

Historical issues raised as ISSE members build for Warsaw meeting

Our reporters
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Members of the International Students for Socialist Equality campaigning in the Polish capital city of Warsaw for a meeting to be held this Saturday, May 19, have been met by students with a warm response and keen interest. Students expressed in particular their agreement with the ISSE's internationalist perspective.

The ISSE has concentrated its work among students attending the University of Warsaw, the neighbouring Academy of Arts, and the Warsaw Polytechnic. An ISSE statement in Polish has been distributed in large numbers at all three institutions and was read closely by many students. (See "ISSE meetings to be held in Poland and Austria")

Students showed considerable interest in discussing political issues and were often prepared to have discussions with the ISSE members for up to an hour at a time. It was easy to initiate discussion and gain an impression of prevailing views and political problems.

A handful of radical left groupings are active at the University of Warsaw, but such groups systematically avoid raising any international and historical issues. The ISSE leaflet, on the other hand, addressed the US-led war against Iraq as a central issue and raised the historical crimes of Stalinism. It also dealt with the role of the Solidarity movement, which initially emerged as a workers' revolt against the Polish Stalinist bureaucracy, but then quickly developed into an agency urging the rapid restoration of capitalism in Poland.

Such Solidarity leaders as Lech Walesa and Adam Michnik played key roles at the end of the 1980s and the following decade in eradicating all social gains in Poland and smoothing the path for the introduction for the most extreme forms of capitalist exploitation. Today Solidarity is one of the most conservative and hated organisations in Polish politics.

Polish students agreed with the ISSE assessment of Solidarity, and the team did not encounter a single student who had anything positive to say about the organization and its right-wing leadership. ISSE members rejected the notion that it was possible to equate Stalinism with socialism, and found broad support. In the course of discussions, however, it became clear that the first generation of postwar students growing up in a capitalist Poland were very unclear about the nature of the Stalinist bureaucracy and developments in Europe following

the Second World War.

This confusion took the form of a pronounced tendency to address political developments from a nationalist position, and involved of an abstract counterposing of dictatorship and democracy. While most students were opposed to the current war in Iraq, a number declared their support for the initial invasion by US troops on the grounds that the country had been led by a dictator. Poland, they continued, had undergone its own bitter experiences with occupation and dictatorship and had felt let down by Western allies, who failed to protect Poland against the Russian occupation after the Second World War.

Other students, including some who now oppose the war, used this line of argument to justify the support by successive Polish governments for the occupation of Iraq. A series of discussions with students revealed that this is a relatively widespread view.

ISSE members explained that such a standpoint turns reality on its head. Despite all the demagoguery of US politicians to the contrary, what currently prevails in Iraq is not some primitive form of democratic society struggling to develop, but rather a vicious and, in the literal sense of the word, mercenary occupation responsible for imposing living conditions far more severe than existed during the worst days of Saddam Hussein.

In a country that possesses huge energy reserves, the vast majority of the population is now denied such basic social rights as access to a regular supply of power, not to speak of the misery arising from the horrendous daily toll of violent deaths.

ISSE members explained that the Polish government was not acting altruistically in its support for the US in Iraq, but was rather seeking an ally and counterweight against Russia and other European powers. This would enable Poland to pursue its own foreign policy interests, while at the same time introducing US-style free-market relations inside Poland itself.

It was also necessary to warn against any standpoint that reduced the fate of Poland after the Second World War to that of a pawn surrounded by two great powers, which are represented impressionistically as Western democracy on one side and Russian dictatorship on the other. Such a simplified view leads to a completely uncritical position with regard to the nature of Western capitalist societies, while at the same time

ignoring the contradictory nature of the Soviet Union itself.

The ISSE pointed out that Polish support for genuine Marxism—i.e., the alternative to the Stalinist deformation of the Soviet Union advocated by the Left Opposition in the 1920s and 1930s—was countered by the bureaucracy in Russia with the annihilation of the entire leadership of the Polish Communist Party, accused by Moscow of being “infected with Trotskyism.” The Polish working class was forced to pay an enormous price in succeeding decades following the wiping out of its political leadership.

Students listened carefully and pointed out that the present government was continuing a policy followed by predecessor regimes of trying to rehabilitate reactionary historical figures in order to encourage nationalist sentiments in Poland. Typical in this respect is the current campaign to present the right-wing dictator, Josef Pilsudski, who led the Second Polish Republic between 1926 and 1935, as a benign defender of Polish rights. A number of historians now declare that Pilsudski was merely defending Polish interests in the Polish-Soviet war of 1920. In fact Pilsudski played a major role that year in organising military forces in alliance with French and British imperialism to invade Russia in an effort to carry out a bloody counterrevolution in the new workers’ state.

Nevertheless, while such nationalist views by some students reflected a degree of confusion over historical issues, the majority of students responded very positively to the international perspective of the ISSE. In common with students all over the world, Polish students are not only aware of but are actively participating in the international networking of science and other disciplines, a trend that is facilitated by the Internet and the globalization of production.

Such developments help expose the utter bankruptcy and pettiness of any national perspective, and there was a broad rejection by students of the bigotry and national narrow-mindedness of the Kaczynski twins who are currently leading the Polish government.

The warm welcome by Polish students stood in glaring contrast to the opposition from university authorities to the ISSE. The ISSE made its initial application for a room on university premises one month prior to the planned meeting, making clear that the ISSE planned a discussion on such international issues as the Iraq war and plans for military action against Iran. Two weeks before the planned date, the ISSE received written confirmation from the university authorities.

As soon as ISSE members began their work, however, and commenced distributing leaflets amongst students, a clerical assistant intervened to make clear that the chancellor of the university was opposed to any political meetings and discussions at the university. Security guards were called to escort ISSE members from the premises, and during the last two weeks the team was forced to campaign outside the university on one of the entrances to the campus. The team immediately raised this scandalous decision on the part of the

university chancellor in discussion with students.

A number of students made clear that they were not surprised by the reaction of the chancellery and that there was no tradition of left-wing organisations holding any meetings at the university. At the same time many expressed their solidarity with the right of the ISSE to hold its meeting, and even the security guards ordered to escort ISSE members from the premises expressed their apologies to the team and agreed that the chancellor’s decision was undemocratic and unjust. The meeting has now been transferred to a café nearby the university, and the ISSE is continuing to campaign amongst students for the right to hold future meetings on the campus.

Students have responded in particular to the stand taken by the ISSE against the Iraq war.

Kamil is studying technology and computer science at the Warsaw Polytechnic. He told us, “The Iraq war is being used by the Polish government to systematically ingratiate itself with the US.... This war is not about freedom and democracy, but about raw materials.”

“I have no illusions that European governments or the US Democrats can, or even want to stop the war,” he added. “It’s an illusion to believe that you could pressure governments to withdraw the troops. Our own government is the best example. They have made their own fate dependent on supporting America and its war. The only way to end the war is through a new international movement.”

Jolanta is studying history at Warsaw University.

“I utterly reject the Iraq war, which clearly has nothing to do with the struggle for democracy. It is completely hypocritical for such right-wing forces as Bush and the Kaczynski brothers here in Poland to pose as the great fighters for democracy.” Jolanta pointed out that there had been a systematic campaign to rehabilitate and establish a cult around the figure of Pilsudski in order to strengthen Polish nationalism. She noted: “Such figures are necessary in order to create a precedent for the sort of authoritarian measures the twin brothers are preparing to implement here in Poland.

“Such measures represent a real danger. As far as I am concerned Polish nationalism is a dead end. Things can only improve for ordinary people here on the basis of an international perspective and international political movement.”



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