

"We believe in the power of historically progressive ideas"

24 April 2003

Below we are publishing the remarks of David Walsh to the conference held by the World Socialist Web Site and the Socialist Equality Party in Ann Arbor, Michigan March 29-30, 2003 entitled "Socialism and the Struggle Against Imperialism and War: the Strategy and Program of a New International Working Class Movement."

Walsh, a member of the WSWS Editorial Board, introduced the sixth and final resolution discussed and adopted by the conference: "The American media and the development of the World Socialist Web Site."

On April 1 the WSWS published a summary account of the conference ["World Socialist Web Site holds international conference on socialism and the struggle against war"] as well as the opening report given by David North, chairman of the WSWS International Editorial Board and national secretary of the SEP in the US ["Into the maelstrom: the crisis of American imperialism and the war against Iraq"].

The texts of the six resolutions unanimously adopted by the conference were published April 2 through April 4 ["Resolutions condemn war in Iraq, call for international unity of working class", "Resolutions call for political independence of working class, oppose attacks on democratic rights", "Resolutions on war and the US social crisis, development of the World Socialist Web Site"]

On April 22 the WSWS published the remarks of Patrick Martin and Ulrich Rippert, who introduced the first and second conference resolutions, respectively [See "Contradictions and lies in the US case for war against Iraq", "Internationalism stands at the center of the history of the working class"] On April 23 we published the remarks of Barry Grey and Lawrence Porter, who introduced the third and fourth resolutions [See "The historic background and content of the struggle for the political independence of the working class", and "The turn to authoritarian methods is a symptom of the failure of American capitalism"].

In the coming days we will publish the greetings brought by international delegates to the conference.

The American media condemns itself. Dominated by a handful of vast conglomerates, the leading newspapers and television networks have become largely a repository of lies,

stupidity and reaction.

To spend any time these days in the company of Fox News, CNN or MSNBC is to participate in something filthy and brutal. One looks at those ranting, ignorant faces with a certain degree of astonishment. These individuals can only be the product of a protracted process of social and intellectual decay, bound up with the narrowing prospects of American capitalism. No social system with a future would call on such human garbage, with their appeals to the basest, most depraved sentiments and conceptions: anticommunism, chauvinism, militarism and social misanthropy in general.

I would prefer in this setting to speak about the *World Socialist Web Site*.

Since January 1998 our movement has attempted to do something never done before in history: to produce a serious daily analysis of political, social and cultural events, international in scope and international in its production and dissemination.

This effort has evoked a powerful response. We are convinced that the WSWS and the international revolutionary program on which it bases itself correspond to the needs of the broad mass of humanity and the deepest currents in history. This remarkable gathering, I believe, is a proof that this conviction is correct.

I would like to address a couple of questions. We say that our movement is rooted in science, that Marxism reflects the processes of social life truthfully and objectively. Now, in our work we attempt to write directly to our readers. We are doing our best to write without jargon, without that dreadful, unconvincing phrase-mongering characteristic of so much of what passes for the radical press. Trotsky wrote, "We are the only party that needs no illusions, self-deception, or false coloring to implement its great historical work."

To exclude empty rhetoric as far as possible, however, does not mean that one can avoid issues that are complex and sometimes unfamiliar to the reader, or language and terminology that is unfamiliar. Trotsky again: "That which can be grasped without difficulty is generally useless, regardless of the subject."

The serious reader has his or her own obligation, to think

deeply, to develop knowledge, to study, in the first place, the Marxist classics—Marx, Engels, Lenin, Trotsky, Luxemburg, Plekhanov, Mehring and others.

Beyond that, we have attempted to comment intelligently on artistic and cultural problems. This seems to us something indispensable, that through art—which, like science, is a means of making sense of the world—we approach deeply human problems, the human condition itself, expressed perhaps in its most intimate form.

How could revolutionaries be indifferent to such problems? Bureaucrats, opportunists and demagogues cannot treat these questions. Such intimate and complex matters sicken and pale in their presence.

We need more commentators, far more contributions. Our challenge is no less than creating a radically altered cultural and intellectual atmosphere, a necessary precondition for revolutionary social change.

We are not, of course, intrigued by intellectualism for its own sake, in showing off, in posturing. If examples of that can be found on our web site, please show us, we would gladly remove them. No, for us ideas are always associated with great political and social and cultural issues, and with acting on them.

“We revolutionists,” Trotsky wrote, “in the area of writing, as in others, give first priority to the will to act: to change something, to bring something about, to achieve something.”

We believe in the power of historically progressive ideas to have a material impact, to find material expression. We still have limited resources and manpower. We cannot bombard the population with our message, we have no means by which to advertise ourselves in every household or even every community, and yet it is no exaggeration to say that the WSWs is on the eve of reaching a mass audience. How is this possible? This has been accomplished strictly through the power of ideas.

As materialists, we understand that the world creates ideas. As true materialists, we understand that ideas also create the world.

I suggested before that our readers had certain obligations. I would add that they have another, equally fundamental and pressing obligation, and that is to become writers for the web site. There could be no greater achievement of this conference than if it produced 10, 15, 20 new writers for the WSWs. On every subject: the everyday life of the working class, social conditions, on politics, on history, on art, on science, on philosophy.

You may think that I exaggerate, but such a development would have a measurable impact on political life. Every serious, regular contributor to the web site strengthens the cause of the working class and brings the day of its

liberation closer.

One of the greatest imaginable errors would be to underestimate yourselves. Why should only the rotten people be presumptuous? Because our “presumptuousness,” that is to say, the fact that we take ourselves and what we do seriously, is based on a scientific and historical appraisal of society and its tendencies.

This is an extraordinary gathering. This is not a matter of self-congratulation. Revolutionary ideas and perspectives are beginning to gather around them on an international scale the makings of a world movement without precedent in history.

Let me cite a passage from the resolution: “In the struggle to arouse and educate the population, the WSWs makes an appeal to its readers’ intellect, sense of justice and fairness, concern for truth, and spirit of self-sacrifice and human solidarity.

“Marxists understand that far-reaching social change comes about as the result of profound objective processes and an equally profound intellectual and cultural reorientation of masses of people. A significant obstacle that lies in the path of those entering into struggle against imperialist war and social inequality today is the generally low level of class consciousness and historical knowledge.

“The WSWs must play a leading role in rebuilding the extraordinary socialist political culture that emerged in the last decades of the nineteenth century and was so grievously damaged by Stalinism. Marxism, as viewed by its greatest proponents, was not merely a political program, but an intellectual current of unparalleled depth and breadth, which subjected every aspect of bourgeois society to criticism.”

History has known traumas and tragedies; there are many difficulties today. What is the wonderful quote from Lincoln? “The occasion is piled high with difficulties. We must rise to the occasion.”

We proceed on the basis of enormous confidence in our ability to win the minds and hearts of great numbers of people, confidence in culture, in the study of history, in reason, confidence in humanity and in its future.



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