

Imperialism: The epoch of wars and revolutions

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Vast technological changes took place in the last hundred years: from electrification and powered flight, via splitting the atom and space travel, to the internet and mapping the human genetic structure. These technological revolutions, and their application to production through the assembly line and computerisation, have shaped human life in every corner of the planet. Consequently the world's population has increased with incredible rapidity. But under capitalism these triumphs of human skill, ingenuity and labour have never attained their full potential.

Instead of reducing the burden of labour they have intensified it. Instead of obliterating poverty and inequality they have increased it. Instead of bringing lifelong security and meeting humanity's elementary needs - food, clothes, housing, health - capitalist development has brought insecurity to millions.

Even in the USA, the richest nation on earth, one in seven people cannot afford basic health insurance. In the federal capital Washington, infant mortality is higher than it is in Kingston, Jamaica. Everywhere, wealth and poverty exist side by side.

Even the most optimistic pundits of the ruling class are not predicting limitless progress and human improvement in the new millennium, in contrast to their predecessors at the start of this century. The reasons are obvious. A century which spawned the horrors of the two world wars and the intervening world slump, the holocaust and a seemingly endless cycle of genocidal regional wars can hardly be cited as proof of capitalism's capacity to bestow universal peace, harmony and prosperity for time immemorial.

If the early years of the century saw the beginnings of the welfare state, of mass trade unionism and universal free education, the later twenties and thirties gave us the greatest economic crash in capitalism's history. In the worst hit countries this crash was the economic motive driving the ruined and hysterical middle classes into the arms of fascism and prompting big capital to back its rise to power.

In turn the rise of fascism led to the unparalleled depredations of the Nazis - six million Jews, millions upon millions of Poles, Russians, Ukrainians and Roma exterminated, and the destruction of half of Europe's industries and communications. And this uniquely destructive conflict led - this time at the hands of the 'democratic' victors - to the deliberate mass murder of the population of the major cities of Germany and Japan by way of both conventional carpet bombing and the atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

The lesson of this for the twenty first century is that such periods of global crisis are not prevented by the technological revolutions or the civilising influence of culture and democracy.

True the 'midnight of the century', symbolised by Auschwitz, the Gulag and Hiroshima, was succeeded by the what the French call the thirty glorious years, the English the Long Boom and in the USA the realisation of the American dream.

Throughout the 1950s and 1960s the propagandists of the ruling class proclaimed that it was possible to create a world without unemployment, poverty, insecurity and indeed to transcend capitalism itself without revolution and even without class struggle.

But the idea of limitless betterment within capitalism proved to be a mirage when the expansionary phase petered out into an equally long lasting one of stagnation, inflation and cyclical crises. The Golden Age of the mid-century boom gave way rapidly to the Iron Age of Thatcherism and Reaganomics, of the New Cold War of austerity packages, downsizing, privatisation, neo-liberalism and globalisation.

The 1980s ended with the collapse of Stalinism and the revolutions of 1989. The lack of an organisation and political programme with which the working class could seize the opportunities presented to it by these events led to the restoration of capitalism. In Russia this meant a slump greater in scope even than the 1929-33 depression. In the USA this coincided with a sustained economic upswing and a technological revolution.

But those hired to sing hymns of praise to capitalism had no sooner got into full voice about the new economy and the new democratic world order than a series of wars and genocides began and a serious crisis gripped Asia, Eastern Europe and Latin America. The world financial institutions held their breath as an overvalued Wall Street spiralled upwards.

Today capitalism's defenders, politicians and professors alike, suggest that the capitalist order is a given, an inevitable feature of life in the new millennium. Yet because they have to acknowledge that capitalism cannot deliver prosperity for the majority, they insist that insecurity and glaring inequality are an inevitable and vital spur to economic life.

All the previous attempts in the 'three worlds' to create stable jobs, social services, education, are proclaimed doomed to destruction by 'globalisation'. The same song is sung with nationally different lyrics by Clinton and Blair, Schroeder and Jospin, Yeltsin and Zhu Rongji. You workers and farmers cannot buck the market. If you don't lower your wages, pensions or give up job security then the transnational corporations will move to where people will.

But as the century draws to a close we see the rise - not without setbacks and bureaucratic sabotage and betrayal - of resistance to the effects of globalisation and privatisation from the USA to the former USSR.

Indeed the history of the Twentieth Century would seem a post-modernist joke or a pessimistic moral fable - aimed at dispiriting the fighters for human freedom or driving them to acts of nihilistic rage - were it not for the history of the class struggle, an ongoing and unquenchable struggle.

