



Four Crises: Climate, Pandemic, Economy and War

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The past two years have seen the world facing a series of interlinked crises. In the forefront is a global health crisis. Covid-19 took governments and health systems by surprise, despite their having been forewarned by epidemiologists and the WHO of a likely second SARS epidemic and by health workers' unions of the unreadiness of their hospitals and clinics to deal with one. Covid-19 has killed over five million worldwide and, with Delta and Omicron variants, is still raging, re-erupting in countries that were convinced they had it under control and were reopening their economies.

Next in the headlines are the mounting number of extreme weather events; floods, wildfires and droughts around the globe, which make the prospect of catastrophic climate change undeniable. Yet the COP26 in Glasgow was just another talkfest. Oil, gas and coal corporations, and the states dependent on their products, the USA, China, India, Brazil and Saudi Arabia, blocked any firm commitment to reduce these sources of CO2 emissions. Once again, the semi-colonial countries, especially those in the tropics that have already suffered heavily, were swindled out of the billions they need to counter the effects, instead being offered more loans.

Thirdly, Covid produced the deepest yearly contraction in the global economy since the 1930s. Lockdowns forced the major imperialist states to ditch their neoliberal dogmas on state spending. Interest rates, which had hovered around zero for years to stimulate economies tending towards stagnation, now allowed states to borrow trillions and, in the imperialist heartlands, to pay workers (or rather their employers) to retain skilled workforces or to work from home. While disruption to supply chains and world markets, and the repeated lockdowns, have caused huge losses, the full scale of capital destruction will not be clear until the pandemic ceases. The IMF predicts that by 2024 global GDP will still be 2.8% below its estimates of where it would have been before the slump caused by the pandemic.

At the same time, bloody wars in Ethiopia and Yemen have embroiled dictatorial regional powers like Saudi Arabia and Iran. In the Horn of Africa and, indeed, across the Sahel, military coups, Islamist guerrilla movements and criminal gangs are fomenting chaos while government troops commit atrocities as freely as the terrorists. The US-China naval arms race in East Asia, the new AUKUS pact and China's repression in Hong Kong and Xinjiang, also underline the entry of the world into a period of intensified inter-imperialist rivalry, promising outbreaks of proxy wars between the regional powers.

Taken together, these have led to a deepening political crisis in the long-established bourgeois democracies. The decade that followed the Great Recession saw stagnation in real wages in many imperialist countries and decline in the United States and Britain. This was accompanied by cuts in welfare provision to pay for the huge handouts to companies judged 'too big to fail'.

Bourgeois democracy without prosperity is an unstable phenomenon and there has been a widespread political polarisation. The presidency of Donald Trump polarised and destabilised US domestic politics. Although he was defeated in 2020, there was then the unprecedented spectacle of him trying to cling on to power and the invasion of the US Capitol by his semi-fascist followers. Despite this, the Republicans have not been discredited in the eyes of half the electorate and a comeback by another far right populist is a real possibility in 2024.

Next year, because of his sizeable fascistic following and support in the military, Jair Bolsonaro could mount a more serious attempt than Trump's to resist electoral defeat with a coup. The antivax and lockdown resisters in Europe usually link to pre-existing right-wing parties like the Austrian Freedom Party and the Alternative for Germany. This

latter development indicates the depth of discontent amongst the middle classes and the less class-conscious sections of the working class, too.

On the other side of the political spectrum, despite the restrictions on public activity, recent years have also seen mass mobilisations. In India, a huge one-day general strike in November 2020, followed by a year-long blockade in Delhi by farmers protesting against neoliberal agriculture laws, forced the 'strongman' Modi into a humiliating climbdown. Then there were the enormous Black Lives Matter mobilisations in the USA after the murder of George Floyd.

The great 'school strikes for future' in 2019 forced the question of climate change up the political agenda. The Sudanese mass movement of 2018-19, which ousted the dictator Omar al Bashir, returned in October this year after Abdel Fattah al-Burhan ousted the civilian representatives from the sovereign council. Mass protests in Chile in October 2019 led to the convocation of a constituent assembly and the scrapping of the Pinochet constitution, but a right-wing populist, like Bolsonaro, could be elected in the second round of the Presidential election in December.

