

May Day Declaration

International Secretariat, League for the Fifth International Fri, 01/05/2015 - 06:27

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May Day 2015 marks a century and a quarter since the Second International launched this annual worldwide celebration of working class solidarity, a practical expression of the Communist Manifesto's clarion call, "Workers of all countries, unite!"

Though the bureaucrats of the trade unions and the parliamentarians of the Socialist and Communist parties, have done their best to turn it into a harmless festival, around the world, those engaged in the everyday battle against poverty, exploitation, social oppression and racism, repeatedly turn to May Day as a rallying point to unite and reinvigorate their struggles.

In addition to agitation against the exploitation of labour by capital and for its replacement by socialism, the Second International adopted three major objectives for May Day; a legally compulsory eight-hour day, full democratic rights, including universal suffrage, for men and women and the struggle against an international war that was already looming.

By the time that war broke out, in 1914, capitalism had established itself as a global system and the whole world was already dominated by a handful of powerful states. In this new epoch, whatever "local" pretexts might be presented, the real cause of such a war was the struggle for world domination between these rival Great Powers. As an international class, the working class could have no common interest with the rulers of any such power but, tragically, the great majority of the International's leaders and parties failed to recognise this and sided with their national ruling classes "in defence of the Fatherland".

Thirty years after the founding of the Second International, and in the aftermath of the war that disintegrated it, the founders of the Third International drew the necessary lesson that it must champion the interests of all nations and peoples fighting oppression by imperialism. They reformulated the old slogan as "workers and oppressed peoples of all countries, unite!"

Today, almost a century later, we celebrate May Day in a world that is essentially the same. In country after country, from the poorest to the richest, even in the USA, the three priorities of 1890 remain as central to working class struggle as they were then. This is despite the many battles that have been fought and the advances that have been made at different times and in different places. The capitalist classes have proved remorseless and implacable in their determination to reverse every gain that has been made.

Recognising that a victory for the working class in one country is a threat to capitalists everywhere, the dominant powers, the imperialist powers, have created international organisations of their own. Institutions such as the IMF, the World Bank, the Bank for International Settlements, the World Trade Organisation or the European Central Bank impose austerity on the great majority who work for wages and salaries while guaranteeing the obscene prosperity of the 1 percent.

But, if capitalism has not changed its ways, neither has it solved its own contradictions. The global financial

crisis of 2008 and the synchronised recession that followed it are proof enough of that. Although it came at the end of the period of 'globalisation' that was supposed to have ushered in a 'new world order' of harmonious capitalist development, what it actually brought was a new world disorder.

Momentarily staggered by the imminent collapse of the whole global banking system and shaken by mass protests which proclaimed 'We will not pay for their crisis!' ruling classes everywhere forgot their supposed neo-liberal principles and used state finance to bail out the bankrupts.

In their efforts to regain control not only of economic developments but of the mobilised masses, the tiny number of industrial and financial oligarchs in the main centres of capitalist power did not only rely on their state forces to bludgeon demonstrators off the streets and squares. They also relied on the established leaders of the Social Democratic, Labour and Communist parties and trades unions, to divert, demobilise and demoralise the organised workers' movements in country after country.

Having weathered the initial storms, the capitalists and their states then set about restoring their fortunes. Domestically, this took the form of concerted attacks to roll back important reforms that workers had fought for and won in earlier periods of economic expansion. Welfare services, public provision of education, housing and health services as well as legal rights regarding working conditions, pensions, job security and health and safety all came under attack under the general war cry; Austerity!

Internationally, the crisis laid bare the strengths and weaknesses of the different states and their allies. Above all, it revealed the emergence of a new contender for global power, China. The years since have seen increasingly obvious signs that the old-established imperialisms, the USA, Japan, the leading powers of the EU, particularly Germany, France and the UK, as well as their new rivals, China and Russia, are preparing for future wars.

The short term priority for the USA, still the world's most powerful state despite its defeats in Afghanistan and Iraq, is to thwart the attempts by Russia to consolidate itself as an imperialist power through renewed domination of countries that were formerly within the Soviet Union.

Having already integrated the rest of Eastern and Central Europe into its Nato alliance, Washington turned its sights on Ukraine. Its instrument was the pseudo revolutionary 'EuroMaidan' movement which culminated in a right wing coup d'etat, spear-headed by fascist forces, in February 2014.

Resistance to this coup, primarily in the Russophone East of the country, unleashed the most serious military conflict seen in Europe for decades. The integration of fascist militia into the regular state forces in the West, the formation of popular militias in the East, drawing in forces from Russia and limited military and logistical support from Moscow and the seizure, with majority local support, of the Crimea by Russia, all demonstrate not only the lengths to which the imperialist powers will go but also the potential of such 'local' conflicts to spark wider, and less controllable, conflicts.

