

Revolutionary Defeatism and World War Two

Fri, 08/09/1989 - 22:00

During the First World War the German revolutionary, Karl Liebknecht declared "the main enemy is at home?". Lenin, elaborated the policy of revolutionary defeatism. By this he meant that the defeat of an imperialist power at war was preferable to a victory won at the cost of the class truce at home.

These policies were in direct contradiction to the patriotism and nationalism being whipped up by the bosses of Europe and the USA. They were also in contradiction to the policies of the reformist traitors of the Socialist International. They called on the working class to give up the class struggle and murder each other on the battlefields in order to defend their respective fatherlands? fatherlands owned and ruled by the bosses.

To this day revolutionary defeatism remains the only consistent and internationalist policy for workers in the event of wars between imperialist states. And it applied in the Second World War, just as much as the first.

Marxism's attitude to war has nothing to do with pacifism. War is an ever present feature of class society. In the imperialist epoch, when class antagonisms have reached their highest level, war has engulfed the whole world twice.

To get rid of war we will have to destroy capitalism itself. Its overthrow will necessarily involve armed insurrection. This is why the working class cannot renounce violence.

Every country at war claims the other side started it, that the other side has carried out atrocities, that it is fighting to liberate a small country and so on. Against this we have to approach every war from the standpoint of class. We have to ask what class forces are involved? What is the class nature of the warring states? Will the workers' international struggle be advanced or set back by the victory of one side or another?

Strengthen

In answering these questions Lenin showed how victory for any imperialist power would strengthen not only its area of exploitation, its internal and external prestige, but also reactionary nationalist sentiments within the working class. And, if class peace was maintained to help the war effort, the real interests of the working class would suffer enormously. Working class organisations would be tied to the state, living standards would be sacrificed to the war effort and democratic rights would be suppressed.

Instead of voting for the bosses' war budget in parliament, rallying workers to the army and sacrificing pay and conditions to the "war effort" the workers' organisations should carry on fighting their own exploiters.

None of this means that Marxists favour the victory of one rival imperialism over another. Revolutionary defeatism is defeatism on all sides. So we do not advocate workers helping the enemy bosses by sabotaging production, spying for the enemy etc. The class struggle would carry on even if the defeat or

our own bosses becomes a reality.

There are "just" wars which Marxists do support. These include not just the workers' armed insurrection and the defence of a healthy workers' state. Marxists support semi-colonial countries in their wars of national liberation and unification against imperialism. We do so regardless of the political regime or the immediate causes of the war.

Likewise we support the defence of degenerate workers' states at war with imperialism, even though political power has been usurped by the Stalinist bureaucracy.

The false Marxists of the Socialist and Communist Parties did not simply echo the bosses' patriotic calls to die for the fatherland in World War Two. They tried to utilise Marxism's support for wars of national liberation and defence of workers' states to rally workers to support the Allied war effort.

The Stalinists argued that since the USSR was allied to Britain, France and the USA revolutionary defeatism had to be suspended. Strikes and mutinies by British workers and soldiers harmed the defence of the USSR, they argued.

Refutations

One of the best refutations of this argument came from Stalinism itself, in an earlier phase.

British CP leader Emile Burns wrote:

"But supposing fascist Germany attacks the USSR; are you now in favour of the workers supporting the British and French governments in an attack on Germany? Under no circumstances. Such action would help the German capitalists to represent the war as one of national self-defence; it would immensely strengthen the British capitalists and weaken the British workers; it would put British imperialism in the event of victory in a favourable position for attacking the USSR; it would mean suppressing the inevitable revolt in India." (*The Labour Party and the menace of War*, 1935)

This was exactly what class peace in Britain, supported by the CP, led to.

Revolutionary defeatism means agitating in every factory, regiment and ship for the class war. Such agitation begins with economic strikes or the defence of soldiers' political rights. But it is aimed at the creation of workers' and soldiers' councils which could form the basis of working class power.

Marxists do not fear the onset of war. We recognise that, despite the initial upsurge in patriotism in the first stages of war, the horrors and privations it brings and the militarisation of society lead to the re-emergence of class struggle in a sharper form.

War is an act of desperation for capitalism. The century of wars signifies it is in its death agony. War and revolution are the fundamental features of the imperialist epoch - and revolutionary defeatism is the strategy essential for turning war into revolution.

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