

# 1917

“To face reality squarely; not to seek the line of least resistance; to call things by their right names; to speak the truth to the masses, no matter how bitter it may be; not to fear obstacles; to be true in little things as in big ones; to base one’s program on the logic of the class struggle; to be bold when the hour of action arrives—these are the rules of the Fourth International.”

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## *Imperialism, Islamic Reaction & Syria’s Civil War* **Middle East Chaos**

The state system established in the Middle East after World War I, when Britain and France carved up the Arab territories of the Ottoman Empire, appears close to collapse. Borders drawn without regard for the political, religious or ethnic identities of the indigenous peoples endured a century, but many may soon be erased. The quarter century of brutal imperialist military intervention

that commenced with the 1991 conquest of Iraq (under the flag of the United Nations) has severely stressed the social and political fabric of much of the region.

Four years of civil war in Syria, fueled by Washington’s desire for “regime change,” has killed a quarter of a million people, destroyed at least \$100 billion of the country’s social infrastructure, and displaced 11 million people from

their homes, contributing to Europe's "refugee crisis." The conflict is rooted in the social contradictions of Syrian society—including ethnic and sectarian hostilities—but almost from the outset the insurrection has depended on massive infusions of assistance from the U.S. and various regional players, particularly Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar.

Syria has had a long history of antagonism between the secular modernizing Baathist regime (centered on the Shia-derived Alawite minority and led, from 1970 to 2000, by Hafez al-Assad, and since then by his son Bashar) and the Muslim Brotherhood (rooted in the socially backward, traditionalist sections of the Sunni majority in rural areas as well as in the urban underclass). In 1982 the Assad regime crushed a Muslim Brotherhood uprising, massacred thousands of civilians in the pro-rebel city of Hama and drove the Islamist opposition underground.

In recent years throughout the Middle East, displaced agricultural workers have gravitated to cities where they struggle to survive in massive urban slums. Syria's participation in imperialist-inspired "market reform" programs, by increasing pressure on sectors of the population already suffering the most, helped set the stage for the current conflict:

"Once self-sufficient in wheat, Syria has become increasingly dependent on increasingly costly grain imports, which rose by 1m tonnes in 2011-12, then rose again by nearly 30% to about 4m in 2012-13. The drought ravaged Syria's farmlands, led to several crop failures, and drove hundreds of thousands of people from predominantly Sunni rural areas into coastal cities traditionally dominated by the Alawite minority.

"The exodus inflamed sectarian tensions rooted in Assad's longstanding favouritism of his Alawite sect—many members of which are relatives and tribal allies—over the Sunni majority.

"Since 2001 in particular, Syrian politics was increasingly repressive even by regional standards, while Assad's focus on IMF-backed market reform escalated unemployment and inequality. The new economic policies undermined the rural Sunni poor while expanding the regime-linked private sector through a web of corrupt, government-backed joint ventures that empowered the Alawite military elite and a parasitic business aristocracy."

—*Guardian*, 13 May 2013

The "reforms" involved the sale of state assets (often scooped up by well-connected regime supporters) and the privatization of education, healthcare and other social services. Unable to afford privatized facilities, the urban poor became reliant on religious charities that provided rudimentary social assistance along with anti-secular Islamist political agitation. As a consequence, pro-jihadi sentiments are most widespread and deeply rooted in the poorest regions.

Syria's Baathist regime had long been on the Pentagon's hit list.<sup>1</sup> In the midst of the 2011 "Arab Spring," NATO intervened in Libya, another secular dictatorship targeted for "regime change," on the pretext of preventing a murderous attack on an insurgent population. Within a few months Muammar Qaddafi was toppled. The Baathist regime in Damascus proved more resilient. While the Western capitalist media has generally framed the uprising as a simple story of a popular revolt against an oppressive dictatorship, the 2011 "Syrian Revolution" was rapidly hegemonized by the

Islamist jihadi descendants of the Muslim Brotherhood. The pro-imperialist ideologues also ignore evidence that the Assad regime has enjoyed the (sometimes grudging) support of a majority of the population. While Assad's family and inner circle are Alawites (with the exception of his Sunni wife Asma), many other ethnic and religious minorities, as well as a substantial chunk of the Sunni majority, prefer life under the relatively non-sectarian

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## 1917

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# *Defend Refugees against Terror and Deportation!* **Proletarian Internationalism & the Struggle against Fortress Europe**



GETTY IMAGES

## **Hungarian riot cops attempt to drive asylum seekers back to border**

*Translation of "Proletarischer Internationalismus und der Kampf gegen die Festung Europa," first published in German in September 2015. First published in English 12 October 2015 on bolshevik.org.*

The recent wave of racist violence against refugee shelters and the increase in right-wing anti-refugee mobilizations across Germany require a response by revolutionaries. That police in Heidenau in Saxony stood idly by as a racist mob went on the rampage for days, and only exercised their monopoly of force when anti-racist activists began to demonstrate, says a lot about the role of the capitalist state and police. Revolutionaries have no faith that the capitalist state will protect refugees against witchhunts, harassment and pogroms. The proposals to segregate refugees along ethnic lines made by Bodo Ramelow, Left Party premier of Thuringia, after rioting in overcrowded accommodation, demonstrate the impotence of the Left Party in resisting state racism. Many Left Party members and activists take part in anti-fascist and

anti-racist demonstrations, but wherever their party holds power, whether directly or in a coalition, it has acted as part of the state apparatus of repression and deportation.

The 50-60 million refugees forced to search for a country of refuge in recent years are victims of the imperialist world order. Global exploitation and oppression by the imperialist powers and their local proxies (dictators and terrorist militias), and the conflicts they deliberately foment, are the cause of this tragedy. Debate has been triggered by mass drowning of people from Africa, the Middle East and Southeast Asia seeking a better life in Europe or Australia, as well as the rising number of refugees who, despite everything, somehow manage to make it to their destination. Marxists must be able to provide a revolutionary political analysis of these events and participate in the mobilization of international working-class solidarity in the fight against Fortress Europe.

A revolutionary answer to the refugee issue must be multi-layered. In addition to openly challenging Fortress Europe both internally and at its borders, it is necessary to



ITALIAN COASTGUARD—MASSIMO SESTINI

### Italian navy approaches overcrowded ship of refugees, June 2014

struggle against racist sentiments within the working class that are fueled by the bourgeoisie and its political agents in the Social Democratic Party (SPD) and the trade-union leadership. Active proletarian solidarity with refugees should also be organized, recognizing that the majority are part of the global working class. Only by combining deeds with words can we develop an awareness that the problem is predatory capitalism and its subjugation of the world, not the people who are seeking to escape persecution, oppression and poverty.

The German bourgeoisie is split several ways on this issue. Pro-refugee liberals and Christians make moral appeals for responding to the suffering of the refugees. They argue that Europe is rich and we must use every legal avenue to reduce the obstacles in the way of those seeking shelter. They make much of the supposedly open and tolerant values of Europe, as well as its history of refugees and deportations, particularly following World War II. Another section of the bourgeoisie sees immigrants primarily as cheap material for exploitation and opposes the racist mobilizations of right-wing populists and fascists for that reason. Dead or wounded refugees are simply bad for business.

The misanthropic propaganda of the right-wing populists and fascists attempts to tap into racist attitudes in backward sections of the working class, resulting in repeated attacks on refugee housing reminiscent of the pogroms of the 1990s. The names of Heidenau and Nauen are now known well beyond the borders of Saxony. These events come as no surprise given the popularity of the (recently split) Pegida movement and the large vote for the right-wing populist Alternative for Germany (AfD) in recent elections. Lutz Bachmann, Pegida's leader, who led a racist mob attack on refugee supporters in Freital in Saxony, was only acting out the logic of his political program. Groups like AfD are supported by a section of capitalists who find it convenient to blame refugees for the low wages, unemployment and social decline their own policies have created. Bavaria's governing party, the Christian Social Union (CSU), has sought to promote racist sentiment in the working class with CSU chief Horst Seehofer's claims that the asylum system is widely abused. While at present only a small section of the German ruling class supports the

far right, the danger posed should not be underestimated. Revolutionaries must actively resist the fascists and right-wing populists and protect refugees and their homes.

### Fortress Europe

The racist Fortress Europe project, based on the use of blockades and border security measures to prevent as many refugees as possible from entering Europe, is worth billions to the defense and security industries waging this grim war. The recent debate over EU military units destroying vessels that might be used by refugees to cross the Mediterranean addressed only one of many reactionary proposals. Billions of euros are being spent on attempts to reinforce the EU's borders on land, sea and in the air. Because there is no legal way for refugees to apply for asylum in Europe from their home country, the price for getting into the EU is high, with refugees and routes into Europe turned into commodities. The people smugglers are already seen as the only realistic way for refugees to get to Europe and the higher the fences and more militarized the borders become, the more refugees will be forced to rely on the traffickers. The risks are extremely high—during the past 15 years over 23,000 people have died attempting to make the journey, according to the Migrant Files project.

### The Role of Frontex

The creation of Fortress Europe through systematic militarization of the borders is an ongoing process, led by Frontex, an EU agency headquartered in Warsaw. In an effort to create a common EU border policy, Frontex provides data and analysis and assigns individual nation states responsibility for particular EU border security measures. Revolutionaries call for the destruction of Frontex, a racist institution which cannot be reformed.

The level of cynicism involved in EU border security was displayed in the discussions of summer 2014 regarding Mare Nostrum—an operation in which the Italian navy rescued more than 140,000 people from the sea. When the EU refused to meet the Italian government's request for funding, the operation was transferred to Frontex—and

renamed Frontex Plus—without any statutory authority to carry out sea rescue missions.

### **Pull Back, Push Back: European Values in Border Security Policy**

The following accurately describes the situation on the EU's external frontier prior to the recent headlines about drowned refugees:

"NGOs and other organizations have however reported for years cases where military vessels or the coast guard intercept refugee boats at sea, and so prevent the people on board entering Europe. At times this is done through the use of armed force, at others by hauling the boats back into waters that do not belong to the EU. Such operations are called Push Backs—and they can end fatally."

—Schiffbruch, by W. Grenz, J. Lehmann and S. Keßler, p. 86 [our translation]

"Push Backs" are integral to racist Fortress Europe. Italy, Greece and Spain all participate, despite it being contrary to EU law. On land routes, refugees arriving in Bulgaria and Greece from Turkey are frequently forced to turn back. Spanish guards attack anyone attempting to climb over the border fences at Ceuta and Melilla with rubber bullets and batons. Injuries and deaths are an inevitable part of the process. This unrestrained state violence is designed to deter those seeking refuge in Europe.

"Pull Back" is a term for collaboration between transit countries and EU authorities. Under Pull Back arrangements, EU member states request that these "third countries" detain refugees on their territory. This policy is underpinned by so-called readmission agreements with the countries concerned.

"There is no official overview of which individual EU member states have concluded such agreements with which third countries. Some of the texts are not even officially published. Each EU country can act as it pleases on this issue."

—*ibid*, p. 93 [our translation]

### **The Distribution of Refugees in Europe**

Within the EU there is much dispute over how refugees are distributed between the member nations. The Mediterranean countries like Greece and Italy are not happy with the existing arrangements, although this is not motivated by concerns over the right of refugees to enter or for their safety. EU policy is characterized by racist, rightist slogans, with refugees depicted as burdens and expenses, and the right to asylum undermined by mass deportations and expedited hearings.

The EU's Schengen Agreement permits EU citizens to move freely and to live anywhere in the European Union. In contrast, under the Dublin Agreement, refugees may only stay in the country where they filed for asylum. Debates over accommodation, the administrative load and the treatment of refugees while their applications are processed are contaminated by cynicism, racism and attacks on democratic rights.

Hungary's reactionary government, cheered on by racist groups in Germany, has erected a fence to block the oncoming wave of refugees. Revelations of the mistreatment of refugees by Hungarian police have been used to divert attention from similar actions by German federal police in Hanover. This exposes the bogus claims by the

ruling class about how much Germany is doing for the refugees. Private security companies, well known in some parts of Germany for employing Nazis and racists, are assigned to protect refugee housing. It is unfortunately not surprising that photos and reports of continuing abuse of refugees have become commonplace.

Many refugees originate in countries shattered by crisis and war and are in need of psychological support. But German authorities, wielding the restrictive Asylum Seekers Benefits Act, refuse to provide such urgently needed help. Penny-pinching restrictions also limit the treatment of physical illnesses.

### **Brain Drain as Imperialist Strategy**

The repeated calls for "highly skilled migrants" and the use of this criterion to select refugees are hypocritical and racist. Most refugees stuck in agonizingly long asylum processes are unable to work. Even if an asylum seeker is offered a job, it is first necessary to check that no EU citizens or previously approved refugees want the position. Brain drain—imperialist countries skimming off workers who earned their qualifications elsewhere—undermines the countries of origin and parallels the exploitative acquisition of raw materials.

### **Refugee Protests**

Refugees have begun to resist this systematic harassment, raising their voices and staging political protests. In Berlin, the occupation of public squares has raised awareness. In Hamburg, tens of thousands have gone onto the streets in solidarity with "Lampedusa in Hamburg," a group fighting for a future for migrants free of arbitrary bureaucracy, racist police street checks and the whole inhumane asylum process.

Since early 2015, Hamburg's SPD-dominated Senate has avoided addressing the crisis, joined by the Greens, despite some involvement in anti-racist and refugee protests. The SPD's feigned sympathy for refugees is clearly aimed only at restoring Germany's reputation from the damage done by imperialist diktats to Greece.

Revolutionaries stand in solidarity with the refugees. The social power of the working class is key in the struggle against Fortress Europe. International solidarity not only means support to global imperialism's victims in the abstract, but also concrete assistance in Germany to those who have fled here. Revolutionaries should counter attempts by German capital to exploit refugees as cheap labor through recruiting them into the trade-union movement. This is the only way to prevent a "race to the bottom" in which refugees are blamed by local workers for falling wages and unemployment.

We stand for the abolition of all racist immigration laws and the special procedures for non-EU citizens. Racism and nationalism are ideological pillars which sustain capitalism and poisons which divide and cripple the global working class.

Fortress Europe must be destroyed from within. It safeguards the imperialist interests of Europe's capitalist rulers. A revolutionary internationalist workers' movement, along with each of its national components, must demonstrate to the victims of capitalist exploitation within and without the walls of the fortress that they have common interests. The suffering inflicted on refugees on a daily basis can ultimately only be ended by the overthrow of the entire global capitalist system. ■

# Middle East...

*continued from page 2*

and secular Baathists than to take a chance on the socially-conservative religious opposition.<sup>2</sup>

The U.S., like its regional allies, is anxious to bring down a regime that is both Russia's only Middle East ally and a critical link between Iran and Hezbollah, whose fighters bested the Zionist military in 2006. The Damascus-Moscow connection dates back to the 1940s, when Syria's rulers refused to agree to American oil giant Aramco's plans for a "Trans-Arabian Pipeline" to bring Saudi oil to the Mediterranean. In 1949, as a result, Syria had the distinction of being the first country to be targeted for a CIA "regime change" coup.<sup>3</sup> The coup failed, as did several subsequent attempts, due to a developing alliance between Syria's Baathist regime and the security apparatus of the Soviet Union. This relationship has continued to this day, and with it Syria's role as an obstacle to the ambitions of American oil giants and their regional allies.

## Oil Money & Imperial Geopolitics

In a 2014 article in the U.S. *Armed Forces Journal*, Major Robert Taylor of the U.S. Command and General Staff College at Fort Leavenworth observed that rather than a sectarian or religious conflict, the "real explanation" of the current Syrian conflagration is all "about money":

"In 2009, Qatar proposed to run a natural gas pipeline through Syria and Turkey to Europe. Instead, Assad forged a pact with Iraq and Iran to run a pipeline eastward, allowing those Shia-dominated countries access to the European natural gas market while denying access to Sunni Saudi Arabia and Qatar. The latter states, it appears, are now attempting to remove Assad so they can control Syria and run their own pipeline through Turkey."

"Viewed through a geopolitical and economic lens, the conflict in Syria is not a civil war, but the result of larger international players positioning themselves on the geopolitical chessboard in preparation for the opening of the pipeline in 2016. Assad's pipeline decision, which could seal the natural gas advantage for the three Shia states, also demonstrates Russia's links to Syrian petroleum and the region through Assad. Saudi Arabia and Qatar, as well as al Qaeda and other groups, are maneuvering to depose Assad and capitalize on their hoped-for Sunni conquest in Damascus. By doing this, they hope to gain a share of control over the 'new' Syrian government, and a share in the pipeline wealth."

—*Armed Forces Journal*, 21 March 2014

Jockeying over transit routes to Europe by foreign interests seeking to profit from the energy deposits of the region is nothing new; the struggle for control of Middle East oil has been a central concern of imperialist planners for well over a century.

In May 1903, as the British navy was beginning to shift from coal to oil as a fuel source, the foreign secretary, Lord Lansdowne, told the House of Lords:

"The British government would 'regard the establishment of a naval base or of a fortified port in the Persian Gulf by any other power as a very grave menace to Brit-

ish interests, and we should certainly resist it with all the means at our disposal.' This declaration, said a delighted Lord Curzon, Viceroy of India, was 'our Monroe Doctrine in the Middle East'."

—quoted in Daniel Yergin, *The Prize: The Epic Quest for Oil, Money, and Power*, 1991

Oil is far easier and cheaper to store and load, and most importantly it has twice coal's thermal content, which, according to a 1923 account by Winston Churchill, First Lord of the Admiralty during World War I, conferred "inestimable" advantages: "The use of oil made it possible in every type of vessel to have more gun-power and more speed for less size or less cost." There was, however, one problem—while England had plenty of coal, it had no oil, which presented:

"the more intangible problems of markets and monopolies. The oil supplies of the world were in the hands of vast oil trusts under foreign control. To commit the navy irrevocably to oil was indeed to 'take arms against a sea of troubles.' ... If we overcame the difficulties and surmounted the risks, we should be able to raise the whole power and efficiency of the navy to a definitely higher level; better ships, better crews, higher economies, more intense forms of war-power—in a word, mastery itself was the prize of the venture."

—Winston Churchill, *The World Crisis*, Part One  
1911-1914

The difficulties were overcome by appropriating Middle East oil:

"We could only fight our way forward, and finally we found our way to the Anglo-Persian Oil agreement and contract, which for an initial investment of two millions [pounds sterling] of public money ... has not only secured to the Navy a very substantial proportion of its oil supply, but has led to the acquisition by the Government of a controlling share in oil properties and interests which are at present valued at scores of millions sterling..."

—*Ibid.*

Imperial domination ensured that, despite amazing natural wealth, the region remained relatively backward, while foreign corporations raked off the bulk of the revenues. The colonial rulers relied on pliable local agents (often elevated to hereditary monarchs) who, in exchange for foreign support and a cut of the spoils, would ensure that the shareholders of the multinational oil corporations derived most of the benefit from petroleum development.

By the end of World War II, the U.S. had displaced Britain and France as the dominant imperialist power in the Middle East. In an October 1950 letter to King Ibn Saud, U.S. President Harry Truman declared:

"I wish to renew to Your Majesty the assurances which have been made to you several times in the past, that the United States is interested in the preservation of the independence and territorial integrity of Saudi Arabia. No threat to your Kingdom could occur which would not be a matter of immediate concern to the United States."

—quoted in Yergin, *op. cit.*

The imperialist godfathers have always been particularly concerned by the "threat" that the peoples of the region might somehow gain control of the natural wealth of their own countries. On 5 January 1957, U.S. President Dwight Eisenhower delivered a "Special Message to the

Congress on the Situation in the Middle East” promising military aid for any regime facing “armed aggression.” In July 1958, when the Hashemite monarchy imposed by the British in 1921 was overthrown in a coup organized by Iraqi nationalist “Free Officers,” Eisenhower dispatched American troops to Lebanon, while British soldiers landed in Jordan. Ostensibly tasked with ensuring peace and stability, their real purpose was to safeguard Western control of Iraq’s oil:

“That Iraq was the real target [of these deployments] was indicated by a report from the New York *Herald Tribune* that initially the U.S. government gave ‘strong consideration’ to ‘military intervention to undo the coup in Iraq.’ According to the *New York Times*, the U.S. and British leaders jointly decided that: ‘Intervention will not be extended to Iraq as long as the revolutionary government in Iraq respects Western oil interests.’”

—*Beyond the Storm: A Gulf Crisis Reader*, 1991

Western security and intelligence agencies have, for decades, utilized the forces of Islamic reaction to counter potential threats to imperial holdings from leftist or nationalist movements. An early model for such operations came in Iran, after Mohammad Mossadeq nationalized the assets of Anglo-Iranian Oil (now known as British Petroleum—BP) in 1951. After initially warning Britain not to intervene, the U.S. set about organizing “regime change” when it became clear that Mossadeq had no intention of sharing Iranian oil with American corporations.

