

Breaking Imperialism's Chains

Workers' Solidarity Federation

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By imperialism we mean a situation of external domination where the ruling class of one country dominates the people and territory of another country. The key imperialist powers are the Western States (USA, West Europe, Japan) and their ruling classes, and the dominant States of the former Soviet bloc (Russia and China).

Roots of imperialism

Imperialism has been a central part of capitalism and the modern State since these structures of oppression emerged 500 years ago. Two factors account for this. Firstly, the imperialist ruling classes wanted to obtain cheap labour and raw materials and new markets for manufactured goods in the Third World (Africa, South Asia, Latin America, Middle East, East Europe). Secondly, the Western States and their ruling classes competed with one another for territory and strategic advantage (such as keeping rival ruling classes away from cheap minerals).

Imperialism before World War Two

The first phase of modern imperialism was merchant capitalism. This was the period opened up by the conquest of the Americas. The capitalist ruling class of the West got its wealth through plunder, trade, slave plantations and the exploiting of European peasants and artisans. Merchant capitalism overlapped with a second imperialist phase, colonialism, in which Western states established direct rule over Third World areas like Africa.

The consequences of imperialism in all these phases were overwhelmingly negative, involving genocide against indigenous peoples, slavery, racism, war, increased food insecurity, poverty and oppression.

Collapse of the colonial empires

The old colonial empires collapsed after 1945 period due to the weaknesses of the key imperial powers, pressure from the USA for access to these territories, and massive colonial revolts.

But while the destruction of the empires was an advance, the anti-colonial movements failed in an important way: power did not pass to the working and poor people who made up the majority of the Third World population, but to local capitalist ruling classes. This failure has very concrete roots in the nationalist politics that dominated most of the anti-colonial revolts (see below). At the same time, external domination continued in the Third World despite the attainment of formally independent States.

Imperialism today

Imperialism did not end with the collapse of the empires. The USA became the main imperialist power after 1945. It sought to expand its economic and military influence through alliances like NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organisation) in order to halt the expansion of the rival imperialist blocs of the so-called socialist (in reality, State-capitalist) countries of the Soviet Union and China. All these imperialist powers repeatedly used military force to secure their interests in the Third World: examples are Nicaragua (US intervention) and Afghanistan (Soviet intervention).

Relations between the key imperialist powers are partly regulated by the United Nations, which is an imperialist-dominated congress of self-seeking Western and Third World ruling classes. It is not a peacekeeper!

Huge multi-national corporations (MNCs) like Shell came to dominate world trade, investment, research, and wealth after 1945. MNC's power allows them to maintain exploitative colonial trade patterns in which Third World countries sell underpriced raw materials to Western companies who in turn charge monopoly prices for manufactured goods. MNCs do invest in Third World countries, but they send most of their profits back to their head offices (instead of reinvesting it locally); undermine efficient local job-creating industries with machinery and imports with few linkages to the local economy; and use cheap, repressed, local labour. In other words, MNCs are part and parcel of the imperialist system in its post-World War Two phase.

The International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank are also imperialist structures. These institutions support right-wing Third World governments (for example, South Africa in 1976). Their policies reinforce the unequal exchange trade patterns inherited from colonialism by promoting reliance on the primary sector (raw materials), and also aid MNC activities by promoting free trade and capital movements. Their weapons are the promotion of free market ideas and the insistence that Third World countries wanting loans adopt a set of neo-liberal/free market policies called Economic Structural Adjustment (ESAP). ESAP calls for: promotion of raw material production; trade liberalisation; and a reduced State role in the economy (meaning privatisation, massive cuts in welfare and public sector jobs).

Why nationalism fails

Imperialism casts a shadow over Third World working and poor people, so what strategy can fight it?

One strategy is progressive nationalism, supported by organisations like the PLO (Palestinian Liberation Organisation) and IRA (Irish Republican Army). These groups argue that all classes in a given nation must unite to achieve self-determination through an independent State.

Although progressive, anti-imperialist nationalism cannot defeat imperialism. Nationalism delivers power to local ruling classes as it relies on taking State power. The State is a hierarchical, bureaucratic structure of coercion that always defends capitalism and concentrates power in the hands of a small ruling class. As a result, the State cannot deliver freedom to the workers and peasants. Nationalism hides class differences within the nation by arguing that all people must unite around their supposedly common interests, when in fact they have nothing in common. Its function is to build a mass support base for local elites angry with imperialism for blocking their ambitions to rule and exploit.

