

Kosova: No to an imperialist protectorate!

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At the end of November, after 120 days of wrangling between the Serbian and Kosovan governments, talks on the future status of Kosova, sponsored by the United Nations, finally broke down. The new Kosovan government announced that it would declare independence in the foreseeable future, possibly in February after the Serbian elections.

Russia on the other hand has made it clear that it will use its veto in the UN Security Council to block any recognition of Kosova's independence. The European Union discussed what stance to take at its Lisbon summit, but did not agree anything definite on recognition.

Since Nato's victory in the war against Serbia, Kosova has been de facto outside the control of the government in Belgrade. The United Nations Mission in Kosova (UNMIK) runs it. Its power rests on the Kosova Force (KFOR) with 16,000 - 17,000 Nato troops stationed there. The Kosovan government is thus little more than a puppet, plundering the country's resources on behalf of, and in collaboration with the imperialist rulers of the country. Elections on 17 November 2007 led to the defeat of the incumbent Democratic League of Kosova (LDK) and its replacement by a coalition led by the Albanian Democratic Party. This represents a victory for the more strident nationalism of Hashim Thaci, but in essence this means exchanging one faction of an emerging, semi-colonial Albanian bourgeoisie for another.

Under Nato occupation, a small elite and 'middle class' emerged, constituting only some 5 to 10 per cent of the population in a country of 2.2 million. Its wealth and privileges are intimately linked to UNMIK, which is not only an occupation force, but also runs the country's economic institutions centring on the privatisation process, i.e. the handing over of the last chunks of the old economy and the natural resources to a criminal - or semi-criminal - new bourgeoisie, or directly to imperialist capital.

For the mass of the population, these years have been an economic and social disaster. Sixty to 70 per cent are unemployed; wages stand at 80 - 120 Euros a month; pensions at about 50 Euros a month.

Oppression of Kosova

Unlike the relations between Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes, who were the constituent and ruling nations in Josip Broz Tito's Yugoslavia, Albanians have been an oppressed nation from the beginning. Kosova - with its overwhelmingly Albanian majority - was forced into the Kingdom of Yugoslavia in the 1920s. During the liberation war against German fascism, the partisans, led by the Stalinists Tito and Enver Hoxha, agreed that Kosova would become part of a future, independent Albania. But after the war - and the 1948 split between Stalin and Tito, in which Hoxha sided with Stalin - Kosova remained part of Yugoslavia. The Albanians of Kosova remained restive under Tito who, in the 1970s, gave the province semi-autonomy from Serbia. This in turn provided fuel for the chauvinist agitation by the Serbian bureaucracy in which Slobodan Milosevic made his name in 1987.

Under his rule over a disintegrating Yugoslavia (1989-2000), the national oppression of the Albanians was massively increased. The Albanian language was banned from being taught in schools, workers were

sacked in their thousands just for being Albanian, most notably in the mines in Trepca, the largest industrial area of the country. Serbian nationalists and paramilitaries threatened the Albanians with pogroms and the 'ethnic cleansing' of their lands; the army bombarded whole villages in the 1990s. 'Recovering' Kosova, the site of the mythologised battlefield of Kosova Polje (Field of Blackbirds), became a central focus of Serbian nationalism.

It was in this period, and as a result of the nationalist massacres in Croatia and Bosnia, that the Albanian masses feared, rightly and understandably, that they could only face even more severe repression under a Greater Serbian rump-Yugoslavia.

In this situation, a movement for national self-determination, seeking either a high degree of autonomy or complete independence, grew massively. The imperialist powers and the European Union steadfastly refused to recognise Kosova's right to self-determination if this meant secession. Revolutionaries defended and supported the Kosovars' struggle against national oppression, their right to self-determination and for their independence under the slogan of a workers' republic of Kosova as part of a Socialist Federation of the Balkans.

Nevertheless, in the massive bombing by Nato air forces, revolutionaries defended Serbia/Montenegro against imperialist attack. This did not include, however, any concession to Serbian chauvinism - its oppression of Kosova, or its denial of the Kosovars' right to self-determination.

Indeed, the Serbian government's insistence on the continued oppression of the Albanian people, the carrying out of mass repression, massacres and the wholesale driving of people from their lands weakened its defence against the imperialists, since it compromised it with a deeply reactionary onslaught on other peoples and made it much easier for imperialism to justify its own arch-reactionary attacks. Therefore, the defence of Albanian self-determination was an integral part of revolutionary tactics throughout the war.

