

# Should socialists support the Libyan revolution?

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There has been a fierce debate on the international left about whether to support the rebels, defend Gaddafi or remain neutral. It has seen socialists end up on totally different sides of the revolutionary struggle. So what is causing the confusion?

Those who believe a correct line can be arrived at by simply taking the opposite side to US and EU imperialism have backed Gaddafi. This includes many Stalinist and Maoist groups, along with some minor fragments of Trotskyism that adapt to them.

By contrast, those who cannot recognise imperialism behind the 'international community' or the United Nations and their 'humanitarian interventions' - like [Gilbert Achar](#) [1] of the Fourth International and the British [Alliance for Workers Liberty](#) [1] grouping - have supported the NATO intervention of the no-fly zone.

A third trend recognises the difficulties of these positions and responds with careful neutrality. They argue that Gaddafi is a dictator whose anti-imperialist credentials are tarnished by a decade of subservience to French, British and Italian imperialism, whilst the rebels are led by openly pro-imperialist elements, most defectors from the old regime. The answer is simple 'keep out of it'.

This position of neutrality ignores the basic question of the character of the mass uprising against Gaddafi 'one which necessarily turned into a fully blown civil war given the regime's murderous repression. Yes, the Libyan rebels were bourgeois democratic in their aims and have a pro-capitalist leadership 'but so did the masses in Egypt and Tunisia. Those who point to the existence of Islamists in the ranks of the rebels seem to forget the role of the Islamists in the ranks of the Egyptian revolution as well.

But is the character of the uprising determined by its leadership? Is the entire character of the uprising determined by its allies? Should the intervention of the imperialist powers on the rebels' side mean that revolutionary socialists should have opposed the revolution?

The answer is no 'no more than the workers' rebellion in 1980 in Poland was solely characterised by the pro-capitalism of Lech Walesa or the Pope and Reagan's support for Solidarnosc. No more than communists should somehow have been 'neutral' in the Spanish Civil War between the capitalist Republican government and the fascist Franco forces.

Of course the NATO powers had their own material reasons for backing the rebels. The US and EU rushed to support them to regain support in the Arab world after their prevarication and delay in the face of the mass uprising against Mubarak in Egypt during January and February.

It is clear enough from the formation of the NTC in Benghazi that a major part of the rebel leadership was willing to hand over larger parts of the economy to imperialist multinationals in return for support and recognition. Other sections with Islamist roots plan to include elements of Sharia into the legal system. All

this has be resisted and the NTC has to be supplanted by revolutionary means.

But the rebel fighters at the front and pro democracy forces in the liberated towns and cities who made the revolution, have not been obliterated by the leadership or its deals with imperialism.

Contrary to the [claims](#) <sup>[1]</sup> of Socialist Worker the NATO intervention has not '[totally subsumed](#)' <sup>[1]</sup> the rebel movement. In the West, in the East and on the streets of Tripoli the rank and file rebellion exists and fights. Yet, Socialist Worker argued that the revolution 'was lost', making the ill-fated prophecy that 'Libya faces cantonisation--with western areas under the control of the old regime and fractured rebel areas beholden to imperialist powers?'. Deriding the rebels as a 'few hundred fighters', this line badly underestimated the democratic aspirations and determination of the Libyan people.

Moreover, the SWP gave nothing in the way of concrete guidance on how the Libyan working class could orientate itself in a situation in which the leadership of the rebellion were increasingly in the pockets of western imperialism, but where the mass still had progressive democratic convictions.

Revolutions certainly do not go forward ineluctably - they bring all classes onto the streets to contest the future direction of entire nations and peoples. A 'lost' Libyan Revolution could have seen the mass movement completely crushed by Gaddafi. Or, alternatively, seen the revolution successfully deposing Gaddafi only to then consolidate a new political order which was intent on turning Libya into a pro-western client state.

The first danger is now all but extinguished, but the second danger still exists. But it is by no means inevitable that the NTC will succeed in subordinating the revolution to the west. Their reactionary political agenda can be contested by the Libyan people. If, they now, having successfully driven out Gaddafi, struggle to obstruct and defeat the west's attempts to control the country's economic resources and new political system, then the revolution will not be 'lost' but go further forward.

Revolutionary socialists must argue that the rank and file fighters, the youth and the workers, organise themselves politically to kick out the pro imperialist NTC.

