

# 2016 ? A year of Reaction: 2017 ? A year of Resistance

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2016 was a year of momentous events. In Syria, the European Union, South America, the USA, these were not positive ones for the struggles of the working class and progressive forces fighting for democratic rights. Rather the opposite.

In Syria, the year ended with the fall of Aleppo to Assad's brutal regime and the possibility of a 'peace of the victors'. In the EU, sympathy for drowning Syrian refugees in 2015 gave way to razor wire fences and walls, the rise of racist populist parties and Brexit. In the US, Trump won, though with a minority of the popular vote, installing the most right-wing administration in decades with a strong grip on both houses of Congress as well as the White House.

In Latin America, the 'pink wave' of populist and 21st century socialist presidents is receding fast. Brazil is locked in a deep economic recession and Venezuela on the verge of economic collapse. In Asia and the Middle East, 'strongmen' like India's Narendra Modi, the Philippines' Rodrigo Duterte, Turkey's Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Egypt's Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, are meting out repression. Indeed, Russia's president Vladimir Putin is something of a poster boy for this cohort. Even the Nobel Peace laureate, Aung San Suu Kyi, is presiding over the Burmese army's ethnic cleansing of the Rohingya minority.

This indicates a rise of what Karl Marx defined as bonapartism, itself an infallible sign of mounting tensions within society requiring the state to rise above and repress the contending forces and dispensing with the normal democratic safety valves of the system.

Partial exceptions to this bleak picture were the South African students' struggle for free education, the Sanders campaign and Black Lives Matter in the US, and the movement that re-elected Jeremy Corbyn as Labour Party leader in Britain. We must hope they are tokens for the future.

Nevertheless, negative and positive, these developments all reveal a global capitalism and state system in increasing chaos. Within the bourgeois ruling establishments, there is a sharp swing to the right. 2016 saw the institutions of globalisation, and its ruling ideology, neoliberalism, targeted by populist forces that stressed regaining national sovereignty and defending 'native' culture, whilst targeting minorities and immigrants. In Pakistan, repression continues in Balochistan whilst the province's prime minister dismisses unrest as 'a handful of miscreants, manipulated by the Indian intelligence agency, involved in anti-peace activities'.

The forces that have made advances include not just 'strong men' eroding democratic rights, but also right wing populist movements, challenging or pushing aside the parties of the traditional bourgeois establishment. This testifies to two things; a historically severe period of crises for capitalism and an equally deep crisis of leadership for the working class. Statistics show stagnant or falling wages, bankrupt

or failing social services and vastly increasing social inequality. This easily explains the anxiety and anger expressed in elections and referenda, even where they are misdirected at the most vulnerable; those seeking asylum from wars, or longstanding ethnic and racial minorities.

Everywhere, the political centre ground, associated with neoliberalism and globalisation, is giving way, that is to say it is losing its popular base. The collapsing centre includes the 'establishment' of the workers' movement, too; the unions and reformist parties who adapted heavily to neoliberalism in the 1990s and early 2000s.

The right have advanced not just by scapegoating Polish or Mexican migrants or Syrian refugees but also by demagogic attacks on globalisation and its free trade plans.

Trump savagely attacked the Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP), the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) and the North American Free Trade Area (NAFTA) for offshoring and shrinking America's once staple industries. Marine Le Pen of the French National Front, and Nigel Farage of the UK Independence Party, attacked the European Union's bureaucratic diktats to member states on their national budgets.

Britain's referendum decision presents a major challenge to the EU and its rulers, Germany and France. The Commission, the Council of Ministers and the Central Bank will have to impose punitive terms on the islanders and their beloved City, 'pour encourager les autres' not to follow suit. In Britain, the conflict over Brexit will be long and bitter and hold new and unwelcome 'surprises', political and economic, but within the walls of the Eurozone, too, all is far from well.

Italy's banking system teeters on the verge of a major crisis with its state bailout power crippled by a national debt standing at 132 per cent of GDP, while its financial sector has amassed \$360bn of bad loans. Greece has not escaped its crisis, despite another tranche of austerity under Syriza. Germany's finance minister and chief torturer of the Greeks, Wolfgang Schäuble, demands further 'structural reforms', insisting debt relief 'would not help'.

Thus far, however, Germany sees no need to abandon policies, such as the fixed exchange rate, that led it to prosper relative to, if not at the expense of, most other EU states during the decade since the banking crash. Germany's 'leadership', if it persists on its present course, could bring down the entire European project.

In Germany, Spain and Italy, new populist parties have coalesced; the Alternative für Deutschland, Ciudadanos, a revamped Northern League and the ambiguous 'neither right nor left' Five Star Movement. They add to the older established Front National in France, Geert Wilders Party for Freedom in Holland and chauvinist governments in Hungary and Poland. Elections in France and Holland in May could well see further shocks.