The national movement was led by the moderate, pro-imperialist and pacifist faction around Ibrahim Rugova. This bourgeois force wanted to limit the methods of struggle against Serbian chauvinism to civil disobedience. However, when this strategy proved impotent, more radical forces emerged - the Kosova Liberation Army or KLA (in Albanian, Ushtria Clirimtare e Kosoves or UCK), These originated from a Stalinist, Hoxa-ite guerrilla movement.

In the run up to, and during the Nato intervention, the KLA effectively split. A wing led by Hashim Thaci, dropped its 'Marxist-Leninist' banner and became a close ally of US and German imperialism around the negotiations in Rambouillet (where the imperialists tried to impose a settlement on Yugoslavia and the Kosovars). The underground Kosova Assembly chose Thaci, not Rugova to represent it at the talks. Indeed Thaci's wing of the KLA took over during and after the war, and sidelined or silenced its opponents, such as Adem Demaci and those in the KLA who had rejected Rambouillet. During and after the war, all the major Kosovar parties became puppets of imperialism, backing the occupation by NATO, the US and the EU.

The disintegration of Yugoslavia was a result, on the one hand, of the inner collapse of the Stalinist system, due to a growing wave of class struggle in the 1980s and the splitting of the ruling caste along national lines and, on the other, of an imperialist intervention to speed up the restoration of capitalism and to 'Balkanise' former Yugoslavia in collusion with emerging national bourgeoisies.

Behind the Yugoslav wars there also loomed a more or less visible struggle between different imperialist powers - principally, the US, Germany, Russia, France and Britain. From the early 1990s onwards, the western powers were united in seeking to weaken Russian influence. It is one of Serbia's misfortunes that

it allied itself to a weak imperialist power, just as sections of the French and British bourgeoisie only half-heartedly supported Serbian interests. Germany was to a large extent the driving force of the Balkan wars and the splitting up of Yugoslavia, seeking thereby to increase its influence in Slovenia, Croatia and Kosova. However, unfortunately for them, it was the US that, at the end of the day, determined the outcome of Balkan politics by the end of the 1990s because of its decisive political and military superiority.

The current diplomatic manoeuvres around the declaration of Kosova's independence represent a revival of the struggle for influence in the Balkans between the imperialist powers.

Russia, as the principal backer of Serbia, is openly opposed to recognising independence. It will veto any recognition on the UN Security Council. But the Western imperialist states have made clear that they will push through their plan anyway and claim that the existing resolutions of the UN would de facto allow recognition of independence, sanction a continued imperialist occupation and administration, and hand the running of the country over to the EU in the coming period.

The Ahtisaari Plan

The EU and US have differing interests as well. Germany was able to rally Italy, France and Britain behind the 'Ahtisaari plan' to turn Kosova from a semi-colonial protectorate run by Nato into one controlled by the EU.

The plan, drawn up by the former Finnish President and UN mediator, Martti Ahtisaari, is not a plan for independence or self-determination of the Kosovars. It is a plan for imperialist domination. It not only envisages the continued military occupation and the running of the economy by imperialist agencies, but also includes a 'constitutional' guarantee that any future social order must be based on a 'market economy'. It will mean a continuation of the economic running of the country by the European Central Bank, the Euro as the de facto currency and the Kosovar version of the 'Treuhand'- the state trust which carried out the privatisation of East Germany (1990-1994), which still controls all those parts of the economy, which have not yet been privatised (including important raw materials, the airport in Pristina, etc.). The Ahtisaari plan is a gigantic rip-off. It has to be rejected.

However, the Ahtisaari plan also demonstrates the character of the Kosovan government and the incipient semi-colonial bourgeoisie of the country. These 'freedom fighters' have agreed and championed a plan for 'independence' which will mean the stationing of almost 20.000 troops there, the continued running of the country by the imperialist agencies, continued privatisations, the impoverishment of the working class etc. They back it because they are joint beneficiaries of the sell-off of their country, 'co-managing' the proceeds of privatisation into their own pockets. They are likely also to hold back their official declaration of independence till after the Serbian presidential election to increase the likelihood of victory by a 'pro-European Union' faction.

The Serbian government has threatened to 'blockade' Kosova economically, if it declares independence. But this threat is empty, since Belgrade has hardly any economic ties to Kosova apart from the Serbian enclaves. On the other hand, the current Serbian administration has confirmed that it will not intervene militarily and has even called on NATO (!) to secure law and order in Kosova.

So we can see a clear plan of the EU and the US to make the semi-colonial status of Kosova permanent, via handing over the leadership to the EU and Germany in particular.

However, whilst this plan is clear. It is a plan, which will meet important obstacles along the way.

