

SEP (UK) meetings on war and censorship: “War preparations are powered by lies”

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The Socialist Equality Party (UK) has concluded a series of public meetings in England, Scotland and Ireland titled “War, lies and censorship: For the building of a socialist anti-war movement.” The meetings were attended by a cross section of workers, youth and students and were followed by lively question and answer sessions.

Addressing the meetings in Sheffield, London and Manchester, SEP Assistant National Secretary Julie Hyland reviewed the escalating war drive by the imperialist powers from the standpoint of the analysis developed by the Trotskyist movement, the International Committee of the Fourth International, over the past three decades.

*Hyland’s address included a slide show presentation that was used to highlight key passages from David North’s 2016 book *A Quarter Century of War: the US Drive for Global Hegemony 1990-2016*. Hyland explained that the attack on WikiLeaks editor Julian Assange and the censorship campaign against the World Socialist Web Site and other socialist, progressive and anti-war websites was the spearhead of efforts to suppress popular opposition to war and social inequality.*

These meetings were called immediately after the April 14 missile strikes on Syria by the US, UK and France. The strikes, which took place with no discussion in parliament, let alone a vote, were presented as a limited measure in retaliation for a supposed chemical attack by the Syrian regime of Bashar al-Assad on Douma. This is an attribution that is highly dubious and for which, like the Skripal affair that preceded the air strikes, there is still no coherent, let alone plausible, account.

You will remember the comments of Theresa May and others that the strikes were simply to send a message to the Assad regime and nothing else. That wasn’t just the line of the government, but also of the so-called “left.” The Stop the War Coalition, for example, spoke of the major powers not really having the stomach for a war, as did Alex Callinicos of the Socialist Workers Party.

We took a very different approach. In the advert for these meetings we warned that the Syrian air strikes were not the end, and that “the imperialist powers will not be satisfied without further bloodshed. A campaign is growing in the political and military/intelligence establishments in the UK and US for a wider war that would threaten a nuclear conflict with Russia.”

Even before our first meeting was held, the Trump administration announced its withdrawal from the Iran nuclear accord and the re-imposition of crippling economic sanctions, and Israel mounted air strikes on Iranian personnel in Syria.

Simultaneous with this, Israel launched its fascistic outrage on the border with Gaza, killing more than 100 Palestinians protesting their forced exile from their homeland and injuring thousands. Amongst the dead were children and women.

How were we able to anticipate this escalation? We don’t have a crystal ball. What we do have is an analysis informed by a Marxist understanding of the contradictions of American and world imperialism, one that examines events not as a sequence of isolated episodes, but as moments in

the unfolding of a broader historical process.

Let me draw attention to the following book by David North: *A Quarter Century of War: The US Drive for Global Hegemony 1990–2016*. This is a collection of essays, news analyses, commentaries and statements produced by the World Socialist Web Site and the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) that covers the period of:

- The first Gulf War in 1991
- The NATO intervention in Yugoslavia and brutal restructuring of the Balkan states
- The US military interventions in Somalia and Haiti and bombing of Sudan
- The response to 9/11 with the invasion of Afghanistan
- The 2003 invasion of Iraq
- The launching of the open-ended “war on terror”—a propaganda slogan that provided an all-purpose justification for military operations throughout the Middle East, Central Asia and Africa and for an assault on democratic rights at home
- The regime-change operation in Libya in 2011
- The start of the civil war in Syria in 2011, which began as a regime-change operation by US-armed and funded Islamist proxy forces fighting to overthrow the pro-Russian and pro-Iranian government of Bashar al-Assad

This quarter century of war, it explained, was the outcome of broader historical processes that, due to time constraints, I will condense into three essential elements:

First, it rooted this drive to war in the collapse of the Stalinist regimes in Eastern Europe in 1989-1990 and the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991. The end of the USSR, along with the rapid restoration of capitalism in China following the Tiananmen Square massacre of June 1989, was seen by the American ruling class as an opportunity to repudiate the compromises of the post-World War II era and carry out a restructuring of global geopolitics, with the aim of establishing Washington’s undisputed hegemony in a new “unipolar world.”