The achievement of the the USA's longer term goal, the containment of China, has the same potential. Obama's 'pivot to the Pacific' is a thinly-veiled strategic response to the realisation that China has already charted out its own route to at least a greater share in global power. Ukraine itself, and the Black Sea, offer a forward position against China's 'New Silk Route' linking Western Europe to Beijing's Central and Western provinces.

Elsewhere, encouragement of Japanese belligerence and agreement to the re-writing of its constitution to allow extensive military development, the proposal for a Trans-Pacific Partnership and the under-writing of a pro-western coalition to remove Mahinda Rajapaksa from power in Sri Lanka, all testify to Washington's

determination to remain the single most powerful state on the planet, whatever the cost.

Nowhere has the combination of inter-imperialist rivalry and the dynamics of local class conflicts, which mobilised millions for democratic demands but with leaderships devoid of any strategy for winning them, produced more tragic consequences than in the Middle East. The impact of the 2008 crisis, coming on top of the US-led invasion of Iraq, with its destruction of that country's infrastructure and administration, and the effects of IMF-imposed 'strategic adjustment programmes', generated a powerful popular resistance that culminated in the Arab Spring.

Although dictators as powerful as Mubarak in Egypt and Gaddafi in Libya were brought down, today, virtually all the gains have been rolled back. The sweep of the counter-revolution is symbolised by Abdel-Fattah al-Sisi's Egypt, where between 20,000 and 40,000 political prisoners languish in jail, many suffering torture and unspeakable forms of ill treatment. Several thousand demonstrators have been gunned down on unarmed protests.

In Syria, where the democratic uprising failed to bring down the Assad regime, 220,000 have already died and millions have fled from a three-sided civil war, pitting both Assad's forces and those of ISIS against what remains of the democratic insurgency. Meanwhile, neighbouring regional powers, like Iran, Saudi and Turkey, manoeuvre for advantage under the eyes, but not the control, of their imperialist backers.

Crisis of leadership

Across the world, the ability of capitalist classes to stay in power, even against huge mass movements, has rested on the inadequacy of the leaderships of those movements. The impotence of the bureaucratic trade unions and the reformist parties, whether social democratic or 'communist', however, led to spontaneous 'new' forms of resistance, such as Occupy and the Indignados. Although the influence of anarchism and populism prevailed for a time and blocked the creation of a new leadership so that these initial mobilisations became disoriented and declined, this did not mean the end of resistance.

In 2014-15, 'new' parties like Syriza and Podemos have emerged, primarily in the electoral sphere, and attracted a mass following with their declarations of total rejection of austerity. The next few months will put these parties, and first of all Syriza, because it is in power, to the harshest test. The EU, led by Germany, is determined to make it yield and implement austerity. If it does so, its downfall is certain.

The strategic choice now facing Syriza or, rather, its rank and file, is the choice that will eventually face any determined resistance to austerity in any country. It will have to take bold anticapitalist measures such as seizing the banks and imposing strict controls on the movement of capital, it will have to confiscate the wealth and resources of the capitalist class in order to meet the needs of the impoverished population. To do this it will have to mobilise Greece's workers in a militia and disarm the forces loyal to capital. It will have to call for the formation of delegate-based workers' councils and base itself upon them, it will have to appeal to the workers right across Europe to come to the aid of a Greek workers' government.

The lesson to be drawn from all these struggles around the world is what guided the revolutionaries in Russia in 1917. It was developed by the Third International but was first fully codified by the Fourth International; in the imperialist epoch, even to win and maintain the most immediate demands, be they political, such as democratic rights, or economic, as in the struggle against austerity, they must be linked to a conscious struggle against capitalism itself. This means developing not only the most radical forms of action; strikes, occupations, seizure of strategic installations and facilities, but also, crucially, the reorganisation of the workers' own organisations into organs of control, control of workplaces, control of districts, control of administration and their arming to enforce their control.

All around the world, a first step towards this will be the struggle of the workers to build, or take control of, their own organisations, above all, the trades unions whose existing leaderships have shown themselves completely unfit even to defend what workers have won in the past and whose forms of organisation are designed not to raise the morale and consciousness of workers but rather to keep them under the control of unaccountable bureaucrats.

Only dynamic, fighting and democratically controlled trades unions will be able to attract the millions upon millions of currently unorganised workers, particularly the women and youth who have been hit hardest by the crisis and austerity programmes.

Such transformations have been achieved by the workers' movements of many countries in the past, but they have never happened spontaneously. Those who recognise the need to revolutionise the workers' movement in order to revolutionise society have themselves to be organised into a political party that can lead the inevitable struggles and build the necessary organisations.

Capitalism is a global system, even if the capitalists themselves are nationally divided, and, as the isolation and degeneration of the Soviet Union proved, capitalism will only be defeated when it is defeated globally. The society that will replace it cannot be less globally integrated than capitalism and, therefore, the party that must organise its overthrow must also be global. The struggle against capitalism must also be the struggle for an international party, the Fifth International.

Long live May Day!

Workers and oppressed of all countries, unite!

Forward to the Fifth International!

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