The Twentieth Century has been the century capitalist crisis and wars - but also the century of revolution. Time and again the working class and the oppressed world wide have stood up to their exploiters. From the great workers' revolution of 1917, through the mass resistance to fascism to the great revolutionary movements against colonial oppression, from the early fight for women's suffrage to the modern movements against racism, women's and gay oppression, opposition has been a constant.

This struggle is unquenchable because capitalism constantly recreates the working class and constantly creates resistance. It plunders and oppresses those on whose labour it depends for profit. Workers are driven by this to fight back. Their vital role in, and organisation by, production makes this resistance inevitable and radical - going to the roots of the very system. The working class is and remains objectively drawn to destroy and replace capitalism.

Time and again the bourgeoisie's spokespeople have written off the working class only to find it

regrouping, regaining its strength and relaunching its struggles. In the last decades of the century, the decline in the numbers of industrial workers in the USA and Western Europe has been used to say 'farewell to the working class' or to proclaim the 'forward march of Labour' halted. This ignores the fact that the working class, as the objective force of waged/salaried workers in production, exchange and distribution, is constantly changing its composition as capitalism transforms itself.

Just as twentieth century capitalism saw old industries disappearing and new ones arising, so too the working class changed. If artisans, millhands and miners dominated the workers' movement of the nineteenth and early twentieth century, and metal workers, engineers or car workers that of the mid-century, then new sections will do so over the coming decades.

The last decades of the twentieth century saw thousands of women workers drawn into paid work and organised production. In the countries of the 'Third World' vast armies of new industrial proletarians were created as the impoverished and landless streamed into the cities and as capital, ever in search of the most profitable sites for production, expanded its factories in Asia and Latin America.

If the working class itself changes, so too does the conscious organised expression of the working class, the trade union and political labour movement. The task of Marxists is to analyse and register these changes and to renew the organisations of our class, to learn the lessons that generations of working class fighters have bequeathed to us.

These lessons include the mass actions of the working class that marked every decade. These actions are sometimes misleadingly called 'spontaneous', as if deliberation, creative thought and will did not go into their making, as if there were not working class fighters conscious of the need to resist at the heart of every strike called.

This creativity created the mass strikes of 1905 in Russia, the factory occupations in Italy in 1919-20, the British and Chinese workers' mass strikes of the mid-twenties and the Spanish, French and American workers in the mid-thirties. So too with May 1968 and the mighty strikes in the 1970s and 1980s, including the occupations of the Polish shipyards and factories, the Great Miners' Strike in Britain and the million strong stay-aways and formation of COSATU in South Africa.

Without this 'spontaneous' creativity the workers' council - a phenomenon of most developed revolutionary crises in the twentieth century, at least in an embryonic form - would not have become such a widespread feature of struggle from Russia in 1905 to Poland and Iran at the beginning of the 1980s. Not only has the council, the soviet to use the old Russian term, proved the most effective organisation for rapidly raising the great majority of the hitherto passive workers to class action but it also proved to be the only means of enabling the working class to take power into its own hands. This is one of the vital lessons taught by the workers of the twentieth century to their successors.

But even the workers' council proved capable of misleadership and bureaucratisation. The story of the twentieth century is also the story of the bureaucratic degeneration of the workers' movement and the struggle against this. It is the story of the fight for revolutionary leadership: a fight over the ideas, the programme and party needed in the working class. It is the story of struggle to rebuild and renew, to learn from both the mistakes and highpoints of the past.

At the start of the century, the workers' movement was already armed with the ideas of Marxism. Marx, Engels and their worker comrades in the First International had already shown that capitalism had to be overthrown. The experience of the Paris Commune in 1871 had revealed that the existing state machine could not be reformed, it had to be smashed through a workers' revolution.

The twentieth century has seen a constant battle of ideas within the workers' movement between those who have tried to build on that legacy, and those who have succumbed to the pressures of capitalist society. Indeed, capitalism would not have survived were it not for the betrayals by the leaders of the movement and the ideas of reformism, the mistaken belief that capitalism could be tamed.

In the early years of the twentieth century, the Second International played a major progressive role in creating a mass workers' movement in Europe and initiating such movements in the Americas and Asia. But its leadership rejected the revolutionary lessons of the previous century. It fell victim to the triple plagues of bureaucratism, national-centredness and reformism. These mutually reinforcing afflictions were fought from within by figures such as Lenin, Luxemburg and Trotsky and many others who formed a revolutionary wing.