As North explained:

Notwithstanding the criminal nationalistic policies pursued by the Soviet bureaucracy on the basis of its programme of socialism in one country, to the extent that the Soviet Union and the People’s Republic of China, established in 1949, provided limited support to various national liberation movements, they deprived US and world imperialism of unrestricted access to and exploitation of the human labour, raw materials and potential markets of a large portion of the globe.

For the US and the other imperialist powers, capitalist restoration in Russia, China and Eastern Europe opened up vast new areas of the globe

previously sealed off to capitalist penetration by the October 1917 revolution. This included some of the greatest untapped oil reserves in the world, especially in the former Soviet republics bordering the Caspian Sea. More importantly, it opened up the possibility of establishing control over the Eurasian land mass, the focal point for two world wars.

Second, the International Committee rejected the claims that the restoration of capitalism represented the “collapse of communism” and the “triumph of liberal democracy.” We insisted that the same economic processes—the developments in technology and globalised production—which had undermined the nationally isolated Stalinist regimes had also shattered the post-war arrangements that had stabilised global capitalism after the world wars of the last century.

In its drive for hegemony, the US would have to take into itself all of the immense pressures and contradictions of world capitalism. But the US already was in a deep-rooted and protracted crisis. Above all, it was riven by massive social inequality.

Thus, it was being forced onto the path of becoming the world’s policeman not from a position of strength, but from a position of enormous weakness. North wrote, “An objective observer, examining the conditions of both the United States and the Soviet Union between 1960 and 1990, might well have wondered which regime was in greater crisis.”

Third, the shattering of the post-war arrangements opened up a new period of convulsions that could find no resolution under capitalism without the violent restructuring of political and economic relations.

In the aftermath of the first Gulf War of 1990-1, the ICFI explained that “the end of the post-war era means the end of the post-colonial era.” The period in which the colonial and semi-colonial countries were allowed a veneer of independence was over. They were being returned to the type of unrestrained domination by imperialism that existed prior to World War II.

The ICFI warned that the US, far from establishing its supremacy, would increasingly come under challenge from both allies and new competitors alike, to which it would respond with increased bellicosity and aggressiveness. Thus, while the immediate target of the US was Russia and China, its striving for global domination would also bring to the fore latent and potentially explosive tensions with its allies in Europe, especially Germany.

This analysis is now being confirmed. All of the old inter-imperialist rivalries that led to two world wars have been rekindled, threatening a full-scale war between nuclear-armed states.

North wrote:

The progressive development of a globally integrated world economy is incompatible with capitalism and the nation-state system. If war is to be stopped and a global catastrophe averted, a new and powerful mass international movement, based on a socialist program and strategically guided by the principles of revolutionary class struggle, must be built. In opposition to imperialist geopolitics, in which national states fight brutally for regional and global dominance, the International Committee counterposes the strategy of world socialist revolution. As Trotsky advised, we “follow not the war map, but the map of the class struggle. ...”

If we view these latest events as part of this continuum, certain essentials become clear.

The present crisis does not arise simply out of the personality, however obnoxious, of President Donald Trump or any other individual politician for that matter. The billionaire’s fascistic rants epitomise the realities of American imperialist policies that produced under Bush and then Obama

Abu Ghraib, Fallujah, CIA secret prisons, Guantanamo Bay and drone assassinations.

That accounts for why the Democrats’ protests are not over attacks on migrants or corporate tax cuts for the rich, but are focused instead on tactical differences over military strategy—expressing their position as the most strident political representatives of the military-intelligence establishment in its drive against Russia.

We can also understand that Washington is not simply reacting to events. Trump’s decision to break up the 2015 nuclear accord, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, or JCPOA, which was reached between Iran and six major powers—the US, Britain, France, Germany, China and Russia—has nothing to do with a supposed Iranian nuclear threat.

