

Fifth International 17 Editorial

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The ruthless coercion of the Greek government into accepting a punitive austerity package, subordinating the country to the economic dictatorship of the Eurogroup, is the latest example of a new period of imperialist barbarism. The Germany of Wolfgang Schäuble and Angela Merkel overruled the feeble protests of the French President and the Italian Prime Minister and made clear who rules not only Greece but the Eurozone.

The vindictive punishment of Greece came hard on the heels of the row precipitated by the Mediterranean refugee crisis, which saw Britain in particular abdicating its responsibility to provide sanctuary for those fleeing war and poverty and offering instead to bomb migrants' vessels and forcibly deport those fortunate enough to make it ashore. It is plain that a new harsh era of selfishness by the great powers has dawned.

Nato, the mailed fist of the Atlantic alliance, is remorselessly and recklessly advancing its forces to the borders of Russia. The United States has augmented its campaign of regime changes, putsches and 'colour revolutions' with a New Cold War intended to militarily and economically subordinate Russia.

In Egypt meanwhile, one general has replaced another and returned relations with the US to business as usual. Under general el-Sisi thousands of political prisoners facing the death sentence are held without trial and the temporary gains of the 2011 revolution are being inexorably reversed - with the connivance of the US. The rise of the Islamic State and a sharp increase in Islamist terrorism from Tunisia to Turkey is the bitter fruit of the West's interventions in and plunder of the Middle East, its fostering of sectarian divisions and its support for Israel after the latter's blitzkrieg against Gaza, which continues to lie in ruins and under blockade one year on.

What is driving the Western powers into repeated provocations of Russia and China, to naked acts to subordinate weaker countries, to austerity policies that undermine social welfare systems built up over many decades? To answer that we have to enter the realm where politics and economics interact.

A historic crisis

The present world situation confirms in many ways the general analysis which the League for the Fifth International made after the outbreak of the Great Recession in 2008: that we had entered a period characterised by a historic crisis of capitalism as a whole. A banking crisis became an industrial crisis and then, after the trillions spent on bank bailouts, a fiscal and sovereign debt crisis. The majority of European states are still staggering under the austerity dictated by the European Central Bank.

Since then, despite a considerable degree of unevenness in rates of recovery from the Great Recession between 2009 and 2011, a large part of the world economy remains mired in low growth and has yet to exceed the high points of the first five years of the 21st century. In May 2015, economic growth in the US and UK continued to slow to around 1.8 per cent and Japan's growth rate is stagnating at around zero. China's fell to 5.3 per cent in April, well below the government's target of 7 per cent for the calendar year.

This overall slowdown in most major economies comes despite the major boost that low oil prices and expanding money supply (QE) should have given them.

The deep economic problems at the root of these tendencies to stagnation and recurring cyclical downturns have not been resolved. Profit rates remain stubbornly low and capital unwilling to engage in major waves of productive investment. The threat of speculative stock exchange and housing bubbles triggering another round of recession remains a real one.

Indeed, we can observe a newcomer to this tendency to crisis; the Chinese economy is suffering a fall in industrial profits and a crash which wiped \$3 trillion from the face value of listed companies on the Shanghai stock exchange. Within China, emphasis is placed on the role of small, inexperienced investors stoking the bull market that saw the Shanghai Composite Index rise by 150 per cent in just one year. The reality is that much of the money which fuelled the rise was credit provided by brokers and the collapse in prices means the losses will undoubtedly feed back into the financial sector itself. Moreover, industrial production has continued to slow and this, together with the stock market's problems, will have a knock-on effect on Chinese industry's suppliers, with prices on the London Metal Exchange falling sharply and Australia and Brazil already adversely affected.

Rivalry intensifies

Fuelled by the post-2008 problems, we are witnessing a period of increased inter-imperialist rivalry. The inter-imperialist contradictions are becoming ever more sharply accentuated, most obviously in the growing confrontation between the US and its Western allies with Russia over Ukraine and the Middle East and between China and the US allies in the South China Sea. We can expect the next months to be marked by an intensification not only of economic but of global political contradictions.