Lenin and the Bolsheviks from 1903-1917 fashioned a wholly new conception and practice of what a working class political party should be.

Firstly it had a programme and strategy which rejected all subordination to the liberal bourgeoisie and which was capable of analysing and taking on the new goals, organisational forms and methods of combat which the revolution posed (the general strike, soviets, defence of the rights of oppressed nations, rejection of patriotism in war, the goal of working class power).

Secondly it was an organisation of combat, not a parliamentary, bureaucratic apparatus. It was a disciplined and democratic party whose members became leaders in mass struggle because these masses recognised their capacities and accepted their tactics and strategy.

This party led the first successful workers' revolution and created the first workers' state.

Lenin, Luxemburg and Trotsky were not able to save the Second International from shameful collapse in 1914 but they did go on to create a New Third International which also attained a mass and revolutionary character under the impact of the Russian Revolution.

The isolation of the Russian Revolution, the bureaucratisation of the young workers' state, the eventual destruction of the soviet system and the Bolshevik Party by Stalin doomed the Third International to collapse. Tragically, before its collapse it played a fatal role in crippling the German workers' unity in action which alone could have prevented Hitler's coming to power.

Leon Trotsky and his co-thinkers, the Russian and International Left Opposition and then the Fourth International, had and have enormous historic significance, despite the bloody defeats they suffered in the 1920s and 1930s. Despite their ultimate martyrdom they developed a scientific critique of Stalinism and a programme to combat it. They predicted that unless it was defeated counter-revolution, imperialist war, the restoration of capitalism in the USSR would set the working class back for many years. They were right, and indeed the Trotskyist movement itself, the Fourth International, underwent degeneration and fragmentation.

A fundamental recovery from this truly historic defeat will not be accomplished without the foundation of a new world party of the socialist revolution. The fact that this will be the fifth time that the working class has taken up this task need not daunt us. Marx foresaw this when he said that 'proletarian revolutions' criticise themselves constantly, interrupt themselves continually in their course, come back to the apparently accomplished in order to begin it afresh, deride with unmerciful thoroughness the inadequacies, weaknesses and paltriness of their first attempts, seem to throw down their adversary only in order that he may draw new strength from the earth and rise again more gigantic before them?.

In the struggle for the new international, revolutionaries will have to combat all sorts of misleading ideas about the current period and its tasks.

Some people who mistakenly call themselves Trotskyists announced in the aftermath of Yeltsin's destruction of the USSR that 'the epoch of the October Revolution had ended'. In so doing they revealed that they identified the October Revolution with the Soviet State and, what is worse, with the bureaucratic monstrosity created by Stalin's political counter-revolution of the 1920s and 1930s.

The destruction of the workers' soviets and the Bolshevik party of Lenin was indeed a historic defeat. It led directly to the triumph of Hitler over the next most powerful revolutionary movement in the world (the German Communist Party), to Stalin's great purges, to the Second World War with the Holocaust and 20 million dead in the USSR alone. But this defeat is half a century behind us.

That the Soviet Union survived these events was a tribute to the strength of the economic foundations laid by the October Revolution and to the impetus it gave to revolutionary movements around the world for the next three quarters of a century.

Apparently powerful and successful states like the USSR and China; heroic and successful struggles against imperialism led by Stalinists like Ho Chi Minh, Che Guevara and Fidel Castro in one sense encouraged the spread of the example of October but in a more profound way they obscured and weakened it. They identified it with the baleful doctrine of socialism in one country.

This meant chopping up the world class struggle into isolated fragments, breaking up the expansionary spread of a world revolution. Only where defensive and thoroughly bureaucratic 'revolution from above' prevented the creation of workers' and peasants' soviet power - the central legacy of October - was a replica of Stalin's dictatorship of the bureaucracy established. Everywhere else promising revolutionary situations were aborted or subordinated to the defence of the USSR, China, Cuba and so on. Shameful deals were done with imperialism.

The World Communist Movement, which succeeded the dissolved Communist International, sank into a species of reformism, no less treacherous than its Social Democratic elder brother. Countless revolutions (Indo-China, Portugal, Afghanistan, Iran) were betrayed; some, like Indonesia (1966) and Chile (1973) with great bloodshed. At the same time the attempts of workers and intellectuals in Eastern Europe and China from 1953-1989 to bring about a revolution that would place political power in the hands of the workers were repeatedly, as in Hungary, bloodily crushed.

