

Britain: ISSE addresses students during week of debates at the University of Sussex

Paul Mitchell
20 May 2008

The International Students for Social Equality recently took part in a “One World Week” of debates on international topics, organised by students at the University of Sussex. The ISSE has been campaigning to set up a student society on the campus and has held three meetings this year—on the Russian Revolution, the Iraq War and the May-June 1968 uprising in France.

After receiving an invitation from event organiser Oniicosi Luqman, the ISSE provided speakers for a number of sessions that were attended by up to 20 students.

Several students signed up to the ISSE. Student union communications officer Koos Couvé said that “it was great you guys talked about things from a broader, international viewpoint. We have never heard such ideas before here and they really had an impact.”

The first session of “One World Week” posed the question “Kenya: Can the new government guarantee fair elections, stop tribal tensions and end corruption?”

World Socialist Web Site correspondent Ann Talbot explained that the crisis that afflicted Kenya after the elections earlier this year “was not a conjunctural episode that can be addressed by reform of the constitution, by better oversight of public institutions, or by widening the political elite to include previously excluded groups.” Kenya was undergoing a systemic breakdown of its political system, which was one expression of a far more generalised crisis in Africa, she said.

Talbot agreed with first speaker, Kenyan freelance journalist Julius MbaLuto, that “the outbreak of what has been described as inter-tribal violence in Kenya has nothing to do with any peculiar propensity of African people for such conflict.” At independence in 1963, the British handed power over to the Kikuyu elite, which then enriched itself at the expense of the majority of the population, including the Kikuyu poor.

For almost half a century, this elite has failed to carry out an effective programme of land reform, one of the most basic elements in the programme of bourgeois democracy, or bring about economic improvement for the vast majority of poor. Although Kenya was held up as an African “success story,” its high economic growth has not benefited the majority of the population, more than half of whom live on an income of less than US\$2 a day and at least half on less than US\$1 a day.

This situation resulted from the subordination of the ruling elite—of whichever faction—to the interests of the major capitalist powers, the international financial institutions and the giant corporations that dominate the world economy. For a short time after independence, as long as the Cold War lasted, Kenya’s new rulers had a certain room for manoeuvre. But no more, Talbot explained. Subjected to IMF Structural Adjustment Programmes that demanded previously protected markets be opened up to global finance capital, the result has been rapid deregulation, privatisations and public spending cuts accompanied by increased looting of the economy.

Talbot explained how Mwai Kibaki and his Rainbow Coalition had won victory in 2002 by promising reforms and an end to the corruption

associated with the previous Moi regime. The Orange Democratic Movement of Raila Odinga, a former member of Kibaki’s government, became the focus of those who were excluded from this “feeding frenzy,” she said. Their inclusion in the new power-sharing government is part of a vast wealth grab. Almost half of MPs have become cabinet ministers or assistant ministers and are entitled to huge salaries and other benefits. Odinga, who is now prime minister, has a fleet of cars and a 45-strong personal bodyguard.

Talbot said that the post-election violence was prepared in advance. It was state repression aimed at the poorest strata of the population, which had a class, rather than tribal character. Politicians on both sides were prepared to sacrifice the lives of almost 2,000 of their fellow countrymen in pursuit of wealth and power. These politicians now sit in the same cabinet and talk about returning the displaced people to their farms and homes. “A cabinet composed of people of this stamp are not about to resolve any of the political and economic problems that confront Kenya. They are part of the problem,” she added.

She concluded by calling for a new political perspective to address the problems that confront the mass of the Kenyan population. Genuine economic development can only take place in Kenya on the basis of the socialist reorganisation of the world economy to meet the needs of the majority of its people.

ISSE organiser Marcus Morgan spoke at the session, “The US people want change. Can Obama bring it?”

Morgan explained how the growing economic crisis and resulting social tensions have thrown the Democratic Party into crisis and seen it fracturing along racial, ethnic, gender and other demographic lines.

The bitter conflict between Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton, despite there being no public expression of major policy differences between them, signifies a deep divide in the US ruling elite. Although Obama had tapped into broad and deep discontent, particularly among young people, over the war, economic insecurity, and the corruption and criminality of the Bush years, he has been carefully groomed as the candidate of “change” by a faction of the Democratic Party that sees a shift in foreign policy as the only way to defend US interests around the world.

Morgan reviewed the historical evolution of the Democratic Party and the collapse of American liberalism. The “New Deal” reforms advocated by the Democratic Party under Franklin Delano Roosevelt during the Great Depression had proved to be the high point of US liberal reforms, he said.

Following World War II, however, the Democratic Party no longer presented itself as the party of the “working man,” but as the defender of the “middle class.” Workers, it was said, would improve their lot by benefiting as consumers from the economic growth and general prosperity of the country.