Tehran has no bomb and never initiated any real program to produce one, while Israel’s own arsenal includes an estimated 200 to 400 nuclear warheads. Rather, Iran is regarded as a regional impediment to the drive by US imperialism to assert its hegemony over the oil-rich and strategically vital Middle East.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* warned in a perspective published in April 2015 in response to the announcement that Iran and the great powers had reached the “framework” for a nuclear accord:

In a broader historical sense, the deal is not worth the paper it is written on. If and when it is expedient, the US will shred the agreement, as has happened many times in the past. The Libyan regime of Muammar Gaddafi cut a deal in 2003 to give up its WMD [Weapons of Mass Destruction] programs only to find itself the target of a NATO-led war for regime-change in 2011. Amid its own economic decline, US imperialism will stop at nothing in its reckless drive for global domination at the expense of its major rivals.

The reality today is that Washington is at the epicentre of worldwide geopolitical and financial instability. Speaking at Johns Hopkins University in Maryland at the start of this year, US Defence Secretary James Mattis unveiled a new National Defense Strategy by stating, “Great power competition—not terrorism—is now the primary focus of US national security.”

In the last months, behind the chaos and scandals engulfing the Trump administration, a war cabinet has been assembled in Washington, signalled by the elevation of John Bolton to the post of national security adviser and Mike Pompeo as secretary of state.

Before his appointment, Bolton, who always opposed the 2015 accord, wrote an Op-Ed in the *New York Times* calling for regime-change under the heading, “To Stop Iran’s Bomb, Bomb Iran.”

In the US and here in the UK, in the last months especially, we have seen a ferocious campaign against Russia. But these threats are only a prelude to an intended military confrontation with China, deemed to be Washington’s most dangerous rival.

In addition to provocations against Syria and Iran, the US has launched a trade war against China. *Financial Times* chief financial analyst Martin Wolf writes: “That the US will be judge, jury and executioner, while China will be deprived of the rights to retaliate or seek recourse to the WTO, is crazy. No great sovereign power could accept such a humiliation. For China, it would be a modern version of the ‘unequal treaties’ of the 19th century.”

The US is rapidly building up its naval forces in the region and setting up missile defence systems and other military installations to encircle China, which is responding with its own military build-up.

At the same time, there is the threat of trade-war measures against Europe, with Trump preparing to impose tariffs on German and French

steel and aluminium exports. This is the other side of military threats against Iran, because with the upending of the accord any foreign firms doing business in Iran face massive US sanctions and even legal action.

If Britain and others are critical of Trump's moves it has nothing to do with concern for the Iranian people or international law. Vast economic interests are at stake.

The European Union is the third largest trader with Iran, and European interests such as the French oil conglomerate Total have signed lucrative agreements. Next to Germany and France, Britain has extensive interests. Bilateral trade has increased nearly 50 percent since the signing of the nuclear deal. In 2016, this was worth 171.5 million euros. That's relatively small, but there is the promise of more to come.

Iran resumed its oil and gas exports to Britain in 2015, while the two countries signed a number of contracts in other fields. The biggest, worth more than half a billion euros, was made in renewable energy. Under a deal signed in September 2017, British investor Quercus is to build a 600-megawatt solar power plant in central Iran, which, once completed, will be one of the largest in the world.

Such deals are critical under conditions where Brexit has produced a political crisis that is set to be matched economically. For all the talk of free trade, long-standing alliances are being ripped up, with Trump's pursuit of an "America First," or rather "America Alone," policy cutting across vital British interests.

One moment, the US, Britain and France are launching a joint missile strike against Syrian government facilities. The next, President Macron, Chancellor Merkel and Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson are pleading and cajoling Trump not to abandon the Iran deal and impose sanctions on the EU.

While stating that Iran is in compliance, they also made clear they were prepared to go along with demanding further measures. And all rushed to endorse Israel's military strike against Iran as "self-defence."

But these entreaties fell on deaf ears. In Europe, there is immense dissatisfaction and fear of US recklessness, but all are uncertain that they can do anything to effectively restrain Washington. That is why the debate over how to respond to Trump's trashing of the Iran nuclear accord is bristling with calls for Europe to accelerate rearmament and develop an independent military intervention force.

As we said in the announcement for this meeting, these war preparations are propelled by more than soldiers and missiles: they are powered by lies. The first casualty of war is truth.

