Ukraine is in crisis, and each month brings new developments. The corrupt and hated President, Viktor Yanukovych, was deposed from office on February 22 after three months of mass protests called Euromaidan. The protests began when Yanukovych, under pressure from the Russian government, backed off from an economic agreement he was negotiating with the European Union. When the government met these protests with violence, they turned into something broader than a protest over an economic plan; it became a widespread rising of the people against corruption, repression, poverty, and Russian interference. Yanukovych fled Ukraine on Feb. 21, was replaced by Acting President Oleksandr Torchynov on Feb. 22, and then by Petro Poroshenko, who was elected on May 25.

The fall of Yanukovych was only a partial victory. The movement that overthrew him was not led by representatives of the masses, but by a faction from the same privileged elite which has ruled Ukraine since independence in 1991. The majority of protesters remained skeptical of whether the new government would bring substantial change; they are not satisfied with simply dismantling a few of the repressive agencies from the Yanukovych years. Another section of the masses, while upset with Yanukovych, had stayed aloof from the protest movement because they didn’t want the deal with the EU or were concerned about how the movement’s leaders would treat the specific concerns of the Russian-ethnic population of Ukraine. Meanwhile the government moved immediately to implement austerity measures as part of a deal with the European Union, and some protests against this have already taken place.

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What is Communist Voice?

*Communist Voice* is a theoretical journal which not only exposes the capitalist system, but deals with the tragedy that has befallen the revolutionary movement. It confronts the thorny questions and controversies facing progressive activists today, and holds that the crisis of the working class movement can only be overcome if Marxist theory again enlightens the struggle for the emancipation of the oppressed. The liberating ideas of Marx, Engels and Lenin have been twisted beyond recognition, not only by outright capitalist spokespeople, but also by the false “communist” regimes of China, Cuba and others today, and of the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe of yesterday. *Communist Voice* denounces these distortions (revisions) of the ideas of Marxism-Leninism — whether Stalinism or Trotskyism or reformism — and stands for placing revolutionary theory on a solid basis through the criticism of revisionism and by analyzing the new developments in the basic economic and political structure of the world today. Through this work, the *Communist Voice* seeks to pave the way for communism to once again become the red, fighting banner of the revolutionary working class movement. Only the influence of the real communist theory can help the goal of a classless, communist society again spread among the workers and oppressed here and around the globe. Only the spread of anti-revisionist Marxism can overcome the influence of liberal, reformist and petty-bourgeois nationalist trends and allow the struggle against capitalism to break out in full force.

The revolutionary parties and movements of the working class in the 19th and 20th centuries never achieved their full goals. The working masses fought monarchy, fascism, colonialism, and various capitalist classes, and also made their first attempts to establish a new social system — however these attempts never went beyond the first steps. This class struggle will be renewed in the 21st century, as the masses are faced with how to escape from the escalating misery brought by capitalist development around the world. To hasten the day of the revival of the revolutionary movement, the *CV* opposes the neo-liberal and reformist ideologies that are dominant today. It holds that progressive work today requires more than opposing the ultra-conservatives and more than trying to reform the marketplace. It means helping reorganize the working class movement on a basis independent of the liberals and reformists as well as the conservatives. The *CV* sees its theoretical tasks as helping to clear the way for a future reorganization of the working class into, first and foremost, its own political party, as well as other organizations that truly uphold proletarian class interests.

*Communist Voice* thus continues the Marxist-Leninist and anti-revisionist cause to which its predecessor, the *Workers’ Advocate*, was dedicated. For a quarter of a century, the *Workers’ Advocate* was the paper of a series of activist organizations, the last one being the Marxist-Leninist Party. The demoralization of the revolutionary ranks included the dissolution of the MLP and, along with it, the *Workers’ Advocate*. But the *Communist Voice* continues, in a different form, with fewer resources, and with more emphasis on theoretical work, the struggle of the *Workers’ Advocate* to contribute to the development of a mass communist party.