While The US is moving to settle conflicts with Cuba and Iran, yesterday's opponents, it is simultaneously provoking fresh disturbances and encouraging right wing reaction in Latin America, trying to re-assert its subordination of the European Union with a New Cold War aimed at Russia and generating new tensions with China with its Pivot Towards Asia.

Both these 'new' imperialist states are in turn trying to escape US domination by building the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation and, at the same time, an economic and trading bloc that draws in China's Silk Route Economic Belt and Russia's Eurasian Union. In addition, China's 2013 proposal for an Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank has been joined by all Asian countries apart from Japan and Taiwan and is increasingly seen as a rival to the IMF and World Bank.

Politically, the turmoil in the Middle East and in south-central Asia, begun by the Afghanistan and Iraq occupations, continues with US 'gendarmes' playing more independent roles, sometimes in defiance of Washington's wishes. The decline of US hegemony has led not only to a sharpening of inter-imperialist rivalry for re-division of the world but also to struggles between reactionary semi-colonial states trying to extend their regional spheres of influence.

This period of stagnation for capitalism marked by severe crises in the weak links of the system has already generated pre-revolutionary situations, regional wars, actual revolutionary outbreaks and counterrevolutions and will continue to do so. Events in Ukraine, Greece, Libya, Egypt and Syria confirm this.

Flashpoints

The counterrevolution to the Arab Spring of 2011 continues unabated in Egypt with el-Sisi's heavy

repression of the Muslim Brotherhood and secular opposition, Saudi Arabia's bombing in Yemen, the terrible civil war in Syria and the rise of ISIS. The flood of refugees has enormously increased, as has the attempt of people from the war torn countries in the Middle East and Sub-Saharan Africa to enter the European Union via the Mediterranean.

In Pakistan, the failures of another civilian government are leading to increased power and interference in politics exercised by the military and the consequent tightening of the screws on civil liberties. In Sri Lanka, conversely, a degree of relaxation followed the ousting of Rajapaksa, an election result engineered behind the scenes with US support but not yet consolidated with a clear governmental majority from the pending parliamentary election. In Latin America, the Bolivarian and left nationalist governments, due to economic pressures, are witnessing the growth of right-wing movements seeking a return to the power of the elites and their US sponsors.

Currently, within the imperialist world, the crisis is most accentuated in Europe. The Greek crisis is having dramatic effects not only on the country itself, acutely posing the question of revolution and counter-revolution, but its outcome will affect the balance of class forces in the whole of Europe and, thus, the future of the EU and Eurozone. Tensions in Spain are high and will grow as the November general election approaches, when the 'neither right nor left' populism of Podemos will be put to the test.

In Germany, the trade union struggle has begun to rise and in Britain the new Tory government has already provoked large demonstrations and offers an opportunity to unite the forces opposing further austerity. Across Europe, reactionary agitation by the press and populist parties on immigration has increased, with big electoral gains for right wing racist parties.

In the US, throughout 2014-15, a series of unprovoked police murders of African American and Latino people, particularly young Black men, has generated a significant protest movement in major cities. Together with a revival of trade union activity, particularly aimed at raising wages for the low paid and insecure, this has led to new movements such as Black Lives Matter and Fight for 15 that point in the direction of revival and renewal of working class organisation.

Leadership

These developments repeatedly pose challenges to working class organisations, both trade union and political: how to lead an effective fight back against austerity, repression, racism etc. The existing leaderships, created in earlier periods, are proving utterly unable to meet this challenge.