All the major news outlets are working overtime to sell the public a rehash of the "weapons of mass destruction" narrative used to justify the 2003 invasion of Iraq. This propaganda exhibits contempt for both the truth and the intelligence of the public. After 25 years of endless war, millions of people have become inured to the hysterical and hypocritical allegations used by the imperialists to dress up their designs against weak countries as a saintly mission for the liberation of mankind.

As we have explained, the distinction between journalism and state propaganda has been obliterated. While journalism seeks to question and probe, propaganda seeks to sensationalize, simplify and incite. Journalism sees all claims as suspect, propaganda treats the statements of the government as sacrosanct and everything else as lies.

Along with propaganda comes increasing censorship. We now know that D-notices were imposed on the Skripals—an affair that resembles not so much a le Carré spy novel as *Alice in Wonderland*, with its six impossible things to believe before breakfast!

The real target of the censorship campaign is not "fake news," but true news—that is, genuine journalism and independent reporting, which by its very nature contradicts the lies of the warmongers in Washington, London and Paris.

That's why WikiLeaks editor Julian Assange has had to shelter in Ecuador's embassy in London for almost six years now and why he was

stripped of any communication with the outside world over a month ago, coinciding with the air strikes.

Assange is presently in immense danger. Ecuador is under huge pressure to kick him out. This would be a prelude to his being arrested and then extradited to the US, where he faces trial and imprisonment for WikiLeaks' exposures of Washington's war crimes.

Last year, US Attorney General Jeff Sessions stated that putting Assange on trial for espionage was a "priority." Then-CIA Director Mike Pompeo, now secretary of state, asserted that WikiLeaks was a "non-state hostile intelligence service." By November 2010, the Obama administration had convened a secret grand jury and had a warrant issued for his arrest on charges of espionage—charges that can carry the death sentence.

The relentless attack on Assange and WikiLeaks was and remains a spearhead in the drive by the ruling elite and capitalist governments around the world to crack down on freedom of speech and impose strict control and censorship over the Internet. Defending him, demanding his freedom, is the spearhead of the fight against this offensive.

Our speaker from the International Youth and Students for Social Equality will give details on how this is developing on the campuses, but I want to draw attention to the efforts of Google and Facebook and the campaign against "fake news" and "Russian interference."

We drew attention last year to a discreetly worded blog post by Google in which it claimed that it had taken measures to "improve" its search system to "help people find what they were looking for." These measures would be implemented, as the company subsequently told a reporter, in such a way as not to "reflect political ... bias." That was a lie.

Rather than helping find what people were searching for, the company carried out a far-reaching revision of the way it evaluated every one of its millions of search terms, severing connections between popular topics—such as inequality, war, democratic rights and socialism—and leading left-wing websites.

The WWSWS was especially impacted. In the year running up to this announcement, our site had received nearly 10 million visits. The month before, over 900,000 individual users visited the WWSWS, reflecting a 25 percent increase in just four months. Within a matter of days, we would go on to publish our first video that received more than one million views.

Within three months of Google's announcement, every single one of the WWSWS's top 45 search terms no longer linked users to the site. As a result, search traffic from Google fell by more than three quarters, far more than any of the numerous other left-wing, anti-war and progressive websites affected by the company's measures.

On August 25, the WWSWS published an open letter declaring that "Google is manipulating its Internet searches to restrict public awareness of and access to socialist, anti-war and left-wing websites," and adding, "Censorship on this scale is political blacklisting."

This is being significantly expanded. Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg delivered testimony before Congress in April in which he outlined the company's plans, through the power of artificial intelligence, to "evaluate" and "police" all the content posted on the world's largest social network to block the dissemination of "fake news." Measures are being taken to limit the reach of oppositional publications or shut them down altogether.

We are witnessing a historical transformation of leading technology companies: from the disseminators of information to its censors. They are being directly incorporated into the military-industrial complex, as witnessed by Google's admission that it is helping the Pentagon develop artificial intelligence for use in its drone programme.

The turn to censorship, under the cover of combating "fake news" and "Russian meddling," is aimed at suppressing and criminalising resistance to war and austerity.

The ruling elite know there is mass opposition to their criminal designs.