Thus, there is every justification for the alarm of populations faced with covid, inflation, unemployment, extreme weather events and war. Time and again they have shown a willingness to protest on the streets. What is missing is a political leadership with a programme to direct the forces that can wrest power from the hands of the corrupt millionaires, and the military regimes, and vest it in councils and militias of the workers of the cities and countryside and the youth.

Faced with these challenges, however, the organisations of the working class and its allies have proved sluggish and hidebound by various types of reformism. Breaking this logjam, enabling the new world to be born out of the agony of the old, is the task of revolutionaries world-wide and international organisation is the key to success in this.

The Continuing Pandemic

The Covid-19 pandemic is plainly not over, already proven by the 'fourth wave' in Germany, Austria and other central/eastern European countries and now by the rapid spread of the "Omicron" variant. It will continue to have powerful economic effects on a capitalist system that in 2019 was already moving from a decade of near stagnation to another major recession. Not only has the virus mutated into more transmissible variants but, whilst all imperialist countries apart from Russia have vaccinated a majority of their populations, only some semi-colonies (primarily in the Gulf, in East Asia and Latin America) were able to do so, and with a considerable time lag. The real economic toll of its ravages in Africa, Latin America and large parts of Asia is likely to be huge, yet the supply of vaccines has been cornered by the imperialist countries. What the true scale of devastation will be on populations in the semi-colonial world can only be imagined.

The pandemic has stretched the world's health services to breaking point and disrupted its capitalist economies, breaking supply chains, laying off workforces and leading to bankruptcies. In the older imperialist countries, some of these effects could be offset by furloughs, massive handouts to employers, all underpinned by historically low interest rates.

Yet stock exchanges and bond markets, after short-lived crashes in the second trimester of 2020, surged back to new highs by the end of the year. This indicated not a recovery in the real economy (the part generating and realising surplus value) but rather a further ballooning of fictitious capital, unable to find sufficiently profitable locations for investment in productive industries. Central bankers and finance ministers are now warning of a return to inflation and, if the so-called real economies fluctuate around stagnation, to the 'stagflation' last witnessed in the 1970s, a decade of explosive class struggles, revolutions and counter revolutions.

The International Labour Organisation has calculated that the equivalent of 100 million full time jobs have been lost in 2020-2021 and fears the number will continue to rise in 2022 as state support spending is withdrawn and companies go bankrupt, with young and women workers suffering the most. Major changes in trade and industry will be revealed, once recovery is complete.

The Coming Climate Catastrophe

Whilst reaffirming the target of keeping global temperature rises below the IPCC's 1.5 degree limit by 2050 in words, at COP 26 in Glasgow, the world's governments left corporations free to continue mining and drilling. The IPCC experts predict that in fact the world is on course for a 2.4 degree rise. Even the lower figure would mean extreme heatwaves, rising sea levels with inundation of islands and coastal cities, and destruction of biodiversity on land and in the oceans.

Climate change will also bring huge political effects. Across Africa, shortage of water resources and desertification of arable and grazing lands have already led to increased migration and to conflicts both between pastoralists and farmers and between states over water resources, all of which will grow dramatically.

Meanwhile, extreme weather events are spreading; huge wildfires in Australia, Greece and along the West Coast of the USA and Canada; floods in Germany and China, destructive cyclones in Fiji and Indonesia. Famine and starvation are underway because of droughts in many regions across Africa and in Afghanistan. Though the suffering in these areas is in part caused by wars and dislocations caused by the pandemic, most of these events can be traced directly to climate change. Yet, in Glasgow, COP 26 utterly failed to take measures which could even begin to limit the causes of human induced climate change. Its great achievement was merely a call on governments to halt their subsidies to coal, oil and gas extraction without even a real timetable to cease extraction.

