

ISSE meetings held in Australia and New Zealand

Our reporters

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The International Students for Social Equality (ISSE) recently concluded a series of meetings at universities in Australia and New Zealand to discuss the ISSE and Socialist Equality Party (SEP) Emergency Conference Against War held March 31st-April 1st in Ann Arbor Michigan. On both sides of the Tasman Sea, students responded strongly to the internationalist program adopted by the conference.

The Emergency Conference Against War issued a call for the mobilisation of the working class in all countries against militarism and war, social inequality and the escalating attack on democratic rights. It was attended by students from universities across the US, as well as delegates from Canada, Europe, Sri Lanka and Australia.

In the two months since the conference, its resolutions have been discussed with hundreds of students in Australia and New Zealand, with campaigns and meetings held at the University of New South Wales (UNSW), the University of Technology Sydney (UTS), Newcastle University, Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (RMIT) and New Zealand's Victoria University in Wellington. SEP member Laura Tiernan, who attended the Ann Arbor conference from Australia, addressed each of the meetings.

Tiernan told students that the conference was a unique political event. Its purpose was not simply to denounce the ongoing carnage in Iraq, but to identify the fundamental source of militarism and develop, on that basis, the necessary programmatic foundations for a genuine struggle against war.

She explained that a new period of inter-imperialist rivalry had erupted, with parallels to the 1930s. World war was not a consequence of the individual intentions of capitalist politicians, but the inevitable product of objective contradictions between world economy and the nation-state system, and between private ownership and a global production process involving the unified labour of tens of millions.

The ISSE's resolution stood in diametric opposition to the protest perspective advocated by the official antiwar coalitions in every country. "Groups such as United for

Peace and Justice in the US, or Stop the War Coalition here in Australia, put forward that the task of students is to build bigger and bigger demonstrations aimed at pressuring either the Bush Administration, or the Democrats, or the ALP, or the UN, to end the Iraq war."

Pointing to the events of February 2003 and the failure of mass protests to avert the US-led invasion of Iraq, Tiernan said that every section of the political establishment—whether nominally "left" or "right"—had given its backing to the war. "Students must draw and act upon the essential lesson of the last four years—the only social force capable of ending war is the international working class."

Political issues that were clarified in the course of the discussion at the ISSE conference in the United States also arose during the campus meetings in Australia and New Zealand: the need for a principled struggle for internationalism and for socialist consciousness in the working class against various forms of tactical opportunism.

At Newcastle University, a first-year engineering student said that while he opposed the initial invasion of Iraq, a withdrawal of US forces would produce civil war: a foreign military presence was necessary to "safeguard democracy" against escalating sectarian violence.

ISSE members explained that the fundamental cause of the death and violence in Iraq was the occupation itself. The recent Johns Hopkins medical school report, whose findings had been buried by the international media, estimated 655,000 Iraqi deaths as a consequence of the US invasion. The absolute precondition for defending Iraq's people and culture was complete and immediate withdrawal of all foreign troops. Tiernan said that billions of dollars should be paid in reparations to the people of Iraq for aid and reconstruction. However, such an outcome was conceivable only as the by-product of an independent movement of the American and international working class.

An SEP member said the occupation of Iraq was a war crime. The government that had been set up there was a stooge regime defending an illegal occupation. It was necessary to combat the conception that democracy could be

dispensed by the United States government via tanks or laser-guided missiles. “The history of the great democratic revolutions, of the American Revolution in 1776, of the French Revolution of 1789, of the American civil war, is the exact opposite. These were great historical movements of the people themselves.”

One student, from Qatar, agreed with ISSE members that religious divisions were being promoted by the major powers. She said that her friends in Iraq were opposed to sectarianism. “When I speak to them on the phone they say ‘What Shia? What Sunni? We are all Iraqi’.”

A discussion ensued about the role of imperialism in the Middle East and the arbitrary creation of nation-state borders—including those of Iraq—by Britain and France in the early twentieth century. The International Committee of the Fourth International was fighting for the unification of the working class throughout the region—Arab, Jewish, Muslim, Christian—for the United Socialist States of the Middle East as part of the world socialist revolution. Only in this way could the root cause of war, poverty and oppression be overcome.

At UNSW an Iraqi student from Basra, who also argued initially against an immediate withdrawal of troops, remarked that he had never heard a genuine socialist presentation before. “I could stay here all day,” he said.

Tiernan emphasised that the ISSE was being built on the basis of political principles derived from the entire history of the socialist movement. Pointing to the conference resolution, she said the ISSE was not interested in building an amorphous protest organisation based on the lowest level of agreement. Groups such as Stop the War Coalition concealed basic political differences, subordinating antiwar sentiment to the political establishment and the existing social order. Students responded strongly, with one history student saying he agreed in particular with Ann Arbor conference delegate Andre Damon’s remarks that the ISSE would win a following based on “political honesty and intellectual clarity”. At RMIT, a student from Zimbabwe said that the overthrow of capitalism was “a huge task”. “We have to look at the failure of previous social movements. People need to learn and not repeat the same mistakes.”

Tiernan stressed that the education of students in the lessons of the twentieth century was central to the work of the ISSE. A more critical attitude to capitalist society was emerging, but this raised the question—is socialism viable? She said it was essential that the lessons of the 1917 Russian Revolution and its subsequent betrayal at the hands of the Stalinist bureaucracy be consciously assimilated by a new generation. The recent essay by *World Socialist Web Site* International Editorial Board chairman David North, refuting

two new biographies of Leon Trotsky, was a major contribution to this project. North’s essay had exposed methods of scholarship at complete odds with the quest for objective truth. Such intellectual dishonesty was aimed at falsifying the political record of Trotsky and thereby reinforcing the monumental lie that no alternative to Stalinism existed.

At UTS three anarchists in their early 20s attended the lunchtime meeting—the ISSE’s first on that campus. They said it was clear that the SEP was the only party exposing the role of Australian imperialism in the South Pacific but could not understand why “other socialist groups” did not do likewise. ISSE members explained that “left” protest organs such as the *Green-Left Weekly*, for example, argued that military intervention into East Timor was necessary on humanitarian grounds, thereby providing a critical cover for the predatory activities of Australian imperialism in the Pacific. This was not a “mistake” but revealed the class character of these organisations and their essential defence of Australian capitalism.

In New Zealand, the Clark Labour government is rapidly jettisoning any pretence of “independence” from the predatory actions of US imperialism, extending its military deployment in Afghanistan and participating in high-level discussions with the Bush Administration over vital strategic interests in the Pacific. Students responded strongly to the ISSE’s analysis of the reasons behind the eruption of US militarism and the struggle for the international unification of the working class. Many signed up to receive further information about the ISSE. At the meeting, discussion developed on the difference between utopian and scientific socialism and on the relationship between war and social inequality. A member of the Libertarian Party attended and argued that capitalism gave workers the ‘freedom’ to leave their jobs if they did not like them. A young Maori worker said it was not possible for workers to simply ‘opt out’. “Sure, I have the freedom to leave my job. But then if I can’t find another job I’ll have no money to eat. It’s not really freedom, is it?”

As a result of the meetings, students on a number of campuses have begun to form ISSE executives and to undertake regular work to build the ISSE, including the commencement of education classes in the history and program of the Trotskyist movement.



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