The slogans of 'taking back control', raised by the right-populists, refer to a widespread feeling of helplessness amongst millions since the crash of 2008. Whichever party was in power, the bank bailouts and cuts in social spending went ahead. But the bankers and the CEOs of the big corporations, escaped with impunity. Indeed, they continued to pocket their huge salaries and bonuses.

In Latin America, the countries of the so-called Pink Wave, were hard hit by bankruptcy caused by the collapse of oil prices and the fall in Chinese demand.

The disenchantment with the major parties, right or left, at first received left wing populist voice in the Indignados and Occupy movements, embodied in the slogan 'they do not represent us'. This was hurled

not just at the conservative or 'Socialist' parties in government but also at the traditional opposition parties, whose lookalike policies since the Crash deprived the electors of any choice.

Even when Greece's Syriza was elected with a clear popular mandate to resist the Troika's package after package of cuts and privatisations, Schäuble insisted 'Elections change nothing. There are rules'. In August 2015, despite a clear referendum victory, Syriza surrendered unconditionally.

In Syria, the year has seen what started as a democratic revolution and became a civil war turn the country into hell on earth for its people and a cockpit for the rivalries of the major imperialist and regional powers: Russia, the US and the EU in the first category and Turkey, Iran and Saudi Arabia in the second.

2016 began with the continuing flood across the Aegean of refugees from the Syrian, Afghan and other war zones, seeking asylum in Europe. The EU had tried and failed to arrange a sharing of refugees. It fell foul of an outburst of anti-immigrant racism, fomented by right wing media, right-wing chauvinist governments like that of Hungary's Viktor Orbán and populist EU countries, led by Hungary, who threw up border fences topped with razor wire across the continent.

The EU's answer to the continuing numbers seeking asylum, in May, was to turn to President Erdoğan, bribing him to 'turn off the tap' of migrants crossing the Aegean. The price was silence on Erdoğan's repression against tens of thousands of his opponents following the September 12 abortive military coup. This included attempts to destroy the left wing, pro-Kurdish party the HDP, and stepping up the war against the Kurds in the south east of the country.

Another 'price' of the coup for the western powers was a rapprochement between Erdoğan and Putin, which opened the way to the liquidation of the resistance in Aleppo, to a Russo-Turkish brokered ceasefire and projected 'peace' conference. The victims of such a reactionary settlement will be, not just the remnant of the Syrian resistance to Assad, but the Kurds, both in Rojava and in Turkey.

Add to this the largely uncommented on crimes of the brutal dictatorship in Egypt, worse than that of Mubarak, overthrown in 2011, will bring to an end a regional revolutionary upsurge that began with so much hope in the Arab Spring.

The new period has also taken its toll on the Bolivarian, populist and social democratic regimes in Latin America. In Argentina and Brazil, admittedly the least radical parts of the 'Pink Tide', right wing parties ousted presidents Cristina Kirchner and Dilma Rouseff in December 2015 and May-August 2016.

In Venezuela, cradle of the Bolivarian Revolution, the regime of Hugo Chavez's successor, Victor Maduro, is in terminal crisis. The model of 21st Century Socialism, largely based on the export of raw materials, but not expropriating the capitalist class or smashing its state, proved to have only temporary advantages, dependent in large measure on China's unsustainable double-digit growth rates. Its implied rejection of the revolutionary socialism of the 20th century has now been cruelly exposed as no new solution for the impoverished masses.

In the USA, the year that began with the optimism of the Paris Accords on climate change, however minimal their provisions, has ended with the election of a president who has stuffed his administration with climate change deniers and fossil fuel executives. Over a century of imperialism has demonstrated the incompatibility of capitalist development with the maintenance of the natural environment upon which all life depends. Capital's insatiable search for maximum profit drives its exploitation not only of working people, but also of natural resources, heedless of the long-term effects on either.

The catastrophic impact of climate change, desertification, flooding and other extreme weather events, and

their attendant famines and epidemics, can only be mitigated, let alone in the long term reversed, if control over production is removed from the hands of the great capital formations who have brought humanity to the brink of disaster. Only socialist revolution will allow the planned optimum usage of resources under the control of the majority and a balancing of development between town and country, not only at national levels but globally.

Donald Trump is a suitable symbol of the new world disorder. His threats of a registration of Muslims and imprisonment and deportation of 3 million 'illegals', will inflame US tensions with Islamic and Latin American countries whilst his America First policy threatens conflicts with other major players, particularly China. His trade policies, if followed through, could even lead to the breakdown of the institutions of post-1991 globalisation. Increased arms spending is on the agenda of many countries. On every continent, country after country is wracked by internal political crises and increasingly frequent clashes between one another.