Climate change, like pandemics, recessions and wars, presents an existential challenge to capitalism as a mode of production and class rule. Its inability to plan and develop the forces of production without unleashing immense destructive forces, breakdowns and soaring inequalities, what Marx called the metabolic rift with nature, proclaims it a social system in decay, despite all its technological and scientific marvels. This has shone a spotlight on capitalism's dysfunctionality, the overriding priority given to profit rather than people's needs. As well as economic breakdown and war, the revolution of the 21st century will have to address the whole range of environmental catastrophes and future pandemics, contributing to the 'socialism or barbarism' crisis of our world.

Stagflation leading to Slump

The Marxist economist Michael Roberts comments that 'forecasts for annual average real GDP growth in virtually all the major economies are for lower growth in this decade compared to the decade of 2010s' which I called the Long Depression'. At the same time, inflation is finally reappearing in economies world-wide, eroding wages, pensions and savings and potentially putting a stop to expenditure designed to stimulate recovery, let alone to herald the new era of (neo) Keynesian social spending hoped for by left social democratic and populist reformists.

The slump of 2020 ended a decade in which, despite upswings, the world economy was tending to stagnation. The root of this lies in the overaccumulation of capital, itself due to the failure to find sufficiently profitable areas of investment within production and its subsequent diversion into unproductive and indeed parasitic investment. Only a truly major destruction of capital, shutting down old industries with low rates of profit, could begin to address this problem. But, as well as raising profit rates in the long run, a major slump followed by a long depression would generate the other key features of our 'epoch of wars and revolutions' (and counter-revolutions). The great powers, obsessed with defending or gaining world dominance in economic and military affairs, are even less likely to restore multilateral institutions, treaties or agreements. The US leads the way in imposing sanctions on anyone who violates its interests. Cold Wars and trade wars can turn into hot wars when vital strategic interests are in play.

Great Power rivalry

In the aftermath of the United States' withdrawal from Afghanistan, a new wave of desperate refugees, driven by the many who are facing starvation in that country, are flooding into neighbouring states like Iran and Pakistan. Thousands are making their way to the borders of the European Union, in part because of the cynical actions of the Belarusian dictator Alexander Lukashenko, aided and abetted by his Big Brother, Russia's Vladimir Putin.

Putin has been engaged in a struggle with the EU since Nato advanced its membership to Russia's borders and fomented 'colour revolutions' in its 'near abroad', including Ukraine. His counterattack included the seizure of Crimea, aid to East Ukrainian separatists and to the Assad regime, a long-time ally and protégé of the USSR and then the Russian Federation. The US and Russia are co-responsible for launching a new cold war in Europe that could well link up with the one underway between the USA and China in Asia.

In China, Xi Jinping has prolonged his leadership indefinitely. The 'historical resolution' of the sixth plenum of the CCP's Central Committee increased his bonapartist role referring to him as its 'core' and elevating him to the same status as Mao Zedong. Clearly this role of arbiter reflects deep tension within the two ruling forces in China, the party-military-state capitalist bureaucracy and the growing private sector big bourgeoisie. Xi's anti-corruption campaign is aimed both at (unknown) bureaucratic rivals and super-rich capitalists like Alibaba's founder Jack Ma, who were taken down a peg, for fear they might develop links with the Chinese bourgeoisie abroad, above all in Taiwan.

Another strand is the CCP's ramping up of Chinese (Han) chauvinism with the persecution of the Uighurs and threats to Taiwan, naval installations in the South China Sea and joint manoeuvres with Russia near Japan. The 'Common Prosperity' programme is promoted as overcoming the gulf between the super-rich and the masses, as well as inequalities between the different regions of the huge country, including the urban-rural divide, and all despite everyone having been 'raised out of absolute poverty'. A string of Chinese companies and CEOs have rushed to put money in the hat being passed round, though.

Xi's strong man stance abroad, his non-attendance at COP26 but a one-to-one meeting with Biden, are meant to demonstrate that China, too, has become an 'indispensable nation'. In addition, there is increasing evidence from the states in South Asia and Africa that the Belt and Road Initiative is an imperialist investment project, attractive to authoritarian and outright dictatorial regimes (Myanmar and, perhaps, Afghanistan) because there are no human rights strings to Chinese aid. If China, like Russia, becomes associated with such regimes, this may not stand the country in good stead in the ideological battles of the Cold War with America.

