

Greetings to the ISSE/SEP Conference: Britain

20 April 2007

The following greetings were sent to the March 31-April 1 ISSE/SEP Emergency Conference Against War from Julie Hyland, assistant national secretary of the Socialist Equality Party in Britain.

The Socialist Equality Party of Britain sends its warmest greetings to this emergency conference against war called by the International Students for Social Equality and the Socialist Equality Party.

It is just four months since the Bush administration was roundly defeated at the polls, as millions of ordinary Americans registered their disgust and hostility towards the Iraq war and the ongoing occupation that becomes more bloody and chaotic every day.

The result was a powerful refutation of the claim that America is a right-wing monolith, whose people are united with the administration in a policy of war without end. Such claims have long been utilised by governments and parties across the world to justify their own kowtowing to US imperialism.

Millions internationally recognised that in the vote the broad mass of the US population had exactly the same fears and concerns for the future as themselves, and felt strengthened by it. Surely now, many thought, Bush will have to listen. And if he does not, then he will have to go.

But he has not listened, and he certainly has not gone. Instead, the Bush administration announced its troop “surge,” the ultimate purpose of which is to quash all opposition to the invasion and divide the country so as to reinforce US control of the major oil fields.

This has been accompanied by escalating provocations against Iran—from the kidnapping of its diplomats to the stationing of gunboats off its coast—actions that underscore the fact that the Iraq war was but one link in a chain of military aggression, as the US seeks to secure its hegemony over its international competitors. Having made clear their opposition to the Iraq war, it seems that the American people, indeed the peoples of the world, are to be confronted with another war that will be even more bloody and destabilising.

How is this to be accounted for? The Democrats were the prime beneficiaries of the November vote. But as the ISSE makes clear in its statement convening this conference, their disagreements with the Bush administration are entirely tactical. It is not the criminal character of the Iraq war that concerns them, but the fact that the war has not been successful. They come forward as the party that will fight America’s wars—or more correctly, who will send others to fight America’s wars—more efficiently and successfully.

It is not that the Democrats betrayed an anti-war mandate—it was never theirs to begin with. How could it be? Though greatly concerned at the prospect of US defeat and international isolation, they too cannot countenance any undermining of US hegemony. And the mass popular revolt expressed in last November’s elections only terrifies them even more.

The situation is exactly the same in Britain—except here it was the Labour government that joined in the attack on Iraq, despite the largest ever anti-war demonstration in history.

The Iraq war encapsulated the character of the British bourgeoisie. For no lie was too great in manufacturing some kind of pretext for the invasion. It was not enough to simply lie over weapons of mass destruction. The British government and its intelligence services produced documents, which were proudly circulated to the world media, that we now know contained even more lies—and one of which was almost entirely plagiarised from a 12-year old PhD thesis.

This is the same government that publicly denounced last October’s study by Johns Hopkins University estimating that 655,000 Iraqis have been killed as the result of the US-led invasion and occupation of Iraq as “flawed” and “suspect”—even though its own scientists and senior officials had warned it against such criticisms, saying that the study’s methodology was sound.

Such lies are necessary for the duplicitous and criminal actions in which the British government is engaged. British warships have now joined the beefed-up US contingent in the Persian Gulf, ready for an attack on Iran. There will be no parliamentary opposition to such a course of action. The Conservative Party has made clear its support for punitive measures against Tehran, whilst the Liberal Democrats—who opposed the Iraq war—are also keen to be seen as talking tough.

They have a problem in as much as few believe them. They have lied too often, and all are gravely compromised as a result. But that does not give them any pause for thought.

The situation facing Blair and his coterie is much the same as faces the Democrats. They are well aware that the backing they have won from important sections of big business, on which they rely for their privileged lifestyle in office and future positions in City boardrooms, depends on them pressing ahead with the policy of imperialist plunder abroad and the gutting of wages, living standards and vital public services at home.

The Socialist Equality Party is standing regional lists in the elections to the Scottish Parliament and Welsh Assembly on May 3. It is widely predicted that Labour will lose heavily in these elections, as the overwhelming majority of the population is opposed to militarism.

Such is Labour’s indifference to popular sentiment, however, that it opened its election campaign by announcing plans to withdraw welfare benefits for the disabled, single mothers and the unemployed. This was followed by Chancellor Gordon Brown—who is predicted to take over as prime minister when Blair finally resigns—unveiling a budget that slashed corporation taxes, while increasing income tax on the lowest paid.

