

Against All Nationalisms



The document reproduced below is based on the presentation which we made to the Sheffield Anarchist Bookfair in 2015. The audio can be found at freecommunism.org but we have been asked by several people to print the introduction to that meeting here. Their motives are not hard to explain. Since the meeting in 2015 the Brexit vote has not only given licence for every racist and nationalist gobshite to verbally abuse anyone in the UK seen to be foreign but has led to 3 murders (after the MP Jo Cox, one man hailing from Poland and another from the Czech Republic have been murdered). According to the Daily Mirror "hate crime" is up 14% but about a third of police forces in England[1] have so far refused to answer their freedom of information enquiry so this is an underestimate. Certainly such hate crimes increased five fold in the first few days after the Brexit vote.

And this nationalist/racist xenophobia is not confined to the UK. It is going on all over the world, often in places of which we hear nothing (take the persecution of the Rohingya in Myanmar/Burma for example).

The material roots of this rising nationalism lie in the capitalist crisis (as the article below explains). The capitalist mainstream complain about the rise of so-called "populism". What they are really

beefing about is that such movements (whether of left or right) are a sign that the ruling capitalist class is losing its grip in the face of a global economic stagnation which they have signally failed to escape in nearly a decade. The system needs to devalue capital to break the cycle and get growth started but the only real way this can be done in massive enough numbers is via generalised war. Left wing populism is useful for fooling the masses into thinking the democratic capitalist system can offer an alternative for them but in the end they all fail e.g. Sanders, Syriza, Podemos and soon Corbyn) because they are trying to go against the laws of capital without going against capital itself - redistribution has its limits and never attacks the real cause of inequality - the antagonistic mode of production. Racist and nationalist movements however come naturally to system based on exploitation and oppression. The lack of an economic solution means that those who think what is needed is greater protectionism against globalisation (but with no pseudo anti-capitalist agenda) like Trump the AfD, those who favoured Brexit, the Front National etc. etc. are now making gains and of course, the system is bending to their nationalist agenda. We are already seeing evidence for this in trade wars, competitive devaluations and the abandonment of "free trade" agreements and these will only exacerbate the problem (world trade is already falling). The nationalist and racist sub plot is beginning to politically line itself up with the real demands of a mode of production at the end of a cycle of accumulation. This makes for a very dangerous future ...

Why We Oppose All Nationalisms

The topic for this session arises out of correspondence between the CWO, the Free Communist and the Midlands Discussion Forum in response to events as far apart as what is going on in the Ukraine, Western Kurdistan (Rojava) and even bonny Scotland. For good measure you can throw in the nauseating commemorations of the First World War which have been going on in the UK and elsewhere since the start of last year. Latest in these are the commemorations of the Gallipoli landings in Turkey which define for the ruling classes of Australia, New Zealand and Turkey their own concept of "nationhood" as well the Armenian massacres which coincidentally started on the same day in 1915. The Armenian genocide by the Turks helped to "ethnically cleanse" one minority. It was followed up by a similar cleansing in 1922 with the killing or expulsion of the Greek citizens of Smyrna

(Izmir) to create Kemalist Turkey from the ruins of the Ottoman Empire. Indeed the breadth and depth of the problem of nationalism today is so widespread that it is certain that none of us would agree on where to begin. It certainly merited us asking for a 2 hour slot to discuss this issue in order for everyone to contribute.

Some might want us to focus on the spreading menace of the extreme Right like UKIP, Jobbik in Hungary, the Front National in France, the Lega Nord in Italy, PEGIDA and the Alternative für Deutschland in Germany, Golden Dawn in Greece and a host of equally unsavoury racist groupings. Perhaps there is an interesting discussion to be had on how some of these are enjoying more support by making racism sound rational and taking about the problem of immigration whilst others remain marginal but inspire fear in minority communities through regular violence. However that is not as significant as the more general rise in the mainstream of capitalist political life of identity politics. Racism and nationalism are never far away from the surface of political discourse but in the face of the capitalist crisis they take on a new purpose and life. So apologies if we talk a little of the global economic crisis of capitalism as our starting point.