In Greece, the reformist and popular-frontist politics of Syriza, as well as the failure of the forces on its left to present a viable revolutionary alternative, pose the danger of a counter-revolutionary outcome to the present crisis if the Tsipras leadership succeeds in imposing its abject surrender on the Greek workers and youth - or if the EU Institutions pull the plug on the Greek economy. The dangers of a constitutional or a military-police takeover could soon become very real. Everything depends now on the working class taking mass action to halt the new austerity programme and establishing workers' control over the banks, industries and distribution. The ultimate solution is for a workers' government to take power, protected by a workers' militia.

Over Ukraine, most of the labour movement and the 'Left' throughout Europe has abandoned the struggle against the Kiev regime and solidarity with the forces in East Ukraine, falling victim to the right wing Ukrainian nationalist narrative of Russian aggression and ignoring the fascist spearheaded coup of 2014. However, the right wing government in Kiev and the IMF/EU sponsored austerity are beginning to break the illusions of the west Ukrainians in the EU and the Maidan regime.

In country after country, then, continued attacks by the ruling classes are driving the masses to resist. Each new wave of resistance makes the emergence of new forces more likely. In such situations, however, it is not only the still dominant reformist leaderships in the Socialist, Labour and Communist Parties and the big trade union federations, that are proving to be an obstacle.

The surrender by Syriza leader Alexis Tsipras to the terms dictated by Angela Merkel and Wolfgang Schäuble and his turn to New Democracy to ram through his deal with the EU and outflank the Syriza left, reveal the total bankruptcy of the 'broad party model'. Reformist leaders will, even if they actually take the working class into a major struggle, at the critical moment reveal themselves to be inept cowards at best and outright traitors at worst.

The reason is simple enough. When our class enemies deploy their immense economic power in open class warfare, reformist politicians dare not reply in kind by mobilising the working class's countervailing power, i.e. mass action by millions to take over the property of the rich and break up the police and military enforcers of class rule.

Events in Spain with Podemos will see the same result unless workers can hold their leaders to account through mobilisation to impose their demands.

A new International

5-8 September marks the hundredth anniversary of the Zimmerwald Conference, when a small number of delegates from Italy, France, Germany, Switzerland, Russia, Poland, Holland etc. met in a Swiss mountain resort to begin a process of rebuilding a new workers' International after the collapse of the Second International into social-patriotism. The struggle to overcome the deep crisis of leadership which is holding back the fightback against capitalism's devastating convulsions cannot be done solely or even initially at a national level. Today's crises, wars and revolutions should spur revolutionary organisations around the globe to clearly pose the urgent need for a worthy successor to the four historic Internationals.

It is widely recognised that the 'far left' is not matching up to the tasks posed by the crisis. Much of it is actually moving to the right, rejecting the idea that a revolutionary strategy, a transitional action programme, and a revolutionary party and International are either necessary or can be built in the current period.

To overcome these obstacles requires the deployment of tactics that are neither opportunist nor sectarian, that do not capitulate to the political horizons of the reformist parties, or even the present consciousness of the working class, nor result in self isolation from existing struggles. It means neither deliberately creating hybrid parties that obscure the decisive question of reform or revolution, but nor does it mean standing aside from serious forces that are trying to break from reformism, just because they do not do so in one fell swoop.

It means combining the open struggle for a new revolutionary party with applying the united front tactic to both to the old mass reformist parties and trade unions, and to 'new' parties like Syriza and Podemos that come into existence. Without doing this, it will be impossible to break the mass of the working class or, in many countries, even its vanguard from their established leaders.

But if the example of Syriza proves anything it proves that whilst the emergence of such parties can be an important contribution to the leftward development of the working class and youth, such confused and contradictory formations are not the parties the working class needs in a revolutionary crisis. The arrival of such a crisis demands determined action to break free of reformist restraints and rally all serious

revolutionary forces.

Many of the issues raised in these struggles are discussed in detail in the pages of this double issue of Fifth International with a particular emphasis on Greece and on the black movement in the US ? its history as well as its present revival. Other issues covered relate to political developments in countries where the League has sections, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Britain.

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