However, the old 'democratic imperialisms' also undermine their 'soft power' by refusing to admit refugees from wars and invasions that were of their making. They are equally, indeed even more, to blame for preventing them from crossing the Belarusian-Polish border by high razor wire topped fences and deployment of armed forces, despite the duty of the EU states under international law to consider all requests for asylum.

The European Union is faced with another huge immigration crisis, not because of an unbearable number of refugees and economic migrants but because of the racist pressure from populist parties who oppose governments carrying out their treaty obligations to process requests for asylum. This is as true on the Channel coast as it is in the forests of Belarus.

Brussels will continue with its racist immigration policy, sealing off "fortress Europe" for most refugees, while admitting some professionals and highly skilled labour, in order to appease the far right and right populist parties. Their racism against refugees and against Muslims will continue to be a key means of rallying reactionary movements but, in the current situation, most are now orienting towards the reactionary movements against vaccination, presenting themselves as defenders of 'freedom'.

If it were a national economy, the EU would be second to the USA in GDP, it is an economic giant but a political dwarf. Its cohesion is light years behind both the USA and China and Brexit has reduced its financial and military weight. France, under Emmanuel Macron, has pressed for economic and political federalism and a military capacity independent of the USA. Germany, however, has held back from any really decisive measures in this direction. The need for unanimity on important reforms means that the eastern European states can veto major initiatives like a unified European army, independent of America.

Progressive Mass Movements

Meanwhile, the movements aimed at saving the planet, like Fridays for Future and the Global Climate Strike, have grown to international proportions. There have been protests around the world, including the mobilisation of peasants and indigenous communities in the Global South. But, as Glasgow (and Paris before it) showed, they have been unable to alter the behaviour of governments and the nature-killing corporations, unable even to 'phase out' subsidies for coal production, let alone halt mining or oil and gas extraction.

Democratic revolutions against repressive regimes, spearheaded by the young people of the world, spread widely at the tail end of the Great Recession in 2011, in the Arab countries, in South East Asia, (Myanmar and Thailand) and in Latin America. But, because they failed to smash the military repressive apparatus, oust the corrupt ruling classes and install new organs of power of the workers, youth and the oppressed, the 'democratic springs' have nearly all turned into 'counter-revolutionary winters', best evidenced by El Sisi's brutal regime in Egypt. Yet the ongoing mobilisation in Sudan, after the 25 October 2021 coup led by General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, shows the resilience of the popular forces and that elites face repeated challenges to creating stable, long-lasting repressive regimes in times of economic crisis.

Nevertheless, there has been a veritable pandemic of 'strongmen', including Duterte in the Philippines, the juntas in Myanmar and Sudan, Bolsonaro in Brazil, Erdogan in Turkey, Modi in India, Xi in China, Bin Salman in Saudi Arabia, the list goes on. The problem facing progressive forces around the world is the limited effectiveness of peaceful protest. Even mass and prolonged protests will fail so long as the state can maintain the morale and discipline of its repressive forces.

A Crisis of Leadership

Another feature of the world situation is the weakness of the "centre left" governments that have come to power in a number of countries and are poised to do so in others if reactionary populist leaders fail to hold on to power. In Brazil, the replacement of Bolsonaro would likely be former president, Lula da Silva, whose chosen successor, Dilma Rousseff, was removed by a judicial and parliamentary coup. It was Lula's 'popular front' with the treacherous bourgeois parties, that opened the way to Bolsonaro. Even if Lula were to win and establish himself in office once again, the cycle would almost certainly repeat itself, this time with the addition of a powerful fascist movement, a legacy of Bolsonaro's presidency.

Major parliamentary reforms are only possible in two scenarios; a prosperous expansive capitalism that can afford 'crumbs from its table' or a mass upsurge that threatens revolution, making serious reforms a viable option for a threatened ruling class. Since neither exists, the latter because of the stifling effects of the social democratic and trade union bureaucracies, continuing political crises are almost guaranteed in the years ahead.