The *Communist Voice* is published by the Communist Voice Organization, which links together members in a few cities. The CVO calls on all activists who want to fight capitalism in all its guises to join with us in opposing all the bankrupt theories and practices of the past — from Western-style capitalism to Stalinist state capitalism, from reformism to anarchism, from reliance on the pro-capitalist trade union bigwigs to “left” communist sectarianism toward “impure” struggles. It is time to lay the basis for the revolutionary communism of the future by revitalizing the communist theory and practice of today. Only when communism spreads among the millions and millions of oppressed can the struggle against capitalism again become a force that shakes the world!

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An evolutionary dead end

by Pete Brown


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“From the correct Marxist premise concerning the deep economic roots of the class struggle in general and of the political struggle in particular, the Economists have drawn the singular conclusion that we must turn our backs on the political struggle ....” – Lenin, Two Tactics of Social-Democracy in the Democratic Revolution, Chapter 4

Gar Alperovitz, a professor of political economy at the University of Maryland and a founder of the Democracy Collaborative, is the author of books on atomic diplomacy, the post-capitalist future, etc. Alperovitz is something of a social activist and is familiar with many trends among reformist circles in particular. His latest book – What Then Must We Do? — is of interest because it addresses the present situation in America and tries to formulate general tasks that progressive people should take up.

Alperovitz’s main argument is that political reformism has definite limits, and that movements and campaigns cannot expect to accomplish very much any more. Reform movements of the past like those for Social Security, Medicare, civil rights, etc. had their place, but they no longer work because large corporations have rigged the system to prevent any fundamental change. Fundamental change, he says, comes down to corporate ownership; as long as rich capitalists own the main means of production, we can’t achieve anything fundamental. They’ll bribe, coerce, lobby legislatures, “capture” regulatory agencies, and in many ways subvert any public attempts to control their greed. But if workers and/or the public at large could directly take over corporations, then they could control the main means of production and use them for the benefit of the public.

This sounds like a call for socialism, which progressives have been advocating for a long time. But Alperovitz is worried that the term “socialism” has connotations reminiscent of the Soviet Union and so avoids it. And he doesn’t mention the traditional social-democratic strategy of winning elections as the path to socialism. He argues that even reform movements with goals short of socialism have their limitations. You might win a few reforms from the capitalists – and Alperovitz is always careful to say activists should continue working on these things and trying to wrest whatever concessions they can from the powers that be – but any such reforms are getting smaller as the economy moves into stagnation. So what Alperovitz advocates instead is a slow takeover of corporations through employee stock ownership plans, co-operative enterprises, municipal ownership plans, regional ownership, and finally (in a crisis) through nationalization. So instead of political reformism Alperovitz advocates economic reformism. He calls this the new fundamental transformation of America.

The decline of liberalism

That Alperovitz barely considers, and then quickly dismisses, the thought of a revolutionary transition to socialism is his big glaring deficiency. But before we get to that, we should first give him credit for the recognition of facts staring reformists in the face. The fact is, liberal reformism has gone bankrupt. Sure, there are still plenty of reformist organizations around, but mostly they promote faith in Obama and the Democrats. Even reformist organizations that try to avoid involvement in partisan politics usually end up, at election time, favoring Democrats over Republicans and then moaning afterwards, “We are disappointed in the candidates we helped elect”.

The Democrats are locked into neo-liberal faith in free markets just like the Republicans. The Democrats haven’t put forth any big reform plans for decades. Obama is concerned with figuring out a way to cut Social Security and Medicare and make these cuts palatable to his Democratic Party base. Obama’s “Affordable Care Act” pretended to be a big reform – and in some states a number of additional people, especially children, have been added to Medicaid — but it’s largely just a scheme to prop up private medical insurance companies.

