

IYSSE (Australia) lectures discuss significance of Zimmerwald anti-war conference

Our reporters
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The International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) held a successful series of lectures entitled, “100 years since the Zimmerwald anti-war conference: How the Russian Revolution was prepared” at four major university campuses, over the past two weeks.

Delivered by Nick Beams, a decades-long Trotskyist leader, the lectures—at Western Sydney University, the University of New South Wales, Macquarie University and the University of Newcastle—were attended by dozens of students, young people and workers. The audiences included undergraduate students in the arts, teaching, science, and other fields, along with postgraduate students, academics, and young workers (see: “Students discuss threat of war, lessons of history at IYSSE lectures”). Each of the lectures was chaired by an IYSSE member on campus.

In opening his address, Beams explained that the attendees at the Zimmerwald conference in 1915, “were among the handful of members of the socialist parties of Europe who had opposed the war which had broken out in August 1914 and who had come together to discuss what could be done to bring about its conclusion and end the historically unprecedented slaughter of the European working class, and the flower of its youth.”

In his extensive remarks, Beams explained that the Second International, which had formally adhered to a socialist and internationalist program prior to the outbreak of the war, had betrayed the working class, with its sections supporting the militarist efforts of their “own governments,” upon the outbreak of World War I.

He stated that just as the war was a product of the breakdown of the global capitalist system, so the betrayal of the Second International expressed deep-going objective processes.

While they had proclaimed their allegiance to the program of socialist revolution, the parties of the Second International had been built under conditions of rapid capitalist development. The super-profits extracted by newly-

emerging imperialism from its subjected colonies and possessions had enabled it to corrupt a section of the workers’ movement. This was the material source of its betrayal.

At the same time, the seemingly gradual character of political developments had cultivated an atmosphere in which opportunist and nationalist tendencies had come to predominate in the parties of the Second International.

Beams explained that at Zimmerwald, Vladimir Lenin, the leader of the Russian Bolsheviks had insisted on drawing the lessons of this betrayal. Representing a “minority of a minority” at the conference, Lenin opposed those delegates who called for the revival of the Second International, or an amorphous struggle for peace.

Summing up the political conflicts at the conference, Beams said, “Lenin’s assessment was decisive. The war had not only demonstrated the historical bankruptcy and barbarism of capitalism, it had also created the conditions for its overthrow. Socialism was not some far-distant goal. The war had created an objectively revolutionary situation which placed socialist revolution on the order of the day.”

It was only through the relentless exposure of all those who had betrayed the working class, and facilitated the war, that the working class could go forward. Beams explained that Lenin’s implacable struggle against opportunism, was the basis upon which the Bolshevik Party led the working class in the Russian Revolution, little more than two years after the Zimmerwald Conference.

Pointing to the parallels between the present situation, and that which existed one hundred years ago, Beams stated, “The Russian Revolution arose out of the breakdown of capitalism, which announced its arrival with the eruption of World War I. Now a second great breakdown has taken place, starting with the financial crisis of 2008, and is deepening and intensifying.”

The contemporary crisis was characterized by a developing revolutionary situation in every country with

mounting social inequality, an assault on the living standards of the working class, and the implementation of sweeping austerity measures.

At the same time, the crisis was leading to an eruption of militarism and war. “The United States, its global economic hegemony having been severely undermined, seeks to counter its decline through military conquest—to assume control of the vast natural and labour resources of the Eurasian landmass,” Beams said. “Hence its provocation and threats of war against Russia in the West and the anti-China ‘pivot to Asia’ in the East.”

At the same time, Beams said that other imperialist powers, including Germany and Japan, were once against turning to militarism. The situation, he warned, posed the threat of a new, and even more catastrophic global conflagration.

Under those conditions, Lenin’s struggle at the Zimmerwald conference assumed decisive contemporary significance. “The conditions that prevailed in Russia in 1917 which led to a revolution were present in all of the countries both during and after the Great War,” Beams said. “There were revolutionary struggles in Germany, in Italy, mass discontent in France, in Britain, mutinies in the armies of both countries. But only in Russia did those conditions lead to an actual socialist revolution.

“Why was that? Because only in Russia was there a revolutionary party capable and willing to patiently explain to the masses the crucial and critical lessons of their experiences—above all focusing on the actions of those in whom they had placed their political confidence—and what they had to do.”

Beams outlined the significance of the ICFI’s struggle against the pseudo-left Syriza government in Greece, which has implemented the dictates of the major European banks, having previously postured as an opponent of austerity. The vindication of the ICFI’s exposure of Syriza, like Lenin’s struggle against the opportunists and apologists of the Second International, was because it based its “analysis on Marxism, which examines politics on the basis of class interests.”

In concluding, Beams declared, “Now the task is the preparation of a new socialist revolution—the objective conditions for which have been well and truly laid. In the transformation of objectively revolutionary conditions into an actual revolution, everything depends on the establishment of a revolutionary party. That was the lesson of 1917. It is the lesson which must be grasped today and acted upon through the decision by those who want to fight for a future fit for humanity to join and build the International Committee of the Fourth International.”

Beams’ lecture was well received, and prompted

numerous questions. Some students asked about the deepening crisis of the European Union. Others asked about changes in the global economy over the past one hundred years, the causes of the emergence of Stalinism in the Soviet Union and the roots of the betrayal of the Second International.

At the Western Sydney University meeting, one student, from an Afghan background asked why the media did not alert people to the escalating threat of war.

In reply, Beams said, “The media is complicit in these preparations for war. One of the crucial tests of events was the glorification of militarism on Anzac Day. ABC, SBS and the entire press all joined in. This is a campaign that goes right down to primary school kids, who are being taught about the glories of war.

“Why is this taking place?” he asked. “Historical anniversaries are always bound up with contemporary events. The government has spent hundreds of millions of dollars on the commemoration of World War I—while they have lined up with the US pivot to Asia against China, the wars in the Middle East, and the US-led provocations against Russia.”

Beams referred to the ban imposed by Burwood Council, and the University of Sydney, on a Socialist Equality Party meeting called to oppose the glorification of militarism, and the preparations for World War III, over the Anzac Day weekend. He explained that the censorship was one of the “surest signs that new preparations for war are underway. They had to prevent this opposition from emerging. That’s what happens in war. As soon as war begins, so does censorship.”

Each of the meetings passed a resolution opposing the ongoing refusal of the University of Melbourne’s Club’s and Societies Committee to affiliate an IYSSE club on spurious and politically motivated pretexts. The resolution, which called on the Committee to reverse its decision, warned that the censorship meted out against the IYSSE is, “of a piece with a broader attempt to suppress socialist opposition to war, amid an unprecedented eruption of militarism threatening a new global conflagration.”



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