The first months of 2018 have seen an immense escalation of class conflict around the world in opposition to the relentless assault on workers' jobs, living standards and democratic rights.

There has been a wave of strikes and struggles: US teachers, UK lecturers, in France a mass movement against rail privatisation. These are only the initial expressions of a re-emergence of class struggles similar to 1968. This time, however, the ruling class is not able to make any accommodations to placate mass opposition.

Billions are being squandered on the military. Global military spending is at a record \$1.7 trillion, the highest level since the Cold War, according to figures published Thursday by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI). The US is the largest spender, with \$700 billion, but it has risen especially sharply over last decade in Central Europe (20 percent) and Eastern Europe (33 percent).

According to SIPRI, just 13 percent of annual world military spending would be enough to end world poverty and hunger; four percent would guarantee food security for the world's population; five percent would meet health needs; 12 percent would provide everyone with an education; three percent would provide clean water and proper sanitation.

Far from spending on such necessities, social budgets are being slashed. Ten years after the 2008 economic crash, another economic crisis is building. This will erupt after a decade of wage cuts and social austerity that have gutted essential provision and living standards.

The Grenfell fire showed the extent to which everything has been plundered. Yet, one year on, still no one has been charged.

Workers have been through the longest wage squeeze in 200 years, with pay stagnating. Real wages are worth £24 less per week than in 2008 and are not expected to return to pre-crisis levels until 2025. By then, the average worker is expected to have lost £18,500.

In contrast, there are now 145 billionaires who reside in the UK and, according to the *Sunday Times* Rich List, the top 1,000 people have £724 billion—out of the country's total wealth of £12,778 billion. In virtually every instance, those listed significantly improved their riches over the last year.

Globally, 42 people own as much wealth as 50 percent of humanity.

There is massive opposition to this state of affairs. But the role of organisations such as the Stop the War Coalition (STWC) is to politically demobilise popular anti-war sentiment.

The coalition directed all public protests by workers and youth against the bombing of Syria to making futile appeals to parliament and—above all—backing Jeremy Corbyn's personal protests against war made as leader of the pro-war Labour Party.

The pseudo-left groups' claim that all will be made well by a Corbyn Labour government plays the same role as a lullaby. It soothes people to sleep.

The drive to war arises not as a result of individual proclivities or policy decisions. It is rooted in the character of imperialism. What the STWC and the pseudo-left present is, in reality, an alternative policy for British imperialism. They believe that the UK should distance itself from the US, which is now too undependable, and rely more on "soft power" and negotiated alliances with the European powers.

It is striking how all these supposedly "socialist" organisations keep the question of war completely separate from fight against austerity and social inequality. Nor do they say anything about growing censorship and they are silent on the persecution of WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange, who has been silenced and whose health and life are in immediate danger.

The most important political allies of Washington and London are the nominally liberal *Guardian* and the pseudo-left milieu, such as the Socialist Party and the Socialist Workers Party. They play the key role in demobilising support for Assange and justifying his persecution. Not only are they silent on what is being done to him, but they have even demanded he face "justice" regarding bogus claims of sexual impropriety—even after

Swedish authorities last year formally closed their trumped-up investigation.

We insist that the critical task is to merge the working class movement in opposition to social inequality with the struggle against imperialism itself. As the world witnesses a new upsurge of imperialist barbarism, the International Committee of the Fourth International reaffirms the critical principles it first advanced in its February 2016 statement, *Socialism and the Fight Against War: Build an International Movement of the Working Class and Youth Against Imperialism!*

- The struggle against war must be based on the working class, the great revolutionary force in society, uniting behind it all progressive elements of the population.

- The new anti-war movement must be anti-capitalist and socialist, since there can be no serious struggle against war except in the fight to end the dictatorship of finance capital and put an end to the economic system that is the fundamental cause of militarism and war.

- The new anti-war movement must therefore, of necessity, be completely and unequivocally independent of, and hostile to, all political parties and organizations of the capitalist class.

- The new anti-war movement must, above all, be international, mobilizing the vast power of the working class in a unified global struggle against imperialism.



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