Alperovitz doesn’t have any criticism to offer of the Democrats, but he does note some basic socio-economic facts: wages have been stagnant for forty years; the minimum wage has not kept up with inflation; income and class inequality are increasing; etc. Alperovitz connects these facts to the decline of unionism, which is now back to a rate not seen since the 1920s. Then he describes how corporations get around any attempts at public regulation: lobbying, “capture” of agencies, avoidance of taxes, etc. What it all adds up to, he concludes, is that the New Deal-era vision of liberalism with political control over the corporations has gone bust. The idea that corporations can be controlled by public political reforms just doesn’t work, if it ever did work very well. These are important facts any liberal reformist should ponder. What’s wrong with the liberal playbook? Alperovitz’s answer is that to get control over private capitalism, the public needs to take over ownership of the corporations. But how to get ownership control? Here Alperovitz goes into his scheme of economic gradualism.

“Evolutionary reconstruction”

Alperovitz calls his scheme “evolutionary reconstruction.” The idea is for trade unions and other public groups to
organize employee buyouts of corporations or to build their own co-operative institutions; or for cities, counties and larger administrative entities to take over ownership of utilities, transportation facilities, etc. Alperovitz is insistent that this be started at the community level and then built up. Only eventually, during some deep crisis, would it be possible to carry out successful nationalizations. Alperovitz expects some Wall Street firms to be nationalized someday, but he doesn’t expect it anytime soon and doesn’t urge it for today.

Alperovitz is trying make public ownership and control of the means of production palatable to liberal activists who might be scared off by the word “socialism.” He explains the shortcomings of the present system and then proposes an easy-to-swallow alternative swathed in rhetoric about “democracy” and the “American way.” He presents this as a “radically new” scheme opposed to the old outmoded “movements and campaigns.” Actually the idea of reforming capitalism into a kind of people’s capitalism based on co-ops and employee ownership goes back at least to Proudhon and the utopian socialists of the early 1800s. But, based on experience of the working class movement of the last 150 years and the work of Marx and others, we know such a scheme would not work, and it wouldn’t produce genuine worker-controlled socialism. This brings us to the shortcomings in Alperovitz’s scheme.

First: What makes Alperovitz think private capitalists are going to allow control of their corporations to pass over to the public without opposition? With their control of legislatures and regulatory agencies, they’ll block any significant attempt by the public to take over their companies. And their control of capital will allow them to exercise control over independent firms, even if those firms get started. Alperovitz himself cites cases where employee-owned firms have run into trouble when the workers wanted a raise in wages. The management of such firms is limited in what it can do by what sorts of loans they can negotiate with banks. For that matter, management often have their own interests to look after before considering workers’ needs.

**Are co-operatives exempt from capitalist pressure?**

Co-operative enterprises run into the same kinds of limits. If they try to grow beyond those limits, it’s only by giving up their original “co-op” ideals; usually they turn into just another corporation. On a smaller scale or locality, co-ops can sometimes be of help to workers or consumers in bringing them goods and services not otherwise available. Many co-ops – bookstores, child care, organic food, etc. – sprang up in the 1960s and 70s, and some are still operating. Electrical co-ops helped electrify the country, especially in the 1930s, and Alperovitz is correct to point to co-ops as a way to help bring the internet and wifi everywhere. On a more sophisticated scale, some fairly normal capitalist companies like REI are organized as consumer co-ops.

Getting involved with co-ops can be a good experience for some workers and activists. But they should also recognize their limits, and that the main strings for the economy are being pulled by fatcat capitalists who will not tolerate serious competition. A good example is the recent collapse of Fagor, one of Mondragon’s flagship co-op companies. Mondragon is a group of worker-owned co-ops founded in the mid-1950s in the Basque region of Spain. The corporation as a whole eventually had 80,000 worker-owners, and Fagor Electrodomesticos eventually became Spain’s largest maker of home appliances.