Firstly, it will not - just as NATO occupation did not - improve the living conditions of the masses in Kosova.

On the contrary, it will make their situation permanent and, in a number of cases even worse (particularly for workers in those companies which are due to be privatised).

The hopes, that many Kosovars undoubtedly had, and still have, of a rapid inflow of imperialist investment and of joining the EU will become ever more obvious for what they are - empty illusions.

Secondly, the EU, NATO and the US present themselves, and the need for continued occupation by their troops in Kosova, Macedonia and Bosnia, as the only "guarantee" to ensure the "peoples", or their nationalist elites, will not massacre each other. Those who openly threatened to bombard Afghanistan "back into the Stone Age" claim to safeguard "civilisation" and "multi-ethnicity", and to be shouldering the "burden" of imperialist plunder in order to ensure the well being of the Balkans.

This is one of the biggest lies about the whole Balkan question. It presents the national tensions, wars, the inflaming of national and racist hatred from the various bourgeois or former Stalinist forces - not to speak of the open fascist or semi-fascist ones - as just an intrinsic problem of the "Balkan peoples".

This racist "explanation" has been used as a cover and justification for the colonial and imperialist politics of the Great Powers in the Balkans for centuries. Imperialist politics and semi-colonial capitalist exploitation continuously reproduce the social conditions, impoverishment etc. which make it imperative for the capitalist class in those countries to split the working class and the poor along national lines. The EU, the USA (and Russia, but from a weaker position) are not only mere executors of this. They themselves have an interest to promote these tensions and render strife between the countries or within the nations permanent. By this very means the imperialists - and increasingly the EU run by the major continental powers - can present themselves as "arbiters" who appear to stand above the nationalist tensions.

Therefore, imperialist rule, in whatever form, will not overcome the national tensions, oppression and hatreds, but make these bitter fruits of "Balkanisation" permanent. This will be even more so, since the Balkans will continue to be an area of imperialist rivalry as well, even if Russia's position has become much weaker over the last decade and the EU's stronger.

Thirdly, the ruling elites, the semi-colonial bourgeoisies in Kosova and the Balkans as a whole, will stir up nationalist antagonisms in order to divide the working class and the oppressed and blame them for the social misery. It is quite clear that the Serbian minority or the Roma will become, or indeed already are, an oppressed nationality in Kosova and it is also clear that they will be such an oppressed minority under an imperialist sponsored Thaci government (or any other nationalist government).

Strategy and tactics

From the end of the 19th century onwards, socialist internationalists have advocated the formation of a federation of Balkan states as the only alternative to the meddling of different imperialist/colonial powers, attempting to divide and rule. Only thus can their economies be developed and national divisions be overcome. In the imperialist epoch, such a federation can only be achieved as a federation of socialist states, led by workers' and peasants' governments. This cannot be done except by driving out the imperialist troops, expropriating the imperialist holdings and agencies and also those of the "new" bourgeoisies and landowners. Such a government would divide available work amongst the people, develop a democratic plan to rebuild the social infrastructure and reorganise the economies. Such workers' and peasants' governments, would have to break up the nationalist armies and corrupt bourgeois state machines, destroy the paramilitaries and establish their rule on the basis of workers' and peasants' councils and the arming of the people.

These governments will also guarantee the right to self-determination of all nationalities and minorities - up

to and including the right to independent statehood if they so desire. Whilst this would be a temporary step back from a larger federation and economic area, it would be a far lesser evil than the forced retention of oppressed nations (or nations who could become oppressed in such a federation). It would be the best proof of the good will and internationalism of those workers' states that were seeking to federate. It would be the course most likely to convince the other nationalities to join in. A Socialist Federation has to be based on voluntary and conscious collaboration between the workers and peasants of different nations. The negative experience of the USSR under Stalin, and Yugoslavia under Tito, proves that anything less leads eventually to disintegration and worse national conflicts.

Such a federation can only be achieved and developed in close collaboration with the working classes of the rest of Europe, through the struggle against US and European imperialism and the EU and support for the struggle for a United Socialist States of Europe.

Any programme following that path will need to combine the struggle for immediate democratic and social demands with the struggle for working class power - a programme of transitional demands for Kosova and the Balkans.

For the independence of Kosova! No to imperialist occupation and rule! For a workers' and peasants' government!

De facto, Kosova today, is not a Serbian province, but an imperialist protectorate. Any meaningful struggle for independence has to start with the struggle against the imperialist occupation and plunder of the country and their puppet 'government' in Pristina.

