Self-determination and the war in Nagorno-Karabakh

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The war in Nagorno Karabakh may be drawing to a close after Armenia, which had mobilised in defence of the ethnically Armenian state, and Azerbaijan signed an agreement on November 9. Fighting started at the end of September and led to thousands of civilian and military casualties, the displacement of as many as 90,000 people and constantly threatened to escalate into a war of regional and even imperialist powers.

Whilst the deal purports to settle this decades-long dispute for good, it is more likely to open the door to a new phase of the war entirely. Karabakh’s movement for self-determination will certainly not disappear with this deal, neither will the competing and volatile regional and imperialist powers with interests in this fragile region.

Furthermore, the crises facing capitalism in Armenia and Azerbaijan will not disappear. Whilst Armenians’ protests against their ruling class’ surrender could easily transform into general protests against the government, a similar awakening of the working class in Azerbaijan is equally likely as they realise that the conquest of Karabakh cannot provide them with jobs, fair wages, or decent public services.

Reactionary War and Repressive Peace

On September 27, Azerbaijani forces invaded the Republic of Artsakh, the breakaway statelet formed largely on the territory of the former Republic of Nagorno Karabakh in a war between 1988 and 1994. Baku justified its invasion by claiming that it was liberating the areas commonly known as the ‘seven districts’, the formerly Azeri-majority territories which were not part of the former Nagorno Karabakh Republic, but were captured in that war. Baku claimed this was to allow resettlement of hundreds of thousands of displaced Azeris.

In reality, however, the invasion was focused almost entirely on the areas of the former Nagorno Karabakh that have never had Azeri majorities and have repeatedly expressed their desire for independence ever since they were ceded to Azerbaijan by Stalin.

Stepanakert, Artsakh’s capital, was shelled almost continuously, leading to the evacuation of its 50,000 inhabitants. Meanwhile, Azeri forces launched their invasion, shelling and eventually capturing the major cities in the south and far north of the territory, using Israeli-supplied drones, cluster munitions and televising executions as they advanced.

Once Azerbaijan had captured the town of Shushi, Artsakh’s second city, which sits strategically in the hills just nine kilometres from the capital, Armenia had little option but to surrender. In exchange for Azerbaijan’s promise not to capture Stepanakert, Armenia agreed to allow a transport corridor across its territory to connect Azerbaijan to its Nakhchivan exclave. Azerbaijan will not only retain the seven districts, whose Armenian inhabitants have been told not to expect to return, but will be allowed to keep all of the
Imperialist Interests
The final peace agreement was brokered by Russia, and largely represents Moscow's desired outcome by carefully balancing its interests on both sides of the conflict. On the one hand, it had helped Armenia win the previous war, and since then the country has become crucial for Moscow economically and militarily. Russia controls all or part of Armenia's telecommunications, banking, energy, gas, metal production, and railways; it also operates a military base in the country.

Meanwhile, Azerbaijan has become an equally important partner since the end of the war. It helped Russia during the Chechen wars, and the two countries have extensive trade and military co-operation. Russia, therefore, was eager to bring the war to a close as soon as possible. Its treaty obligations to Armenia did not extend to Karabakh, and it stood aside during Azerbaijan's invasion on the clear condition that the campaign did not cross the border into Armenia.

Its relations with both countries not only allowed Russia to facilitate the negotiations but also to advance its own interests. The 2,000 Russian troops to be stationed in Nagorno Karabakh are ostensibly peacekeepers? but their actual role will be to police resistance to Azerbaijan amongst the remaining Armenians and to provide leverage against Turkey and the U.S. in this critical region.

Turkey took a very different position, actively calling for an Azerbaijani victory and supporting it with arms and several thousand fighters via its proxies in Syria. The demand to keep peacekeepers of its own in Karabakh, however, was vetoed by Russia. Whilst the United States left a vacuum for Turkey and Russia during the war, the deployment of Russian troops threatens to completely change the position. Washington has extensive interests in Azerbaijan, specifically a trade, fibre-optic and military airspace corridor that passes just beyond the territory where Russian troops are to be stationed. Whilst the fighting between Armenia and Azerbaijan is settled for now, the possibility of the region becoming the theatre for future inter-imperialist confrontations remains.

What Next for Karabakh?
Beyond the manoeuvres of the regional and imperialist powers, the struggle for self-determination for the people of Nagorno Karabakh has suffered a major defeat. Few Armenians from either Karabakh or the seven districts will return to their homes and many have become refugees in Armenia and beyond. Meanwhile, the Republic of Artsakh's borders have been reduced to a fraction of those of the former Nagorno Karabakh and the newly-occupied territory is set to be integrated into Azerbaijan.

The mass movement that gripped Karabakh in the 20th century has largely remained dormant since it achieved its goal of de facto independence. It is highly likely, however, that this movement will re-emerge in opposition both to the Russian troops and the Azerbaijani state.

This will equally likely begin with mobilisations for a rejection of the agreement, a demand which socialists would support. Alongside this, socialists must support Artsakh's right to self-determination while recognising the right of return of Azeris displaced in earlier conflicts.

None of the wars in the Caucasus have solved any of the region's complex national questions. They have simply reinforced the domination of the capitalist classes over national minorities, while overseeing the ongoing impoverishment of the region in the name of profit.

In order to break this cycle, socialists must fight to build workers' parties which, while defending the democratic rights of the region's nationalities, are committed to the programme of permanent revolution in
which the working class, by taking power for itself, will develop the productive forces of the region by social ownership and democratic planning.

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