The late 1960s and early 1970s saw the post-war boom beginning to unravel against the background of civil rights struggles, the Vietnam War, urban riots and a wave of strikes. “As the promise of rising living

standards through the expansion of the consumer society faltered, the Democratic Party sought to refashion itself under the banner of identity politics,” he explained, becoming an unstable alliance of competing interest groups, which included the civil rights establishment and more privileged layers of blacks and other minorities, feminist organisations, gay rights groups, trade unions and environmentalists.

Working class support for the Democrats was further eroded as the party supported demands for the restructuring of the US economy in the face of its global competition. It was Democratic President Jimmy Carter, Morgan recalled, who initiated the first major attack on the reforms of the New Deal and began an offensive against the wages and living standards of the working class.

If there was one telling indication of Obama’s real political agenda, Morgan added, it was when, in an unguarded moment, he spoke of the “bitterness” of working class voters in Pennsylvania over wage-cutting, layoffs and deepening economic insecurity, and the indifference of both Republican and Democratic administrations to their problems. Following a media campaign, Obama apologised for his “blunder” and remained on the defensive for the remainder of the Pennsylvania campaign. This episode demonstrates how completely American liberalism and the Democratic Party are dedicated to suppressing discussion on the fundamental class tensions and interests that dominate American society and opposing the development of an independent socialist perspective in the working class.

Morgan’s appraisal drew a sharp response from the Stop The War Coalition speaker on the platform who was opposed to a socialist critique of Obama and the Democrats. She insisted that Obama was the best of a bad bunch, and that it was a question of uniting the discontent that will emerge, largely of a local and ethnic character, into a “national forum” pledged to “mass radical action.”

Jean Shaoul, who writes on Israel and Palestine for the *World Socialist Web Site*, spoke at a session considering the questions, “Palestine—How can the Palestinians be liberated? What does the division between Hamas and Fatah mean? Can a majority of Israelis be won to supporting Palestinian rights? Who is precluding the two-state solution?”

Shaoul made it clear that it is only possible to understand the failure of the struggle to liberate Palestine from the standpoint of Leon Trotsky’s Theory of Permanent Revolution.

She explained how shortly after Israel defeated the Arab nations in the 1967 Six-Day War, Yasser Arafat and his Fatah faction came to dominate the Palestine Liberation Organisation. Although it was a popular and radical mass movement, its perspective was one of a democratic, secular, capitalist state where the Palestinian bourgeoisie would be free to exploit its own working class.

Arafat and the PLO sought to work through the various Arab regimes, which were entirely dependent on a world market dominated by the imperialist powers and who were ultimately fearful of the threat to their rule posed by the working class. As such, they had demonstrated their inability to either achieve genuine independence from imperialism or secure the democratic rights and social needs of the workers and peasant masses they exploited.

“One after another, all of these regimes betrayed the Palestinians with tragic consequences,” Shaoul added.

Along with oil revenues, backing from the Soviet Union had allowed the Arab regimes a certain room for manoeuvre in their dealings with the major powers. But the first Gulf War in 1991, which unfolded during the final days of the USSR and amidst the drive to restore capitalism, saw the majority of the Arab regimes line up unambiguously with Washington. This left Arafat completely isolated. In 1993, he was forced to sign the Oslo Agreement, officially renouncing his original perspective of freeing the whole of 1948 Palestine and accepting a two-state solution.

The Palestinian Authority set up under the Oslo agreement, Shaoul

continued, was to be the vehicle for the Palestinian bourgeoisie to exploit the working class and become fabulously wealthy. Fatah became associated with corruption, waste and inefficiency that even Arafat’s prestige could not disguise. While Arafat himself ultimately balked at Washington’s demands to accept Israel’s dictates, his successor, Mahmoud Abbas, pledged himself to peace on whatever terms Washington and Tel Aviv demanded.

Shaoul described how Hamas offered no alternative, but was a retrogressive development of the Palestinian national movement. Its explicit call for an Islamic state, she said, would involve the subjugation of non-Muslims and the mass expulsion of Israeli Jewry. In its ideology and methods, Hamas mirrors the Zionist extremists, who claim all of Palestine as a Jewish state with no room for other peoples.

Hamas, too, has all but accepted a two-state solution, Shaoul continued, making an offer recently to the Israeli government to accept a Palestinian state on the pre-1967 borders along with its promise of a ceasefire.

Such a state, even if realised, would be economically unviable other than as a heavily fortified investment platform for the transnational corporations from which to brutally exploit the working class and peasantry.

The liberation of Palestine is only possible as part of a perspective of ending the artificial patchwork of capitalist states in the Middle East and through the unity of Arab and Israeli workers, youth and intellectuals in a combined struggle to establish the United Socialist States of the Middle East.

Shaoul rejected the conception that the Israeli people are collectively responsible for the oppression of the Palestinians. Israel is beset by class and social conflicts and has a strong and militant working class that opposes its government’s social and economic policies.

The fate of the Middle East, Shaoul said, “will, in the final analysis, be decided in the US and Europe, either by the political representatives of big business implementing their plans for the region’s military and economic subjugation, or by the major battalions of the international working class doing what is politically necessary to prevent this.”



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