After Mossadeq was successfully removed in 1953, the Pahlavi monarchy, originally established by a military coup in 1925, was restored. For the next quarter century Iran was a key pillar of American domination of the Middle East. The underground Devotees of Islam who had fiercely opposed Mossadeq’s modernization plans, and actively supported the CIA’s coup, were equally hostile to the Shah’s “White Revolution” of 1963, which introduced limited social and economic reforms. Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, who had personally participated in the events of 1953 alongside the Devotees of Islam, was sent into exile and, in 1978, emerged as the leader of the reactionary Islamist revolution that overthrew the Pahlavi dynasty and severed Iran’s ties to the U.S.

### Origins of Jihadi Terror: CIA Militarization of Afghan Reaction

The loss of its Iranian client regime, which had served both as a bulwark of reaction and imperialist enforcer in the Persian Gulf, was a major setback for the U.S. In January 1980 President Jimmy Carter enunciated the “Carter doctrine” in response to the “grave threat to the free movement of Middle East oil” posed by Soviet military intervention in landlocked Afghanistan. Carter observed that the Middle East is of “great strategic importance. It contains more than two-thirds of the world’s exportable oil,” which the U.S. was naturally entitled to control:

“Let our position be absolutely clear. An attempt by any outside force to gain control of the Persian Gulf region will be regarded as an assault on the vital interests of the United States of America, and such an assault will be repelled by any means necessary, including military force.”

—quoted in Yergin, *op. cit.*

The Soviet intervention in Afghanistan in the 1980s had nothing to do with access to the Persian Gulf, as Carter was well aware. It was intended to defend a friendly government against an armed revolt by Islamic reactionaries recruited and equipped by the CIA. The Afghan “freedom fighters,” as the Western press described them, were enraged by the pro-Soviet regime’s plans to educate girls, reduce the bride price and introduce a modest land reform. The U.S. objective was to contain and degrade the degenerated Soviet workers’ state:

“In their quest to defeat the pro-Soviet Afghan government and the Soviet military stationed in Afghanistan, the United States, the Federal Republic of Germany and other NATO member countries banked, not only on the Afghan Mujahidin, but also Arab jihadists, including Osama bin Laden. The then little known Osama bin Laden, and the other jihadists were promoted with Saudi Arabia’s financial and logistical support. The head of Saudi foreign intelligence at the time and Bin Laden’s contact person, Prince Turki al Faisal bin Abdulaziz al Saud played a major role. Today, he provides his political expertise to the ‘Advisory Council’ of the Munich Security Conference.”

—*German Foreign Policy*, 28 May 2015

The success of the CIA, working with Saudi and Pakistani intelligence, in forging the Afghan *mujahedin* into an effective military formation provided valuable lessons for future “regime change” interventions, including the attempt to topple Assad. Every such intervention comes with its own “humanitarian” public-relations cover story, but in the Middle East the fundamental objective—control of the resources of the region—remains a constant.<sup>4</sup>

The Afghan jihadis who overthrew the secular left-nationalist regime in Kabul paved the way for the eventual rule of the Taliban, while Osama bin Laden and other *mujahedin* cadres formed al Qaeda to drive the Western invaders from the Muslim world. The corporate media treated bin Laden’s popularity in the Middle East in the aftermath of the criminal destruction of the World Trade Center in 2001 as inexplicable, but as we observed at the time:

“The explanation for this is pretty simple: bin Laden’s program is in tune with what most people in the area want. He has pledged to call off Al Qaeda’s *jihad* against the U.S. if three conditions are met. First, U.S. forces must leave Saudi Arabia, home to Mecca and Medina, Islam’s two most holy sites. The second condition is that the sanctions against Iraq, that have killed over a million people, be ended. Thirdly, bin Laden demands an Israeli withdrawal from the West Bank, Gaza and East Jerusalem and the creation of a Palestinian state in these territories.

“Most Americans wouldn’t find these demands objectionable, which is why they have been virtually blacked out [in the media]. Bin Laden’s ultimate program is of course to impose fundamentalist Islamic regimes throughout the Middle East, but as a first step his chief concern is to expel the ‘infidels’ from the region.”

—“Imperialism’s Bloody Trail,” 1917 No. 24, bolshevik.org

### UN/U.S./UK War Criminals Devastate Iraq

The destruction of Iraqi society that has unfolded over the past quarter century began with the United Nations’

1991 “Gulf War” against the country’s secular Baathist regime headed by Saddam Hussein. To avoid the overhead of a protracted occupation, the U.S.-led invaders pulled out after defeating the Iraqi army and sought to bring down the government by imposing economic sanctions.

The regime managed to survive, but the cost for Iraqi civilians was horrific. The United Nations Children’s Fund, UNICEF, estimated that these sanctions were responsible for at least 500,000 “excess” fatalities of children under five. When asked about this monstrous crime, Madeleine Albright, U.S. Secretary of State under Bill Clinton, replied simply: “We think the price is worth it.”

This massive and indiscriminate atrocity was, of course, swept under the rug by the Western media. By comparison, the horrific in-your-face ISIS videos of suicide bombings, executions and beheadings seem small-scale and personalized. The grotesque hypocrisy of imperialist “human-rights” advocates willing to quietly engineer the death of tens of thousands of innocents in a defenseless neocolony almost defies belief. John Pilger aptly described the detached psychotic attitude of the contemporary leaders of the “free world”:

“there is a vapid, almost sociopathic verbosity from Cameron, Hollande, Obama and their ‘coalition of the willing’ as they prescribe more violence delivered from 30,000 feet on places [in Iraq] where the blood of previous adventures never dried.”

—“From Pol Pot to ISIS: The blood never dried”

The U.S. objective in Iraq was to establish a powerful military presence in the heart of the Middle East to exert direct control over the region’s vast petroleum resources. Some strategists proposed that this could best be accomplished by redrawing the map of the Arab Middle East. In September 2002, six months before the second U.S. invasion of Iraq, the CIA-connected Stratfor think-tank reported that Vice President Dick Cheney and Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz were discussing the possibility of using ethnic conflicts to break up Iraq and “justify [America’s] long-term and heavy military presence” in the Middle East:

“The new government’s attempts to establish control over all of Iraq may well lead to a civil war between Sunni, Shia and Kurdish ethnic groups, with US troops caught in the middle. The fiercest fighting could be expected for control over the oil facilities. But uniting Jordan and Iraq under a Hashemite government may give Washington several strategic advantages.

“First, the creation of a new pro-US kingdom under the half-British Abdullah [king of Jordan] would shift the balance of forces in the region heavily in the US favor. After eliminating Iraq as a sovereign state, there would be no fear that one day an anti-American government would come to power in Baghdad, as the capital would be in Amman [Jordan]. Current and potential US geopolitical foes Iran, Saudi Arabia and Syria would be isolated from each other, with big chunks of land between them under control of the pro-US forces.

“Equally important, Washington would be able to justify its long-term and heavy military presence in the region as necessary for the defense of a young new state asking for US protection—and to secure the stability of oil markets and supplies. That in turn would help the United States gain direct control of Iraqi oil and replace Saudi oil in case of conflict with Riyadh.”

—*ProFuture Investments*

The conquest and occupation of Iraq in 2003 by the U.S., with its British sidekick at the head of a “coalition of the willing,” shattered the existing state and devastated much of what remained of the country’s social and physical infrastructure. An estimated half-million Iraqis were killed in the invasion and the resulting chaos and sectarian bloodletting.

After toppling Saddam Hussein, U.S. authorities soon began talking about the possibility of regime change for neighboring Syria and Iran, both of which had previously been cooperating with the U.S. in its “Global War on Terror.” This led Damascus and Tehran to do what they could to support any Iraqi grouping, whether Sunni or Shia, that was prepared to actively resist the occupation.

The extent and effectiveness of the Iraqi resistance caught U.S. planners by surprise and turned the whole venture into a gigantic and costly failure. In an attempt to win the support of the majority Shia population, occupation authorities dissolved the entire civilian administrative apparatus of the Baathist regime, as well as the military and police force. This proved a serious miscalculation. The Shia masses refused to embrace the occupiers as liberators, and by the first anniversary of the invasion, Shia militias joined Sunni fighters in active resistance:

“‘We’ve been treating this until now as a series of incidents—Saddam (Hussein) loyalists and this or that,’ says Bruce Jentleson ... a former State Department official.... ‘What we’re facing now is a broad insurrection that’s rooted in groups with their own differences sharing an increasingly strong anti-Americanism.’

“In recent days, there have been reports of collaboration between rival Sunni and Shiite factions in Iraq, united by their opposition to the U.S. occupation.”

—*USA Today*, 13 April 2004

Muqtada Al Sadr’s powerful Shia militia, the Mahdi Army, which fought a pitched battle with U.S. forces in the Iraqi city of Najaf in August 2004, actively organized support for Sunni insurgents in Fallujah when British and American forces attacked the city in November 2004.

## Iraq’s Descent into Communalism

Everything changed in February 2006, when the destruction of the al-Askari mosque, an important Shia shrine in Samarra, set off an orgy of communal bloodletting. It is unclear who the perpetrators were—occupation authorities blamed al Qaeda, which denied responsibility, while Iran and Hezbollah pointed the finger at U.S. and Israeli intelligence agents. What is clear is that the architects of this crime succeeded in driving a deep wedge between Shia and Sunni communities.

The Madhi Army took the lead in Shia revenge attacks:

“Thousands of tortured bodies were picked up in the streets of Baghdad over the next two years. For Sunni, Muqtada became a living symbol of the perpetrators of these atrocities against them, though he says the Mehdi Army was by then out of his control and he stood the militiamen down in 2007.”

—*Independent*, 6 March 2013

The murderous communalism that engulfed Iraq provided an opening for the rapid growth of al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), the progenitor of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). AQI was led by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, who



began his career with the Afghan *mujahedin* in the late 1980s. Zarqawi foreshadowed ISIS with his flamboyant and seemingly nihilistic tactics—at one point AQI released video footage of him sawing off an American captive's head. The leadership of al Qaeda was not pleased:

"In 2005, for example, al-Qaeda leaders sent messages advising Zarqawi to stop publicizing his horrors. They used modern strategy jargon—'more than half of this battle is taking place in the battlefield of the media'—and told him that the 'lesson' of Afghanistan was that the Taliban had lost because they had relied—like Zarqawi—on too narrow a sectarian base."

—*New York Review of Books*, 13 August 2015

In an attempt to defuse popular resentment, the U.S. occupation authorities installed a puppet government headed by Nouri Al Maliki, a leading Shia politician. But Maliki's corrupt regime soon alienated Kurds, Sunnis and even many Shia:

"Theft of public money and incompetence on a gargantuan scale means the government fails to provide adequate electricity, clean water or sanitation. One-third of the labour force is unemployed and, when you include those under-employed, the figure is over half. Even those who do have a job have often obtained it by bribery. 'I feared seven or eight years ago that Iraq would become like Nigeria,' says one former minister, 'but in fact it is far worse.' He cited as evidence a \$1.3bn contract for an electricity project signed by a minister with a Canadian company that had only a nominal existence—and a German company that was bankrupt."

—*Independent*, 3 March 2013

While Washington officially disapproved of the sectarianism and venality of Maliki's regime,<sup>5</sup> what really distressed U.S. planners was watching their supposed puppet drift into an increasingly close alignment with Tehran's theocratic rulers, whose weight in the region increased substantially with the elimination of the Iraqi Baathists, Iran's most formidable Arab rival in the Persian Gulf.

To offset Tehran's rising influence, the U.S. executed a maneuver designed to simultaneously put a lid on resistance and provide a lever to counter Iranian influence in Iraq. In 2006 Washington began putting former Sunni insurgents in Anbar province on the U.S. payroll in what was advertised as the "Awakening" movement. The opportunity for this shift arose because Iraqi tribal leaders who had earlier treated AQI fighters as allies in resisting occupation fell out with the foreign-led jihadis.<sup>6</sup>

The turn in Syria was paralleled by a regional program, in cooperation with the Saudis, in which the U.S. began to covertly support Sunni jihadis combating Tehran and its allies. In 2007 Seymour Hersh quoted a former U.S. intelligence officer's observation that: "we're financing a lot of bad guys with some serious potential unintended consequences. It's a very high-risk venture." Hersh reported:

"To undermine Iran, which is predominantly Shiite, the Bush Administration has decided, in effect, to reconfigure its priorities in the Middle East.... The U.S. has also taken part in clandestine operations aimed at Iran and its ally Syria. A by-product of these activities has been the bolstering of Sunni extremist groups that espouse a militant vision of Islam and are hostile to America and sympathetic to Al Qaeda.

"One contradictory aspect of the new strategy is that,



KARIM KADIM—AP

#### October 2015: Shiite fighters mobilize in southern Iraq

in Iraq, most of the insurgent violence directed at the American military has come from Sunni forces, and not from Shiites. But, from the Administration's perspective, the most profound—and unintended—strategic consequence of the Iraq war is the empowerment of Iran."

—*New Yorker*, 5 March 2007

By 2010, al Qaeda in Iraq was on the ropes. But the sectarianism of the Shia-dominated government in Baghdad, which stopped funding Anbar's militias and began persecuting Sunni politicians and tribal leaders, helped AQI come back. Under a new leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, AQI recruited many officers from the disbanded Baathist army, as well as experienced tribal fighters who had earlier participated in the Awakening movement.<sup>7</sup>

The Sunni Islamist uprising that began in 2011 in Syria provided an important opening for AQI that Baghdadi quickly seized by sending in cadres, who organized a Syrian branch (Jabhat al-Nusra). By August 2012, a U.S. Department of Defense Information Report observed that jihadis (including al Qaeda) "are the major forces driving the insurgency in Syria."

#### Syrian Jihad: CIA as Quartermaster

The resilient Syrian insurgency is generally presented in the Western media as the outgrowth of spontaneous popular opposition to the regime. But successfully challenging Syria's formidable state apparatus required massive foreign support, orchestrated by the U.S. working



PHILIPPE WOJAZER—REUTERS

### French President François Hollande and Russian President Vladimir Putin at summit in Paris, October 2015

with its regional allies. As Hersh reported:

“The full extent of US co-operation with Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar in assisting the rebel opposition in Syria has yet to come to light. The Obama administration has never publicly admitted to its role in creating what the CIA calls a ‘rat line’, a back channel highway into Syria. The rat line, authorised in early 2012, was used to funnel weapons and ammunition from Libya via southern Turkey and across the Syrian border to the opposition. Many of those in Syria who ultimately received the weapons were jihadists, some of them affiliated with al-Qaida.”

—*London Review of Books*, Vol.36, No.8, 17 April 2014

Britain’s contribution to equipping the Syrian jihadists came to light in June 2015, when prosecutors in London were forced to drop a “terrorism” case against a Swedish citizen, Bherlin Gildo, after it was revealed that British intelligence had itself been working with the groups he was charged with helping (*Guardian*, 1 June 2015).

An unusually candid article in the *New York Times* (24 March 2013) revealed that more than 160 military cargo planes had delivered at least “3,500 tons of military equipment” to Syria’s “revolutionaries.” As in Afghanistan in the 1980s, the CIA was heavily involved: “David H. Petraeus, the C.I.A. director until November [2012], had been instrumental in helping to get this aviation network moving and had prodded various countries to work together on it.” Turkey played the same pivotal role in supporting the Syrian insurgents that Pakistan had for the Afghan *mujahedin* in the 1980s:

“The Turkish government has had oversight over much of the program, down to affixing transponders to trucks ferrying the military goods through Turkey so it might

monitor shipments as they move by land into Syria, officials said. The scale of shipments was very large, according to officials familiar with the pipeline and to an arms-trafficking investigator who assembled data on the cargo planes involved.”

—*Ibid.*

### Imperialists Engineer ‘Salafist Principality’

The August 2012 Department of Defense Information Report cited above contained the following projection:

“If the situation unravels there is the possibility of establishing a declared or undeclared Salafist principality in eastern Syria (Hasaka and Der Zor), and this is exactly what the supporting powers to the opposition want, in order to isolate the Syrian regime, which is considered the strategic depth of the Shia expansion (Iraq and Iran).”

It identified the jihadists’ “supporting powers” as “The West, Gulf countries, and Turkey,” and presciently anticipated that AQI “could also declare an Islamic State through its union with other terrorist organizations in Iraq and Syria.”

In 2013 Baghdadi announced that AQI and its Syrian affiliate had fused to launch ISIS. The refusal of a large section of the membership of Jabhat al-Nusra to go along with this led to bitter and continuing infighting. Yet this internecine warfare did not prevent ISIS from successfully seizing Ramadi and Fallujah in January 2014, which gave it control of Anbar Province. That same month, ISIS forces captured Raqqa in northeast Syria. In June 2014 a thousand ISIS fighters, outnumbered at least 15 to 1, stunned the world when they routed two Iraqi Army divisions and seized the important Iraqi city of Mosul, along with a sub-

stantial amount of abandoned military equipment. A few weeks later, on 30 June 2014, ISIS proclaimed a “caliphate” stretching from the gates of Baghdad, across Syria to the Turkish border.

This was not welcome news in Washington, where ISIS is viewed as a potential threat to the Saudis and other Persian Gulf imperial protectorates. In response, the U.S. moved closer to Baghdadi’s “moderate” jihadi rivals, particularly Jabhat al-Nusra (aka Nusra Front), al Qaeda’s Syrian franchise. Suddenly the corporate media began referring to Syria’s al Qaeda members as “moderate” opponents of the secular Assad regime. A recent *New York Times* article broached the fact that “the Qaeda-affiliated Nusra Front” is “among the groups benefiting from the enhanced firepower” from the CIA, and admitted that the “American-backed units calling themselves the Free Syrian Army” are effectively subordinated to al Qaeda’s Syrian branch:

“It is a tactical alliance that Free Syrian Army commanders describe as an uncomfortable marriage of necessity, because they cannot operate without the consent of the larger and stronger Nusra Front. But Mr. Assad and his allies cite the arrangement as proof that there is little difference between insurgent groups, calling them all terrorists that are legitimate targets.”

—*New York Times*, 12 October 2015

The premier journal of the U.S. foreign-policy establishment was somewhat more direct in explaining that Osama bin Laden’s organization has evolved into “the enemy of the United States’ enemy”:

“Since 9/11, Washington has considered al Qaeda the greatest threat to the United States, one that must be eliminated regardless of cost or time. After Washington killed Osama bin Laden in 2011, it made Ayman al-Zawahiri, al Qaeda’s new leader, its next number one target. But the instability in the Middle East following the Arab revolutions and the meteoric rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) require that Washington rethink its policy toward al Qaeda, particularly its targeting of Zawahiri. Destabilizing al Qaeda at this time may in fact work against U.S. efforts to defeat ISIS.”

—*Foreign Affairs*, 9 March 2015

The strategic objective of U.S. Middle East policy—domination of the region and its resources—remains a constant, but the tactics employed to achieve this end can change abruptly, as Muammar Qaddafi and Bashar al-Assad, both former “allies” in the “War on Terror,” discovered. The attitudes of the other major players in this conflict are generally less flexible. The Saudis and Iranians are locked into a rivalry for preeminence in the Persian Gulf, while Turkey, which jockey with Iran for influence in northern Iraq, and other territories once part of the Ottoman Empire, bitterly opposed the Saudis’ support for the 2013 coup that overthrew Egyptian President Mohamed Morsi, who had been elected as the Muslim Brotherhood candidate a year earlier.

### Russian Intervention—Changing the Calculus

In 2011 the Kremlin acquiesced to the NATO “regime change” in Libya that turned one of Africa’s most socially developed societies into a dystopic “failed state” ravaged by warlords and jihadi gangs.<sup>8</sup> On 30 September

2015, Russian planes intervened in the Syrian conflict aiming to prevent a repetition of that catastrophe. If the Assad regime fell, Russia would lose its naval base on the Mediterranean, Iran would be weakened and triumphant Islamic radicals would stand astride the Muslim world. Several hundred of the foreign jihadis currently in Syria hold Russian passports.<sup>9</sup> As Henry Kissinger recognized, a jihadi takeover of Syria/Iraq could destabilize Russia’s Muslim regions (*Wall Street Journal*, 16 October 2015).

The French response to the November 2015 terrorist attack that killed 130 in Paris, for which ISIS claimed responsibility, illuminated a potential fissure in the NATO alliance. While ramping up participation in the U.S. coalition’s attacks on ISIS positions, French President François Hollande simultaneously began praising Russia’s vigorous aerial campaign. During a visit to Moscow, Hollande floated the idea of uniting efforts in a single coalition, a proposal complicated by the fact that Russia and the U.S. are pursuing very different objectives in Syria.

France, like other European NATO members that have more exposure to the risk of domestic jihadi terror attacks, naturally tends to see the logic of the Russian/Iranian policy of destroying all components of the Islamist opposition in Iraq and Syria. The U.S., like its Saudi, Turkish and Qatari allies who helped arm and equip jihadis in order to weaken their regional Shia rivals, has been pursuing a delicate policy of containing, rather than destroying, the “Islamic State,” which it still sees as leverage in the struggle to topple Assad.

