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Internationalist Notes

Broadsheet of the Internationalist Workers' Group

May Day 2023: There is no "Right Side" in an Imperialist War, No War but the Class War!

The continued existence of capitalism demands an increasingly higher price. Whether through rapidly rising living costs, rising interest rates, collapsing banks, environmental disasters, or on people who are forced to flee for their very survival. Half a century after the end of the post-war boom, the capitalist system threatens to drag humanity into an abyss. The war in Ukraine not only demonstrates that an "international peace and security order" does not exist, but is a terrible confirmation that the only solution to capital's pursuit of profit is to plunder and destroy the planet. Only the working class, the class that generates the wealth of the world with its labor power can prevent this. But this is only possible if that class is able to come to a recognition both of the destructive force of the wages system and its own potential collective power.

The Ukraine War

Now we are 15 months into a brutal war in Ukraine. But this is not just about Ukraine or Russia. This is the first step to a wider war. What the population of Ukraine is suffering today is what we all face tomorrow. And today both Russian and Ukrainian workers are suffering death at the fronts to defend what? The property and interests of their oligarchic cliques. For our rulers, defense of "the nation" makes sense since they own and control its means of production. For the rest of the population, imperialist war means the loss of home and livelihood and for many, the loss of life itself.

Of course, the propaganda machines on both sides are working flat out to convince us that we should die for "our" country. On the Russian side the denunciation of the treachery of the perfidious West, which has broken every promise not to bring NATO up to its borders, is matched only by its twisted portrayal of the "pedophile" West as decadent for recognition of LGBT+ rights. But then "family values" has been a stock in trade for Russian nationalism since Stalin revived them. On the other side, Putin has been a propaganda gift for the US and its allies. After years of poisoning, killing and jailing opponents, at home and abroad, it is easy to portray his invasion of Ukraine as the act of a megalomaniac. Add to that the brutal Russian strategy (starting in Chechnya and perfected in Syria) of destroying everything that cannot be taken, which has only fed into the Western narrative that this is not a war between Western hubris capitalizing on the fall of the USSR against Kremlin revanchism, but one of "democracy" against "autocracy". The war crimes committed by the US and UK in Iraq or the NATO bombings in the former Yugoslavia are now long forgotten.

Imperialist Confrontation

The outbreak of war in Ukraine has marked a new step towards capitalism's 'final solution' to its economic crisis: general imperialist war. We don't know when this will erupt, but where conflict was previously limited to economic sanctions and trade wars, the Ukraine war is a step towards direct violence between the major powers. The US and its allies may not be actually sending troops into battle against the Russian forces, but the amount of Western weaponry deployed in Ukraine has made a material difference to the outcome. More fundamentally it has started an arms race. NATO has already sent so many weapons and munitions to Ukraine that they have now discovered their reserves are nearly exhausted. Weapon production lines which have lain dormant for almost three decades are now being turned back on. New investment has had to be made to get them up to scale. Arms spending was already on the increase after the Russians took back Crimea in 2014, but within a few months of the Ukraine war starting, global military spending passed \$2 trillion for the first time with at least 60% of it in NATO states. Of the top military spenders in the world, the US still spends more on arms than the next 9 states put together but all plan to spend more. Germany, which has pledged 100 billion to "military modernisation" since the war started, has overturned its long-standing position of refusing to sell arms into a war zone. Military budgets are increasing everywhere, and this new arms race is an irrevocable step towards a wider conflict.

If that were not enough, the war has further deepened the division of the world. The globalization (i.e., expansion of Western finance capital into new spheres and hyper-exploitation of cheap labor on capitalism's fringes) of the last three or so decades is now in reverse gear. Protectionism is on the rise, notably in the US where Biden's Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) involves massive state subsidies to new 'green' businesses to promote the US position and undermine China in the 'green technology' race. On the military front, whilst Sweden and Finland seek NATO membership, Russia, China and Iran are being driven ever closer together to evade Western sanctions and give each other military and economic assistance.



The US ruling class may be bitterly divided on just about everything, but the one point of convergence is China. US hegemony since 1945 saw off the USSR but China represents a much more serious threat. The USSR relied only on military power, but China also has enough economic power to become a threat to the central plank of US hegemony – the still mighty dollar as the world's reserve currency. The dollar still dominates but it has been in decline for two decades. And the war has done more to undermine it than all the cheap Chinese commodities did during peace. Today more countries are reducing their dollar holdings and others have stopped using it as either a reserve or trading currency. Even US ally Saudi Arabia trades oil for renminbis. It should come as no surprise, then, that Blinken and Biden rarely make a speech without pointing to the greater threat posed by China whether via its technology (Huawei and TikTok) or its threat to Taiwan. Indeed, a whole slew of US generals and ex-military men are currently competing to predict precisely when China will invade Taiwan, giving dates that range from 2024 to the end of the decade.