The only hope of saving the economic foundations laid by October 1917 (the expropriation of the bourgeoisie and the rudiments, albeit with terrible distortions, of planning) was squandered. When the bureaucracies finally realised that bureaucratic planning was heading for collapse, first in China and then in Russia, they set about dismantling and privatising, only restrained by fear of the working class response and the desire to save their own political power and grab the state property for themselves.

Of course the bourgeoisie wants workers to draw only negative lessons from the collapse of the Stalinist states, the misnamed communist countries. In schools, in the media, in the pulpits and temples, the same message is hammered out: communism failed, 'human nature' is too greedy and selfish, rebellion leads to catastrophe, workers cannot run things for themselves.

We draw opposite lessons. The degeneration of the USSR, the rise of Stalin, the terrible consequences of Stalinism and 'socialism in one country' teach us that the New International in the new century must above all stand for workers' democracy and revolutionary internationalism.

What, in summation are the positive and negative lessons which the twentieth century leaves to its successor? Capitalism is still a vicious and exploitative system that cannot bring peace, prosperity, social security or equality to the vast majority of humanity. Its phases of economic expansion threaten the human environment with degradation and its periodic crises take the livelihood and lives of millions and lead to wars where high technology means an ever lower descent into cruelty and barbarism.

Nor can capitalism raise the human personality to higher levels of artistic and scientific creativity for and by the millions. It can perform this cultural enrichment only for a few and at the expense of degrading and drugging the majority with a noxious cocktail of consumerism, religious national and racial hatreds and the disabling neuroses and obsessions of sexual oppression.

But the lesson of the Russian Revolution as well as the other great liberatory movements since the Second World War, is that the forces can be rallied, organised, educated to defeat and destroy capitalism. If during this century imperialism has become more and more global, if it has rendered the nation state obsolete as an instrument for the exploited and oppressed majority it has also created a truly world working class. Our task is to create a conscious, revolutionary World Working Class Movement.

Of course the debilitating legacies of the Twentieth century still hold sway over the weakened official labour movement. In Western Europe Social Democracy and (New) Labourism exert a paralysing near-political monopoly. The poisonous remnants of Stalinism, though enormously weakened, remain. Indeed in Russia and Serbia they have taken on an ever more fascistic aspect: chauvinism against national minorities, anti-Semitic outbursts and even blocs with openly fascist parties.

In countries as different as the USA and Argentina corrupt and undemocratic union bureaucracies block the creation of independent workers' parties and keep the workers' movement tied to the parties of their exploiters. Even in countries like Brazil and South Africa where, in the 1980s, powerful new trade union movements arose in the struggle against dictatorship, bureaucracies have emerged and hardened, opting for reformism and sabotaging workers' struggles.

But despite the continued strength of these agents of the bourgeoisie within the workers' movement stirrings of new forces and new organisations can be seen in South East Asia and in Africa. Spontaneous struggles of great dimensions have broken out in Latin America and rumblings can be felt in continental Europe east and west.

Across the world young people are voicing their discontent with global capitalism and the new technologies (websites, email, video etc.) are leading to a new spirit of self-organisation and activism which transcends national frontiers and even those between the three worlds. Of course such spontaneity and self-organisation will not of itself fully regenerate a fighting international movement of the exploited and oppressed.

But it does provide, alongside the militants of the old and newer labour movements, the milieu, the ferment from amongst which a new international party of world revolution can and will be built. We are convinced that the revolution of the twenty first century will be a global revolution, just as the class struggles and crises of the century will be more global than those of the twentieth.

Of course this does not mean that it will be simultaneous, but it does mean that the great velocity of economic and political events themselves, as well as the near instantaneous means of information and communication, will increase the combined character of this revolution.

The young militants of such a party will turn their faces to the future, full of confidence that our final victory

lies in the twenty first century. In any case the manifest barbarism of global capitalism drives us on. But we will return time and again to the October Revolution - the central defining event of the twentieth century - to the soviets and the Bolshevik party which made it possible and to the deeds and words of its two most crucial leaders Lenin and Trotsky.

Then we shall hear words spoken such as these, the words with which Lenin announced the seizure of power to the Congress of Soviets. These words ring into twenty first century like a call to arms:

?Comrades, the workers? and peasants? revolution, about the necessity of which the Bolsheviks have always spoken, has been accomplished ... Its significance is, first of all, that we shall have a soviet government, our own organ of power, in which the bourgeoisie will have no share whatsoever. The oppressed masses will themselves create a power. The old state apparatus will be shattered to its foundations and a new administrative apparatus set up in the form of soviet organisations. From now on a new phase in the history of Russia begins ? We must now set about building a proletarian socialist state in Russia. Long live the world socialist revolution!?

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