In the past the French bourgeoisie has been willing to steer a course independently of Washington—Charles De Gaulle pulled France out of NATO in 1966, and it only formally rejoined in 2009. There is, as yet, no indication that any similar development is imminent, but it is no secret that the blowback from the U.S.-led pursuit of “regime change” in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya and Syria has chiefly impacted America’s European allies.<sup>10</sup>

Putin’s decision to intervene militarily in support of Assad changed the dynamic of the conflict by putting direct pressure on the insurgents and their supply chain. It also boosted the morale of the Syrian Arab Army, which, strengthened by Iranian and Hezbollah reinforcements, began to slowly retake territory lost in the preceding period. The Russian intervention apparently caught the U.S. intelligence community by surprise and created consternation within the American bourgeoisie. The Senate Armed Services Committee hastily convened a hearing to discuss “Russian Strategy and Military Operations” in Syria. Senator John McCain, a perpetual advocate of American “boots on the ground,” characterized Russia’s Syrian intervention as “the latest disastrous turn in the Middle East as well as another humiliating setback for the United States.” His remarks reflected the exasperation of much of the ruling class:

“a few weeks ago the administration warned Russia not to send its forces to Syria. Russia did it anyway. The administration then tried to block Russia’s access to air space en route to Syria. It failed. The consequence? U.S. officials rushed into talks with Russia’s military to ‘deconflict’ in Syria. Our Secretary of State called Russia’s actions an ‘opportunity’ to cooperate because we share ‘fundamental principles’ and President Obama acquiesced to his first formal meeting in two years with

Vladimir Putin, undermining international efforts post-Crimea to isolate Russia, exactly as Putin desired. And how did Putin respond? By bombing U.S.-backed opposition groups in Syria."

McCain continued:

"We should also not be surprised if Putin expands his anti-American coalition's operations into Iraq, where they have already established an intelligence partnership with Baghdad. However this conflict ends, it must not involve Vladimir Putin shoring up his partners, crushing ours, destroying our remaining credibility in the Middle East and restoring Russia as a major power in this vital region as Putin wants. We cannot shy away from confronting Russia in Syria...."

McCain, an early and enthusiastic cheerleader for the ultra-rightist leadership of Ukraine's 2014 "Maidan revolution," proposed ways to make the Kremlin pay:

"But we should not confine our response to Syria. We must look to impose costs on Russia more broadly, including the provision of arms to Ukraine, the increase of targeted sanctions, and steps to deepen Russia's international isolation."

When Turkish jets downed a Russia SU-24 bomber attacking Islamist forces near the Syrian border in November 2015, informed commentators pointed to the likelihood of U.S. involvement (*Harper's Magazine*, 4 December 2015). Instead of contacting Moscow to apologize or offer an explanation, Ankara immediately appealed to NATO and the U.S., both of which promptly solidarized with Turkey's action. Rather than back down, the Kremlin redoubled attacks on the insurgents targeted by the original mission and imposed economic sanctions on Turkey. Russian air-defense capacity was also upgraded, and Putin publicly instructed the Russian military that henceforth "Any targets threatening our [military] group or land infrastructure [in Syria] must be immediately destroyed" (*RT*, 11 December 2015).

This episode highlights the risk that the Syrian conflict could lead to a direct military confrontation between the world's two leading nuclear powers. During a Republican Party presidential candidates' debate on 15 December 2015, New Jersey Governor Chris Christie breezily declared that if he were president he would impose a "no-fly" zone over Syria and shoot down any Russian planes that dared to violate it. Fellow Republican contender Rand Paul replied: "I think if you're in favor of World War III, you have your candidate" (*The Hill*).

The change in the relation of forces on the ground made the strategy of standing back and awaiting the Assad regime's inevitable collapse appear less viable. Given the massive unpopularity of further military adventures in the Middle East, America's rulers seem to have concluded that, at least for the moment, a "peace process" is the best option. The ostensible basis for negotiations is a shared desire to preempt the consolidation of a "terrorist caliphate."

Russia's intervention may have forced the Obama administration to recalibrate its tactics, but as both Washington and Moscow are well aware, their objectives in Syria are fundamentally incompatible. This is illustrated by the differing attitudes to al-Nusra. Assad and his backers regard the Nusra Front and their fellow jihadis, who make up the overwhelming majority of the armed opposition, as terrorists to be eradicated, while the White

House continues to coyly refer to them as "moderates." The U.S. has complained vociferously that Russian air attacks have focused on CIA-supported "moderate" militias rather than ISIS. The Russians counter that the U.S. air campaign against the Islamic State has shown few tangible results. In particular, the Kremlin pointed to the free flow of oil from Syrian and Iraqi wells held by ISIS to the Turkish black market.<sup>11</sup>

In 2014 numerous reports began to appear in the Western media about oil smuggling financing the Islamic State. CNN estimated that this activity was producing revenues of "at least \$2 million a day. This could fetch them more than \$730 million a year, enough to sustain the operation beyond Iraq" (CNN, 22 August 2014). Despite the attention, until the Russian planes arrived the convoys used to transport the oil were largely untouched, even though, according to the Royal Institute of International Affairs (aka Chatham House): "Some queues of tanker trucks have been reported to extend 2 kilometres." When Putin pointed this out at the November 2015 G-20 confab in Turkey, American representatives lamely explained that they had hesitated to hit the smugglers to avoid risking civilian casualties. But, embarrassed by the publicity, the policy changed and within a week the Pentagon announced that U.S. planes had destroyed a convoy of 116 trucks in eastern Syria.

To blunt the impact of Russia's military activity and slow down the progress of the Syrian army, the Pentagon, working through its Gulf State allies, began upgrading the opposition's weaponry:

"Insurgent commanders say that since Russia began air attacks in support of the Syrian government, they are receiving for the first time bountiful supplies of powerful American-made antitank missiles."

—*New York Times*, 12 October 2015

Walter Pincus of the *Washington Post* addressed concerns that backing away from demanding Assad's departure as a precondition for negotiations might mean "that President Obama has no strategy for Syria":

"There is and always has been a strategy. From 2011 it has been to end the regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, primarily through diplomatic rather than military means. Since 2012, the Obama strategy has been to use force to degrade and defeat the Islamic State."

—*Washington Post*, 2 November 2015

In fact, the U.S. has always been more concerned to enable and channel than to "degrade and destroy" the jihadi revolt. The "diplomatic" track was only embraced when Russian intervention began to roll back the insurrection. As Pincus observed, "What changed last week was not Obama's Syrian strategy, but some U.S. tactics—because they were not working." The objective remains "regime change":

"Defeating the Islamic State in Syria, under Obama's strategy, rests on enabling local Syrian forces not only to beat back Islamic State fighters but to hold freed territory until a new central government, established in Damascus, can take over."

—*Ibid.*

## Imperialists Propose Partitioning Syria

At the October 2015 Senate hearing, retired U.S. General John Keane suggested a means of giving a Syrian carve-up



UNITED NATION RELIEF AND WORKS AGENCY—GETTY IMAGES

### Damascus, 2014: Waiting for food in devastated Yarmouk refugee camp

a “humanitarian” spin:

“If we establish free zones—you know, for moderate opposition forces—but also sanctuaries for refugees, that gets world opinion support rather dramatically. If Putin is going to attack that, then world opinion is definitely against him.”

—*New Eastern Outlook*, 12 October 2015

At the Senate hearing John McCain noted the broad consensus within the American ruling class in favor of balkanizing Syria:

“As everyone from [former CIA head] David Petraeus to Hillary Clinton has advocated, we must rally an international coalition to establish enclaves in Syria to protect civilians and our moderate partners and do what is necessary to defend them.”

Richard Haass, editor of *Foreign Affairs* and president of the influential Council on Foreign Relations, observed that “Neither the US nor anyone else has a vital national interest in restoring a Syrian government that controls all of the country’s territory.” Haass concluded: “A Syria of enclaves or cantons may be the best possible outcome for now and the foreseeable future” (*Project Syndicate*, 15 October 2015).

In June 2015 Michael E. O’Hanlon of the Brookings Institution published a document entitled “Deconstructing Syria: A new strategy for America’s most hopeless war,” in which he proposed that “the only realistic path forward may be a plan that in effect deconstructs Syria.” The first step would be to have “American, as well as Saudi and Turkish and British” special forces assist “moderate oppositionists” in establishing “reliable safe zones within Syria” that would “never again have to face the prospect of rule by either Assad or ISIL.”<sup>12</sup>

In the abstract the idea of balkanizing Syria into a welter of mini-states run by local warlords or Islamist militias might seem like a tidy solution to a messy problem. But one of the difficulties of getting allies and vassals to do the heavy lifting is that they have a tendency to want to pursue their own, frequently mutually exclusive, agendas. Turkey and Saudi Arabia took different sides in the conflict between the Egyptian military and the Muslim Brotherhood, while Saudi and Qatari-funded jihadi militias battled each other in Syria. And then there is the prospect of a Zionist oil protectorate on the Golan Heights, which is likely to be extremely poorly received by America’s various Muslim coalition partners.<sup>13</sup>

### Turks, Kurds & Imperialists in Syrian Matrix

O’Hanlon proposes that the partition of Syria should be “undertaken in the safest zones first—perhaps in Kurdish areas.” This is because Kurdish fighters, with extensive U.S. air support, successfully drove ISIS out of their territory in northeastern Syria.

The Kurdish people have historically been brutally oppressed by the rulers of Turkey, Syria, Iraq and Iran, whose borders run across the Kurdish homeland. Ankara is fiercely opposed to the creation of anything remotely resembling a Kurdish statelet in Syria—particularly as the dominant force there are the fighters of the People’s Protection Units (YPG, the military arm of the Democratic Union Party [PYD]). The PYD is the Syrian affiliate of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), a petty-bourgeois left-nationalist guerrilla formation based in southeast Turkey.

The Turkish military has made repeated attempts to eradicate the PKK over the past 30 years, during which



DAVID MESEGUER

### YPG fighters on the frontline in Afrin region

more than 40,000 people, mostly Kurds, have been killed. This campaign has cost Ankara hundreds of millions of dollars, yet the PKK remains a potent factor in the region. The YPG/PYD initially sought to stay out of the civil war between the hated Assad regime and the Sunni insurgents. After Assad pulled his troops out of Kurdish areas in late 2012, the YPG took the lead in organizing minorities threatened by jihadis:

“KDP-S [Kurdish Democratic Party of Syria, affiliated with Massoud Barzani’s corrupt Kurdistan Democratic Party] member Mohammed Ismail, based in Qamishli, told *Al-Monitor* he is worried: ‘We have discussed this with other components of this region, Assyrians, Arabs most of them, who support the regime accept this project, but those who are with the Syrian revolution don’t support this.’”

“The YPG is the only militia that is capable of holding ground and fights off al-Qaeda-affiliated groups, which led to more support for the PYD among not only Syria’s Kurds, but also local Arabs and Christians.”

— *Al-Monitor*, 12 November 2013

When ISIS fighters swept through large parts of Syria and Iraq, the PKK saw an opportunity to break out of diplomatic isolation by providing protection for foreign energy corporations involved in the operation of oil fields near the Iraqi city of Kirkuk. PKK fighters also rescued members of the Kurdish-speaking Yezidi minority who had

been trapped on Mount Sinjar by ISIS and whose plight was heavily advertised in the Western media as a means of building support for intervention.

When ISIS besieged the Kurdish town of Kobanê on Syria’s northern border in autumn 2014, the Turks refused to allow munitions and reinforcements for the YPG defenders to cross the border, despite outpourings of “humanitarian” concern by U.S. officials. After a desperate struggle, Kurdish fighters, with U.S. air support, eventually succeeded in breaking the siege of Kobanê, while Turkish air strikes ignored ISIS in favor of targeting PKK bases in Iraq.

For years Washington has been supplying Ankara with intelligence on the PKK, which remains on the official U.S. list of “terrorist” organizations. But the Turks’ focus on attacking America’s Kurdish allies instead of ISIS created tensions that led to a deal in July 2015, with Washington turning a blind eye to Turkish attacks on the PKK/YPG in exchange for access to Turkey’s Incirlik air base near the Syrian frontier. Strategically, Ankara is a far more important ally, but the YPG/PKK fighters remain critical to containing ISIS. For the time being, Washington has sought to work around the problem by pretending that the YPG and PKK are separate entities:

“Obama administration officials acknowledged the PKK and YPG have links and coordinate with each other in the fight against Islamic State, but they said the U.S. continues to formally shun the PKK while dealing directly with

YPG. The groups operate under separate command structures and have different objectives, the officials said."

—*Wall Street Journal*, 24 July 2015

This corresponds to the PKK's official characterization of its branches in Iraq, Syria and Iran as autonomous formations, but in reality they operate as a single, closely integrated, entity:

"It's all PKK but different branches,' Ms. Ruken [a 24-year-old 'battle-hardened guerrilla'] said, clad in fatigues in her encampment atop Sinjar Mountain this spring as a battle with Islamic State fighters raged less than a mile away at the mountain's base. 'Sometimes I'm a PKK, sometimes I'm a PJAK [PKK's Iranian branch], sometimes I'm a YPG. It doesn't really matter. They are all members of the PKK."

—*Ibid.*

### PKK's Utopian Municipalism & Kurdish Right to Self-Determination

The PKK and its imprisoned founder, Abdullah Öcalan, claim to have rejected the Maoist-Stalinist monolithic organizational model in favor of anarcho-localism, to the delight of many foreign leftists who celebrate the "democratic experiment" underway in the PYD/YPG's Rojava Cantons. Well-known anarchist academic David Graeber wrote:

"The autonomous region of Rojava, as it exists today, is one of few bright spots—albeit a very bright one—to emerge from the tragedy of the Syrian revolution. Having driven out agents of the Assad regime in 2011, and despite the hostility of almost all of its neighbours, Rojava has not only maintained its independence, but is a remarkable democratic experiment. Popular assemblies have been created as the ultimate decision-making bodies, councils selected with careful ethnic balance ... and, in a remarkable echo of the armed *Mujeres Libres* (Free Women) of Spain, a feminist army, the 'YJA Star' militia (the 'Union of Free Women', the star here referring to the ancient Mesopotamian goddess Ishtar), that has carried out a large proportion of the combat operations against the forces of Islamic State."

—*Guardian*, 8 October 2014

Rojava's local councils administer the provision of the goods and services necessary for survival under conditions of civil war. Residents have, by all accounts, a significant amount of democratic control of local organization, and there is an attempt to vigorously enforce equal rights for women, as well as for ethnic and religious minorities. But such measures do not pose a serious threat to the survival of existing class and clan structures. Article 41 of the Constitution of the Rojava Cantons clearly upholds property rights:

"Everyone has the right to the use and enjoyment of his private property. No one shall be deprived of his property except upon payment of just compensation, for reasons of public utility or social interest, and in the cases and according to the forms established by law."

In its 1978 founding statement, the PKK declared that it intended:

"to establish a Democratic People's Dictatorship in an Independent and Unified Kurdistan and eventually to

create a classless society. The Kurdistan National Liberation Struggle, which is conducted by the PKK, is an inseparable segment of the world socialist revolution strengthened by the socialist countries, national liberation movements and working class movements."

—quoted in Gullistan Yarkin, "The ideological transformation of the PKK regarding the political economy of the Kurdish region in Turkey", *Kurdish Studies*, Vol. 3, No. 1, May 2015

Graeber treats the PKK's substitution of utopian municipalism for the goal of Kurdish self-determination as a major advance:

"The PKK has declared that it no longer even seeks to create a Kurdish state. Instead, inspired in part by the vision of social ecologist and anarchist Murray Bookchin, it has adopted the vision of 'libertarian municipalism', calling for Kurds to create free, self-governing communities, based on principles of direct democracy, that would then come together across national borders—that it is hoped would over time become increasingly meaningless."

Öcalan's apparent jailhouse conversion to anarchist pipe dreams of capitalist state power melting away semi-spontaneously has been incorporated as a key element of the PKK's new "democratic modernity" doctrine based on modifying, rather than abolishing, capitalist property relations and the exploitation that flows from them. Öcalan puts it like this:

"We cannot acknowledge capitalism as an economic system. Maybe we cannot totally abolish it; but we can change and erode it; we can construct our own economic system."

—quoted in Yarkin, *op. cit.*

The PKK is only one of many organizations that, after the triumph of counterrevolution in the degenerated Soviet workers' state, arrived at overtly reformist conclusions in the attempt to find a "third road" between capitalism and socialism.<sup>14</sup>

Marxists uphold the right of the Kurdish nation to self-determination, as well as their right, in Kobanê and elsewhere, to defend themselves against those who would oppress or annihilate them—including ISIS, al-Nusra or the Turkish military. Most ostensibly Marxist political tendencies are in agreement on this point. An exception is the increasingly idiosyncratic Spartacist League/U.S. and its satellite sections in the International Communist League (ICL) who have decided that PYD collaboration with the U.S. military (receiving munitions and supplying coordinates for air strikes to soften up ISIS positions) has turned it into an imperialist proxy. Öcalan's ideological flexibility would undoubtedly incline him to jump at the opportunity to sign on as a junior partner in an imperialist coalition to reconfigure the Middle East (particularly if it meant getting out of jail). But the PKK has not been invited to the table. At this point the PKK/YPG remains an independent political factor—the degree of tactical cooperation it has engaged in thus far falls short of strategic integration with or subordination to the U.S. imperialist coalition.

This is not likely to change as long as Turkey is deemed a more valuable ally than Öcalan's fighters, which is why Washington has not attempted to obstruct Ankara's campaign to eradicate the PKK. At the same time, U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry claimed credit for the YPG/

PKK's success against ISIS in a 28 October 2015 speech to the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace:

"In northern Syria, the coalition and its partners [i.e., YPG/PKK] have pushed Daesh [ISIS] out of more than 17,000 square kilometers of territory, and we have secured the Turkish-Syrian border east of the Euphrates River. That's about 85 percent of the Turkish border, and the President is authorizing further activities to secure the rest...."

"We're also enhancing our air campaign in order to help drive Daesh, which once dominated the Syria-Turkey border, out of the last 70-mile stretch that it controls."

—U.S. Department of State

Ankara has a complicated relationship with its imperial patron. The Turkish ruling class, which aspires to annex as much territory in bordering regions of Iraq and Syria as possible, regards the prospect of an independent Kurdistan, or even the consolidation of a PKK-dominated statelet in northern Syria, as an existential threat. It therefore vehemently opposes any further progress by the PKK/YPG "coalition partners" along "the last 70-mile stretch" of the Syrian border that ISIS controls.

Despite its antipathy for any form of Kurdish self-rule, Ankara has developed close commercial and political relations with the "Kurdistan Regional Government" (KRG) in northern Iraq, a corrupt U.S. protectorate established in 1991 and run by the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP). The leaders of the KRG, who share Ankara's bitter hostility for the PKK/YPG, would like to formalize their independence from Baghdad.

The U.S. would like its Turkish ally to engage ISIS on the ground in Syria, but President Recep Tayyip Erdogan is only prepared to venture into this potential quagmire if the U.S. first imposes an ongoing "no-fly zone" over northern Syria, including the "70-mile stretch" separating the two YPG/PKK enclaves. Despite Washington's desire to see Turkish troops intervene in the Syrian conflict, it is not inclined to guarantee air support. With Russian planes active against ISIS positions close to the Turkish border, any attempt to impose a "no-fly" zone could risk a great deal for very little.

YPG control of the entire border would have a significant impact on the outcome of the struggle by severing the "humanitarian corridor" through which volunteers, arms and supplies reach the rebels. It would further complicate Islamic State oil exports to the Turkish black market. Ankara is alarmed that both Moscow and Washington appear ready to support any attempt by the YPG/PYD to wrest control of the remaining section of the border from ISIS:

"Turkey has warned the United States and Russia it will not tolerate Kurdish territorial gains by Kurdish militia close to its frontiers in north-western Syria, two senior officials said.

"This is clear cut for us and there is no joking about it,' one official said of the possibility of Syrian Kurdish militia crossing the Euphrates to extend control along Turkish borders from Iraq's Kurdistan region towards the Mediterranean coast."

"The PYD has been getting closer with both the United States and Russia of late. We view the PYD as a terrorist group and we want all countries to consider the consequences of their cooperation,' one of the Turkish officials

said.

"Turkey suspects Russia, which launched air strikes in Syria two weeks ago, has also been lending support to the YPG and PYD."

"'With support from Russia, the PYD is trying to capture land between Jarablus and Azaz, going west of the Euphrates. We will never accept this,' the official said."