China has long openly stated its goal was to supplant the US as the world's superpower by 2049 (a century after the Chinese Communist Party drove the Kuomintang to Taiwan). Retaking Taiwan has always been a stated goal of Beijing. China has generally been less aggressive than other US rivals as it has carefully built up its economic power, but the global capitalist crisis has not spared China either. It is now bailing out its banks (already reeling from a burst property-boom bubble) as various parts of the infrastructure of the Belt and Road Initiative have turned out to be white elephants. Now, Chinese rhetoric is beginning to match that of the US, especially since the US (which already has some 400 bases with 300,000 troops and 60% of its navy in the Pacific) has built a series of anti-Chinese alliances across Asia. Although the second military power in the world (apart from in numbers of troops), China trails well behind the US in military terms, but it would be fighting a regional war in its own backyard whilst US military might is spread out across the globe.

Nothing that has happened in the last 15 months has surprised us or other internationalists. The Ukraine crisis simmered for almost 20 years with both the US and Russia promoting their own factions within the divided and corrupt Ukrainian oligarchy. In all that time, neither side has shown one iota of concern for the concerns or fears of the other. The crisis is so deep that imperialist rivalry allows for no rational discussion – it is a zero-sum game which could eventually make zeros of us all now that the Ukraine war has magnified all the tensions that have been haunting the world imperialist order for decades.

Workers Have No Country

For the last four decades of economic stagnation, workers have been in retreat everywhere. We have seen wages cut and our working conditions made more unbearable and precarious. The financial crash of 2007-8 only added to our woes when the ruling class state bailed out the banks, since the price of that bailout was paid by workers via "austerity" which further lowered real wages. Now we are being hit by rampant inflation, yet the world's leaders (representatives of the "oligarchs" everywhere) solemnly intone that there is no money to pay for wage rises that won't even compensate for all that has been lost over 40 years. They can find billions for weapons to defend their property and investments but not to repair decaying infra-

structure nor invest in health and education.

However, in the last year there are signs that something is beginning to change. Striking millions across the world, from Iran to Europe and the USA, against the decline in living standards, and other attacks, are offering us a glimmer of hope. For the moment, the majority of workers are still hesitant. The last few decades have left a legacy of low confidence and expectations. Many still have a faint hope that some left politician or union bureaucrat will pull a rabbit out of the hat to make life more bearable. But there is no scope for that in the midst of a capitalist crisis. And our struggle must be more than just a fight for “fair shares”. As the history of the last two centuries shows, the capitalist system will not tolerate workers’ gains for long. The demands of profit will demand more exploitation, and this takes many forms.

We thus have to start the real fight for our own interests, re-learning how to organize collectively against the attacks against us on all fronts. Strikes and demonstrations are only the beginning. They remain token resistance unless they link up with other workers everywhere – isolated workplaces or even regions cannot win on their own. Effective collective action means everyone has to actively participate. Strike committees elected by mass meetings (assemblies) of all workers and recallable by them are the “finally discovered form” (Marx) with which workers can achieve this.

However, these are not the only criteria for success in the struggle. We must be conscious of what we are fighting for and how high the stakes are. The point at issue is no less than the abolition of capitalism and its exploitation through the wages and profit system, which engenders wars and other disasters. (In the process, liquidating the usual ways of dividing workers by race, gender and sexual orientation, upbringing or whatever). As capitalism steps up its war propaganda it will once again call upon us to die “for our country” or “democracy”. But “workers have no country”. We don’t own land or factories, which are “the wealth of nations” (Adam Smith). That is the prerogative of the property-owning capitalist class. Workers have no material interest in supporting either side in these imperialist wars. We reject all the excuses and alibis that are trotted out to make us give our lives to protect their wealth. Their democracy is a sham. They have drawn up the rules of a political game that ensures the safety of the system no matter who wins. Their system of parliamentary representation is nothing but “democracy for the moneybags”.

The lesson has long been clear. We cannot win more than temporary palliatives as long as we play by their rules. Whilst they are stepping up their violence at home and abroad, we have to step up the resistance. Whilst their weapons are tear gas, batons, bombs and missiles, ours are consciousness that a new world is yet possible, and our collective organization. The latter involves not only creating organizations of struggle wherever wage workers live and work but also an international political organization to coordinate and guide that struggle against not just this or that state but the entire global system. There are many internationalists around the world who can see all this but who are trapped in the debates of the past. The issues today are too serious for useless polemics, which generate voluminous academic tomes, or sitting on the sidelines. We need a positive engagement to begin to build an international body to lead the global fightback. This is why we have tried to work with others in the framework of No War but the Class War over the last fifteen months to prepare a response to what capitalism has in store for us. Their war or our revolution are increasingly becoming the stark alternatives.

Whether fighting against wage cuts or war, our slogan remains:

NO WAR BUT THE CLASS WAR!

Who We Are

"The IWG stands for a global society where production is for need and not profit (and is therefore sustainable), where the state, national frontiers and money have been abolished, where collective power is exercised through class-wide organizations like workers' councils. This has to mean the active, daily participation of the majority aiming for the interests of all. Only then can the world be rid of the capitalist offspring of poverty, hunger, oppression and war: we call it communism but this vision has nothing in common with Stalinist state capitalism and the old USSR.