No to the Ahtisaari Plan and an EU take over! For the immediate withdrawal of the NATO and EU-troops! No to the UN and EU economic advisors! For the expropriation without compensation of the imperialist enterprises under workers' control. The imperialist powers must be forced to compensate Kosova and Serbia alike, and in full, for the war destruction of the region.

The struggle for independence also has to include the right for self-determination of the national minorities and of the Serbian minority in particular - up to and including their right to secede and join Serbia if they wish.

In the struggle for independence, revolutionaries and the working class can unite also with left-nationalist democratic forces like the Kosovan LPV (movement for Self-Determination) led by Albin Kurti. It mobilised thousands of youth in mass demonstrations last February. The LPV correctly believes that there can be no genuine independence for Kosova whilst there is a foreign occupation force there and calls for its withdrawal. It also defends the right of the Serb minority to live free of harassment in Kosova. It condemns the glaring social inequalities, privatisations and unemployment. For their activities, its activists have suffered police repression and arrests.

But revolutionaries would have to cooperate with the LPV in joint actions for such progressive goals under their own banners and without hesitating to criticise the petit-bourgeois politics of this formation.

The Serbian working class also has to be won to support the self-determination of the Kosovars, as well as fighting against any further nationalist adventures in Bosnia. The Serbian workers have to realise that this is not only in the interest of the Kosovars, but also in their own class interest, since the forced retention of Kosovars in Serbia would only serve to chain the Serbian working class and peasants to 'their' nationalist rulers and their Greater Serbian projects - just as a forceful retention of the Serbian minority ultimately would only serve the nationalist capitalist forces in Kosova, the nationalist government in Belgrade and the

continuation of imperialist rule over the Balkans.

The struggle for independence has to address not only the national question. It also has to address the fight for democratic rights. Imperialism and the national militias control the 'government' of Kosova and the elections. The Ahtisaari plan envisages a future economic order without any democratic decision-making by the population.

The low turnout to the recent election - below 50 percent - demonstrates that this government is not only at odds with the Serbian minority who boycotted the elections, but is actually discredited in the eyes of half of the population.

A constituent assembly, rather than the imperialist sponsored government, has to address these questions. It has to be convoked under the control of mass organisations of the workers and the poor - not by the 'democratic' advisors of the EU, the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe, the UN or the USA.

Fundamental in the struggle for democratic rights is the fight for the right to organise, to demonstrate, to strike, to form political parties without the control of the UNMIK or the Kosova 'government' and for the release of political prisoners (e.g. those of left nationalist parties).

Such rights can only be fought out in class struggle, with mass demonstrations, mass organisations of the working class and oppressed - and with class organisations which are open to members from all nationalities. They will have to be protected against imperialist oppression, or against nationalist and police provocations and attacks, by organised self-defence.

An action programme and a working class party

Kosova may enter a very explosive situation in the coming months. The workers, the poor, the peasants and the minorities have been the losers in the last rounds of conflict. The working class has shrunk as a class even further. Most of the population lives in poverty, whilst on the other hand, privatisations continue, money from imperialist agencies to 'reconstruct' the country ends up in the pockets of the rich. Others engage in smuggling, drug trafficking etc.

The privatisation of companies has to be addressed on the one hand by the struggle of the workers affected - occupations etc. in order to fight eviction. But it has to be addressed as a general question via mass mobilisation of the whole population around demands to open the books, open all the contracts the government has struck and around demands to renationalise and to introduce workers' control of the companies.

What the mass of the people need is a fight for a programme of public works, for a minimum wage and minimum unemployment benefits and pensions set by trade unions and councils of the population, for free access to schools and training for all - in order to bring back the people in work and to end poverty. The people can and should be organised around such demands by action committees, control committees on prices etc.

But the working class is not only in a situation of enormous pressure and social degradation. It also lacks organisations that fight for its own class interests. The trade unions are very weak and influenced by nationalist organisations, their leaderships are often corrupted and incorporated by the imperialist agencies.

The existing trade union federation, the Union of Independent Trade Unions of Kosova (BSPK) has to be cleansed of imperialist collaborators, those who sit on the board of the privatisation agency AKM. They

have to be opened to Serbian and other minorities. The BSPK has now started to become more active and rejects the privatisation as a whole. But it has to take action against the privatisation process and also take up the general political questions - most importantly the question of a workers' party in Kosova.

The creation of a party of the working class in Kosova is the key task, if the working class wants to defend its own interests. Such a party must not be dependent of the Socialist International in Kosova, nor a late born semi-Stalinist apparatus. It has to be a party that fights against imperialist and capitalist exploitation, for a workers' and peasants' government, for a Socialist Kosova as part of a Socialist Federation of the Balkans.

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