—Reuters, 13 October 2015

The very fact that the YPG is maneuvering between Russia and the U.S., two powers that are manifestly not acting in concert in Syria, would seem to refute the notion that the YPG/PKK is nothing more than an American proxy.<sup>15</sup>

While ISIS has a well-deserved reputation for murderous attacks on "infidels" (Kurds, Shia and other ethnic or religious minorities), Amnesty International has reported instances of collective punishment in the Rojava region. YPG units are accused of "the razing of entire villages in areas under the control of the Autonomous Administration [in Kurdish Syria], often in retaliation for residents' perceived sympathies with, or ties to, members of IS or other armed groups." Most of the victims are Turkmen and Arabs. Their plight has not received a lot of attention, as the seriousness with which ethnic cleansing is taken by the imperialist "international community" inevitably depends on whether the perpetrators are seen as friends or foes. It is a minor irony that, according to Amnesty, "Some civilians said they were threatened with US-led coalition airstrikes if they failed to leave" ("Syria: US Ally's Razing of Villages Amounts to War Crimes"). The YPG has denied the allegations, but there is a logic to communal conflict that tends to generate a vicious cycle of ethnic cleansing.

The Marxist attitude to the complicated and overlapping military conflicts in Syria begins with unconditional opposition to any and all imperialist intervention. While upholding the basic democratic right of the Kurdish nation to self-determination, and defending the Kurds against their Turkish oppressors and against the pogromist atrocities of ISIS, class-conscious militants are equally committed to the defense of the rights of Turkmen and Arab civilians threatened by YPG units. In Syria's civil war, revolutionaries do not support either the brutal Baathist dictatorship or its reactionary Islamist opponents. At the same time, it is necessary to side militarily with any indigenous forces (including Islamists) when they are attacked by the U.S. and other imperialists.

### **Fake Leftists Solidarize with Islamist 'Revolution'**

Many of the ostensible revolutionary socialists who characterized the 2011 uprising against Assad as a "Syrian revolution" are finding it difficult to square this initial assessment with the ugly jihadi reality that can no longer be denied. France's Nouveau Parti anticapitaliste (NPA, founded by followers of the United Secretariat) argues that the supposed "revolutionary processes of the Middle East and North Africa" have failed to achieve "democracy, social justice, and equality [their initial objectives]," as the political scene is dominated by "representatives of the old authoritarian regimes on the one hand, [and] Islamic fundamentalist and reactionary forces in their various components on the other" (*Revue L'Anticapitaliste*, No.



62, February 2015). The NPA nonetheless imagines that “democratic and popular” forces in the Free Syrian Army, along with the PYD, are keeping “the revolution” alive:

“there is still a refusal by various so-called ‘friends’ of the Syrian revolution to politically aid and militarily support the democratic and popular components of the Free Syrian Army (FSA) and the Kurdish groups of the PYD (Syrian PKK), who fought and continue to fight the Assad regime and the reactionary Islamic forces.”

—*Ibid.*

The erratic impressionists of the League for the Fifth International (L5I, until recently represented in Britain by Workers Power) similarly continue to characterize the Islamist revolt as a “struggle for freedom and democracy,” going through exquisite contortions in attempting to explain why their “Syrian revolution” has such a reactionary coloration:

“Such a degree of dislocation and dispersal makes it clear why the Syrian revolution has not progressed according to the textbooks of some so-called revolutionaries, and also why the forces of civil society and their organisations have been compressed and cramped into bodies waging a war.

“Factories and workshops closed and laid off their workers. And the official trade unions, tied hand and foot to the Baathist regime, were unable or unwilling to defend them or chart any independent course of action. It explains too why the Syrian working class has not been able to play any independent role beyond local and episodic instances. Nevertheless, in spite of all this, the struggle for freedom and democracy goes on, albeit under the harshest conditions and against a range of different counterrevolutionary forces.”

—*Workers Power*, 11 August 2015

The Free Syrian Army, once credited as the leader of the “Syrian revolution,” has melted away as the vast majority of its adherents decamped to join one or another jihadi militia. Of the various insurrectionary groupings, the L5I singles out the Islamic Front as having “a genuinely popular base of support.” The fact that the Islamic Front seeks to impose sharia law does not, apparently, disqualify it as a component of what the L5I considers the “Syrian revolution”:

“Unlike the increasingly isolated and now barely tolerated Jabhat al-Nusra, and unlike IS, whose presence in Syria almost has the character of an Iraqi occupation, the Islamic Front does have a genuinely popular base of support. However, it cannot be long before people come to realise that any thoroughgoing ‘revolution within the revolution’ will sooner or later have to extend also to a confrontation with the Islamic Front, especially once the common threat of Assad and IS starts to recede.”

—*Ibid.*

The L5I characterizes the CIA-backed rebels fighting Assad as a “counter-revolution within the revolution,” while also complaining that the imperialists should be providing more support for their “Syrian revolution”<sup>16</sup>:

“They [Obama, Cameron and Hollande] have rendered the anti-Assad rebellion very little material support. Indeed, their fear of inadvertently arming ‘Al Qaeda’, that is, any radical Islamist fighters, has prevented them arming anybody. What support there has been has come from Qatar, Saudi Arabia and Turkey who, in this respect, are far from being mere puppets of the White

House as testified to by the fact that their aid has gone to the various strands of Islamists that stand closest to them and which the US fear more than they fear the Assad regime.”

—League for the Fifth International IEC theses, 19 August 2014

The Syrian “revolution” that the L5I clings to is at least as hostile to the working class and oppressed as the Baathist dictatorship which it seeks to replace.

## ISIS Barbarism: Byproduct of Imperialist Intervention

ISIS is depicted in the bourgeois media as a depraved and unfathomable expression of pure evil, an “unprecedented threat to international peace and security,” in the words of a 20 November 2015 UN Security Council resolution. A year earlier (2 October 2014), the editorial board of the *New York Times* proclaimed “the Islamic State—led by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi—stands alone in its deliberate, systematic and public savagery” and decried its “beheadings, crucifixions, tortures, rapes and slaughter of captives, children, women, Christians, Shiites” as signifying “a cult of sadism, not only as a weapon in its stated goal of establishing an Islamic caliphate but as the very reason for its existence.”

While much of the appeal of ISIS lies in its deserved reputation of ferocious bloodthirstiness, the ISIS “cult of sadism” is an irrational byproduct of the imperialist world order. Its bitter and deranged denunciations of infidels, apostates and female “immodesty” provide a focus, however misguided, for the anger of many thousands of Sunni Arabs whose lives have been shattered by occupation, war and desperate poverty.

ISIS has proved adept at directly accessing alienated youth in the imperialist heartlands via skillful use of social media. An estimated 3,000 West European youth (chiefly French, British and German) have journeyed to the Middle East to join ISIS. Many are Muslims from Europe’s inner city ghettos with no job prospects and no future. The growth in state repression and overt mainstream Islamophobia makes it likely that the Islamic State will continue to enjoy a steady stream of recruits from this source.

In its smoothly-run internet marketing campaign, the Islamic State projects an image of its warriors as pious adherents of Islam distinguished by their fidelity to the injunctions of the Koran. Yet Lydia Wilson, editor of the *Cambridge Literary Review*, who has interviewed many captured ISIS fighters, reports that most “are woefully ignorant about Islam and have difficulty answering questions about Sharia law, militant jihad, and the caliphate” (*The Nation*, 21 October 2015). She also observed:

“If we were looking at foreign fighter recruits to Afghanistan 10 or 20 years ago, there was intensive religious and theological training attached to recruitment. Nowadays, we see that recruitment strategy has branched out to a much broader audience with many different pull factors.”

Wilson also commented:

“There is no question that these [Iraqi] prisoners I am interviewing are committed to Islam; it is just their own brand of Islam, only distantly related to that of the Islamic State. Similarly, Western fighters traveling to the Islamic

State are also deeply committed, but it's to their own idea of jihad rather than one based on sound theological arguments or even evidence from the Qur'an. As [Erin Saltman of the Institute for Strategic Dialogue] said, 'Recruitment plays upon desires of adventure, activism, romance, power, belonging, along with spiritual fulfillment.' That is, Islam plays a part, but not necessarily in the rigid, Salafi form demanded by the leadership of the Islamic State."

Most ISIS recruits are eager to seize any means of striking back at the imperial conquistadors who have made their lives a nightmare:

"These boys came of age under the disastrous American occupation after 2003, in the chaotic and violent Arab part of Iraq, ruled by the viciously sectarian Shia government of Nouri al-Maliki. Growing up Sunni Arab was no fun. They are children of the occupation, many with missing fathers at crucial periods (through jail, death from execution, or fighting in the insurgency), filled with rage against America and their own government. They are not fueled by the idea of an Islamic caliphate without borders; rather, ISIS is the first group since the crushed Al Qaeda to offer these humiliated and enraged young men a way to defend their dignity, family, and tribe. This is not radicalization to the ISIS way of life, but the promise of a way out of their insecure and undignified lives; the promise of living in pride as Iraqi Sunni Arabs, which is not just a religious identity but cultural, tribal, and land-based, too."

In the mainstream bourgeois media ISIS is disingenuously presented as having materialized out of thin air, but in fact it is an entirely logical consequence of the damage that decades of imperialist intervention have done to the Arab world. France's celebrated left-liberal intellectual, Thomas Piketty, in reflecting on the November 2015 terror attack in Paris, observed that the Middle East is "the most unequal [region] on the planet" due to imperialist control, in particular the tendency to appoint their local agents as hereditary monarchs:

"Within those monarchies, he continues, a small slice of people controls most of the wealth, while a large [number]—including women and refugees—are kept in a state of 'semi-slavery.' Those economic conditions, he says, have become justifications for jihadists, along with the casualties of a series of wars in the region perpetuated by Western powers."

—*Independent*, 1 December 2015

The mass popularity of the "Arab Spring" of 2011 was rooted in the hope of toppling the corrupt, Western-backed dictatorships tasked with maintaining the status quo across the region. These protests briefly raised the hopes of millions of victims of the autocratic regimes and their "neoliberal" austerity programs imposed in accordance with the dictates of imperialist finance capital. The naive hopes of the Egyptian protesters that the removal of Hosni Mubarak would significantly improve the lives of the masses were soon dashed. In the absence of any genuinely anti-imperialist formation, the Muslim Brotherhood, an Islamist movement founded in 1928 under the slogan "The Koran is our constitution," filled the vacuum of leadership, and its candidate, Mohamed Morsi, was elected president in June 2012. A year later Morsi was removed by a military coup which brutally crushed all resistance.

The failure of the Brotherhood's electoralist project seemed

to validate their jihadi opponents who had long argued that Islamic rule could only be achieved through armed struggle. A book entitled *The Management of Savagery: The Most Critical Stage through which the Umma Will Pass* written by a pseudonymous author ("Abu Bakr Naji"), appeared on the internet in 2004, and has long been popular with Sunni jihadists. Translated into English in 2006, it provides useful insights into the "polarization" strategy employed by Zarqawi's AQI a decade ago and ISIS today, although it was never officially endorsed by either organization.

The book seeks to outline a strategy for how Islamist fighters can defeat the United States, its allies and vassals and create an Islamic State across the Middle East. While the text has a pronounced theological bias and is full of doctrinal commentary and scriptural references, it also addresses some of the key material questions posed. In particular, it proposes that the jihad's "media dimension" should take up the damage done to the Arab world by foreign domination:

"A summary—in a few lines—of the study which the economic cadre prepared along with a focus on the extent of the injustice which the Umma [the global Muslim community] has experienced on account of the devalued price of oil. It should also explain how wealth that was obtained throughout the decades—along with its loss—was not used for building the Umma as much as it was used as funds for a handful of the collaborators and agents of the West among the Arab and Islamic regimes, such that the crumbs of crumbs remain for the Umma and its people..."

There are numerous references to lessons to be drawn from previous jihadi campaigns, with particular attention to the successful Afghan jihad against the Soviets in the 1980s. This, the author observes, led to:

"reviving of dogma and jihad in the hearts of the Muslim masses—who had submitted to the (social) entity of this superpower—when they saw the example and model of these poor, Afghani people—their neighbors—in jihad. They were able to remain steadfast in the face of the strongest military arsenal and the most vicious army (in the world) with respect to the nature of its members at that time. Thus, we saw that the jihad brought forth many Muslims from unknown lands, like Chechnya and Tajikistan."

In what is very likely a reference to the relative ease with which the U.S. and its allies were dislodged from their toehold in Lebanon in 1983, the author contrasted the Soviet military with the Americans:

"O people! The viciousness of the Russian soldier is double that of the American (soldier). If the number of Americans killed is one tenth of the number of Russians killed in Afghanistan and Chechnya, they will flee, heedless of all else."

Abu Bakr Naji poses three stages in the struggle to create a stable and viable Islamic state. The first is a stage of "vexation and exhaustion." During this phase there are four "goals": 1) "Exhausting the forces of the enemy" by widespread, if small-scale, attacks on tourist areas and oil installations to raise overheads, drain resources and spread security forces over a broad area; 2) "Attracting new youth to the jihadi work by undertaking qualitative operations" on a scale "that will grab peoples' attention"; 3) "Dislodging the chosen regions .... from the control of the regimes of apostasy" and 4) training the administrative cadres necessary to administer the "chosen regions"



ZUMA PRESS

### March 2015: Jabhat al-Nusra and Islamic State militants together at the Syrian border

once they come under jihadi control.

The stage of “vexation and exhaustion” is designed to produce a “region of savagery” characterized by the chaotic breakdown of all social order and desperate insecurity:

“the region of savagery will be in a situation resembling the situation of Afghanistan before the control of the Taliban, a region submitting to the law of the jungle in its primitive form, whose good people and even the wise among the evildoers yearn for someone to manage this savagery. They even accept any organization, regardless of whether it is made up of good or evil people.”

A “region of savagery” prepares the way for the next step, “the management of savage chaos”:

“If we picture its initial form, we find that it consists of the management of peoples’ needs with regard to the provision of food and medical treatment, preservation of security and justice among the people who live in the regions of savagery, securing the borders by means of groups that deter anyone who tries to assault the regions of savagery, as well as setting up defensive fortifications.”

“Mastering the administration of the regions which are under our control” is not an end in itself, but rather provides a base area for “the first step of polarization” via larger-scale operations:

“By polarization here, I mean dragging the masses into the battle such that polarization is created between all of the people. Thus, one group of them will go to the side of the people of truth, another group will go to the side of the people of falsehood, and a third group will remain neutral, awaiting the outcome of the battle in order to join the victor. We must attract the sympathy of

this group and make it hope for the victory of the people of faith, especially since this group has a decisive role in the later stages of the present battle.

“Dragging the masses into the battle requires more actions which will inflame opposition and which will make the people enter into the battle, willing or unwilling, such that each individual will go to the side which he supports.”

The management of savagery is projected as “the most critical stage” because, if successful, it “will be a bridge to the Islamic state which has been awaited since the fall of the caliphate.” Alternatively, “If we fail—we seek refuge with God from that—it does not mean [the] end of the matter; rather, this failure will lead to an increase in savagery!!”

While the “caliphate” declared by al-Baghdadi in June 2014 is far from secure, it does at least appear to have real support in the territories it controls, if only on the grounds of being a lesser evil. A leading American authority on Syria, Joshua Landis of the University of Oklahoma, reports that many people are so desperate for social order that they are indifferent to whether it is administered by Baathists or ISIS:

“the situation in Syria has gotten so bad over the last four and a half years that many Syrians are embracing dictatorship again. They want authority over chaos and stability over insecurity, even at the cost of living under dictatorship and giving up political freedoms. We see this in the ISIS territory, where many people claim that they are happier under a cruel authority than no authority at all. They tasted militia chaos, which prevailed before ISIS swept through the region. They learned how dangerous it can be. They may not like ISIS, but they like the security, the

institutions, and semblance of order that ISIS has brought. Assad benefits from the same calculations on his side.”

—9 November 2015 interview with RT

Landis posted a report on his blog by Omar al-Wardi, the pseudonym of a Syrian émigré who recently revisited his birthplace. Despite the “crimes and inhumane acts,” al-Wardi noted that the areas controlled by the Islamic State “are among the regions of Syria from which young people are least likely to flee to Europe, a point that many seem to have missed” (“A Trip to the ‘Caliphate’: Oppressive Justice under ISIS”).

One factor that enabled ISIS to gain the upper hand over its jihadi rivals was that it paid its fighters better. A comparable disparity in the treatment of the civilian populations in the rebel areas was described by al-Wardi:

“One of the main reasons ISIS has been accepted by a vast majority is that corruption was rampant in the area during the first years of the uprising against Assad. First, the militias that called themselves the Free Syrian Army ruled. They disported [sic] themselves no differently than thieves and bandits. Civilians lived in a state of anxiety that their possessions would be lifted from them one after the other and fear that they would be harassed and possibly killed. Then came al-Nusra, which was concerned only with power and gave little care to justice or good government. Between the Free Army and Nusra, society was lost. No one dared approach the authorities to resolve disputes. Once the Caliphate established control over the region, however, people have breathed easier and feel less oppressed.”

It is a remarkable indictment of U.S. propaganda that civilians “feel less oppressed” under the deranged rule of ISIS than under those forces Washington describes as “moderates.”

### Toward a Socialist Federation of the Middle East

A week after the criminal 11 September 2001 attacks in New York City, we predicted that a military assault on Muslim countries would bolster Islamic extremism:

“the attack on the World Trade Center is only one link in a long chain of events. A massive imperialist military attack on Afghanistan and/or Iraq would be a catastrophe that would produce many thousands of additional innocent victims and ultimately strengthen the forces of Islamic reaction in the region.”

—“U.S. Imperialist Rule: An Endless Horror,”

18 September 2001 (reprinted in *1917* No. 24, bolshevik.org)

The military assaults on Afghanistan, Iraq, and later Libya, killed hundreds of thousands of people and uprooted millions more from their homes. The once powerful workers’ movement in the Middle East, sapped by Stalinist class-collaborationism and political adaptation to anti-working-class ideologies (most egregiously Ayatollah Khomeini’s 1979 “Islamic Revolution”), has lacked the political capacity to take the lead in resisting the imperialist occupation forces. This opened the door for al Qaeda, ISIS et al to pose as the leaders of resistance to the Western imperialist crusaders. As a result, the forces of Islamic reaction are stronger than ever before. Yet the imposition of Islamic theocracy will not alter the operation of the world market which condemns the impoverished masses

of the Middle East to lives of suffering and privation.

The international workers’ movement has no interest in the victory of either Syria’s Baathist dictatorship or their reactionary Islamist opponents—which are, in the final analysis, qualitatively equivalent agencies of exploitation. Revolutionaries do, however, side militarily with any indigenous forces—including the reactionary Taliban, ISIS, al Nusra and al Qaeda—in confrontations with the “democratic” imperialists. In 1983, when Islamic Jihad bombed the barracks of the U.S. Marines and French Legionnaires in Beirut, we characterized these as justified blows against imperialist oppression.

The brutality of the jihadis is no reason for Iraqi workers to embrace the cynical “democratic” imperialists and their “war on terror.” In October 2014, the leftist Federation of Workers’ Councils and Unions in Iraq (FWCUI) reported that ISIS had murdered eight workers in Tikrit for objecting to the idea of working for no pay. A few months earlier Falah Alwan of the FWCUI had pointed out that imperialist intervention is the root of the problem:

“All the while the US government—the prime cause of these problems to begin with -- prepares to intervene however it chooses. President Obama has so far expressed his concern over Iraqi oil twice when talking about recent events. He has not shown any regard or concern for the fate of two million people now under the control of ISIS, or for the women who have started committing suicide in Mosul as a result of ISIS gangs.... We reject US intervention and protest President Obama’s inappropriate speech in which he expressed concern over oil and not over people.”

—Jadaliyya, 13 June 2014

The protests that have rocked the region in recent years—in Iran in 2009, in Tunisia, Egypt and Bahrain in 2011 and then in Istanbul in 2013—are evidence of the acute social tensions that lie just beneath the surface of these societies. In the face of enormous obstacles, workers’ struggles continue across the Middle East. In May 2015, 15,000 Turkish autoworkers ignored threats from the state and the instructions of their union leaders to launch a wildcat strike to win better wages. In January 2016, 18,000 Egyptian employees of Petrotrade walked out in direct defiance of a ban on strikes. The rulers of the brittle neocolonial regimes of the Middle East have good reason to be anxious about their future.

In the 1848 *Communist Manifesto*, Karl Marx and Frederick Engels observed that workers around the world have fundamentally common interests, and, in that sense, “have no country.” The chief victims of the wars for global domination waged by the U.S. and its predatory partners are of course the masses of the Muslim world. But in the citadel of imperialism, the flag-waving militarist xenophobia of the “war on terror” has been accompanied by declining living standards, wholesale attacks on democratic rights and the growth of a sinister surveillance state.

The international workers’ movement, particularly within the imperialist countries, has the potential to take the leading role in finding a historically progressive solution to the misery and poverty imposed on the vast majority of humanity by imperialist war and social disorganization. A glimpse of the possibilities was provided on 1 May 2008, when militants in the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU) shut down every port on

the U.S. West Coast with an exemplary one-day strike against the war in Iraq. This powerful example of solidarity between workers in the imperialist heartland and those in Iraq was the result of the actions of militants with a long history of class-conscious political activism in the ILWU (see "Anti-War Strike," bolshevik.org).