The enemy is at home

Although Third World elites may use anti-imperialist language, they cannot challenge imperialism once they hijack the anti-imperialist struggle to take power. Nationalists fail to realise that imperialism's international power, in the form of Western militaries, the UN, the IMF and World Bank, and MNCs, means that it is impossible for any one country to pursue an independent path. Those who try are stamped on hard, like Iraq in the Gulf War of 1991.

Third World ruling classes are objectively allies of imperialism as their interests are mostly identical. They rely on the imperialist economic relationships for their wealth, and on Western ruling classes military aid to crush worker-peasant resistance to the exploitation and repression this entails. For their part, imperialist ruling classes support these local elites as they help manage imperialism and capitalism.

Conflicts do sometimes arise between Third World and Western ruling classes. For example, local elites may resent the restrictions of imperialism and try take an independent capitalist development path, for example, by nationalising MNC property. However, although imperialists intervene against these renegades, the real source of conflict between the two groups is over how to manage capitalism and the State, not about whether or not to keep them. Both sides support these structures and agree on the need to repress the working masses. Nationalisation is not socialism but only a transfer of property from company bureaucrats to State bureaucrats. Where a genuine worker-peasant revolt breaks out, the two elites drop their differences and unite against their common enemy, the workers and peasants.

Path of class struggle

There is another way, Anarcho-Syndicalism. Since imperialism is rooted in capitalism and the State, we argue that the anti-imperialist struggle can only be successful if it is also a struggle against these structures. And these structures can only be destroyed by class struggle as only the workers and peasants are capable of building a free society as only they do not need to exploit, and have no vested interest in the current system.

Since an isolated anti-imperialist struggle or revolution cannot win, a successful struggle requires maximum international support and solidarity. The worker-peasant revolution must spread into other territories dominated by imperialism and also into the imperialist countries. The true allies of the Third World toiling masses are the Western working classes, not the exploiting local elites who hijack power. These Western working classes do not benefit from imperialism as it strengthens the repressive power of their own rulers, wastes resources and lives on the military, promotes reactionary ideas that divides the workers (like racism), and allows MNCs to cut jobs and wages by the shifting operations to repressive Third World countries.

The revolution aims to establish an international stateless socialist system based on equality and worker-peasant self-management through federations of workplace and community councils. Such a system will allow all people full self-determination and the right to express their various cultures and ways of life.

For international solidarity and revolutionary resistance

In order to work towards this final victory, we must join anti-imperialist struggles as we support their immediate aims, as campaigning gives people confidence in struggle, and out of working class solidarity. It is in struggle that people are won to revolutionary ideas, and so we must link these daily struggles to our vision of a free society. Overall, we oppose all imperialist interventions (including those of the UN), as they are part of the problem, not the solution. Any imperialist-brokered settlement will have as its primary aim the preservation of ruling class power. We are for the unconditional withdrawal of imperialist troops from any occupations.

We are opposed to all imperialist wars, but we do not side with Third World elites when they clash with imperialist powers. Instead, we call for solidarity with, and victory to, the working and poor people of that country, who are, after all, the main victims of any conflict. We make this concrete by offering solidarity including material aid to independent working class and working peasant and anti-authoritarian organisations. We call on First World workers to oppose the interventions. We defend all progressive independence movements and progressive forces (including nationalists) in their battles with oppression. We defend the right of ordinary people to choose to have an independent State and/or secede from an empire. We demand the liberation of all colonies and sites of imperial oppression, and oppose all attacks on secessionist movements.

We welcome local defeats for imperialism as they give confidence to working class struggles in the imperialist countries and as they encourage anti-imperialist struggles in other countries. At the same time, however, we are forced to recognise that any defeat of imperialism that does not have Anarchist/Syndicalist goals will not be ultimately succeed. In countries where nationalist movements do come to power our role is not to support them but rather to organise for a revolution that will place power in the hands of the working class and working peasantry.

We are opposed to ESAP policies, not because they are technically faulty but because they hurt ordinary people. Class struggle is the key to defending and advancing the conditions and rights of working and poor people in this situation. We are for an international minimum wage and international working class unity. If capitalism is global, the workers struggle must become global as well. The way to defeat MNC manipulation of different national wage rates in order to attack workers is not protectionism against cheap imports or surrender to the demands of capital, it is international unity in support of basic worker and consumer living standards across the world. We therefore support all initiatives at international trade union unity but argue that control must stay with the rank-and-file. We are for solidarity strikes between workers in different countries in general, and for solidarity action and trade union unity between workers employed by the same MNC in different countries in particular.

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