Such actions bring to mind the infamous declaration attributed to

Marie Antoinette when told that the peasants had no bread: “Let them eat cake.” Today’s ruling elite has indeed taken on the character of the aristocracy in pre-revolutionary France. The UK has already been described as the world’s first “onshore tax haven.” Under Labour, the wealthiest 1,000 individuals have seen their fortunes triple to £300 billion. At the same time, the UK’s total personal debt now exceeds £125 trillion and is increasing by more than £1 million every four minutes, as families are forced to go heavily into debt in order to get by. It is estimated that more than half the population would be unable to survive financially for longer than 17 days if they suffered an unexpected loss of income.

This state of affairs cannot continue. Indeed, there are signs that millions are becoming conscious of the advanced state of the political situation they confront and its dangers. The mass protests against the Iraq War in 2003 were indicative of this, but the politicisation today takes place under conditions in which protest politics and appeals to the United Nations, the European Union, and so on, have been shown to be worthless.

The response won by the ISSE is a sign of this. Of course, there will be those amongst the petty bourgeois radical fraternity who would question any political fight amongst students because they are not “working class” or sufficiently oppressed to respond.

What rubbish. Historically, socialism has always attracted the brightest and most self-sacrificing intellectuals to its ranks. One only needs to mention the names of Karl Marx, Frederick Engels, Lenin, Leon Trotsky and Rosa Luxemburg to show the ridiculousness of such claims.

It is also to blind oneself to social dynamics. Across the world, there has been a phenomenal growth in student numbers—not least from countries such as China and India. This is the outcome of the fact that for many young people, including large sections of those traditionally defined as middle class, higher education offers the only hope of avoiding unemployment and the most degrading and lowest-paid work.

Almost 30 percent of Europeans in their 20s now have university degrees, a share that is three times higher than among those over 60. Even in the UK, long notorious for its failure to educate and train large numbers of young people, particularly working class youth, there has been a dramatic change. According to statistics, UK student numbers have risen from around 500,000 in the 1960s to more than 2 million today. These include an increase among ethnic minority youth, and particularly among women.

Even so, with the average graduate income in the UK estimated to be £18,000 per annum, it is not the route to the top it is held up to be. Many graduates find themselves working in call centres, as bank cashiers, etc. Moreover, the imposition of £3,000 student fees in England, which some are demanding rise again to £10,000 a year, is forcing hundreds of thousands of young people into debt. There are no grants or scholarships to speak of in England, with the result that students must borrow heavily to pay fees and rent. Just two years after the introduction of fees, the average student is expected to complete his or her course with £20,000 debt.

Our movement has insisted that the fight to develop a mass socialist movement against war and inequality can only take place through a fight to establish the political independence of workers and youth from the bourgeois parties and their apologists, and that this requires the sharpest ideological struggle against all forms of opportunism and centrism.

Tendencies such as Communist Refoundation in Italy and

Revolutionary Communist League in France are extremely discredited and have become completely integrated into the bourgeois establishment. But that does not obviate the need for such an ideological offensive. As the crisis of capitalism develops, generating mass class upheavals, the bourgeoisie will seek to develop new political safety valves to mislead and miseducate this movement.

The universities assume the role of think tanks in germinating and developing such tendencies. That is why the SEP in Britain is especially proud to be hosting the forthcoming lecture tour by David North, chairman of the editorial board of the *World Socialist Web Site*, at the University of Glasgow on April 25 and the University of Cardiff on April 27, under the title “In defence of Leon Trotsky—a reply to the post-Soviet school of historical falsification.”

Despite the passage of nearly 70 years since his assassination by a Soviet agent, Trotsky remains the most controversial and misrepresented of all the major figures of the October 1917 revolution. The dissolution of the Soviet Stalinist regime in 1991 has produced no let up in this campaign of falsification. In fact, the growing social polarisation across the world, combined with the complete discrediting of the old workers’ organisations, has led to a renewed offensive against Trotsky.

By defending historical truth, the lecture tour in Britain will provide a powerful rebuff to such travesties of serious and objective research and in doing so cut an ideological path for all those students, youth and workers looking for a progressive alternative.

The building of a new socialist leadership amongst young people internationally is a critical task for the Marxist movement. It is the generation whose best representatives are gathered here today, from the United States, Canada, Europe, Asia and Australia, who must now assume the responsibility for ending capitalism, militarism and war and constructing a world free from all forms of oppression.

Julie Hyland,
for the SEP Britain

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Socialist Equality Party visit:

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