The return to power of the Taliban after the ignominious defeat of the USA and the chaotic departure from Kabul, has added to the destabilisation of the whole of South Asia, including Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Myanmar. Underlying this is the rivalry between the USA and China and India's desperate attempt to challenge both. Xi Jinping's Belt and Road Initiative, intended to secure regional dominance, will ensure future conflicts all around the Indian Ocean.

Today, however, the region is rocked by legitimate democratic struggles for national rights. The Uighurs, the Rohingya, the Tamils, the Kashmiris, the Balochs and a variety of ethno-linguistic communities in Afghanistan, have all suffered pogroms and ethnic cleansing by military regimes and fundamentalist groups, whether Hindu, Muslim, Buddhist or, in the case of the Uighurs, supposedly communist.

Pro-Palestinian supporters in Europe and North America, have faced a vicious counterattack from the Israeli state and its supporters in the imperialist governments and the right-wing media. The initial successes of the campaigns to expose the Apartheid character of the Israeli settler state led to a blizzard of false accusations of racist hostility to Jews. Its biggest success was its contribution to ousting Jeremy Corbyn from the leadership of the Labour Party. Supporters of the Palestinian cause, including courageous progressive Jews, have been targeted in Britain and all serious criticism of

Israel is now greeted by media accusations of antisemitism.

Never has the need for a new International been clearer if the world's working class and its natural allies amongst the socially and racially oppressed and the poor peasantry, are to unite and strengthen their resistance to the attacks from domestic capitalism and imperialism. Yet the parties that call themselves socialist or communist, and Trotskyist centrist forces on a world scale, have mostly retreated into national isolation, even in comparison to the anticapitalist, anti-neoliberal, globalisation or anti-war mobilisations of the 1998-2006 period.

In those years, world and continental social forums gathered together climate activists, indigenous groups, feminists, progressive trade unionists and left socialist groups of various kinds. But the reformist parties like the Brazilian Workers' Party (PT) and campaigning NGOs (like Attac) paralysed these meetings with a straitjacket of 'no votes' on action, no political parties, no debates leading to the adoption of policies. The partial exceptions were the Florence ESF (2002) and Porto Alegre WSF (2003) which did launch a global antiwar movement of tens of millions.

What are we to do?

In the aftermath of the Great Recession, the Occupy movements and the Arab Spring were followed by international movements of women and people of colour. Reformists and revolutionaries in these progressive movements once again reached out to one another in combined actions against wars and mistreatment of immigrants.

Organisationally, such collaboration was based on networking rather than on democratic representative structures. Although many have praised this "leaderlessness", it actually left decisions on policy and tactics to self-appointed academics, radical journalists and 'community leaders'. Whilst most proclaim their solidarity with one another, they do not recognise that all the different movements require a much stronger unity for victory. Steps towards this could be taken by united fronts in which goals are agreed democratically and then carried out collectively.

Identity Politics, in which the subjective experience of oppression is the preeminent determinant of goals and tactics, tends to divide rather than unite the oppressed. Although many in these movements do indeed recognise the need to win working class forces and proclaim themselves anticapitalist and even Marxist, they do not accept that overthrowing capitalism requires a common programme and integration into the class struggle in a revolutionary party. In part this is a result of the failures and crimes of Social Democracy, Stalinism, and the centrist varieties of Trotskyism.

Without a new world programme for revolution, the solutions to the burning questions of the environment, racial and gender inequality and poverty will not be found. Only a reborn and internationally organised working class movement, drawing in the youth activists already engaged in all these struggles, can create a vanguard able to challenge capitalism on every one of these fronts. The crises we have outlined will contribute to creating pre-revolutionary and revolutionary situations even bigger than those which occurred in 2010-11 in the aftermath of the Great Recession.

For this reason, the League for the Fifth International calls on all militant and progressive forces that recognise capitalism and imperialism as the enemy to gather again to debate strategy and organise common action. Their goal should be the development of a common action programme which charts a course for the world's workers and oppressed from today's struggles to a world revolution.

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