But in recent years, especially since the Great Recession, Fagor has run into trouble. Fagor lost money for five years straight and ran up debts of $1.2 billion. Sales fell because of Spain’s property bust and because of low-cost competition from Asia. Workers’ pay was cut by 20%, but it didn’t save the company. Management had already moved some production to Poland to get lower-wage workers, and as a last-gasp effort management planned to move most production outside of Spain, asked for emergency loans from other Mondragon companies and also invited in outside shareholders. But capitalists considered this too-little-too-late and refused to help. Late last fall the company collapsed into bankruptcy.

Fagor workers are now laid off and demonstrating outside Mondragon headquarters demanding jobs. Other Mondragon companies will try to absorb as many as possible, but they are also under pressure as Spain continues to labor in recession with 27% unemployment. Fagor workers also lost the life savings they had plowed back into the company, thinking they were helping build security; that money is now tied up in bankruptcy proceedings.

The lesson is that co-operative enterprises too are forced to obey capitalist logic as long as they operate in a capitalist environment. Workers who want to see co-operative principles extended to the entire economy should take up the task of transforming the entire economy – that is, by going to socialism. But has Alperovitz learned this lesson? His answer was contained in an article titled “Mondragon and the System Problem” that appeared on the Truth-Out website last November 1. (See http://www.truth-out.org/news/item/19704-mondragon-and-the-system-problem. The article is co-authored by Alperovitz and Thomas M. Hanna.) In this article Alperovitz admits that co-operative principles have their limits in a capitalist economy. As he says, “The question … is whether trusting in open market competition is a sufficient answer to the problem of longer-term systemic design.” And he hints that no, it would be better for those designing large-scale co-operative enterprises to also consider designing an entire system like that rather than trying to compete in a capitalist environment.

All very correct, but stated in a dry academic manner as advice to intellectuals who are “designing systems”. Meanwhile the Fagor workers are without jobs, their life savings are flushed down a capitalist sinkhole, and worker-activists demanding change are left without guidance. Alperovitz treats “the system” as something that intellectuals can toy with at their pleasure, and when they all agree on the perfect system then of course the powers-that-be will be happy to comply and institute such a system. All of this is far removed from the actual facts staring workers in the face. And it totally ignores politics and the question of who actually controls the present system.
**Public ownership under capitalism**

Municipal-owned firms also have fairly strict limits to what they can do. They’re only set up in the first place when the capitalists see the need for certain things to get done, but no one capitalist firm has the resources to do it on their own. So they set up a public enterprise, for example to provide public transportation. But the firm’s mandate is very limited. And if the demand for these services grows to any extent, and the capitalists think there’s a profit to be made in this area, they’ll privatize the enterprise and allow competing companies to join the party.

Alperovitz has a lot of knowledge about the recent setting up of various public enterprises. But one suspects he’s actually misreading the present situation entirely. In fact the main trend today is toward privatization. Many formerly public enterprises – prisons, schools, police and even the army — are being privatized. Even when public funds are taken for a new “public” enterprise like the new hockey arena in Detroit (while the rest of the city goes bankrupt), it’s often under the control of private corporate interests (like the hockey arena being under the control of the local hockey club).

Alperovitz lives in a dreamland where the U.S. slowly but surely makes a nice even transition to democratic socialism. But he’s wrong to think that public ownership of an enterprise under the general capitalist system ensures public control of that corporation or even more humane conditions for the workers there. Post office workers in the U.S. are treated like dogs just like private-sector workers — even worse in some ways, because they’re threatened with “retarding the mail” and “violating federal law” if they engage in a strike or slowdown. Now, it’s also true that government workers often have guarantees against unemployment and for future pensions, guarantees that are more secure than those of private sector workers. And they usually have benefits (health care plans, etc.) that are fairly stable. But the government did not simply grant these because workers “controlled” the government. Part of it’s due to the different nature of the work, and part of it’s due to workers waging very definite struggles over the years such as the 1970 postal strike.