In order to get there we are working to create a world working class political organization - a 'party' for want of a better word - not a government in waiting but a guide in the struggle for a new world. We by no means claim to be that party but we do aim to be one of the elements which will need to come together in its formation. As the working class, the majority of the world's population, is more and more faced with the consequences of a crumbling capitalist system, it will have to unite and overthrow the capitalist system and its bloody imperialist appetites."

The Internationalist Workers’ Group is the US affiliate of the Internationalist Communist Tendency.

For more information about our organization and answers to frequently answered questions: <https://www.leftcom.org/en/about-us>

East Palestine Chemical Disaster: Capitalism Goes Off the Rails

Years of deregulation, decaying transportation infrastructure and increasingly unsafe working conditions led to the conditions that created the East Palestine chemical spill. The means used to clean up the spill initially involved burning the chemicals off. The immediate objective for the company was to get cargo moving on the tracks as fast as possible, and burning is faster than pumping. The length of cargo trains has increased, along with the use of two-person crews. The toxic chemical cocktail that has poisoned East Palestine is often chemicals used in the production of polymer plastics. More than vinyl chloride spilled from this disaster, but a toxic cocktail of isobutylene (causes coronary thrombosis and dermatitis), butyl acrylate (causes irritation for the eyes, skin and upper respiratory system; dermatitis sensitization; dyspnea (breathing difficulty)), benzene (causes acute myeloid leukemia and has been linked with acute lymphocytic leukemia, chronic lymphocytic leukemia, multiple myeloma, and non-hodgkin lymphoma), ethylhexyl acrylate (causes dermatitis), and ethylene glycol monobutyl ether (causes irritation in the eyes and nose, as well as headache, nausea, vomiting and dizziness). The burn then released dioxins and other compounds into the atmosphere. Norfolk Southern poisoned and silenced a community to get the cargo rolling, with the usual complicity of the government.

Norfolk Southern sent in its own police force to maintain order in East Palestine. The investigators doing the testing are employees of Norfolk Southern. Subsequently, the community of East Palestine found itself effectively converted into a Norfolk Southern company town. The cost to human and animal life is likely to kill off many of those exposed to the toxins, with residents of the East Palestine and workers on the clean-up crews reporting serious problems with respiratory ailments.

In 2022 a rail strike was averted through the action of the US government in negotiations with the rail unions. The US Congress legislated them back to work. One of the main grievances was a complete lack of sick time or time off. The deal imposed by the federal government gave workers a small amount of sick-time combined with a pay increase, almost an insult. There exists a long history of militancy on the rails, with the Great Rail Strike of 1877, the Pullman Strike in 1894, and the Railway Shopmen's Strike of 1922. President Truman twice threatened to call the army out on railway workers during his presidency. Thus, a long history of legislation, like the Railway Labor Act of 1926, exists to control and channel discontent. Workers in the rail industry have twelve unions, all divided by trade and craft, ossified in place in a process that exists to keep commodities circulating and profits growing. The act was a mechanism for the state to replace strike activity with binding arbitration. This system tended to ossify the position of the twelve unions as bargaining agents. The act was eventually expanded to include airline workers. While not robbing them of their formal right to strike, it makes the state both mediator and restorer of order if the arbitration process fails and workers go on strike.

One umbrella organization, Railway Workers United, called for the government to nationalize the railroads, citing President Wilson's temporary nationalization of the rails during WWI. However, Wilson's nationalization was conducted so to facilitate the war effort and prevent strikes in the strategically important rail transportation industry. With a system of labor union representation in place that was engineered to divide workers the need for workers to unite beyond the boundaries imposed on them by the unions and the state could not be more clear. The stakes can be seen when a disaster of the magnitude of the East Palestine, Ohio disaster strikes and the line between company and state vanishes in the drive to get the rails running again. The same nation that deregulated the rails would not necessarily change how the rails are run as long as the accumulation of profits is involved. Where workers control, through workers' councils, would be able to drive the use of less toxic chemicals, safer transportation systems, and better conditions for the conduct of socially necessary labor. It's only the working class that can stop the poisoning of the environment for profit. With the reign of capital, the company will always own the shop, nationalized or not.

The cleanup and coverup had as its only priority to get the freight rolling again. There is a military aspect in keeping rail freight running as surely as there was during Wilson's nationalization of the rails. The same reason that last year the federal government forced a settlement to avoid a rail strike is the same reason that Norfolk Southern incinerated the toxic mess left in the wake of the train crash. Disasters like these are recurring reminders of why capitalism must be overthrown. The special legal attention that railway workers have received over the last hundred and sixty years points to the potential of their organized power. Only with their fellow workers in other sectors too, generalizing the struggle beyond one sole industry, will they have the chance to bring the system that spawned this disaster to its knees.

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