

Socialist strategy needed to oppose war and social inequality

By Socialist Equality Party (Australia)
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Millions of people around the globe are looking for a way to fight against war, militarism, the attacks on democratic rights and deepening social inequality.

They feel a deep sense of disquiet and a growing concern that terrible catastrophes lie ahead: a further escalation of the war in Iraq and Afghanistan; an attack on Iran; the prospect of economic chaos amid growing turbulence in the global financial system; the ever-present danger of a major infrastructure collapse in their cities and towns; the threat of “natural” disasters produced by climate change and environmental damage.

These sentiments will see thousands of people turn out on the streets of Sydney on Saturday to take part in protests during the Asia Pacific Economic Co-operation summit (APEC), attended by 21 of the world’s political leaders, including US President George W. Bush, Russian President Vladimir Putin, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and Chinese President Hu Jintao.

But after eight years of such demonstrations—starting in Seattle in 1999 and reaching a high point in the global demonstrations against the Iraq war in February 2003—it is time to draw a political balance sheet. International experience has revealed that, to the extent that protests are dominated by the conception that the political establishment can be pressured to change course, no matter how large they are, or how sincere their participants’ motivations, they cannot resolve the problems of war, repression and social reaction.

This has again been underscored in Sydney. Large sections of the city have been transformed into a virtual military-police state. Police have been granted sweeping powers, and the armed forces deployed in domestic “security” operations. A water cannon has been readied, amid incessant denunciations of protests and protestors as “violent”. All this graphically demonstrates the real content of the so-called “war on terror.” The program of military conquest abroad, whether in Iraq, Afghanistan, East Timor or the Solomons, signifies militarism and the suppression of democratic rights at home.

The 5 km long, 2.8 metre high steel and concrete wall encircling the centre of Sydney and establishing an exclusion zone around the APEC proceedings, is physical testament to the complete isolation of governments around the world from the broad mass of the people they claim to represent. And the “opposition” Labor Party’s fulsome support for the Howard government’s military-police measures exemplifies another universal process: there is no constituency in any section of the official political establishment for the defence of basic democratic rights.

Drawing the lessons of these international experiences means making a political break with the illusions promoted by the organisers of Saturday’s demonstration. According to the Stop Bush Coalition,

the worldwide antiwar protests in 2003 were successful because they lessened the impact of the “shock and awe” campaign during the invasion of Iraq. This outrageous claim is aimed at suppressing the truth: the violence perpetrated by the US-led forces and their allies against the Iraqi people—both during and since the initial invasion—has led to the deaths of around one million people, created millions of refugees and virtually destroyed Iraqi society. Moreover, four and a half years later, the US is not only committed to the indefinite occupation of Iraq, including the establishment of large permanent military bases, it is actively preparing a military onslaught against Iran.

The protest groups promote the illusion that “another world is possible” within the framework of the present capitalist social and political order, if only enough pressure is applied to the powers that be. Again, this is aimed at throwing dust in the eyes of all those concerned about the growing dangers confronting human civilisation—which are more than apparent at this summit.

Attempts to make comparisons with the anti-Vietnam War protest movement are totally misplaced, because they obscure the essential content of the current war.

Far more is at stake for America’s ruling elite in Iraq than there was in Vietnam. The Iraq war is aimed not only at the conquest and occupation of one country. It is part of a desperate drive to overcome the historic decline of American imperialism, through the use of its military supremacy, to maintain the position of global dominance it achieved after the two world wars of the first half of the twentieth century.

This US drive for global supremacy is being waged under the banner of the “war on terror”. Its focus has been the Middle East and Central Asia, because of the region’s vast oil and gas reserves. For the US to retain its position against its old rivals in Europe, as well as against the rising global powers of China and Russia, it must control these resources.

The same kind of rivalries and antagonisms that wracked the world at the beginning of the twentieth century—leading ultimately to the outbreak of World War I in 1914, followed just two decades later by World War II—have now re-emerged.

So apparent are the deepening conflicts that former Australian Prime Minister Paul Keating has warned that the key task of APEC must be to integrate China into the system of international relations—and not repeat the old European powers’ mistake with respect to Germany at the end of the nineteenth century.

No matter how clear the dangers, however, or how loud the warnings, the interests of the rival capitalist powers cannot be peacefully reconciled. It is not, in the final analysis, the intentions of

capitalist politicians that give rise to world war. The descent towards war is an expression of the objective contradiction between the global development of the productive forces and system of competing nation states, which forms the framework of the capitalist profit system.

Each capitalist great power seeks to resolve this contradiction by strengthening its own global position. But in doing so, it comes into conflict with the economic, political and military interests of its rivals.