Alperovitz makes it sound like publicly owned enterprises are socialist, where the workers and mass public are in charge. But even though gaining public ownership can sometimes bring some area of the economy into greater scrutiny, it doesn’t guarantee public control. And right now we’re in a time when many services are being privatized, and government workers are under intense pressure. Detroit city workers are being laid off in the hundreds, their pay and pensions cut to the bone, and federal workers have also seen their pay frozen. Postal workers’ last contract solidified a two-tier pay structure, cutting the pay of new-hires drastically. Obama’s nationalization of General Motors did not result in the workers getting wage raises, guaranteed pensions or job security — just the opposite. And once the “turnaround” had been completed and GM was once again making a healthy profit, it was returned to private ownership.

Alperovitz is wrong to think public ownership is the end of problems. The present situation is one of struggle, as workers try to fight against privatization of public programs and at the same time fight to preserve decent wages and benefits. Besides supporting public workers, the mass public also has an interest in fighting to preserve government services. The increasing frequency of environmental crises shows the importance of public environmental supervision, which the capitalists for their part are fighting to avoid. For example, the carbon lobby has successfully gotten exemptions from the Clean Water and Clean Air Acts for fracking. And the private insurance industry has for now turned back the demand for nationalized health care.

Privatization usually means cutbacks in services as well as drastic cuts in workers’ pay and benefits. Thus it’s in the interest of working class activists to fight against privatizations. But even with public ownership, workers’ pay and benefits are not secure, and a constant battle against capitalist cutbacks needs to be made. Alperovitz ignores all this. There’s also a continuing struggle over government programs that exist, so that they function to actually supervise the capitalists and prevent catastrophes like oil spills, chemical leaks into the water supply, etc. Public ownership is not a panacea as Alperovitz thinks, but it is an invitation to more public struggle.

**Is the capitalist economy stagnating?**

Alperovitz also misreads present economic conditions. He sees stagnant wages and increased inequality and concludes the economy is stagnating. But actually the capitalists have been going through boom times. After the big bust of 2008 they began recovering in 2009 (with the help of trillions of dollars from the government) and since have enjoyed five years of growth. 2013 was a boom year for the stock market, with the Dow reaching record highs and profits higher than ever. Alperovitz is correct, of course, about stagnating wages; but that doesn’t mean the capitalist economy is stagnating. There’s a good deal of fragility in the world economy, as the after-effects of the Great Recession are still being overcome. And the capitalists are happy to use any reports of stagnation to bolster their call for cutting wages and benefits. How to create jobs? Cut wages. How to raise wages? Cut unemployment benefits. How to guarantee Social Security? Cut Social Security. The capitalists’ solution to any problem is always: make the working class pay, and pay more. And despite Alperovitz thinking that we are in the process of evolution toward a publicly-owned economy, the capitalists are not in any mood to give up their record profits to public takeovers or competition from public or co-operative enterprises.

**What is to be done**

If political reformism is stymied by corporate control (as Alperovitz maintains), and if Alperovitz’s economic gradualism is also headed nowhere (as I maintain), “what then must we do?” The title of Alperovitz’s book gives a hint, as his title is actually Alperovitz’s personal translation of a famous Russian pamphlet by Lenin, *What Is To Be Done?* Alperovitz gave it a new translation to indicate he’s turning Lenin on his head: instead of fighting against Economism and advocating preparation for political revolution, as Lenin did, Alperovitz advises activists to turn away from politics and concentrate on
economic evolution.¹

Alperovitz is what Lenin would call an Economist, someone preaching to neglect politics and put the economic struggle in command. Except that for Alperovitz economic transformation isn’t really struggle in the form of strikes, etc. There’s no call for activists to support actual struggles that exist or might break out. Instead there’s a call to consider “better system design.”

