out to explain that the war in Iraq is an imperialist war. When we use the word “imperialist,” it is not simply as an epithet, but as a description of an objective social and economic process.

Much has changed since Lenin wrote his book, *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism*. However, certain fundamental characteristics remain, and indeed have become more pronounced. Imperialism is the highest stage of capitalism. It is an expression of the social interests of the ruling class in capitalist society. It is the attempt by this ruling class to use military force in order to control resources, dominate markets, and establish a more advantageous relationship relative to its rivals.

The resolution states clearly at the beginning, “The war against Iraq is an imperialist war. It is an act of aggression undertaken in the interests of the corporate and financial oligarchy in the United States and its allies in Britain and other countries. As in the world wars of the twentieth century, what is taking place is a re-division of global resources, as the US ruling class seeks to assert military control over key strategic resources.”

In this sense, the war is not an accident. It is a product of underlying contradictions in the capitalist system. The resolution states, “The increasingly global integration of production smashes against the limits of the obsolete nation-state form in which the capitalist system is historically rooted. This contradiction intensifies the basic conflict between the private ownership of the productive forces by an increasingly narrow ruling class and the social character of a productive process that involves the labor of hundreds of millions.”

I want to elaborate on this point a bit, because I think it is quite important. Over the past several decades, capitalism has gone through an extraordinary period of global integration. One hundred fifty years ago, Marx and Engels (in the *Communist Manifesto*) spoke of the global nature of capitalism, about the way in which “The need of a constantly expanding market for its products chases the bourgeoisie over the entire surface of the globe. It must nestle everywhere, settle everywhere, establish connections everywhere.”

Global integration has developed at an extraordinary pace since then. There is no such thing as a national economy. Every economy depends upon the world market for capital inflows, for the sale of finished goods, for importing critical raw materials, and for many other things as well. Increasingly, the very process of production takes place on a global scale, with corporations seeking out regions with the cheapest sources of labor to produce their goods and sell them on the world market. Certainly American capitalism, and with it the social position of the American ruling elite, is in a position of deep dependency, and in fact is in an increasingly weak economic position on the world market. As the resolution notes, “American capitalism rests on the fragile and unstable foundation of massive capital inflows, unprecedented levels of debt, and various forms of financial speculation and manipulation.”

If we place the present period in its historical context, we can sketch out certain basic trends. American capitalism has lost the dominant economic position that it enjoyed in the period following the Second World War, but the American ruling class certainly has not lost the appetite that went with

it.

The American ruling elite, whose interests are represented by the government of this country, has no response to its position within the framework of global capitalism except through military force. As the SEP noted in our 2004 election statement, “The violent eruption of American imperialism—which finds its essential expression in the Bush administration’s doctrine of preemptive war—represents a desperate attempt to resolve the contradiction between world economy and the nation state by establishing the hegemony of one country—namely, the United States—over all other countries.”

Our response to the war must be based on our understanding of the general tendencies underlying it. If war is a product of the capitalist system, then war cannot be ended except through the abolition of capitalism. A movement against war must be a movement against capitalism. As the resolution states, “The only way the war can be ended is through a unified political movement of the international working class, on the basis of a socialist program. The world’s productive resources must be placed under the democratic control of the world’s population so that these resources can be used to meet pressing social needs, rather than the amassing of personal fortunes and corporate profit.”

This is the basic perspective of the resolution before you. I will not go through it all in detail, but I would like to point out that what it attempts to do, as concisely as possible, is to outline the different aspects of the crisis of global capitalism. It explains that the war against Iraq is part of a global strategy of US imperialism, that the American ruling elite is interested in controlling not just Iraqi oil. It is interested in undermining the position of its rival capitalist powers through military actions or other interventions on every continent. Any one of these regions could be a flashpoint that sparks a broader conflict between the United States and Russia, or the United States and China, or the United States and one or other of the European powers.

The drive of the American ruling elite for military domination is inextricably bound up with the attack on working people in the United States, as the corporate and financial oligarchy seeks to claw back whatever concessions were granted to the American working class in a previous period. The incredible growth of social inequality and the eruption of militarism are two sides of the same process.