We don't want to spend too long on this here (we have devoted hundreds of pages to this over the years) but one of the axioms of our position in the CWO is that the fundamental analysis of Marx's Capital remains valid for our own time. Capitalist production involves enormous contradictions from which it cannot escape. The very forces which make capitalism the most dynamic mode of production hitherto known are also the same ones that create its basic problems. Marx noted that capitalist accumulation did not go in a straight line but in cycles. Every decade or so the system suddenly, and apparently inexplicably to capitalist economists, would suffer a crisis. Unlike economic crises of the past these were not crises caused by scarcity but by overproduction. But this overproduction did not mean that everyone could have the basic means of existence. There was too much to sell but no-one to buy even though they lacked basic necessities. The result was actual starvation for any workers who lost their jobs. And those who lost their jobs often had to listen out for where they could go to get any kind of work at all. The working class has always been a class of migrants. In the nineteenth century though it allowed those capitalist who had enough capital to survive to buy out their rivals at

knock down prices (what we call a devaluation) and the cycle could resume again but with a greater concentration and centralisation of capital. This process was repeated several times until that concentration created monopoly capitalism and the internal competition in each capitalist nation-state became less significant than the competition between the leading firms of these national states. This brought forth the early defence of these firms by the state both through things like tariffs and ultimately military action. As we used to write, trade wars were the precursors to shooting wars. Capitalism had shifted in one decisive aspect. From now on the concentration of capital was so great that only a massive and destructive devaluation of capital would bring about the profitable revival of the economic cycle. In the twentieth century capitalism's cycle of accumulation turned into an infernal cycle of imperialist wars costing millions of lives and wiping out capital values in a way never seen before. The six years from 1939-45 led to the post-war boom which was the longest sustained boom in capitalists history.

But this boom too also faded in the early 1970s as the same tendency for the rate of profit to fall meant that capitalism once again entered into a crisis of the end of the cycle of accumulation. But here is where our epoch is again different from the past. In the past the nation-state did not play such a significant role in the everyday micro-management of the economy and society. With the domination of finance capital the state has to maintain the conditions for ensuring the stability of the regime of accumulation. This led to the assumption by the Labour and Tory Governments after 1986 (the so-called Big Bang) that the financiers could be left free to run the economy. It created an illusion of capitalist recovery based on the notion that debt was now irrelevant and that somewhere down the line the surplus value to pay it would turn up. We predicted that this would end in tears long before it happened (in fact we considered it miraculous that it continued so long). In fact even at this point Marx's Capital is accurate as he points out that the final act of every cycle in its downward phase is speculation and the creation of fictitious capital. And this phase is not over but the creation of fictitious capital has been transferred from the banks to the national states. Bank debt became sovereign debt. But if states are going to issue more sovereign debt then they need to get bondholders to believe that they will get their money back. So the same financial institutions who brought about the speculative bubble insist on good housekeeping and the reduction not in debt

(which continues to balloon) but in the immediate budget deficit so that the promise of reduced debt in the future can be held. Under these conditions they buy the bonds (another form of fictitious capital?) and the governments of the states meanwhile have to cut state spending or increase state revenue. Welcome austerity. Thus those who have had not connection with the financial system – the working class – everywhere find themselves paying for the crisis.

Some people will now be breathing a sigh of relief that we have got away from the dreary science of economics back to real people but this is the premise for what we are here to talk about today. If the ruling class is making a frontal attack on the working class there is a danger of a class response. To avert this what better vehicle than identity politics (and perhaps the latest election result was a victory for nationalism English and Scottish nationalism both sides of the border?) and what is a more obvious identity than the notion of “the country” or the nation? And there is no doubt that over this phase at the end of the cycle of accumulation (i.e. the last 40 years) this has increased across the globe. In the UK the Falklands War was a defining moment in the shift. Before then nationalist notions were confined to nostalgia for the Second World War by those that had survived it. After then Union flags sprang up like mushrooms and a rabidly nationalist press (owned largely by non-UK citizens!) has kept the message going to the point where many come to believe that nationalism is simply natural.