These inter-imperialist rivalries, which resulted in social and economic devastation and the deaths of tens of millions of people in the first half of the twentieth century, were suppressed, but never overcome, in the decades following World War II. Two factors—the economic dominance of the United States and the Cold War with the Soviet Union—provided a framework for regulating international relations.

In the last decade and a half, the collapse of the Soviet Union and the economic decline of the US have transformed the international situation. The criminality of the Bush administration—and the support it receives from the Democratic Party—reflects the life-and-death struggle by the United States to maintain its global hegemony.

Not only has the post-war framework of international relations disintegrated. The processes of globalisation, which have seen the rise of new powers, China and India in particular, have intensified the contradiction between world economy and the capitalist nation-state system. The conditions are thus being created for the eruption of new inter-imperialist conflicts. That is the historical significance of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. They are, as Bush has remarked, not separate conflicts, but different theatres of the same war.

A recognition of the objective social and economic driving forces behind a new period of war leads to just one conclusion: the struggle against war cannot be organised on the basis of protests to the ruling classes and their governments. Rather, it must be conducted on the basis of an international socialist strategy aimed at the unification of the working people of the world in the overthrow of the capitalist profit system and its anachronistic nation-state framework.

Even within the stage-managed setting of APEC, the lines of conflict are emerging. Outside the official agenda, Bush, Howard and Abe will meet to strengthen the growing security ties between the US, Australia, and Japan—an alliance directed against China.

Reflecting the type of discussions being held behind closed doors, the Murdoch-owned *Australian* newspaper published an article on the theme: who will dominate Asia: the US or China?

Significantly, the first agreement announced between Australia and the US upon Bush's arrival was to give the Australian military increased access to high-powered US military technology.

And US secretary of state Condoleezza Rice, in her only media interview, paid special tribute to the role of the Australian military, not just in Iraq and Afghanistan, but in the Solomon Islands and Timor, and to the "hard work" of the Australian government in places like Fiji and Tonga.

The APEC summit itself is being portrayed in the official propaganda as a tribute to the successes of the "free market". According to Howard, the protests are motivated by a "hatred of economic growth" and of the capitalist system that produces it.

Likewise, an editorial in the *Australian* denounced the "tired and old-fashioned campaign against capitalism" and hailed the role of capitalist globalisation in "helping to lift hundreds of millions of people out of poverty."

These hymns of praise are not only belied by the massive police-military operation surrounding the summit, but by recent

developments in the very heart of the global capitalist economy.

Ten years ago, the high priests of the "free market" dismissed the Asian economic crisis as a result of "crony capitalism". Now it is clear that what began as a malignancy in the outer regions of the world economy has extended to its heart—the United States, Europe and Japan.

The near meltdown of the financial system produced by the subprime mortgage crisis in the United States is the outcome of the entrapment of the poorest sections of the population, in loans they could never repay, by the banks and lending institutions. It is indicative of the growth of financial parasitism on an unprecedented scale.

In past decades, the economic supremacy of the United States provided a foundation for the world capitalist economy as a whole. It was based on the development of a vast manufacturing industry—machinery, communications, transport, technology. Now the US economy is dominated by little more than loan sharking and the selling of "toxic" financial products to unsuspecting banks and finance companies in the rest of the world.

The growth of parasitism has proceeded on such a scale that central bankers admit they do not fully know any longer how the financial system operates, let alone how to regulate it.

While the initial turmoil may have temporarily subsided, longer term processes, with far-reaching implications, have been set in motion. Uncertainty over debt exposures has paralysed sections of the credit markets, while there are warnings that the contraction of the US housing market could spark a recession—with global consequences.

In other words, the economic devastation that hit millions of people in the Asia-Pacific region a decade ago—the most serious since the Great Depression—now threatens working people all over the world. While the immediate effects of this deep-going crisis may be mitigated by interest rate cuts and other financial manipulations, these measures will only lead to the storing up of explosive contradictions for the not-too-distant future.

Like the threat of war, the dangers of financial collapse and economic recession cannot be countered by protest politics. They are the clearest expressions of the failure of the capitalist system as a whole. And they are not the result of globalisation. On the contrary, the development of the productive forces on a global scale provides the objective basis for the resolution of all the problems confronting mankind. But in order that these productive forces—created by the collective labour of working people the world over—can be utilised to meet humanity's needs, they must be freed from the grip of private ownership and profit.

The urgent task faced by students and working people in Australia and around the world is the building of a mass international political movement of the working class guided by the program of socialist internationalism. This is the perspective of the International Committee of the Fourth International and its Australian section, the Socialist Equality Party, developed every day on the *World Socialist Web Site*.



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