It would be ridiculous to give up on the Libyan revolution because of the crimes of its leadership or the manoeuvres of the imperialists in Washington, London or Paris - we must fight for a revolution within the rebellion, a struggle for consistent democracy and internationalism.

### **An analogy from Trotsky**

The Russian revolutionary Leon Trotsky had to deal with similar arguments in 1938 within the Fourth International. He outlined a concrete example not unlike the situation we have today in Libya: 'Let us assume that rebellion breaks out tomorrow in the French colony of Algeria under the banner of national independence and that the Italian government, motivated by its own imperialist interests, prepares to send weapons to the rebels. What should the attitude of the Italian workers be in this case? I have purposely taken an example of rebellion against a democratic imperialism with intervention on the side of the rebels from a fascist imperialism. Should the Italian workers prevent the shipping of arms to the Algerians? Let any ultra-leftists dare answer this question in the affirmative. Every revolutionist, together with the Italian workers and the rebellious Algerians, would spurn such an answer with indignation. Even if a general maritime strike broke out in fascist Italy at the same time, even in this case the strikers should make an exception in favour of those ships carrying aid to the colonial slaves in revolt; otherwise they would be no more than wretched trade unionists? not proletarian revolutionists?'. [Learn to think: A Friendly Suggestion to Certain Ultra-Leftists](#) <sup>[1]</sup>

Ah, but isn't this example flawed ? aren't we now dealing with a situation where the rebels are fighting colonel Gaddafi, a staunch anti imperialist and hero of his people? Rubbish. Gaddafi is no consistent anti imperialist, especially not since he 'came in from the cold' in 2005 and shook hands with Prime Minister Blair of Great Britain.

He is deeply unpopular with huge parts of his population, the material basis for the uprising. Those imperialists who once supported him have gone over to opposing him and are trying to bring him down ? to them we say: get out of the way, this has nothing to do with you, the people of Libya alone will defeat Gaddafi and his wretched cronies, his murdering secret police, his torturers and assorted maniacs.

Certainly, if the west wants to send guns and equipment to Benghazi and Misrata then by all means ? but no military advisers, no special envoys, no conditions and above all no strings.

Those that point to the reactionary nature of the leadership and the supposed inevitability of Libya becoming a pro imperialist enclave are guilty of the worst type of pessimism. Nothing is yet decided and as long as so many of the rebels are armed and there is space for democratic debate then there is still some hope for a healthy revolutionary outcome. Under Gaddafi there is none, just brutal dictatorship and terror.

Take the examples of Benghazi, reported in April by the New York Times.

?...the former bar association building is filled with artists, musicians and activists, churning out posters, banners and revolutionary rock songs. Raw democracy is nothing if not creative. Latif Frajeni, 12, watched one day recently as his father, Mohammed, 50, taped up a revolutionary poem.?

Outside the courthouse where the TNC meets ?scores of tents and trailers accommodate grass-roots efforts at democracy: one for law students, another for lawyers; one to report spies, another for some mothers and their daughters who have appointed themselves in charge of sweeping up the mess every morning.?

?Yes, there?s NATO in the sky, but what?s happening on the ground, we are doing that.? said Imam Bugaighis, an early spokesperson for the rebels. This quote more than any other reflects the contradiction of the revolution ? and no doubt there are many amongst the rebels who see NATO as a useful tool in their rebellion, but one that they will discard as soon as the fighting is done.

?In conclusion, socialists always oppose imperialism but they do not always support those who are fighting imperialism. This is true especially if their fight is predominantly and overwhelmingly a fight against their own people.

Gaddafi?s regime is or was a totalitarian dictatorship defending itself against a risen people, in arms, fighting for democracy.

The support of imperialism for the rebels does not transform the situation and would not unless that support obliterated and transformed the revolution into an imperialist invasion/occupation/takeover. It has not and never even approached that. The fighting was done overwhelmingly by relatively uncoordinated militias of non-professional soldiers. All journalists with the fighters confirm this. Of course the air attacks on Gaddafi's tanks and communication lines helped the rebels a lot at certain stages. Certainly the TNC is pro-imperialist (but divided) but there are thousands of local committees and militia units that are not under the direct control of the TNC.

So the answer should be clear: yes, socialists should support the Libyan revolution and urge it to go forward and make it permanent in a fight for working class power.

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