The chaos, poverty and bloodshed engulfing Syria and Iraq derive from the inherent logic of capital accumulation in a global system governed by the principle of profit maximization. Only through expropriating the means of production, transport and communication, and reconstructing the world economy on the basis of rational socialist planning governed by the principle of production for human need can humanity transcend the tyranny of capitalist irrationality. This requires the organization of the most politically conscious militants into a disciplined, revolutionary workers' party.

Amid the imperialist militarism, obscurantism and poisonous communalism wracking the Middle East, it is important to uphold the perspective of working-class

unity across national, religious and ethnic lines in joint class struggle against all the oppressors—in the first place the imperialists, but also the Zionist, Turkish, Persian and Arab rulers. Only proletarian revolution can ensure that the region's resources, including its vast energy wealth, are used for the benefit of the hundreds of millions of oppressed and exploited, rather than Western oil corporations and their corrupt local henchmen. The road to a future where the myriad ethnic and religious groups of the region can live together in security and material comfort is the creation of a revolutionary association of peoples in a Socialist Federation of the Middle East. The necessary instrument for carrying out this struggle is a Leninist-Trotskyist party, deeply rooted in the proletariat, and armed with the only program capable of addressing the political, social and economic problems of the oppressed and exploited through the expropriation of both foreign and domestic capital—the program of permanent revolution. ■

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1 In a 2007 speech former NATO Supreme Commander General Wesley Clark recalled a 1991 conversation with Paul Wolfowitz (then U.S. undersecretary of defense) on the lessons of the "Desert Storm" assault on Iraq under Saddam Hussein:

"We learned that we can use our military in the region, in the Middle East, and the Soviets won't stop us.' He said, 'And we've got about five or ten years to clean up those old Soviet client regimes—Syria, Iran, Iraq—before the next great superpower comes along to challenge us.'"

—YouTube

2 According to a 9 October 2015 U.S. Congressional Research Service report: "most rank and file military personnel [in the Syrian army] have been drawn from the majority Sunni Arab population and other minority groups." It also notes:

"Support for the Asad [sic] government from foreign Shiite fighters has galvanized some Sunnis' views of the regime as irretrievably sectarian. Nevertheless, much of the daily violence occurs between Sunni armed oppositionists and a Syrian military force composed largely of Sunni conscripts."

—"Armed Conflict in Syria: Overview and U.S. Response"

The fact that Sunni soldiers have generally remained loyal to the regime strongly suggests that the primary axis of the conflict does not run along sectarian lines.

3 Declassified U.S. records show that "beginning on November 30, 1948, [CIA operative Stephen] Meade met secretly with [Syrian Army Chief of Staff] Colonel [Husni] Zaim at least six times to discuss the 'possibility (of an) army supported dictatorship'" (see "Cold War and Covert Action," *Middle East Journal*, Winter 1990).

4 The "humanitarian wars" on Iraq in 2003 and Libya in 2011 were modeled on NATO's 1999 large-scale aerial assault on Serbia, which was largely driven by a desire to control strategic access to the newly discovered oil and gas fields of the Caspian Basin, as we noted at the time (see "NATO's 'Humanitarian' Terrorism," 1917 No. 22).

The pretext for attacking Serbia was to prevent a "genocide" of ethnic Albanians in Kosovo. Like the supposed killings of

Kuwaiti babies in 1991, Saddam's "weapons of mass destruction" in 2003 and the imminence of a massacre of Libyan civilians in 2011, the reports of atrocities against Albanian Kosovars proved to be a cynical invention to justify brutal military aggression, as journalist John Pilger describes:

"David Scheffer, US ambassador-at-large for war crimes [sic], claimed that as many as '225,000 ethnic Albanian men aged between 14 and 59' might have been murdered...."

"With the Nato bombing over, and much of Serbia's infrastructure in ruins, along with schools, hospitals, monasteries and the national TV station, international forensic teams descended upon Kosovo to exhume evidence of the 'holocaust.' The FBI failed to find a single mass grave and went home. The Spanish forensic team did the same, its leader angrily denouncing 'a semantic pirouette by the war propaganda machines.' A year later, a United Nations tribunal on Yugoslavia announced the final count of the dead in Kosovo: 2,788. This included combatants on both sides and Serbs and Roma murdered by the KLA. There was no genocide. The 'holocaust' was a lie."

—*Counterpunch*, 27 February 2015

5 The situation has only worsened under Haider Al Abadi, who replaced Maliki as prime minister in August 2014. Under Abadi, the Badr Organization, one of several Shia militias, controls much of the state apparatus:

"The [Badr] group's sway extends deep into Iraq's Internal Security Forces, where it is said to directly manage many police and special operations-type groups. Badr also has great influence in the political sphere: It has secured key positions within the Iraqi government, and is part of Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi's State of Law alliance—Abadi even wants to appoint its leader, Hadi al-Amiri, as the country's interior minister."

—*Foreign Policy*, 18 September 2014

6 According to David Kilcullen, a U.S. counter-insurgency expert, the falling-out started "when AQI began to apply the standard AQ method of cementing alliances through marriage":

"In Iraqi tribal society, custom (*aadat*) is at least as import-

ant as religion (*deen*) and its dictates, often pre-Islamic in origin, frequently differ from those of Islam. Indeed, as one tribal Iraqi put it to me, ‘if you ask a Shammari what religion he is, he will say “I am a Shammari”’ – the Shammari being a confederation which, like many Iraqi tribes, has both Sunni and Shi’a branches.

“Islam, of course, is a key identity marker when dealing with non-Muslim outsiders, but when all involved are Muslim, kinship trumps religion. And in fact, most tribal Iraqis I have spoken with consider AQ’s brand of ‘Islam’ utterly foreign to their traditional and syncretic version of the faith. One key difference is marriage custom, the tribes only giving their women within the tribe or (on rare occasions to cement a bond or resolve a grievance, as part of a process known as *sulha*) to other tribes or clans in their confederation (*qabila*). Marrying women to strangers, let alone foreigners, is just not done. AQ, with their hyper-reductionist version of ‘Islam’ stripped of cultural content, discounted the tribes’ view as ignorant, stupid and sinful.

“This led to violence, as these things do: AQI killed a sheikh over his refusal to give daughters of his tribe to them in marriage, which created a revenge obligation (*tha’r*) on his people, who attacked AQI. The terrorists retaliated with immense brutality, killing the children of a prominent sheikh in a particularly gruesome manner, witnesses told us. This was the last straw, they said, and the tribes rose up. Neighboring clans joined the fight, which escalated as AQI (who had generally worn out their welcome through high-handedness) tried to crush the revolt through more atrocities. Soon the uprising took off, spreading along kinship lines through Anbar and into neighboring provinces.”

— *Small Wars Journal*, 29 August 2007

7 “AQI founder Abu Musab al-Zarqawi kept the former Baathists at a distance, because he distrusted their secular outlook, according to Hashim [Ahmed S. Hashim, a professor at Singapore’s Nanyang Technological University researching ISIS].

“It was under the watch of the current Islamic State leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, that the recruitment of former Baathist officers became a deliberate strategy, according to analysts and former officers.

“Tasked with rebuilding the greatly weakened insurgent organization after 2010, Baghdadi embarked on an aggressive campaign to woo the former officers, drawing on the vast pool of men who had either remained unemployed or had joined other, less extremist insurgent groups.

“Some of them had fought against al-Qaeda after changing sides and aligning with the American-backed Awakening movement during the surge of troops in 2007.”

— *Washington Post*, 4 April 2015

8 On 9 March 2015 the Ron Paul Institute pointed to the connection between Senator John McCain, a leading advocate of the 2011 imperialist intervention in Libya, and one of that country’s leading Islamist reactionaries, Abdelhakim Belhadj:

“When McCain was cheerleading for the US attack on Libya, Belhadj was among those he promoted as offering the promise of a democratic Libyan future. But Belhadj was at the time a founder of the ‘Libya Dawn,’ which was a group of Islamic militia forces tied to al-Qaeda in Libya. Did Senator McCain overlook his Libyan friend’s

ties with al-Qaeda in his zeal to see Gaddafi overthrown or did he simply not know about it?

“But that’s not even half of it! We now learn that Senator McCain’s friend has been promoted from an al-Qaeda operative to his current position as the head of ISIS in Libya!”

— Ron Paul Institute

9 “Nearly 30,000 foreign recruits have now poured into Syria, many to join the Islamic State, a doubling of volunteers in just the past 12 months” according to the *New York Times* (26 September 2015). This includes some 250 Americans who “have entered or tried to enter the conflict in Iraq or Syria,” compared to 750 from Britain. The article states that “1,800 French citizens and residents are believed to be enlisted in jihadist networks worldwide.”

10 In a 24 November 2015 piece in *Asia Times*, Peter Lee suggests that the Paris attacks were blowback from the Libyan intervention, in which France played a leading role:

“To sum up: the alleged and now reportedly deceased architect of the Paris attacks, Abdelhamid Abaaoud, did not fight ‘for IS.’ He fought ‘with’ Katibat al-Battar al-Libi, a Libyan outfit whose presence in Syria predates that of ISIS. Even after Katibat al-Battar al-Libi decided to pledge allegiance to ISIS, it retained its independent identity.”

Lee characterized Katibat al-Battar al-Libi as:

“a rather bloody piece of outreach by Libyan Islamists to share Libya[’s] experience in insurrection and revolution with Syria. After IS arose and became a dominant military and financial force, the ‘KBL’ threw in their lot with ISIS, and members of the brigade subsequently returned to Libya to establish an IS beachhead.”

11 There are reports that Bilal Erdogan, the son of Turkey’s president, is heavily involved in marketing the smuggled oil (see *Zero Hedge*, 26 November 2015).

12 O’Hanlon suggested that a blind eye should be turned to the al Qaeda connections of the CIA-supported “moderate” oppositionists:

“past collaboration with extremist elements of the insurgency would not itself be viewed as a scarlet letter—since some of that collaboration could have been a necessary means of surviving on Syria’s complex and challenging battlefield.”

13 For obvious reasons the U.S. foreign-policy establishment has not sought to highlight Israel’s interest in annexing the Golan Heights, seized from Syria in the 1967 war. In February 2013, Israel licensed Afek Oil and Gas Company to explore the Golan. A major oil deposit was reportedly discovered. Afek is the Israeli division of Genie Energy Ltd., whose “strategic advisory board” includes a gaggle of high-profile imperialist predators, including former U.S. Vice President Dick Cheney, media monopolist Rupert Murdoch, former CIA head James Woolsey, British banking magnate Baron Jacob Rothschild, former U.S. energy secretary Bill Richardson and former U.S. Treasury head Larry Summers.

14 For a discussion of the differences between anarchist and Marxist models of post-capitalist social organization, see *Conversation with an Anarchist*, bolshevik.org.

15 The Spartacist League has taken pains to strike a firmly anti-imperialist posture over the recent Syrian events, correctly asserting “any force, however unsavory, that attacks, repels or otherwise impedes U.S. forces strikes a blow in the interests of the exploited and the oppressed”

(*Workers Vanguard*, 5 September 2014). This stands in stark contrast to their shameful social-patriotism in 1983 when “Islamic Jihad” blew up the U.S. Marine barracks as well as those of the French Foreign Legion in Beirut, forcing both imperialist militaries to pull out of Lebanon (see “Marxism vs. Social Patriotism,” bolshevik.org). In 2010, the ICL alibied U.S. military intervention in Haiti, although in that case, unlike in 1983, they belatedly repudiated their social-patriotic position (see “Sclerotic Spartacists Unravel,” bolshevik.org).

16 The *Workers Power* article attributes the survival of the Baathist regime to “Russian imperialism’s veto in the Security Council and its supply of weapons and other logistical sup-

port to Assad.... To date, this remains the primary imperialist intervention in Syria, not the verbal posturing of Obama, Cameron or Hollande.” Russian support has been critical for Assad, but, as we explained in “Ukraine, Russia & the Struggle for Eurasia” (bolshevik.org), Marxists cannot characterize Russia as imperialist:

“There are no mechanisms, beyond the sale of oil and gas at world market prices, by which Russia extracts wealth from less developed countries on any significant scale. Indeed in recent years Russia, despite a near-monopoly position as an energy supplier in neighboring former Soviet republics, has provided subsidies rather than pursuing superprofits.”

## United-Front Rally in New Zealand Free Mumia Abu-Jamal!



1917 PHOTO

### Adaiah Hannah addresses crowd at Mumia united-front rally

*Responding to cruel and vindictive disregard for the serious health problems of Mumia Abu-Jamal by prison authorities, a small protest was held on Friday 8 May 2015 in Wellington, New Zealand, to demand his immediate release. The rally was jointly organized by Aotearoa Workers Solidarity Movement, Fightback, the International Bolshevik Tendency, the International Socialist Organisation, Don Franks and Val Morse. The ISO’s Somi Yun highlighted Mumia Abu-Jamal’s critical medical situation, while an independent Maori demonstrator, who had participated in Mumia demonstrations in the United States 10 years ago, led a chant. Below is a lightly edited version of remarks made by Adaiah Hannah of the IBT, first published 18 May 2015. For further updates on Mumia’s health and the campaign for the medical treatment he needs, see [www.rachelwolkenstein.net](http://www.rachelwolkenstein.net).*

We are here today to demand the immediate release of Mumia Abu-Jamal, America’s most prominent political prisoner. Mumia has spent more than 33 years in jail—30 of those years on death row. He is now condemned to life without parole.

Mumia was charged with the murder of police officer Daniel Faulkner in December 1981. He is innocent. From the beginning it was apparent that he was framed. The crime

scene was not sealed. Supposed witnesses were coerced to lie or face jail on other charges. Evidence was “lost.” Mumia’s wounds did not correspond to police descriptions of what happened. Medical staff said that Mumia did not speak in the ambulance or while being admitted to hospital, but the police say he confessed during this time. He was denied his own lawyer. The judge was overheard by a court clerk to say that he’d help to “fry the nigger!” And to cap it all off, another man, Arnold Beverly, has confessed to killing Faulkner.

This case demonstrates once again that the capitalist state is not neutral. Mumia was a radical political journalist and known to the police and FBI from the time he joined the Black Panthers at 15. He exposed the corruption of Philadelphia’s city officials and police. He was a nuisance for the state.

In spite of his incarceration, Mumia has continued to campaign against injustice. He has fought to have the truth told. However, his right to be heard beyond prison walls, and that of other prisoners, has repeatedly been under attack by the American state and the Fraternal Order of Police. His communication with his family is often denied and his telephone rights removed.

The latest crisis Mumia has faced is his deteriorating health. The prison authorities largely ignored this until he actually fell unconscious. They have withheld the results of medical tests. Mumia’s family, lawyers and friends are waging a constant fight to get decent medical diagnosis and treatment.

This crisis has sparked the latest international call to demand immediate freedom for Mumia Abu-Jamal, recognizing that the justice system seems determined to execute Mumia one way or another.

On 1 May, a day to recognise international workers’ struggles and solidarity, ILWU Local 10 shut down the Port of Oakland to protest against the wave of racist police killings of black and brown Americans. Actions such as these are necessary for workers here in New Zealand to emulate.

We, workers and oppressed, have the power to change things. But it requires class struggle. For that we need a leadership. We need to move forward to the building of a mass revolutionary party committed to consigning the horrors of capitalism to the history books. ■

# Ferguson, Baltimore, Oakland Labor Action to Fight Racist Cop Terror!



**1 May 2015: Protesters march from the Port of Oakland in solidarity with victims of racist police killings**

*Oakland, 1 May 2015*—Workers organized by International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU) Local 10 voted two weeks ago to shut down the Port of Oakland on 1 May in protest of the recent wave of racist police killings of black and brown people across America. This bold reassertion of May Day as a celebration of workers' struggle and solidarity is a direct response to the growing list of widely-publicized murders: Michael Brown, Eric Garner, Tamir Rice and Walter Scott—as well as countless lesser-known victims of racist cop terror in “the land of the free.” The timeliness of this labor action was sharply illustrated in the week leading up to May Day as Baltimore erupted in fury and flames in response to the brutal killing of 25-year-old Freddie Gray while in police custody.

ILWU Local 10's action is a very important initiative. While shutting down the Port of Oakland for a day will not solve the systemic problem, it points the way forward through the intervention of organized labor in defense of the oppressed. *An Injury to One is an Injury to All!*

The May Day 2015 port shutdown is the latest in a long series of waterfront actions, including the August and September 2014 blockades of Israeli ZIM Lines ships in the Port of Oakland in solidarity with the oppressed Palestinian masses; the 23 October 2010 shutdown of Bay Area ports to demand justice for Oscar Grant; the 20 June 2010 labor/community picket against the *Zim Shenzhen*; the May Day 2008 West Coast port shutdown protesting the imperialist wars in Iraq and Afghanistan; the 24 April 1999 West Coast port shutdown in support of Mumia Abu-Jamal; and the historic 1984 11-day strike against South African Apartheid cargo (initiated by IBT supporter Howard Keylor).

Local 10's work stoppage comes at a time when we are witnessing what may turn out to be a revival of combativeness in the U.S. working class, spearheaded by a campaign by fast-food and other precarious workers—many of them women and people of color—demanding a \$15 minimum wage. It also comes in the context of increased attacks on the ILWU by the bosses and the concessionary bargaining of the

union leadership. While the rank and file of the unions and unorganized workers are clearly willing to fight, the conservative labor bureaucracy pursues a strategy of narrow business unionism, at best seeking a few meager improvements in working conditions and wages.

The political strategy of the union leaders is to pour millions of dollars of membership dues into the coffers of “friendly” Democratic politicians. In the 2016 “race for the White House,” rightwing hawk Hillary Clinton appears to have locked up the job of Wall Street's Democratic Party challenger to its Republican twin. In order to advance their historic interests, as well as win real gains—whether higher wages, immigrants' rights, combating racist police attacks or preventing the launch of another imperialist war—working people need their own independent political organization committed to fighting for the interests of the exploited against the Democratic and Republican machines.

A class-struggle leadership of the labor movement would seek to turn the campaign for a minimum wage of \$15 an hour into an offensive to win substantial wage gains for all and to end unemployment with a 30-hour work week and a sliding scale of wages and hours. Instead of begging the Republicrats to create a “path to citizenship” for millions of undocumented workers, it would champion full and immediate citizenship rights for all immigrants. It would expand on the example provided by ILWU Local 10 and advance the perspective of labor action against police violence. And in place of utopian calls for a less aggressive U.S. foreign policy, it would—once again building on steps taken by the ILWU—organize workers' actions against the imperialist war machine.

A political fight today to forge the nucleus of a class-struggle leadership can lead tomorrow to the creation of a mass revolutionary party committed to the perspective of a workers' government. Only a workers' revolution can consign the horrors of the capitalist system to the history books and open the road to a socialist future of peace, prosperity and equality. ■

JOSH EDELSON—AFP—GETTY IMAGES



# Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership An Attack on the Working Class



JAKOB HUBER—CAMPACT

## Berlin, October 2015: 250,000 people protest the TTIP

*Translation of "TTIP: Ein Angriff auf die Arbeiterklasse," first published in German in January 2015. Published in English 31 July 2015 on bolshevik.org.*

Since July 2013, the EU Commission, U.S. government officials and industry lobbyists have been negotiating a free trade agreement between the European Union and the United States. This is significant for two reasons. First, it will lead to the creation of the largest capitalist free trade zone on the planet and, second, it is an attack on a wide range of political and social gains previously won by workers on both sides of the Atlantic.

### What is the TTIP?

The Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP), also known as the Trans-Atlantic Free Trade Agreement (TAFTA), is being negotiated behind closed doors. Free trade agreements between economic regions are routine for global capitalism, but the TTIP clearly has other objectives. There are already strong trading links between North America and the EU even without this new agreement. Over half of U.S. overseas investment goes to the EU, which in turn is the biggest foreign investor in the U.S. with 71% of the total.

"TTIP is correctly understood not as a negotiation between two competing trading partners, but as an assault on European and US societies by transnational corporations seeking to remove regulatory barriers to their activities on both sides of the Atlantic."

—John Hilary, *The Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership*, p.8

"It is true that there are many FTAs [free trade agreements], but the planned TTIP would have a unique and enormous weight and expresses a clear claim to a leading role in the global economy. The old metropolises—the U.S. and Europe—want to use the TTIP and TPP [Trans-Pacific Partnership] agreements to stabilize their large but declining influence and make their dominance incontestable."

—Conrad Schuhler, "TTIP must be prevented — and we can do it," *Das Blättchen* No. 17, 18 August 2014

The U.S. and EU still account for 46-50% of global GNP, a third of world trade and 65% of foreign investment, but their share is shrinking. Since 2008, crises in the Eurozone and the global economy have done a lot of damage in Europe and the U.S., while the proportion of world trade accounted for by the so-called BRICS countries (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa) has steadily risen.

### Why So Secret?

When extracts from the TTIP treaty text were leaked on the internet ([www.ttip-leak.eu](http://www.ttip-leak.eu)) there was a storm of protest. The secrecy surrounding the agreement is difficult to explain if the aim is simply to improve economic relations between the U.S. and the EU.