Whenever Alperovitz says political movements and campaigns are worthless and won’t accomplish anything, he’s always careful to parenthetically remark “Of course, such things should still be done. We still need to continue these campaigns.” But he also argues they won’t get anywhere, and he argues for putting the emphasis instead on economic evolution. And as far as politics is concerned, Alperovitz has nothing to say about it. He doesn’t discuss or criticize any parties or trends. He just ignores them. So Lenin’s critique of the Economists applies to him: that by ignoring politics he leaves the field open to bourgeois political trends that preach slow, conservative politics that go along with the “evolutionary reconstruction” in economics advocated by Alperovitz.

Crisis and revolution

Lenin stood for the orthodox Marxist idea of revolution, for workers to seize control of the means of production, to smash the capitalist state machine and transform the system into worker-controlled socialism. This is the genuine alternative to reformism, both economic and political. This revolution cannot be carried out overnight or spontaneously, but in What Is To Be Done? Lenin outlined some of the steps necessary for the working class to prepare for it. In later works such as The State and Revolution Lenin further elaborated revolutionary tactics. Prior to the actual insurrection Lenin advocated workers and their party participating in elections (sometimes), economic strikes, movements and campaigns – all the things Alperovitz writes off as headed nowhere. Lenin also recognizes limits to these movements, but he considers workers’ participation in them as valuable for the experience gained, if nothing else. Even if no tremendous reform is achieved, the workers at least learn to strike together, learn the value of organization, and learn how the capitalists try to undermine and sabotage workers’ demands. Lenin also advocated using the experience gained to help build a workers’ revolutionary political party. None of this is ever mentioned by Alperovitz, who considers any attempt to build a revolutionary movement a waste of time, if not downright dangerous.

Alperovitz does mention revolution, but he tries to prevent any serious consideration of it. For one thing, he’s horrified at the prospect of violence, and considers the winner in any violent confrontation to be reactionary forces. It never occurs to him that workers might get organized enough to carry out mass revolutionary struggle that wins. He thinks any revolution is bound to end in something like Pinochet’s Chile. This is simply defeatism that negates much of history. It also ignores Alperovitz’s own argumentation about how the capitalists control much government regulation and reform legislation. He forgets to mention they also control the political parties that put these regulations and legislation into effect and the election campaigns and laws that help these parties maintain control. These facts make revolution necessary. Even if it’s not immediately possible, preparations for it could be started by serious activists. That means participation in study groups, general propaganda and specific agitation among the widest circles of people with concentration on workers.

Alperovitz tries to argue that revolution will never be possible because there’s no prospect for a deep crisis that would bring revolution to the top of the political agenda. In a chapter entitled “Two Dogs That Are Unlikely to Bark Again” Alperovitz argues we are unlikely to see a repeat of the Great Depression or World War II, massive crises that led many people to question the worth of capitalism. He says the capitalists have learned from past mistakes; they know better how to handle the ups and downs of their economy, and they are more adept at smoothing out foreign relations so we don’t have massive world wars.

This chapter is almost laughable as Alperovitz tries to portray the strength and stability of a system he has spent the rest of his book criticizing as oppressive and exploitative. Yes, it lives and grows by generating poverty; but that’s hardly noticeable, he thinks; no one would ever think to overthrow it. Just since 2000 we’ve lived through two big bust cycles, the dot-com recession followed by the Great Recession; but no problem, supposedly the capitalists know how to keep their economy on an even keel. We’ve been engaged in constant Mideast wars since 2001 (with sporadic flareups before that) and our militarist state is on a constant war footing; but there’s no prospect of a major war, Alperovitz says, and we haven’t stumbled into World War III (yet). Alperovitz pretends to consider environmental crises, but he doesn’t give them serious consideration — as he should, because they’re frequent and growing in intensity. Hurricanes Katrina and Sandy grew into political crises that haven’t completely died out yet. Storms and freak weather are becoming more common as global warming increases, and this problem is going to intensify and become a major source of international friction. And environmental disasters are not limited to weather events: just consider BP’s Gulf of Mexico disaster, frequent leaks from oil pipelines, contamination of the water table by fracking, the recent shutdown of Charleston’s water supply because of a chemical leak, or the more frequent accidents at aging nuclear power plants. There’s also the growing threats to our food supply, as fisheries in both the oceans and fresh water are collapsing. Overfishing and acidification of the oceans are causing the destruction of marine ecosystems at the same time that droughts and storms are causing serious harm to agriculture.