One hundred years after Lenin wrote Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism, the accuracy of his description of this as an epoch of 'particularly intense struggle for the division and re-division of the world' is clearer than ever. The emergence of two new imperialist powers, Russia and China, in the new century has already destabilised the previous 'new world order' established after the collapse of the Soviet Union. For China, in particular, further growth will challenge the dominance of other powers in more and more regions of the world.

Yet all is not well within China itself; at the end of his first five years in office, Xi Jinping has failed to implement his programme of subjecting state owned industry and banking to 'market forces' against the intransigence of entrenched bureaucrats fearful of losing their privileged positions. At the same time, the nascent bourgeoisie, although lacking any political leadership, is pursuing its own interests by sending its capital abroad, weakening the yuan in the process. In the run up to the 19th Party Congress in November, we can expect a raising of the factional heat as Xi prepares for his second term.

During his election campaign, Trump savagely attacked China's trade and monetary policies. Since then, his Tweets condemning China's military build up in the South China Sea have continued the provocation. What China has to fear from the unpredictable Trump is that he will make good on his promises to stand up to China on trade and monetary policy. Militating against this in the short term is the continued dependence of the Chinese and US economies on one another.

China's own assertion of control of the Spratlys, by building artificial islands capable of military use, has caused serious friction with a US intent on maintaining its own string of bases and a naval presence in an area where \$5 trillion of world trade passes through narrow straits of immense strategic importance. Clearly, in the years to come, this could become a powder keg if the US and its allies seek to contain China and China seeks to avoid the threat of being blockaded in a future conflict. A naval rearmament race is already underway with incalculable consequences.

International workers' resistance the only answer

These frictions over trade and resources, together with the bloody and prolonged regional wars and new cold wars, should be a serious warning to the workers of Europe, North America, indeed of the whole world.

The lesson to be drawn from the debacle of Syriza in government, and the stalled advance of Podemos, is that the new party the working class urgently needs cannot be either a federation of the left with a parliamentary reformist strategy, or a populist all-class alliance. Even less can it be a reformed party of the imperialist bourgeoisie, like the US Democrats, as Bernie Sanders is advocating. Even the Corbyn

movement in the UK will fail if its leaders make major policy concessions to cohabit with the right in Labour's 'broad church', hoping for an election victory in 2020.

What we need are working class parties waging a militant class struggle on an everyday basis. They need to be fighting the bosses in the workplace, on the streets against racist cops, against fascists, organising the defence of working class or minority communities. At election times, they need to fight independently of all bourgeois parties and petit bourgeois ones like the Greens, too. Their programmes must be based on the ultimate and immediate goals the working class needs, not on those supposedly attractive to the middle classes or to backward sectors of workers.

In the many countries around the world with dictatorial and authoritarian regimes they will have to organise in illegality for the inevitable revolutionary crises that will hit these regimes. They need to be uncompromising in internationalism, antiracism, and defence of the oppressed. They need to be clearly socialist anticapitalist and revolutionary in their strategic objectives.

Although the foundation of new working class parties, either through splits in existing mass reformist parties or by labour or workers' parties where they have not existed before, will often mean an alliance of reformists and revolutionaries, the two programmes are ultimately incompatible and irreconcilable. As Rosa Luxemburg observed, the two tendencies are not just different routes to the same goal; their two goals are counterposed.

Whatever the differences in the severity of its impact in different countries, the capitalist crisis is international and so, too, must be the working class solution to it. In this respect, the more recent movements have represented a step back compared to the internationalism of earlier movements with their summit sieges, social forums and internationally coordinated actions.

The Greek working class was, essentially, left to fight on its own. In both Syria and Ukraine, illusions by different factions of the left, either in a 'democratic' Nato imperialism or an 'anti-imperialist' Russia, led to weak international solidarity with the progressive forces in both countries.

One important first step forward would be for large numbers of active fighters against austerity, racism, war and environmental destruction to come together at the demonstrations and counter summit against the G20, which meets in Hamburg on 7 and 8 July, 2017. A similar gathering, the European Social Forum, in 2002, launched the biggest worldwide antiwar movement in history.

Such a meeting of organisations and parties actively engaged in the resistance, plus those from emigré and refugee groups, could work out a plan for sustained actions on a continental scale. Similar efforts need to be made on other continents, especially in countries that might be dragged into conflicts with one another. If we do this, then 2017 can be a year of unpleasant surprises for our rulers and a worthy one in which to commemorate the greatest event in the history of human liberation since the French Revolution.

One hundred years ago, against the backdrop of the carnage on the Somme, the suppression of the first wartime strikes in Germany and the repression of the Easter Rising in Ireland, the outlook for the revolutionary movement at the end of 1916 looked bleak indeed. Less than one year later, the Russian Revolution changed the direction of history, gave the socialist movement a new model of political organisation and established the first workers' state. As we enter 2017, that remains our inspiration.