The figures included in the resolution on inequality in the US are extremely significant. The top tenth of 1 percent of the US population has a greater income than the combined income of the poorest 150 million Americans! And inequality is becoming more extreme every year. Not since 1928, in the period immediately preceding the Great Depression, was inequality so pronounced as it is today. It is hardly necessary to recall that the Great Depression led directly to a period of enormous revolutionary explosions, the eruption of class antagonisms in the United States and internationally, the rise of fascism in Europe, and the barbarism of the Second World War.

The resolution also discusses the attack on democratic rights, and makes the important point that just as the “war on terror” has been used as a pretext for militarism, so too it has been used as a pretext for the attack on democratic rights. The real underlying causes in the two instances are fundamentally the same—the drive by the ruling elite to secure its interests. The policy of militarism and the growth of social inequality must inevitably produce social explosions, and the maintenance of these policies in the face of growing international opposition requires the abolition of democratic forms of rule.

Finally, I want to stress two points in this resolution that I think are of absolutely critical importance. The first is the question of internationalism. Internationalism is significant in a number of respects. First, the entire population of the world is menaced by the eruption of American imperialism. The danger of world war is a danger that we all face, no matter what country we live in. Second, the American ruling elite is not

alone in its imperial ambitions, and American society is not the only society wracked by growing social inequality and mounting attacks on democratic rights. In the United States we find the most concentrated expression of certain general trends, but as the resolution points out in its various sections, the attack on democratic rights is taking place internationally, as is the growth of social inequality. Indeed, the fact that these processes are repeated in country after country is one of the most important pieces of evidence that their cause is very deep.

Fundamentally, the perspective of internationalism arises from the international character of the capitalist system. Capitalism is a global economic system, and opposition to capitalism must take place as a globally integrated political movement. The global nature of the capitalist system has generated a class—the international working class—whose objective class interests transcend all national boundaries. We must reject the notion that our response to the globalization of the productive forces should be the attempt to reassert national boundaries. As we have argued on the WSWS repeatedly, the problem is not globalization per se—indeed the development of the productive capacity of human society has created the conditions for a rapid increase in the living standards of people all over the world. The problem is the persistence of the nation-state system and the private ownership of the productive forces. It is these conditions that must be abolished through an international socialist movement.

The second point in the resolution that requires special emphasis is the question of the political independence of the working class. One might argue that this is the most fundamental of all questions, because it incorporates everything else.

The resolution states, “There is a force that can oppose these policies and put an end to war—the international working class, the vast majority of the world’s population. The working class is the only segment of the population whose social interests are irreconcilably opposed to the social interests that underlie imperialism. It is also the only genuinely international class, whose social interests transcend the confines of the capitalist system of competing nation states.” The objective interests of the working class are bound up with opposition to the capitalist system of exploitation. It is only on the basis of these objective interests that a movement against capitalism can be based.

In the United States, the fight for the political independence of the working class demands an unrelenting struggle against the Democratic Party and all those organizations and institutions that in one way or another have as their orientation the attempt to pressure the Democrats. The conference takes place in the midst of a debate going on in Congress over the war in Iraq. This debate has been presented in the media as a valiant struggle by the Democrats to bring an end to the war, in the face of opposition from the Bush administration. This is a complete fraud. As we have sought to emphasize on the WSWS, the divisions between the Democrats and Republicans are entirely tactical in nature—there does not exist within any section of the two-party system an expression of the popular opposition to the war.

A number of recent pieces appearing in the press give evidence of this fact. We have, for example, the editorial in the *New York Times* on March 29, which states, “Mr. Bush, his advisers and his loyalists on Capitol Hill threw up a cloud of propaganda aimed at making Americans think there is a debate going on between those who want to win the war and those who want to lose. That’s nonsense, and the White House knows it. Mr. Bush’s inadequate response was a cynical attempt to portray the Democrats and moderate Republicans who voted with the majority as indifferent to the political future of Iraq and to the morale of American soldiers stationed there. In truth, it is Mr. Bush who has been defaulting on his own responsibilities in both areas, and that is why Congress needed to add the language he now objects to so vehemently.”

In other words, the Democrats want “success” in Iraq just as much as the Bush administration—they just have a different view of how best to

achieve it. Several articles have appeared in the *Times* in recent weeks elaborating on the positions of Senator Hillary Clinton, one of the Democratic Party frontrunners for President in 2008. Most recently, on March 27, an article was published entitled “Mindful of Past, Clinton Cultivates the Military.”