All these crises generate outrage and public opposition. Throw in the occasional racist outrage such as the murder of Trayvon Martin, and it’s clear that capitalism still has the potential for plenty of crises. Alperovitz himself recognizes

¹In another “brilliant transformation”, in a recent article Alperovitz changes the famous Marxist slogan “Workers of All Countries, Unite!” to “Worker-Owners of America, Unite!” This is a gross parody of Marx’s revolutionary slogan. (See Alperovitz’s opinion article in the Dec. 14, 2011 New York Times.)
that the “fixes” installed in the system by Wall Street “regulation” and Obamacare are very temporary and bound to fail before long. No, capitalism is not immune from crisis, not at all. We can’t say that any one of these crises will be “the one” that sparks revolution, but we can say with confidence that crises are built into capitalism. Any one of them is bound to produce opposition and outrage, and a series of them together may add up to a revolutionary crisis. It’s up to political activists to try and build a revolutionary movement out of them.

It’s not even clear that capitalism requires an overall crisis to generate a revolutionary movement, or at least a serious reform movement. Consider the civil rights movement, which thrived and became the centerpiece of national politics in the mid-1950s. This was not a time of general crisis. Capitalism was in the middle of the postwar boom, the *I Love Lucy* period economists call the Golden Age of capitalism. Yet even in the middle of that time, the inequities and oppressive aspects of capitalism stuck out like sore thumbs and generated a powerful mass movement that transformed the political landscape. No, it did not produce a revolution; but it produced people who saw the need for revolution.

The task remaining for activists today is to carry through that insight, not devote themselves to economic gradualism. The insight gained by the most conscious activists of the 1960s was that revolution is necessary. That doesn’t mean it’s immediately possible. But it does mean that fundamental reforms can never be carried out as long as capitalist exploiters dominate both economy and politics; it means they must be dispossessed through radical means, and control of the basic means of production must pass into the hands of society as a whole. Activists should be helping others understand the need for revolution and helping prepare conditions for it.

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**Historic strikes rock South Africa in 2014**

Thirty-four striking miners were shot down in cold blood at Marikana, South Africa on August 16, 2012. Despite this atrocity, reminiscent of the worst days of apartheid, the miners won their strike and achieved major wage increases. The determination of the strikers inspired other mineworkers and set off a strike wave across the South Africa economy. It is continuing to this day.

On January 23 this year, platinum miners began a five-month strike that ended in victory in late June. The lowest-paid workers achieved a 20% increase in wages, with additional 10% raises for the next two years. This is well above the current inflation rate of between 6 and 7%. The strikes also achieved the three-year contract period they were fighting for, defeating the employers’ demands for five-year contracts. This is the longest and largest strike ever in South Africa mines, and the settlement is a resounding victory.

Then in July, there was a four-week strike of engineering workers, mostly belonging to NUMSA, the National Union of Metalworkers, the largest union in South Africa. Over 200,000 workers went on strike, at over 10,000 workplaces, including Toyota Motors and GM. They were fighting for higher wages and against neo-liberal labor policies, such as the use of labor brokers for hiring workers. The full details of the settlement aren’t yet in, but the lowest paid workers, which is most of the workers, will have a 10% increase each year of the three-year contract. But some of the employers were balking at the settlement, so it is not clear if the strike is over everywhere.

Despite these victories, the wages of miners and most other workers in South Africa remain low. Moreover, the government has also passed various anti-working class measures, and the capitalists will be considering how to prevent strikes in the future. The current struggles, therefore, may be the harbingers of greater struggles to come.