The national parliaments of affected countries and even the European Parliament have been shut out of the process. The control of information regarding the negotiations is reminiscent of a spy movie. In Brussels there is a special TTIP reading room in which a select group, only a few of whom are MEPs, can read the minutes of the nego-

tiations. There is concern over American dominance of the TTIP process.

The forces behind the TTIP must have known that this stealthy implementation would be criticized for short-cutting bourgeois democratic principles such as parliamentary approval of legislation. But many well-meaning critics of this secrecy are naive about the “democratic” character of capitalism. It is an illusion that the parliaments in which politicians seek night and day to push the agendas of their respective parties could have any fundamental objections to the TTIP. Many politicians from the Greens and the Social Democrats, and even sections of the Left Party, are upset that the corporations and their lobbyists do not trust them to persuade the victims of capitalism to accept further reductions in their living standards.

Secret negotiations usually mean cover ups. We demand public access to the TTIP negotiations although we have no illusions that the parties involved will openly admit their plans to attack workers in the U.S. and Europe. Their preference is for the mass of the population to be kept in ignorance, for they fear that if their machinations were revealed it could spark resistance and jeopardize the entire project. Best to keep the lies and exploitation under cover of darkness.

Such bourgeois methods starkly contrast to the policy of the Soviet government after the 1917 October Revolution. The first successful proletarian revolution opened a path for humanity to transcend the odious practices of capitalism. In one of its first measures, the government led by Vladimir Lenin declared the practice of negotiating secret diplomatic treaties null and void. The “Decree on Peace” issued on 26 October (8 November) 1917 states:

“The government abolishes secret diplomacy, expressing, for its part, the firm determination to carry on all negotiations absolutely openly and in view of all the people. It will proceed at once to publish all secret treaties ratified or concluded by the government of landlords and capitalists from March to November 7, 1917. All the provisions of these secret treaties, in so far as they have for their object the securing of benefits and privileges to the Russian landlords and capitalists—which was true in a majority of cases—and retaining or increasing the annexation by the Great Russians, the government declares absolutely and immediately annulled.”

—“Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, 1918”

## Investor Protection

A central plank of the TTIP is the introduction of Investor to State Dispute Settlement (ISDS), a form of guarantees for investors, into U.S.-EU trade relations. ISDS gives corporations the right to argue their cases (including private complaints) before international arbitration tribunals whose hearings are conducted in secret—rather than before national courts—when disputes arise. ISDS proceedings are extremely expensive—estimated at around \$US 8 million per case—which excludes all but large corporations. While circumvention of bourgeois-democratic standards is not unusual, this is a particularly scandalous proposal.

ISDS procedures have been used by the imperialist nations in other trade agreements to ensure that companies operating in countries with little or no central government control can assert their interests—i.e., so that plundering of

the neocolonies can proceed more smoothly. Neocolonial regimes which attempt to resist imperialist exploitation can be thwarted by means of ISDS arbitration procedures.

“ISDS procedures are first and foremost insurance for international investors against social revolutions and political upheavals. So it is not surprising that among the first countries in the dock are Argentina, Ecuador and Venezuela which have seen privatizations reversed and companies nationalized.”

—Conrad Schuhler, *op cit*

We have already seen examples of how investor protection is used to override decisions made by national governments. For instance, the Swedish energy company Vattenfall is currently suing the German government for 3.7 billion euros, because its nuclear power plants at Krümmel and Brunsbüttel will be shut down earlier than expected due to Germany’s decision to phase out nuclear power. Vattenfall is basing its claim on a 1994 agreement containing investor protection clauses. Another example of the impact of ISDS is neocolonial Ecuador which in 2012 had to pay \$U.S. 1.77 billion plus interest to the American Occidental oil corporation for cancelling its operating contract.

International arbitration tribunals can be used to neutralize the rulings of national courts in various ways. Of course, in capitalist countries the “common good” of the bourgeoisie is the highest legal principle, which is why it is illusory to imagine that the legal system can be neutral, fair or independent. But even so, big business has now found it necessary to override this bourgeois democratic instrument, presumably due to increased competition among multinationals and their countries of origin. ISDS arbitration *de facto* undermines the normal criteria of bourgeois justice. For example, there is no provision for appealing a tribunal’s decision, and the appointment of arbitrators is haphazard.

We have no illusions in bourgeois courts and judges. But there are many laws in capitalist countries that directly result from earlier struggles of the workers’ movement. For example, statutory sick pay in Germany was won in a 1956 strike that lasted 114 days, longer than any other for half a century. We must defend such historic gains of the labor movement.

A current example in Egypt shows that investor protection is not only aimed at overriding bourgeois democracy but also represents a direct attack on concessions to the working class. Veolia, a French corporation, is seeking damages from Egypt because the government attempted to link wages to inflation which damaged Veolia’s profits and led to the cancellation of a waste disposal contract.

## 11 October 2014—

### Protests by the Friends of ‘Smart Capitalism’

The European day of action against the TTIP on 11 October 2014 exposed the reformist notions of those who uphold the “good capitalism” of the petty bourgeoisie against the “evil capitalism” of the transnational corporations.

Many of the specific criticisms of the TTIP made by Attac and other endorsers of the 11 October 2014 protest are valid. However, in the final analysis their objective is simply to create a nicer sort of capitalism:

“We call for a fundamental change in trade policy. The economy has to serve people, and not vice versa! Human

rights, democracy and the environment must be put first instead of corporate profits. On October 11th we are going to protest together against the sell-off of our public property, democratic achievements, social and environmental standards!"

—www.attac-netzwerk.de

Capitalism serves the interests of capital. Human rights, democracy and environmental protection, as well as the quality of life of the international working class and those excluded from the labor market, depend on international class struggle, not on moral appeals against such things as free trade agreements. In lamenting the difficulties faced by small and medium-sized businesses under the TTIP, Attac fails to recognize that global competition is an essential element of capitalism or acknowledge that sheltering national economies from multinationals means protectionism. Free trade and protectionism are simply the two sides of the same capitalist coin.

A *cause célèbre* among anti-TTIP campaigners is the use of chlorine in chicken processing. In the U.S. slaughtered chickens are dipped briefly into a chlorine bath in order to kill germs. The European Union allocates E-numbers to authorized food additives, and chlorine dioxide is designated E926. Until 1957 it was approved in the Federal Republic of Germany for bleaching flour. It has also been used in the treatment of poultry, meat, fish, fruit and vegetables and the disinfection of drinking water. In 2008 the possibility of its use with poultry was discussed at EU level but was rejected by the Council of Ministers. In 2009 the United States brought a complaint over this before the Dispute Settlement Body of the World Trade Organization.

But the EU has its own skeletons in regard to the environment. Europe's biosphere is being damaged by capitalist commodity production; its air, water and soil are being contaminated by pollutants. Current environmental standards have not removed harmful substances such as dioxin-like PCBs (polychlorinated biphenyls) in foods, nor have they avoided contaminated eggs nor prevented the introduction of cattle infected by BSE (bovine spongiform encephalopathy). The idea that all U.S. standards are below those of the EU is an increasingly common amalgam of anti-Americanism with illusions in the EU. The regular operation of capitalism—whether in the EU or the U.S.—seeks to maximize profits regardless of the dangers to people or the environment.

### DGB and SPD—A Comprehensive Betrayal

Some elements of the SPD (Social Democratic Party of Germany) have raised criticisms of the TTIP in similar terms to those of the October 2014 protests. To head off this criticism, DGB (German Trade Union Confederation) chair Reiner Hoffmann and SPD leader Sigmar Gabriel put out a joint statement in support of the TTIP:

"Trade talks between the two major economic areas, the USA and EU, which are paving the way for a free trade agreement, provide an opportunity to intensify bilateral trade relations and at the same time to make them fairer and more sustainable. The agreement could also help to promote fair and sustainable trade rules globally and set standards. The point is to enable more prosperity to actually reach broad sections of the population, improve



NO CREDIT

**October 2014: Activists march to British Parliament during European Day of Action against the TTIP**

economic, social and environmental standards, and create fair competition and good working conditions."

—Reiner Hoffmann and Sigmar Gabriel,  
"Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP): demands in relation to the free trade talks between the EU and the US with reference to sustainability, workers' rights and the provision of public services"

The idea that the TTIP could bring "prosperity" to the working masses is about as realistic as the existence of Santa Claus. Workers' conditions will continue to fall if the capitalist wish list contained in the TTIP is implemented. Concessions won through collective bargaining could be challenged by arbitration tribunals on the grounds that wage increases or other gains could reduce company profits. It is hardly surprising that DGB leaders are only proposing a few petty changes to the TTIP and have abandoned their earlier posture of flat rejection of the whole project. The union leaders feign resistance and put forward a few criticisms only to maintain the support of the rank and file.

It is only logical, in a system where the profit motive is paramount, that appeals for justice fall on deaf ears. A serious critique of the TTIP must go beyond particular manifestations of capitalist irrationality and instead encompass a comprehensive rejection of the entire system of exploitation and a determination to fight the capitalist system as a whole. ■

# What Kind of Political Party?



**July 1920: Delegates to the Second Congress of the Communist International in Petrograd**

*A shortened version of an IBT contribution to a panel discussion on "What is Political Party for the Left?" held in Chicago in April 2015. Published 4 September 2015 on bolshevik.org.*

The question of what kind of party we should seek to build very much depends on what objective we want to achieve, because different forms of political organization are appropriate for different tasks. We in the IBT take the view that the essential task facing humanity is the expropriation of the capitalist class and the destruction of the military and security apparatus that serves and protects it. This cannot be accomplished through persuasion or incremental reform because the capitalists will not cooperate in their own destruction—that's obvious. It will take a convulsive social revolution. This is a precondition for constructing a rationally planned, ecologically sustainable, equitable social system where the working class and its allies rule directly.

It hardly needs to be said that right now in the U.S., and the rest of the imperialist countries, we are a very, very long way from a proletarian revolution. But that is the task for those who are serious about a socialist future—there's no alternative.

We have more than 200 years of experience to draw on, reaching back to Gracchus Babeuf and Philippe Buonarroti and their "Conspiracy of Equals" in the 1790s. There have been a lot of failed attempts to overcome capitalist hegemony—ranging from the putsches of the Blanquists, to the electoral cretinism of the social democracy and the popular frontist "two-stage" strategy adopted by the Stalinized Communist International in the 1930s.

Lenin sketched four necessary conditions for a successful workers' revolution in the conclusion of "Left Wing Communism." The first is that the ruling class, confronted with a crisis which it is unable to solve using its traditional methods, begins to polarize into different factions pursuing different policies. Secondly, the intermediate social layers between workers and capitalists begin to lose confidence in the viability of the ruling regime. Thirdly, the working

class begins to exhibit a combative attitude and to look for solutions outside of its experience under capitalism and the framework of the established structures. These first three factors were all present to a greater or lesser degree in the Paris 1968 events, among other pre-revolutionary situations. What was missing was the fourth, and decisive, factor: the existence of a mass revolutionary workers' party with a tested and competent leadership. In the run-up to the Nazi victory in Germany, Leon Trotsky observed:

"The class, taken by itself, is only material for exploitation. The proletariat assumes an independent role only at that moment when from a social class in itself it becomes a political class for itself. This cannot take place otherwise than through the medium of a party. The party is that historical organ by means of which the class becomes class conscious."  
—"What Next?"

Marxists conceive of revolutionary organization on an international scale—the object is the creation of a single world party with national sections. The basis for such a party has to be a common political program, i.e., a system of ideas that address the fundamental problems that confront humanity in general and the working class in particular. One of Trotsky's favorite maxims was: "It's not the party that makes the program; it's the program that makes the party."

There is only one time in history that a revolutionary party led the working class in a successful seizure of power. Despite the fact that this occurred almost a century ago in a predominantly peasant country, the fundamental elements of political organization and strategic orientation that made that success possible, and distinguished the Bolshevik party from the mainstream social democrats of the Second International, remain of vital significance for the future. It is our view that serious revolutionaries should model their activity on the Bolshevik success, rather than the repetitive failures of reformist gradualism, multi-class alliances and the all-embracing formlessness of episodic "new" phenomena like the New Left or Occupy that, when they initially appear, are seen as something completely unprecedented, but eventually turn out to be merely the square wheel reinvented.

Leninism is not currently popular among most young people who don't like capitalism. This is largely because, as well as being seen as old-fashioned, it is also derided as authoritarian and hierarchical. As a system of organization, Leninism is indeed hierarchical—it involves layers of organization, possession of authority and chains of command with certain bodies empowered to issue binding instructions on lower bodies and individual members. If you are in a Leninist organization, you don't just get to do what you feel like.

As for authoritarian, we recall Frederick Engels' observation in his dispute with Bakunin that: "A revolution is certainly the most authoritarian thing there is; it is the act whereby one part of the population imposes its will upon the other part by means of rifles, bayonets and cannon" ("On Authority"). So yes, revolution is authoritarian and to that extent Leninism is "authoritarian" as well. To get anything done we are going to have to impose the will of the working class (represented by its democratically-elected leaders) on those who are presently imposing their will

on us. If you don't like that, then you do not belong in a Leninist organization.

A Leninist organization is more than that and, like a healthy workers' state, it has to be characterized by feedback loops which give the rank and file the means to determine the strategic direction of the organization, to change and adjust policies as situations develop and, if necessary, to replace leaders found to be deficient. That sort of democracy is indispensable, and without that you do not have a Leninist organization. Any political movement inevitably has a leadership. The question is whether it operates openly or secretly behind the scenes. That's your choice.

A serious socialist movement must not only be able to challenge the ideological dominance of the capitalist elites and their agents, but also develop the capacity to overcome the resistance of the existing state apparatus in order to carry out the expropriation of the ruling class. This requires the construction of what Lenin described as a "combat organization," the prototype of which had, 100 years ago in Russia, sunk roots throughout the working class, and also extended its reach into almost every level of society, including, and particularly, the ranks of the armed forces. When the opportunity presented itself in the midst of the crisis of the Tsarist regime during WWI, the Bolsheviks successfully outmaneuvered the equivalent of the FBI and Homeland Security apparatuses and put together a coalition with other radicals, particularly anarchists and Left

Social Revolutionaries, that successfully carried out a working-class seizure of state power.

The October Revolution of 1917 was the greatest event in history. Ultimately the revolutionaries were defeated, but they had set a powerful example and actively organized parties embracing hundreds of thousands of workers (the sections of the Communist International). That was their highest priority—they had an internationalist perspective from the beginning and they understood that their revolution could only succeed if it spread. The organizational model developed during the first four congresses of the Communist International—that is when Lenin and Trotsky were leading, not Stalin—is not a secret. In our view, this model remains fundamentally valid in all important respects. The fact that we are a very long way from being able to create such parties does not make them any less necessary.

I expect many people here today think that there is little prospect of forming a viable "left party" in this country, and I expect that there is a near consensus that it is impossible to imagine recreating a mass Leninist International. There is no question that this is an extremely remote prospect at this point in history, but if we are serious about undertaking a struggle for fundamental social change—that is, getting rid of capitalism and replacing it by socialism, which given our present circumstances really amounts to a fight to save humanity from extinction—it surely makes sense to start from what is objectively necessary, rather than from what seems to be achievable in the present circumstances. ■

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## *CWI/Socialist Alternative Providing Left Cover for Democrats* **Marxism & Bourgeois Elections**

*The following is a lightly edited version of a talk given by an IBT comrade on a Platypus-sponsored panel in Chicago in April 2015. Published 19 May 2015 on bolshevik.org.*

The Second Congress of the Communist International passed a resolution that included the following rather angular assessment of capitalist electoralism:

"6. Consequently communism denies parliamentarism as a form of the society of the future. It denies it as a form of the class dictatorship of the proletariat. It denies the possibility of taking over parliament in the long run; it sets itself the aim of destroying parliamentarism. Therefore there can only be a question of utilising the bourgeois state institutions for the purpose of their destruction...."

"11. ... The Communist Party does not enter these institutions in order to carry out organic work there, but in order to help the masses from inside parliament to break up the state machine and parliament itself through action...."

—"Theses on the Communist Parties and Parliamentarism," 2 August 1920

This makes clear the fundamentally negative attitude of Marxists to capitalist elections. As the anarchists aptly observe, "if voting changed anything, they'd make it illegal." Under imperialist "democracy" you generally have a choice between two or more nearly identical sets of policies differentiated chiefly by packaging, not content. The

rightwing party talks about how "tough love" and harsh medicine are good for people. If you don't like that you can vote for the "kinder, gentler" brand of capitalist who pretends to be concerned about your problems but ends up implementing similar policies. The illusion of choice helps stabilize the system, but for the vast mass of the population there is no real difference.

Working people in the past had to fight hard to win the franchise, and Marxists defend this right. In Spain in the 1930s, for example, when Franco and the military overthrown the elected government and did away with elections, revolutionary socialists had a side in the civil war that resulted. We might see something similar in Greece in the next few years.

The whole bourgeois-democratic ritual has sometimes been denounced by confused leftists who fear that participation in elections automatically amounts to a betrayal. The Spartacist League decided a few years ago that it is a violation of principle for Marxists to ever consider running for president. We disagree and feel there is no need to revise the attitude of Engels, Lenin, Trotsky and the rest of our revolutionary forerunners on this question.

To the extent that electoral politics allows for competing social interests, Lenin argued, running socialist candidates provides another potential arena in which to pursue the class struggle. Sometimes it may make sense to stand



**Kshama Sawant with Bernie Sanders**

candidates in a given election; other times it does not. It is largely a question of resources and tactics—the issue is always how best to promote revolutionary political consciousness in the working class.

Marxists participate in bourgeois elections fully aware of the limits of “democracy” and its function for the ruling class. Under capitalism, most important decisions are made outside formal political channels. Elections serve chiefly as a means of legitimating the rule of a tiny minority with a certificate of popular approval. The right to cast a ballot every few years (a right increasingly under attack in the U.S. under the guise of preventing “voter fraud”) is used by the capitalist media as evidence that state policy reflects the will of the people.

In theory the voters are supreme, but in reality the choices are limited to what capital permits. This is why it is not possible to use the bourgeois state to pursue workers’ interests—that requires smashing up the existing state apparatus and replacing it with new “armed bodies” committed to defending a different social order.

While Marxists have no faith in bourgeois democracy, we cannot simply ignore electoral politics as long as the majority of the population still takes it seriously. Election periods are often characterized by heightened popular attention to political debate and can provide opportunities to pose questions and raise issues that the capitalist parties would prefer to ignore.

Participation in bourgeois elections is always a tactical, rather than a strategic, question. In periods of revolutionary upheaval the capitalists will sometimes call elections in an attempt to neutralize or at least divert the course of mass radicalization. This occurred in Russia in October 1905 when a general strike led by Moscow rail workers sparked the first proletarian mass revolt against the Tsarist regime. Tsar Nicholas II wanted to crush the uprising with massive bloodletting, but was convinced by his advisers that it would be a lot wiser to introduce a parliament, or Duma, to nominally share power. Both wings of Russia’s socialist party—Bolsheviks and Mensheviks—responded by advocating an electoral boycott because the new parliament was clearly designed to derail a developing social revolution. When the crisis abated, first the Mensheviks, and then the Bolsheviks, changed their attitude and stood candidates in the elections.

There is one other aspect of electoral tactics I want to

touch on, that of “critical support.” This is normally posed in situations where reformist or centrist parties are running but where the revolutionaries are too weak to stand their own candidates. If reformist workers’ parties (like the British Labour Party or the Canadian New Democratic Party, which have an organic connection to the trade-union bureaucracy) are campaigning as the representatives of workers’ interests against the bosses, and a section of the working class has illusions in them, Lenin proposed calling for a vote to them—while clearly pointing out their political deficiencies and that they will betray if elected. The idea is to put them into office to expose them—a form of “support” that Lenin compared to that provided by a rope to a hanged man. This tactic is only applicable in cases where a party represents an independent expression of workers’ interests at least in organizational terms. In situations where they are in a bloc with bourgeois or petty-bourgeois formations, or clearly express a willingness to form such a bloc (see “Managing the Greek Crisis: Syriza & the Dangers of Popular Frontism,” bolshevik.org), there is no basis for any kind of electoral support.

The whole question of electoral tactics for Marxists has come into focus in the U.S. recently due to the success of Kshama Sawant of Socialist Alternative (U.S. section of the Committee for a Workers’ International [CWI]) in defeating a sitting Democrat and getting elected to Seattle’s City Council. This got a lot of attention, and the fact that she focused on the demand to raise the minimum wage to \$15 an hour helped put it on the national agenda.

Socialist Alternative runs a statement of “What We Stand For” in every issue of their paper, which, under the heading “Break with the Two Parties of Big Business,” clearly states: “Unions and other social movement organizations should stop funding and supporting the Democratic and Republican Parties....” Yet a few weeks ago Sawant was caught entering a fundraiser for Democratic Party council member Larry Gosset (a “leftwing” Democrat of course).