The *Times* notes that Clinton has fought to establish close ties with senior military officials, and quotes retired general and former Army vice chief of staff Jack Keane as stating, “I think that eight years in the White House, traveling the world and seeing the United States military doing the nation’s business, and now her time in the Senate, has given her a significant appreciation of the military that maybe her husband didn’t have before the White House.”

Keane, it is important to note, has been one of the leading advocates and advisers behind the “surge” strategy in Iraq, and he was closely involved in the discussions within the Bush administration while this strategy was being developed. He is described by the *Times* as “close to the senator” (Clinton).

Previously, Clinton has made clear that the various proposals being advanced by Democrats in the House and Senate on Iraq have nothing to do with ending the occupation of the country. Tens of thousands of troops will remain there indefinitely regardless of which party is in control of the US government. The concern of the Democrats is not with the war and its aim, but with the fact that the Bush administration’s policy has been a disaster for the interests of American imperialism in the Middle East.

Our opposition to the Democratic Party in the US, and similar institutions internationally, follows naturally from our understanding of the nature of the war and the general features of the capitalist system. The Democratic Party defends capitalism. It is a bourgeois party that supports the interests of American imperialism. The perspective of pressuring the Democrats is bankrupt precisely for this reason.

In fighting for the political independence of the working class, it is not just a question of opposing illusions in the Democratic Party. It is necessary to oppose all those tendencies that in one way or another serve as props for the political establishment. The fight for the political independence of the working class has long been what has distinguished our political tendency, the International Committee of the Fourth International, from every other supposedly socialist organization.

In concluding, I want to make some brief remarks on the International Students for Social Equality and the background to this conference. The plans for this conference originally came out of a meeting of the ISSE Steering Committee, a body that was formed following the November election in the US. In considering the implications and likely consequences of the massive repudiation of the war in Iraq, the SEP took note of the contradiction between the depth of popular opposition to the war and the determination of the Bush administration to continue its prosecution. In our analysis, we stressed that the Democratic Party, notwithstanding its criticisms of Bush’s conduct of the war, remained committed to the defense of the financial and strategic interests of the American ruling elite in Iraq, the Middle East and Central Asia. For these reasons, the aims of the growing mass movement against the war would not and could not be realized within the political framework of Congress and the two-party system.

These are not national problems. None of the political questions that we face are national questions. In considering the development of the political situation, we realized that the growth of oppositional sentiment on campuses would be an important part of broader tendencies around the world. We decided that it was necessary to intervene very strongly on campuses and schools. We changed the name of our organization from the Students for Social Equality to the International Students for Social Equality in order to encapsulate more clearly the perspective that we are seeking to bring to students internationally.

What are our aims? We are seeking to develop a layer of politically

educated students on campuses, educated in an understanding of history and the objective tendencies underlying war. We are seeking to develop a group of young people who realize that the fight against war must be part of an international socialist perspective.

For this reason, we included in the charter of the ISSE Steering Committee meeting the statement, “The aim of the ISSE is to reach a broad audience of student youth, but its orientation is not toward building an amorphous protest organization. The ISSE must struggle to differentiate the perspective of revolutionary socialist internationalism from that of the radical groups that have a presence on the campuses. In contrast to these groups, the ISSE will base its appeal on the fight for a clear political perspective, and in this way the ISSE will attract the most advanced and conscious sections of the student youth.” This conference is a product of this perspective, and is itself an expression of its viability.

The resolution that we hope to adopt at this conference is a document that we can take forward as we seek to build a political movement to end imperialist war. It will be a document that will be read by tens of thousands of people around the world. We must take the product of the discussion this weekend and we must fight for the perspective contained within it.

Comrades, I want to return to the point with which I began—the significance of this conference. There are many signs that we are entering a period of political upheaval, due to a combination of factors—the crisis of the American occupation of Iraq, the unending revelations of government corruption and criminality, the cumulative impact of growing social inequality internationally. Underlying all of these developments is the crisis of the capitalist system itself. We have to begin by very consciously preparing for a realignment of political forces, as masses of people internationally enter into political life.

We represent the working class internationally in this political situation. This is our role, and we must consciously base ourselves on this understanding. None of the institutions of the political establishment speak objectively for the interests of the working class. I hope that by the end of this weekend, we will have a strong basis for carrying out our future work on campuses and in the working class more broadly, and we will begin a new stage in the development of the international socialist movement.



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