

ISSE holds successful campaign and meeting in Warsaw, Poland

Our correspondent
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Members of International Students for Social Equality (ISSE) recently carried out an intensive two-week campaign for a socialist and internationalist perspective against war in the Polish capital city of Warsaw. They distributed thousands of leaflets and organised regular book tables at the University of Warsaw, the Academy of Arts and the city's main Polytechnic. Students readily accepted the leaflets and showed great interest in discussions, which often lasted up to an hour and revealed very heterogeneous opinions. The campaign culminated in a successful meeting on May 19.

The University of Warsaw was founded in 1816 by the Russian Tsar and has remained an important intellectual and cultural centre in Poland. In March 1968, student protests that began at the university spread across the whole country. The students initially demonstrated against the cancellation of a scheduled play, "Dzidy" by Adam Mickiewicz, at the Warsaw People's Theatre. The protest movement spread quickly, however, and turned into a general protest against political and cultural censorship and raised the demand for the social control of state-owned property. The protests were put down by force, and sympathising professors were dismissed from their jobs. Nevertheless, the university remained a centre of critical thought.

The university is situated on the outskirts of the city centre of Warsaw, which has been extensively refurbished. Modern and multistoried buildings have been erected alongside some of the monumental constructions left over from the Stalin era. Policemen control every vantage point in the city centre to ensure that the view of tourists is not disturbed by the sight of beggars or the homeless. Just a few hundred metres away, on the other side of the river Weichsel, the suburb of Praga presents a very different picture. The suburb is dominated by grey soulless tenements lined up one after the other, and it is obvious that poverty is widespread in the city.

Numerous statues across the city recall the turbulent history of Warsaw. Alongside tributes to the brutal dictator Pilsudski are monuments to Mickiewicz and memorials to the Warsaw rebellion of 1944. Only recently, a museum was inaugurated to commemorate this event, but the opening

unleashed a violent debate, with its initiators seeking to completely play down the significance of the Jewish rebellion in the Warsaw Ghetto. Just a small panel was included referring to the role of the Jewish people in the rebellion. The initiators of the museum were able to rely on the support of right-wing politicians who declared that the main emphasis had to be placed on the role of the Polish resistance to Nazism.

As the ISSE campaigned for its meeting, most students expressed their opposition to such an instrumentalisation of history for nationalist purposes. In discussions, it became clear that the ultra-conservative Kaczynski government and its reactionary nationalism are deeply hated. Many students reacted very positively to the internationalist and socialist perspective of the ISSE.

Discussions inevitably quickly oriented around historical issues: the estimation of the role of Stalinism and the Solidarity movement, as well as the role of Pilsudski. Most students supported the position of the ISSE that Stalinism had nothing in common with genuine socialism. At the same time, it emerged that the first generation of students growing up in a capitalist Poland was very unclear about the character of the Stalinist bureaucracy and post-war developments. This confusion was expressed in a definite tendency to view political developments from a national standpoint and contrast dictatorship and democracy in a thoroughly abstract manner.

Some students defended the participation of Polish troops in the occupation of Iraq, declaring that the issue was to defend democracy and human rights. Poland, they argued, had suffered occupation and suppression on many occasions in its history and today has the responsibility to help other countries.

Polish history was also at the centre of the meeting that the ISSE held at the end of its campaign.

In his introductory contribution, Marius Heuser stressed that there were two major traditions in the workers' movement in Poland—an internationalist and a nationalist tradition. Heuser explained that only the Fourth International

had fought for the unification of the Russian and Polish workers' movement in a struggle against Stalinism and as part of the international socialist movement. (See "Report to ISSE meeting in Warsaw: Nationalism and internationalism in Poland")

Wolfgang Weber, a member of the PSG (Social Equality Party) executive committee and author of the book *Solidarity and the Perspective of Political Revolution in Poland*, noted that Pilsudski was not the outstanding figure presented by a number of contemporary historians. All of his successes—in particular the founding of the Polish state—were a result of the weakness of his opponents. From simple peasant stock he stubbornly followed a single aim. Poland failed to make any significant economic progress in the 1920s and 1930s, and made no development with regard to social and democratic progress. Instead, the country experienced stagnation and brutal dictatorship. Poland was simply too late in terms of its economic development. The period during which the creation of national states took a progressive form was past, and Poland—surrounded by two strong powers—was incapable of undergoing an independent national development.

Heuser added that the current Polish elite confronted the dilemma that their desires in no way corresponded with material reality. The country had close economic ties to the European Union states, and in particular Germany, but at the same time is fearful of any domination of Europe by Germany, which would endanger Poland's own ambitions as an eastern European regional power. The elite fears that an alliance between Europe and Russia would consign Poland to insignificance. While the Polish bourgeoisie in the late nineteenth century had bowed down to the Russian Tsar, and Pilsudski had allied himself with England and France against the Soviet Union and later collaborated with Hitler, the current ruling elite in Poland has thrown in its lot with the US and its brutal and aggressive foreign policy.

The victims of this policy were not merely Iraqi and Afghan civilians, but also Polish workers, who had to pay a high price for the ambitions of the dominant elite. The Kaczynski brothers used nationalist campaigns in order to prepare authoritarian forms of rule and continue the radical austerity course of the last years, while sending Polish soldiers abroad to take part in international missions.

Another participant at the meeting declared that he did not believe that nationalism had particularly deep roots among Polish workers and students. When one conducted a serious discussion, then a very different picture emerged. Many Polish workers have lived and worked abroad or have friends who have done so. They regard themselves as Europeans. The problem is the complete absence of any political tendency in Poland that formulates an

internationalist perspective.

A Lebanese student who has lived in Poland for four years defended a European perspective, but from an entirely different point of view. He said that Europe is good for Poland because then the country can better defend its interests against Russia. In addition, living standards in Poland would adapt to the European average, and therefore rise.

In reply, it was noted that the standard of living of the ordinary population was sinking throughout Europe. In Poland, the restructuring of agriculture and the mining industries at the behest of the European Union had resulted in mass poverty. Prices have risen sharply while wages have stagnated. The European Union of the banks and big business is directed first and foremost against the interests of all workers.

Ulrich Rippert, chairman of the PSG, told the meeting that one had to be clear in one's approach to historical issues and actual political developments. Marxists proceed from the standpoint that workers have no interest in the defence of the national state. Nations are divided into classes. While conflicts between the ruling circles in individual countries are increasing, workers are confronted with the same problems internationally and have to respond on the basis of international unification.

This has to be the approach with regard to Polish history and also the European Union, Rippert said. Workers have an organic interest in overcoming national borders inside Europe and using international productive forces in a planned fashion for the well-being of humanity. A unification of Europe on a capitalist basis is doomed to failure, he said. The more Europe attempts to take on and defy its imperialist rivals, the more intense become the divisions inside Europe itself. Rippert then spoke of the recent attempts by the German ruling elite to unite Europe under its supremacy, a development that has been opposed by Poland and other nations.

The Social Equality Party has decided to continue and expand its activities in Poland. At the centre of this work is the clarification of all the most important experiences of the Polish workers movement in the twentieth century—a history that contains important lessons for the entire European and international working class. An important step in this work is the publication of Trotsky's writings in Polish.



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