But it isn't. It actually arises from the bourgeois revolutions of the eighteenth century. Before then we had no national loyalties but only loyalties as subject to a ruler who ruled by divine right. The bourgeois revolution though needed something to legitimise the kind of property relations they wanted to defend. Hence the rise of the notion of “a citizen” rather than a subject. And by claiming that they spoke for the entire nation or “the people” against monarchs and aristocrats they put themselves at the head of a wider movement which received enthusiastic support from the downtrodden masses of peasants, artisans and workers. Liberty, fraternity and equality were mighty powerful slogans. So powerful that people did not realise that under the brave new bourgeois world some were freer than others and equality was only equality before the law which defended the rights of existing property owners and not equality in the more general sense. In the early stages of the

bourgeois revolution the idea of "democracy" was considered as dangerous as the idea of communism is today so voting rights were restricted to those who owned a certain level of property. In the French Revolution the Jacobins were so aware of the problem here that they distinguished between "active citizens" who owned property and "passive citizens" who were entitled to go and fight external enemies to a country where they held nothing. When it came to the First World War and workers were asked to go "fight for your country" the notion of "your" was abstract but for a bourgeois property owner who really did own a part of the country the same slogan was concrete. Its no accident that proportionally more members of the property-owning classes died in the trenches.

Which brings us to the central question about identities. Whereas we put our class before all else the bourgeoisie's ultimate weapon is always the appeal to nationalism. But from the days of the Communist Manifesto Marxists have always argued that "workers have no country". This isn't just rhetoric. It's a material recognition that we have no property and that we go where we can to sell our labour power. Hence we are a class of migrants. As far as Marx was concerned workers would have to settle things with their own capitalists first but as the class relationship was the same everywhere our struggle was from the beginning potentially international. "Nation or class" is just another expression of "bourgeois or proletarian" or indeed the class war. And just as nationalism is the ideology of the bourgeoisie in the class war it only flourishes when the bourgeoisie are on top.

The classic exception was 1914 when millions of workers who for 2 or 3 years had battering at the doors of capitalism were suddenly confronted with an imperialist war. The war did not come from nowhere and the Socialist International had already passed two resolutions which said they would oppose by all means any war. We all know what happened next as the Second International collapsed under a wave of betrayal and jingoism. It was an enormous defeat for the working class. Abandoned by the socialists and unaware of the consequences of modern mechanised warfare, workers flocked to the banners of the various national and imperialist causes. But as we have shown for the working class nationalism is an artificial construct. It only works when "the nation" is successful or at least not under strain. And the romance of World War One was quick to evaporate. The principled stand of Lenin in 1914, (*Turn the imperialist war into a civil war*) which had him branded as a lunatic by most

socialists, reaped its reward in the movement against the war which became a revolutionary inferno in 1917. And all over Europe wherever the working class took to fighting for its own agenda the imperialist war began to falter. It was not the military which brought the First World War to an end but the working class who finally rejected the nationalist lie of *Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori*. [2] In fact so resistant to the nationalist message was the working class that the bourgeoisie in the West needed something more than dying for "King and Country" the next time around. Instead the Second World War was justified as an anti-fascist war for democracy but of course carried out by "democratic nations". On the Axis side however it was not just a nationalist war to restore national honour trampled in the peace treaties after World War One. It was also took the logic of nationalism a stage further into a war of racist genocide the scale of which was not to be found in human history previously. Only capitalist imperialism can bring you really organised genocide.

And mentioning the Second World War brings us to the Ukraine war. Ukraine was once the bread basket of Russia and then the USSR. Since the Orange Revolution of 2004 which was largely funded and supported by the West it has become the centre of an imperialist struggle for influence. Over three quarters of the population speak Ukrainian whilst only 17% speak Russian and live mainly in the East of the country. The pro-Western elements have not only talked up Ukrainian nationalism but have allowed the fascist far right Right Sector to mushroom and gain some power in their zone. They were the ones who attempted a bit of ethnic cleansing in Odessa last year and event seized upon by the Russian nationalists in the East. There is nothing like a good atrocity to reinforce identity politics of one group against another (as we know from Northern Ireland). In the East of Ukraine though there has never been a great deal of support for rejoining Russia and the nationalists there are using the anti-fascist message to reinforce their claim to be defending the area. In fact they are visiting misery on the area and can only do so by bringing in Russian troops (220 of whom we now know have died there in the last year or so). This is obviously an inter-imperialist war yet the left and most anarchist groupings in the area (and outside the area) are lining up to back the claims one side or another. Only the anarcho-syndicalist group KRAS in Russia have come out with a class position condemning both sides and calling for workers' unity. In the context of Putin's Russia where even bourgeois opponents of the regime meet unexplained untimely deaths this takes some courage. The