Electoral politics can be a two-way street—as it seems that Socialist Alternative is well on its way to discovering. Their evolution into an auxiliary of the Democrats is evident in their coverage of “Chuy” Garcia’s campaign for mayor of Chicago. In the 8 March 2015 issue of their paper they described him as a “longstanding Democratic Party representative” who nonetheless struck “a strong anti-establishment tone.” Socialist Alternative said that “Chuy has to put many more concrete details of his platform on the table before working people can truly believe his words.” They noted that he proposed to cut county workers’ pensions and hire 1,000 new cops, but still concluded that he “put forth policies that inspire unions and communities,” and then helpfully attached a list of petty reforms they would like him to adopt.

Workers hate Chicago’s current Democratic mayor Rahm Emanuel, and no doubt many have illusions in the left Democrat Garcia. The job of socialists is to break these illusions—not to reinforce them by spinning fantasies of pressuring Democratic Party politicians to turn into people prepared to “take on big business.”

Sawant may be the best known “socialist” in America, but the policy of supporting candidates from the “lesser evil” party of racism and imperialist war has been around since Stalin introduced the Popular Front turn in the 1930s. The result was the Communist Party giving political support to Franklin Delano Roosevelt. It was the wrong policy for socialists then, and it is just as wrong today. ■

# Election 2016 and Working-Class Independence

## Pandering to Illusions in Sinn Féin



DAVID KEANE

### November 2014, Cork: 10,000 march against water tax

The fightback against capitalist attacks in the name of “austerity” (or “recovery”) has been at the forefront of the class struggle in Ireland over the past few years. The Campaign Against the Household & Water Taxes formed in late 2011, followed by the anti-water charges movement, involved rudimentary self-organisation in many working-class communities around resistance to the installation of water meters and payment of these hated taxes. The struggle brought many people into political activism who had never been involved before. This level of grassroots organisation was an important component of the immediate successes of these campaigns and begins to point the way towards the kind of organisations we will need to take power away from the capitalist parasites.

The upcoming election brings these political issues onto the national stage and creates a greater audience for a revolutionary perspective and the idea of developing working-class political consciousness to confront the capitalists directly. Yet the disorientation of the far left and anti-austerity movement is profound, and there are many illusions in the possibilities for real change via capitalist elections.

### Communists & Capitalist Elections

Communists have long understood that bourgeois parliaments are not a motor force for fundamental social

change in the interests of the working class. The second congress of the Communist International in 1920 outlined the general approach of revolutionary socialists to these institutions of capitalist rule:

“communism denies parliamentarism as a form of the society of the future. It denies it as a form of the class dictatorship of the proletariat. It denies the possibility of taking over parliament in the long run; it sets itself the aim of destroying parliamentarism. Therefore there can only be a question of utilising the bourgeois state institutions for the purpose of their destruction. The question can be posed in this, and only in this, way.”

“... Election campaigns should not be carried out in the spirit of the hunt for the maximum number of parliamentary seats, but in the spirit of the revolutionary mobilisation of the masses for the slogans of the proletarian revolution. Election campaigns should be carried out by the whole mass of the Party members and not only by an elite of the Party. It is necessary to utilise all mass actions (strikes, demonstrations, ferment among the soldiers and sailors, etc.) that are taking place at the time, and to come into close touch with them. It is necessary to draw all the proletarian mass organisations into active work.”

—“Minutes of the Second Congress of the Communist International”



COLLINS PHOTOS

**1 November 2014: Water protest in Dublin**

The assumption for the mass organisations of the Communist International was that they would be standing their own candidates in bourgeois elections in order to provide a platform for communist ideas and build support within the working class. Given the absence of mass communist parties today, revolutionaries are usually not able to stand their own candidates. Instead, it is necessary to develop an effective approach to the existing range of non-revolutionary labour-based candidates and consider whether to use the “critical support” electoral tactic as a vehicle for communicating the ideas of revolutionary Marxism. This tactic can be used where reformist or centrist workers’ parties promise specific measures claiming to stand for workers’ interests against the bosses, and a section of the working class has illusions that they will carry out their promises. In giving critical support, revolutionaries stand with the working-class voters in advocating the interests of the class, but clearly warn in advance that these parties will ultimately fail to deliver due to their underlying reformist perspective and commitment to the capitalist state.

### **Bourgeois Populism in Ireland**

Since the point of critical support is to win more adherents to the perspective of resolute class struggle, this tactic is not applicable to parties that deny the basic independent interests of the working class by forming a bloc with bourgeois or petty-bourgeois parties or by signalling a willingness to join with them in pursuit of governmental power. This is a real danger in Ireland, where political life is currently dominated by various forms of bourgeois populism. It was, for instance, a powerful force within the campaigns against the household and water charges.

The strongest organisational expression of this is the

mainstream anti-water charges group Right2Water (R2W), whose political domination by the capitalist Sinn Féin is manifested in R2W’s refusal to call for either non-payment of the charges or for mobilisations to physically obstruct meter installations.

Sinn Féin’s political platform begins from the perspective of Irish nationalism, which is by definition cross-class. Anyone doubting that Sinn Féin are a capitalist party just has to read their most recent pre-budget statement, especially Part 3 “To pursue the happiness and prosperity of the whole nation,” which starts with a long section titled, “Supporting and encouraging business”.

The spread of the idea that Sinn Féin are a valid part of “the left” or workers’ movement threatens to subvert all the positive developments in working-class consciousness of the anti-household and water charges movements. A central test for any candidates in this election claiming to stand for the interests of the working class is therefore their attitude towards Sinn Féin.

### **Right2Change: Political Cover for Sinn Féin**

The politics of R2W have now found electoral expression in Right2Change (R2C) which, while not standing for election itself, is asking candidates to sign up to a set of reformist “Policy Principles” that include “agreeing to form a progressive government based on this platform if the numbers allow”. Given the configuration of the forces involved, this amounts to supporting, in advance, participation in a government with Sinn Féin. Anyone signing up to, or politically supporting, the R2C policy principles document has explicitly rejected any conception of the political independence of the working class.

Organisations that have signed this document include the Communist Party of Ireland (CPI) and People Before Profit (PBP, the electoral bloc initiated, and politically dominated by, the Socialist Workers Party/SWP). The Workers Party have given their political support to the document, although they have not formally signed up (see “WP Support Right 2 Change Principles as Basis for Progressive Change”).

PBP/SWP dodge the problems with providing this political cover for Sinn Féin by echoing claims that R2C is a coming together of the “left” (though its bureaucratic trade-union leaders prefer to talk about the potential for a “progressive” government):

“We will talk to Sinn Fein and to left independents after the election if the numbers permit a major change. The outcome of these talks and, therefore, our willingness to enter or, alternatively, support a left government from outside depends on agreement that our red line issues will be carried through.”

—“People Before Profit and a Left Government”

### **AAA: A Real Alternative?**

Not signing up to the R2C principles does not necessarily indicate a willingness to fight for the independent interests of the working class.

The Anti-Austerity Alliance (AAA), initiated and politically dominated by the Socialist Party (SP), Irish section of the Committee for a Workers’ International (CWI), is the most significant organisation on the left that has not signed up to R2C. In a list of four basic principles, the



AAA/SP declare that they stand on the basis of “No coalition with Fianna Fail, Fine Gael or Labour” (“Potential for New Left Movement”). Rather than including Sinn Féin in this list, the SP criticise them for refusing to make the same pledge. The principles are followed by the declaration that: “The AAA will discuss with parties and individuals after the next election to see if a genuine Left government can be formed based on this platform.” The clear implication is that Sinn Féin could be a part of this “Left” government if it would rule out co-operation with Fianna Fail, Fine Gael or Labour. Although many SP members will readily concede in private that Sinn Féin is a capitalist party, in their publications it is treated as a kind of social-democratic workers’ party. When pressed by the IBT at recent public meetings, prominent SP spokespeople have declared that after the election, if the AAA was faced with a decision on whether to form a coalition with Sinn Féin, *then* they would include “breaking the rules of capitalism” in their negotiations.

Of course if these reformists are already too afraid of public opinion within the wider working class to tell the truth about Sinn Féin’s capitalist nature before the elections, why should anyone believe they would be able to withstand the thousand-fold greater pressure on them after a successful electoral bid, when the potential for a so-called “progressive government” would be immediate?

Such crossing of the class line would not be surprising given that the SP’s sister organisation in the United States (Socialist Alternative) is supporting the capitalist politician Bernie Sanders in his attempt to become the Democratic presidential candidate, again falsely painting him as a social democrat.

“Socialist Alternative welcomes Sanders’ decision to run for President to help create, as he says, ‘an independent voice, fighting for working families’ to ‘bring the fight to the Koch brothers, Wall Street, and corporate America.’ His campaign will give Hillary Clinton a much-deserved challenge and will widen the spectrum of political discussion, injecting some working-class reality into the increasingly surreal and narrow parameters of official debate.”

—“Bernie Sanders calls for Political Revolution Against Billionaires”

There can be no “working-class reality” injected by a politician who has caucused for decades with the Democrats in Congress and who now is running to lead one of the twin parties of the American ruling class. Similarly, entertaining the idea of forming a “Left” government with Sinn Féin represents a promise to betray the working class in advance of the election.

### **For Working-Class Independence!**

It is obvious that, like all left reformists before them, the so-called “revolutionary socialists” of both the AAA/SP and PBP/SWP would capitulate and participate in a “progressive” Sinn Féin-led government—haggling only over minor details in the programme for government and ministerial positions.

We know of no parties or independent candidates that are prepared to reject in advance any electoral blocs or participation in a future government with capitalist par-

## ***Defend water charges protesters!***

Activists from working class communities around the country are being taken to court for their protests against the water charges and particularly against the installation of water meters.

In Cork, two activists, Bairbre and Brian, have already been prosecuted for protesting too effectively against meter installations—they are appealing against their fines. They along with two others, Megan and Dan, have another trial for the same “crime” on Wednesday 24 February (10:30am, Washington St, Cork).

The “Cobh Three” (Alan, Karen and Vincent) are due in court in Fermoy outside Cork on Friday 1 April, for a similarly successful protest against meter installations in October 2014.

At the time of writing there is not yet a date for the trial of AAA TD Paul Murphy and others who are facing the threat of significant jail sentences for the bogus charge of “false imprisonment” for their participation in the protest against Tánaiste Joan Burton in Jobstown, Dublin, in November 2014.

These criminal proceedings are an attack on *all* anti-water charges activists and indeed on the wider workers’ movement. It is very important that there are sizable demonstrations of support on all these trial dates and against any future legal victimisation of anti-water charges activists anywhere in the country.

**An injury to one is an injury to all!**

ties. The conclusion for revolutionaries must therefore be to call for a spoiled ballot. This tactic should not be seen as a policy of abstention from the electoral process. It is rather motivated by the perspective of using capitalist elections to argue for the fundamental principles of revolutionary Marxism—above all working-class independence, without which there can be no possibility of fundamental social change in the interests of the oppressed.

The tactic of calling for a spoiled ballot can help spark discussions about this key issue in the lead-up to, and aftermath of, the election. It has resonance with working-class militants in the anti-water charges movement who took action on their own behalf without waiting for instructions from established opposition parties, and several of whom are now facing criminal charges due to the necessity of taking the anti-meter protests beyond the restrictions of capitalist law and order (see below). The organisation of the working class by streets, estates and towns that we saw at the height of the protests was an important first step in how we will need to organise, but ultimately we need to take the fight into the workplace. To lead the struggle against austerity and for the interests of the oppressed to its successful conclusion, the working class needs—on both a national and international level—to build a party with a revolutionary Marxist programme. ■

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# Spoil Your Ballot! No Choice for Workers!

## British Workers Need a Revolutionary Party



JEREMY SELWYN

### Homeless people queue for food in London

“Though you would never know it from the campaigns’ petty squabbling, the country is heading for profound and potentially irrevocable change”, declares the *Economist* (2 May 2015). The capitalist press is filled with reports on the unpredictability of Thursday’s general election, but there is a general consensus that neither Labour nor the Conservatives is likely to command an overall majority. Possible outcomes include either party trying to maintain a minority government, a grand coalition or some sort of rainbow coalition. But it might as well be a patchwork polka-dot coalition for all the difference it will make for the working class. Whatever combination of bourgeois politicians hold office after 7 May, workers and the poor will continue to suffer. That much at least is certain.

The *Economist* favours a repeat performance from the Tory/Liberal Democrat alliance that has slashed hundreds of millions of pounds of spending over the past five years and is openly planning billions more. Wages have fallen steadily in real terms, popular living standards are lower and the division between rich and poor is wider than ever. A million workers on zero-hour contracts are part of the ever growing “precarariat”. Welfare “reforms” such as the bedroom tax and household benefit caps and a desperate shortage of affordable housing have produced a surge in homelessness: “Official estimates of rough sleeper numbers in England in 2013 were 2,414—up 37% since 2010. But the [independent] study’s estimates based on local data suggest that the true figure could be at least four times that” (*Guardian*, 4 February 2015). Meanwhile, large chunks of the National Health Service continue to be sold

off, and state education has been dramatically eroded through the creeping privatisation of schools.

Working people need their own political organisation to resist this comprehensive capitalist offensive.

That organisation is not the Labour Party. Five years after they were running their own austerity programme in government, the Labour leadership seems unable to decide whether to pitch themselves as better at managing the economy (administering cuts) than the Tories, or as champions of a more humane version of austerity with reforms like scrapping the bedroom tax and reducing university tuition by a third. Anyone who can remember the Blair/Brown government should be aware that once in power Labour would soon be pleading “necessity” as a justification for a whole range of new attacks. Nevertheless, because Labour cultivates a less posh and more socially liberal image, large sections of the working class will end up voting for them as their parents and grandparents did. The servile sycophancy of major trade-union leaders (paralleled by most of the ostensibly revolutionary left) helps promote illusions in Labour as a lesser evil, although more advanced sections (eg, rail workers, firefighters and communications workers) have begun breaking from reflex Labourism in recent years.

Marxists recognise that Labour’s continuing connection to the trade unions means that it remains a bourgeois workers party. In circumstances when such a party turns to the left and projects a willingness to fight for the rights of the poor and exploited, revolutionaries could consider offering “critical support”—calling for a vote to Labour in order to exploit the contradictions between the illusions and hopes of its working-class base and its pro-capitalist programme. But those who pursue a policy of strategic “auto-Labourism”, by advocating a vote for a party that stands on its record of vicious attacks only half a decade earlier, merely confess their own resignation to the status quo, whatever “Marxist” phrases might be employed to disguise it.

Ed Miliband must retain the fiction that he is aiming for an absolute majority, but everyone knows that Labour will eagerly participate in a coalition—formal or informal—if that’s what it takes to secure power. The outcome would be a cross-class bloc that is premised on serving the interests of capital at the expense of the popular masses—what Marxists refer to as a popular front. There was little outcry when Birmingham Labour MP Gisela Stuart suggested that Labour should not rule out forming a “grand coalition” with the Tories if neither party wins a majority. If that seems the best way to establish “stable” rule for British capitalism, then that is what Labour will do.

Unprecedented levels of disillusionment in the three main parties has led to shifts in the political landscape over the past five years, with an increased number of voters indicating that they will not opt for any of the major

parties. One beneficiary of this is the UK Independence Party (UKIP), which has seen an increase in support since the last general election, gaining 24 MEPs in the 2014 European elections. UKIP is picking up votes from far-right organisations such as the British National Party (BNP), from the anti-EU wing of the Tories, and also from traditionally Labour working-class voters, ground down by recession and suffering from a low level of class consciousness. UKIP is a “party of despair” that scapegoats immigrants for all of society’s ailments. A measure of UKIP’s success is the fact that all the main parties have shifted to the right as they compete to show their anti-immigration credentials.

### Pretenders to Anti-Austerity Politics

The Scottish National Party (SNP) has seen a massive surge in support after its narrow defeat in the referendum on Scottish independence last September, and has enjoyed significant media coverage in the run up to the general election. During the referendum campaign, left nationalism was extremely popular in the Scottish working class and, true to form, most left organisations tailed along, claiming a working-class dynamic in the bourgeois nationalist “Yes” camp (see “Scotland’s Independence Referendum: Austerity, nationalism & class collaboration”). Some, following the lead of Scotland’s best known “revolutionary”, Tommy Sheridan, have translated this to outright electoral support to the SNP, abandoning the class line entirely.

With SNP leader Nicola Sturgeon touted as “winner” of the seven-way televised leader debates, the party seems poised to win the vast majority of seats in Scotland. Despite some rhetorical opposition to the “ideological” austerity plans of Labour and the Tories, the SNP is committed to wield its votes in Westminster in the interests of Scottish capitalism. Plaid Cymru, the smaller Welsh nationalist equivalent, plays a similar role.

Like the nationalists, the bourgeois Green Party, whose members and policies cover virtually the entire political spectrum, is positioning itself to Labour’s left for this campaign. It promises to scrap university tuition fees, repeal the bedroom tax and the 2012 Health and Social Care Act and carry out a popular pledge to renationalise the railways. On the left of the party we have the Green candidate for Redcar, Peter Pinkney, who is president of the RMT trade union and says he wants to “abolish capitalism and replace it with a socialist system” (*Morning Star*, 24 June 2014). If Pinkney is serious about this claim, why is he running on the slate of a party that stands for green-tinted capitalism?

Whenever British Greens have achieved power at the municipal level they have quickly reneged on their anti-austerity promises. In Brighton and Hove City Council, where the Greens are the biggest party, only a handful of party “rebels” voted against a Labour/Green “compromise” budget of cuts for 2015/16. Greens in Bristol and other councils, as well as in Ireland and Germany, have a similar track record of participating in the administration of austerity capitalism.

### The ‘Left’ Alternatives

Instead of auto-Labourism or chasing petit-bourgeois Greens and nationalists, Marxists set as our goal the strug-

gle to build a political organisation that is committed to fight for the historic interests of working people. This is the declared purpose of Left Unity, an electoral project which has been around for a couple of years and is fielding a small number of parliamentary candidates. We attended local Left Unity meetings for a few months, including its first policy conference in Manchester in March 2014—an event that was chiefly consumed with bureaucracy and conversations about how best to manage capitalism if the party was elected. Although there are individual branches with inclinations to both serious political discussion and practical intervention in social struggle, Left Unity as a whole is a politically stagnant lash-up without a serious base in the working class, or a programme that goes beyond reformist tinkering. It has moreover openly declared support for (and no-contest pacts with) Greens and Labour leftists.

Most Left Unity parliamentary candidates are standing on a joint platform with a larger electoral force, the Trade Unionist and Socialist Coalition (TUSC), a formation with a similar left-reformist programme. Founded for the 2010 general election, TUSC is in essence an electoral front rolled out for local and parliamentary elections, a bloc between the Socialist Party, Socialist Workers Party and the RMT. It is standing a significant number of candidates this year: 130 for parliament and 600 more in the simultaneous local elections. TUSC has support among grassroots activists, is committed to a “no cuts” policy and advocates independent working-class representation. Yet little has changed in its reformist framework since we noted in 2010:

“TUSC is an umbrella under which each constituent group is free to run candidates with their own programme provided they also endorse the general TUSC policies including a call for “democratic public ownership of the major companies and banks that dominate the economy” and a list of demands such as the right to asylum, free health care, free education and an end to the war in Afghanistan ([www.tusc.org.uk/policy.php](http://www.tusc.org.uk/policy.php)).

“These demands, tailored to appeal to disillusioned Labour supporters, are quite deliberately set in a social-democratic context. There is no mention of the expropriation of big capital—merely a muddle-headed reformist call for “public ownership” of “major” firms, which implies nothing more radical than the nationalisation of British Steel in the 1960s. The need to replace the existing bourgeois state apparatus with organs of working-class power is, of course, entirely absent, as is any discussion of the need to smash the growing threat posed by the BNP and EDL.”

—“Spoil Your Ballot! Break with Brown & the Labour traitors!” bolshevik.org, 14 April 2010

In February the Socialist Party, the main organisers of TUSC, were busy offering advice to “left” councillors on reformist bookkeeping tricks for managing capitalism more fairly:

“The Socialist party has argued that councils should, instead of making cuts, use their reserves and prudential borrowing powers, in the first instance, to give them time to mount a mass campaign. Now, with the general election only two months away, why not use that stop-gap and demand that an incoming Labour government underwrites any debt?”

—“Councils at breaking point: the strategy to fight back”, 25 February 2015

The main barrier to Marxists advocating any sort of electoral support to TUSC is its enthusiastic embrace of the Prison Officers' Association (POA), revealed in the demand to "Reinstate full trade union rights to prison officers". The TUSC steering committee includes Steve Gillan (POA general secretary), Joe Simpson (POA assistant general secretary and TUSC candidate for the Enfield North constituency) and Brian Caton (former POA general secretary, feted by the Socialist Party in 2010 as a star new recruit). Screws, like cops, are not part of the working class but agents of the repressive apparatus of the capitalist state, as we argued five years ago:

"The Socialist Party's decision to embrace the thugs who enforce capitalist rule as fellow workers dramatically illustrates the distance that separates them from the most fundamental elements of class-struggle politics. The willingness of the other ostensibly "revolutionary" groups in TUSC to participate in a coalition alongside Caton and his crew signifies that they are little better."

—"Spoil Your Ballot! Break with Brown & the Labour traitors!"

### Left Apologists for Labour Traitors

Many supporters of TUSC and Left Unity are also calling for a vote to Labour in seats where no left candidate is standing. Most of Britain's ostensibly revolutionary groups seem to be stuck in an eternal time loop, exhibiting more attachment to Labour than the majority of class-conscious workers. The job of revolutionaries is to combat illusions in Labourism, not to follow along behind until the last worker sees through this political agent of British imperialism. It is a telling indictment of the supposedly "revolutionary" formations of the British left that most of them have yet to politically break from the Labour traitors.

One exception is the Socialist Party, which refuses any support to Labour, but to justify this position finds it necessary to falsely assert that Labour is now an outright bourgeois party without an organic connection to the mass organisations of the working class. This is simply the flip-side of the notion that Marxists must always vote for a reformist workers party.

Workers Power, the flagship section of the League for the Fifth International, remains the classic exponent of reflex Labourism:

"Because of the party's continued connections to the trade unions, millions of working class people still hope that by supporting it they will get a better life and some protection from the Tories. Supporting Labour at the polls, while demanding that they go much further than current policies, can raise the horizons of the great mass of the working class."

—"Election 2015—a race to the bottom",  
February 2015

It is nonsensical to assert that it will somehow "raise the horizons" of working people to promote illusions that Miliband and his crew of parliamentary cretins might somehow adopt class-struggle tactics. Yet this is the core of Workers Power's policy of advocating votes to Labour while simultaneously proclaiming "we demand of Labour candidates that they break with all forms of austerity and support the fightback against it, here and now and if they get into government" ("General Election 2015: the choice

is simple", March 2015). There is no reason to imagine that Labour will do anything remotely like this. Given that neither Miliband nor any other leading party figure make any pretence of such a "break", Workers Power's "demand" that they do so amounts to providing left cover for Labour's anti-working class campaign.

Workers Power supplements this with the promotion of parallel illusions in rank and file trade-union control of Labour: "Union members, whose subs fund Labour, should insist it carries out the policies of no cuts and renationalisation that their own conferences have repeatedly voted for" ("Election 2015—a race to the bottom"). Revolutionaries instead fight for trade unions to disaffiliate from Labour and seek to forge a party committed to fighting the bosses, not coddling them.

### Spoilt Votes Count—Write 'NO CHOICE FOR WORKERS' on your Ballot!

In a *Newsnight* interview in October 2013, comedian Russell Brand caused some outrage across the political spectrum by calling on people not to vote. "Why pretend?" he asked, "Why be complicit in this ridiculous illusion?" Although Brand has since changed his tune, endorsing Labour and the Green MP Caroline Lucas, his interview hit a nerve as an expression of a view particularly widespread amongst the young. Marxists do not boycott elections on principle but neither do we fetishise the vote. When there is no candidate worth voting for, we should say so. In this case, spoiling your ballot paper is a legitimate tactic through which revolutionaries can take advantage of the greater awareness of political issues during an election campaign, without endorsing the illusion that there is a candidate that expresses, in some way, the interests of the oppressed and exploited. *Don't play the "lesser evil" game! Write "no choice for workers" on your ballot.*

Marxists participate in bourgeois elections without illusions in the limits and the function of "democracy" for the ruling class. Under capitalism most important decisions are made outside the formal political channels with elections serving chiefly as a means of legitimating the rule of a tiny minority with apparent popular approval. The right to cast a ballot every five years is portrayed by the capitalist media as evidence that state policy reflects the will of the people.

In theory the voters are supreme, but in reality the choices are limited to what the capitalist class permits. This is why it is not possible to use the existing bourgeois state to pursue workers' interests—that requires smashing up the existing state apparatus and replacing it with new "armed bodies" committed to defending a new egalitarian social order. To do this requires a mass revolutionary workers' party, which would utilise elections as a political platform to campaign against capitalist austerity, sexism, racism and imperialist war, while advocating the creation of workers' councils and the seizure of power to form a workers' government which would base production on human need and not profit. But this will not be possible while the leadership of the left and workers' movement set their sights so desperately low.

***Down with the misleaders! Build a revolutionary party!***

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# Labourism...

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the interests of working people. Class politics are once again being discussed in the mainstream media—usually in the context of ridiculous attempts to paint Corbyn as a dangerous radical, which he most certainly is not. Rather, Corbyn's role and aspiration is to restore the image of the Labour Party as a credible alternative to capitalist rule, when in fact it has an unblemished record of loyally supporting the British state, at home and abroad, on every important issue.

## Defy the Anti-Union Laws!

Arguments that the groundswell of support for Corbyn constitutes the long-awaited mass movement against austerity are founded rather more on hope than on analysis. Although Labour branches at ward and constituency level are experiencing increased attendance as well as a rise in membership, this is not matched by corresponding workplace militancy.

When railworkers on London Underground and the national network took strike action during the leadership campaign Corbyn was photographed visiting picket lines and generally expressed support for the right to strike, but at no point has he advocated serious strike actions (ie, hitting the bourgeoisie where it hurts) as a *strategic* path for defeating austerity. While he calls for the repeal of the Tory anti-union laws (retained by the Blair/Brown government for 13 years) and opposed the current even more draconian Trade Union Bill, Corbyn has never encouraged workers to *defy* these laws—an absolute necessity in order to carry out effective strikes.

In a largely hostile episode of the BBC's *Panorama* shown shortly before his election, Corbyn was pushed to comment on whether he supported unions breaking the law and he replied hypothetically that "There are circumstances where people legitimately defy the law. I fully understand that and I would support them in doing that." This is a testament to growing pressure from the ranks for unions to actively resist the Tory legislation, reflected in increased left talk on this issue from Len McCluskey, head of Unite. Speaking to the TUC Congress the day after the Tory's Trade Union Bill passed its first reading, Corbyn posed the issue as one of civil liberties rather than an overt class attack on workers, and promised to repeal the laws in five years' time:

"When we have been elected with a majority in 2020, we are going to repeal this Bill and replace it with a workers' rights agenda and something decent and proper for the future. "... by calling into question the right of free association of trade unions they are actually in contravention, in my view, of Article 11 of the European Convention of Human Rights.... We have got to fight this Bill all the way, because if they get it through it's a damage to civil liberties and for everybody in our society."

—Labour List, 15 September 2015

Rather than waiting for Corbyn to come and save the day in parliament five years from now, the union movement must destroy this legislation with industrial action

as the first step to overturning the entire Tory/Blairite austerity programme.

Most of the major trade unions are still affiliated to the Labour Party, providing substantial funding and constantly encouraging their members to vote Labour. The Blairite right wing of the party would like to weaken this influence and break the contradiction at the heart of Labour, turning it into something more akin to the US Democrats. In response to Labour's record of serving the bosses, some smaller left-wing unions such as the Rail, Maritime and Transport union (RMT) and the Fire Brigades Union (FBU) began distancing themselves from the party, but their support to Corbyn's campaign has brought them back in line with the Labour-backing mainstream unions such as Unison and Unite. For these latter unions, endorsing Corbyn was a matter of simple self-preservation, given the dissatisfaction of the ranks. For the RMT and FBU, he appeared to represent what they had wanted all along—a shift to the left within the party. The membership, who have seen little serious resistance to austerity from their unions, are hoping the new Labour leader will step into the breach.

Corbyn's first move on being elected—a speech at a mass demonstration in support of refugees—was a sharp counterpoint to David Cameron's grudging offer to take in a mere 20,000 refugees over five years, while negotiating with French authorities to build bigger security fences at Calais and supporting efforts to militarise European Union borders. But Corbyn has really proposed remarkably little concrete policy. Socialists welcome refugees to Britain and advocate full citizenship rights for all who arrive, while consistently calling for the *defeat* of Britain, the U.S. and other imperialist powers whose military excursions in the Middle East precipitated this crisis in the first place—not,

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**Europas Krieg gegen Flüchtlinge**

Europa zeigt in der Frage der ankommenden Flüchtlinge seine rassistische Vinstre in voller Pracht. Das Entstehen von Grenzschleusen, das Sprechen der letzten Reste des demokratischen Rechts auf Asyl, die rassistische Gewalt, erbeutete Übergriffe auf offener Straße, oder die rassistische Gewalt der Sicherheitskräfte entlang der Grenze, sind nur die offensichtlichsten Beispiele. Innerhalb der liberalen Bourgeoisie geht die Angst um, dass die Europäischen Union an der Art und Weise, wie die einströmenden EU-Staaten mit den Flüchtlingen umgehen, zerbrechen wird. Die Tatsache, dass es in der EU nicht möglich ist, sich auf eine Verteilung der Flüchtlinge zu einigen, zeigt, dass das vereinte Europa nur in den Trümmern der liberalen Bourgeoisie existiert. In Deutschland wurde ab dem Sommer 2015 eine von rassistischen Vorurteilen geprägte Debatte geführt, in der zum Erdbeben der ankommenden Flüchtlinge kein reaktionärer Vorschlag gemacht wurde. Rassisten und Faschisten faulig gelassen wurden. Rassisten und Faschisten der rechten dem neurechten Grenzschutz durch die rassistische Brandstiftung in Ungarn als Sieg. Grenzschutz auf Flüchtlinge sind logische Konsequenz einer immer selbstbewusster auftretenden radikalen Rechten.

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IBT contingent on anti-austerity demo, London, June 2015

as Corbyn put it on *Panorama*, for an alternative policy that does not “put British troops in harm’s way”.

### Labour Loyalty

Corbyn is deeply loyal to the party, seeing Labour as the natural home of workers and the oppressed, despite all its betrayals. During the campaign he said that those who wanted to vote for him should only join Labour “if they are genuine supporters and become genuine members of the party” (*Guardian*, 28 July 2015). While his selection of positions in the shadow cabinet indicate that he is consolidating key allies around him, such as shadow chancellor John McDonnell, it is also clear that he has attempted to build as broad a coalition as possible by including leadership rival Andy Burnham and retaining the posts of Hilary Benn and Lord Falconer, both of whom served under Blair.

It is evident that Corbyn will have to compromise if he wishes to retain his leadership. Already there are reports that shadow defence minister Kevan Jones was persuaded to remain in his post with assurances that the Trident nuclear weapons would not be scrapped or Britain withdrawn from NATO, despite Corbyn’s long-held opposition to both (*Telegraph*, 18 September 2015). Corbyn has been clear that he intends to operate strictly within the bounds of parliamentary legality. Like his Labour left allies he is comfortable with the existing British state which defends social privilege, exploitation and private ownership of the means of production. The Corbynites do not pretend to much more than wanting to establish a more equitable distribution of income.

In recent decades there has been no reason for socialists to advocate any sort of electoral support, however critical, for Labour, as working-class illusions in its socialist pretensions have worn increasingly thin. During this time we have advocated that unions and Labour activists should

break with Labour in the process of building a party committed to really fighting for the interests of the working class. While Labour cannot and should not be ignored as a site of struggle, particularly when it periodically lurches to the left, the faults of the British left, in the main, lie in accommodation to Labourism, rather than too little engagement.

Most of the ostensibly revolutionary left launched itself with enthusiasm into Corbyn’s campaign, but this was little more than business as usual for many of these groups. The Socialist Workers Party (SWP), Workers Power, the Alliance for Workers Liberty (AWL) and the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB), to name a few, have regularly called for votes to Labour through all the years of Blairism, votes to a party lead by those who Workers Power now denounce as “the careerists, the cowards, the traitors whose past crimes in government and present capitulation to austerity condemns them in the eyes of millions” (Workers Power, 15 September 2015).

Workers Power is perhaps the most skilful of the auto-Labourites at putting a left face on class compromise and adaptation. While offering some pro-forma criticism of Corbyn’s overt reformism, they cast Corbyn as a potential threat to the ruling class:

“The fact that Corbyn’s campaign has such support has unsettled the bourgeois establishment; its toleration for a government elected on Corbyn’s programme would be virtually nil.”

— *Workers Power*, 29 July 2015

They advocate that “all socialists should join the Labour Party, defend and promote Jeremy’s progressive demands, and work to extend and deepen these policies in a revolutionary socialist direction” (Workers Power, 15 September 2015). In the extremely unlikely event that Labour on Corbyn’s watch does move left and dares to “extend and deepen” his reformist programme, Workers Power anticipates ruling class resistance:

“The great economic power of the capitalist class and the repressive power in the hands of its state cannot be successfully defied, let alone broken, by electoral mandates alone. “Only the huge numbers and organisations of the working class and the youth, rallying to our side any progressive sections of the middle class, can match and master the power of business and the state. The working class can win and exercise control over production, distribution and via the banks finance and the exchanges. We can organise mass self-defence against the state forces when they repress strikes and demonstrations, let alone when they threaten a coup, as they would undoubtedly do against a radical Labour government.”

— *Ibid.*

Of course Corbyn and his friends in the Labour left would flatly oppose any talk of such measures. He wants to improve conditions for working people under capitalism and, like all left-talking social democrats, believes he can best do so through accommodation with the ruling class—he does not dream of attempting to “match and master” them. Workers Power, in its excitement at Corbyn’s ascent, sketches out a scenario of virtual dual power via mass mobilisations and self-organisation, omitting the need for a revolutionary party:

“By creating democratic bodies for mobilisation, councils of resistance at local and national level, by creat-

ing instruments of workers' control of production and services, we can not only shorten the life of this Tory government. We can create the basis for a new type of government altogether: not just a parliamentary Labour government encircled by the institutions of capital, but a workers government determined to break the power of the bosses, the bankers and the generals for good."

—*Ibid.*

Labour Party loyalists of left and right will ensure that it cannot serve as any sort of revolutionary instrument, even in a period when the working class is intent on forming soviets. Breaking the power of the bosses requires the wholesale rejection of Labourism with its pro-imperialist reformism and deference to Britain's parasitic elites. But instead of posing the necessity for a political break from Labourism, Workers Power is talking as if they really believe that, with enough left pressure, Corbyn and his crew of Labour Party devotees may somehow be capable of creating "a workers government determined to break the power of the bosses".

While Corbyn's rapid ascent reflects a real appetite for struggle among working people, his role, like other left-talking Labourites before him, is to channel and contain threats to the bosses, not to "break the[ir] power". The role of Marxists therefore is not to celebrate Corbyn, but to expose the pro-capitalist logic of his politics and thus begin to prepare the ground for a future left-wing break from Labourism.

### Class Politics & Contradictions

One group which has been caught particularly flat-footed by Corbyn's surging popularity is the Socialist Party, which in the 1990s pronounced that Labour no longer had a significant working class connection and had been transformed into an outright capitalist formation, a change that "will not be easily reversed" (*Socialism Today*, September 2015). This apparent metamorphosis coincided with the purge of supporters of the Militant Tendency (the Socialist Party's predecessor) from their decades-long entry in the Labour Party. In order to switch strategy and stop voting Labour, they had to declare it a bourgeois formation. This is only the flip side of the view expressed by many ostensibly Trotskyist groups that because Labour has an organic connection to the mass organisations of the working class, it is therefore necessary to support it electorally. In both cases, this misses the conjunctural character of the Leninist tactic of critical support, which is as much about when and how to withdraw support as when to give it.

The Socialist Party has compared Corbyn to Bernie Sanders, the left-posturing candidate who is doing surprisingly well in the US Democratic presidential primaries, supported by their American co-thinkers in the Committee for a Workers International (CWI). Similarly, they equate Labour with the Democrats as "an out-and-out 'pro-business' capitalist outfit" (Socialist Party, 19 June 2015).

What the CWI in the US are entirely missing is the class line—the Democrats are simply one of two capitalist parties seeking to manage American imperialism. The Labour Party, because it remains organisationally separate from the British bourgeoisie, still represents, in deformed fashion, the principle upon which it was founded by the trade unions over a century ago—that workers need their own

political party separate from those of the bosses. Sanders is nothing more than a left-talking bourgeois politician whose job is to keep American workers locked into supporting the Democratic Party of racism and imperialist war.

Corbynmania also seems to have infected the normally insular and vitriolic Spartacist League, which has uncharacteristically "welcomed the Corbyn campaign" for striking "a dramatic blow against the Blair project of severing the party's historic links with the trade unions" (*Workers Hammer*, Autumn 2015, no. 232). This requires a hasty reversal of their analysis, reasserted only a few months previously at their national conference that Labour "does not act like a classical social-democratic party. New Labour today is moribund as a reformist party of the working class" (*Workers Hammer*, Summer 2015, no. 231). Although presenting a mild caveat that "While the demands posed by the Corbyn campaign are supportable, they cannot be achieved through old Labour parliamentarism" ("Jeremy Corbyn: Tony Blair's Nightmare") and a pro-forma call for revolution, the Spartacist League appears to be so delighted with "a welcome upheaval in British political life" that it does not want to spoil the mood by focusing too much on the limitations of Corbyn's brand of overtly pro-capitalist reformism.

It would be foolish to deny that Corbyn's meteoric rise reflects the social tensions generated by a growing polarisation of British society and a desire by a large section of the working class to strike out in a radically different direction from the Blairites. This is an important development and potentially sets in motion a process that could lead politically advanced sections of the working class to seriously engage with revolutionary ideas, and begin to break from the political straightjacket of social-democratic reformism. The elementary duty of Marxists at this moment is to point out that Corbyn's project of advancing the interests of the victims of capitalism while rigidly adhering to the rule-book written by the exploiters is doomed to fail. The class struggle between the bourgeoisie and the working class is a zero sum game and to come out on top working people need to recognise that their interests are antithetical to those of the bosses. Corbyn preaches exactly the opposite.

The enthusiasm and conscious self-identification of the working class as a class with its own interests that have spontaneously surged up around the Corbyn campaign will soon be dissipated if contained within the framework of Labourite parliamentarism. Rather than wait five years in the hope that Corbyn might win an election, it is in the urgent and immediate interest of the workers' movement to engage in mass industrial action to smash Cameron's reactionary union-bashing legislation. Such a step, which is well within the realm of immediate possibility, would represent an important step in the direction of the working class acting *for* itself. Instead of prioritising such a perspective, most of Britain's self-proclaimed revolutionary socialists are seeking to ride the Corbyn wave, hoping to push it a bit further to the left. Workers who have illusions in the possibilities of Corbyn's left-wing Labourism can potentially be won to the understanding that what is necessary is an entirely different sort of political organisation—a party with a revolutionary programme that rejects social-democratic accommodation with capitalism, on the road to destroying capitalism itself.

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## Jeremy Corbyn & Class-Struggle Politics

# Labourism Rebooted



Hundreds of thousands of people marched through London, Liverpool and Glasgow on 20 June in defiance of the recently elected Tory government, displaying an anger that has not been seen on the streets for many years. Just a few days earlier, Islington North MP Jeremy Corbyn had surprised supporters and critics alike by gaining enough nominations for a place on the ballot for leader of the Labour Party. The explosion of support for Corbyn that followed was unanticipated, providing a vehicle for simmering anger and frustration. A week after his resounding victory on 12 September, the Tories pushed through legislation to hobble the legal ability of trade unions to take effective strike action and slashed the tax credits which many lower income families, in and out of work, rely on to survive.

Labour Party membership swelled during the leadership race, and tens of thousands more have joined since Corbyn's election. The militancy of the June demonstrations, with no follow-up plans offered by the organisers, has been channelled in the direction of parliamentary social democracy. While his candidacy filled a vacuum left by decades of New Labour betrayals, Corbyn's politics ensure that those who hoped for a real break from Labour's history of consistent accommodation to the ruling class will be bitterly disappointed.

We pointed to Labour's contradictory class character in a statement published prior to the May general election:

"Marxists recognise that Labour's continuing connection

to the trade unions means that it remains a bourgeois workers party. In circumstances when such a party turns to the left and projects a willingness to fight for the rights of the poor and exploited, revolutionaries could consider offering 'critical support' — calling for a vote to Labour in order to exploit the contradictions between the illusions and hopes of its working-class base and its pro-capitalist programme."

—"Spoil your ballot! No choice for workers in 2015!"  
bolshevik.org

Corbyn's calls for tax reform, renationalisation of the railways, a programme of house building and rent control, increased funding for the NHS, a ban on zero-hour contracts and increased access to childcare and education are well within the historic mainstream of Labour Party policy. They seem radical only in the context of how far two decades of neoliberal Blairism has pushed the party to the right. The late Tony Benn, for example, the long-time leader of the Labour left who almost won the post of deputy leader in 1981, clearly opposed NATO (ie, the main military alliance of British imperialism), a question on which Corbyn hedges. And despite his Labour loyalism, Corbyn has also indicated openness to work in some sort of cross-class coalition with the bourgeois Scottish National Party or Greens.

Corbyn's campaign and prominence as leader bring the contradictions of Labour further into the open and put the question of what sort of politics are necessary to advance

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