war is reducing the Russian economy to ruins but Russian chauvinism can blame it on the Western sanctions whilst taking pride that Mother Russia is at last standing up to the eastward march of Western imperialism. Nostalgia for the Great Patriotic War is now at a new high and the classification of all Ukrainians as “fascists” only reinforces the national pride of the Russians. And with last week’s NATO manoeuvres in Estonia bringing RAF jets into confrontation with Russian air defences we should not ignore just how dangerous this conflict could become.

We’ll leave out anti-fascism as a cover for support for nationalism as in western Kurdistan (Rojava) for people to discuss but as a last example would just like to look at something closer to home and the curious case of Scottish nationalism. Revolutionaries are neither for nor against any particular form of political arrangement the capitalist class want to make. After all to oppose Scottish nationalism per se is to favour British nationalism. We oppose them all. What we have turned our criticism to is the illusions being bought and sold by those who claim to be for the working class both North and South of the border. They argue that the Scottish working class would be better off in a non-Tory, non-Blairite Scotland. Apart from the wonderful lack of solidarity which says the English working class can stew in their own juice this is actually a fantasy. The SNP has skilfully outmanoeuvred a Labour Party which is not only known to be corrupt at local level in Scotland but is also seen as a second Tory party since it adopted Blairism. But the SNP’s claim’s to be a party for the workers needs some examining. Their fawning welcome for globalised business has been kept fairly low key and has only come to light occasionally in such well known incidents such as Trump’s golf course in Aberdeenshire or the Ineos debacle at Grangemouth. They have also suffered little examination of their record. They boast that university education remains free in Scotland but they don’t tell you that this was at the cost of dismantling further education colleges. And despite having a disproportionate amount of money to spend due to the generous Barnett formula they have hardly covered themselves in glory over the poverty question. According to one researcher for Open University last year the situation is still dire

- *870,000 people in Scotland still live in poverty (17% of the population).*
- *200,000 children in Scotland still live in poverty (20% of all children).*

- *Poverty in Scotland is significantly higher than in many other European countries*
- *Poverty exists across Scotland. Nearly all local authorities in Scotland have council wards where over 20% of their children live in poverty.*

During the first ten years of devolution, a period when New Labour were in power, there was a much welcomed fall in the levels of poverty in Scotland, particularly child poverty. However, the picture for the immediate future shows not only that the modest reductions have been halted but there will be an increase in the levels of poverty in Scotland, as in other areas of the UK. By 2020 it is estimated that an additional 100,000 children in Scotland will be living in poverty. (G Mooney Open University 2014)

It should be added that the figures for England will not be much better but the whole idea of the wonders of nationalism just takes us back to the crisis. Without it and the obvious failures of the traditional governing parties there would be no surge of support for the SNP. In this case nationalism is a cargo cult which is the last hope for the system but the problem for us all remains the capitalist system and those that abandon a class analysis only foster illusions.

At the moment nationalism is everywhere in the ascendant and its dangers cannot be underestimated but it is largely in the ascendant because we have been losing the class war. This has been going on for decades. But as our example from the First World War shows history can often take sudden turns in different directions so all is yet to play for. We do not know when or if this will happen but we do know that against all nationalist mystifications we take a class position which is to oppose all capitalist ideologies of identity. In face of all of them we are revolutionary defeatist. In the question of nation or class there can be no compromise since class war is the only way to halt the wars that capitalism is already waging and is also preparing. All those who look for a progressive nationalist cause whether in the Ukraine or Rojava are traitors to the class war and that's why we oppose them all.

CWO

[1] In Scotland, which voted against Brexit, hate crime has actually decreased. One such crime reported in England was of an assault of a police officer on Teesside apparently because “he had a Scottish accent”.

[2] The quote is from the Roman poet Horace and was re-used by Wilfred Owen in his poem of the same name. Translation: It’s sweet and fitting to die for one’s fatherland. It is now found in many places of nationalist propaganda such as the memorial archway at the entrance to Otago Boys’ High School, in Dunedin, New Zealand.|