These strikes show that discontent with the market-fundamentalist policies of the ANC is growing. The miners strike of 2014 was carried out by the Association of Mineworkers and Construction Union (AMCU), not the ANC-affiliated National Union of Miners (NUM). The brutal murders at Marikana in 2012 were carried out by the police apparatus under the ANC government. And the engineering strike was carried out by NUMSA, which has withdrawn support for ANC and is fighting the pro-ANC policies of the leadership of COSATU, the Confederation of South Africa Trade Unions.

**NUMSA repudiates the Tripartite Alliance**

At its Special Congress of December 16-20, 2013, NUMSA denounced the policy of workers being subordinated to the electoral needs of the ANC through the Tripartite Alliance of COSATU, the ANC, and the South African Communist Party.² It passed the “Resolution on Challenges Facing the Alliance”, which declared that the Alliance is "dysfunctional" and that "although there are protests everywhere and every day in the country, the Alliance is not an instrument in the hands of these struggling masses..." It noted that the Alliance was mainly an electoral prop for the ANC: "The Alliance operates and works during election periods and it is our experience that the working class is being used by the leader of the Alliance – the African National Congress (ANC) – as voting fodder." Nor did the Alliance stand for progressive policies, but instead "The Freedom Charter which, we understood as the minimum platform and program of the Alliance, has been completely abandoned in favour of right-wing and neo-liberal policies such as the National Development Plan (NDP)." Indeed, it noted that "The Alliance has been captured and taken over by right-wing forces. Those who are perceived to be against neo-liberalism...


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or to be advocates of policies in favour of the working class and the poor are seen as problematic, isolated or purged."

The resolution didn’t flinch about what this meant, and firmly stated that "There is no chance of winning back the Alliance to what it was originally formed for, which was to drive a revolutionary programme for fundamental transformation of the country, with the Freedom Charter as the minimum platform to transform the South African economy." It firmly declared that "In light of the above as NUMSA, we should call on COSATU to break from the Alliance. The time for looking for an alternative has arrived." It put forward an alternate policy of building "a new UNITED FRONT that will coordinate struggles in the workplace and in communities, in a way similar to the UDF of the 1980s. The task of this front will be to fight for the implementation of the Freedom Charter and be an organisational weapon against neoliberal policies such as the NDP." (emphasis as in the original)

NUMSA went on to note that "The South African Communist Party (SACP) leadership has become embedded in the state and is failing to act as the vanguard of the working class." It declared that "The chance of winning back the SAPC onto the path of working class struggle for working class power is very remote." And so it saw the need for a new organization, saying "In the struggle for Socialism, the working class needs a political organisation committed in theory and practice to Socialism."

How can it be that a communist party is an obstacle to the struggle for socialism? In our view, it is because the South African Communist Party is a revisionist party which has long abandoned Marxism and the revolutionary struggle. It talks in the name of "communism" and "socialism" and "Marxism", but it has revised the meaning of these terms, and made them into window-dressing for the pro-capitalist policy of the ANC. It is no longer a real communist party, and hasn't been for decades.

This is not something peculiar to South Africa. At present, all over the world, the large "communist" parties are revisionist ones, and they have betrayed the cause of true communism. Hopefully the militant South African workers will look into the cause of this. The NUMSA resolution makes a start on this in calling not just for building a movement for socialism, but for examining both past attempts at building socialism and the various different left-wing political parties active today. In this way, NUMSA intends to start along a long and difficult path, essential but difficult as the entire left is in crisis today and there is no mass political trend to simply copy from. The Communist Voice is descended from the trend that published The Workers' Advocate from 1969 to 1993, and we have sought to create conditions for rebuilding a real communist party in the US. We founded The Workers' Advocate because we were upset with the policies of the "Communist Party of the USA" and other groups that spoke in the name of communism. It turned out to be a much longer and harder process than we anticipated to distinguish what was right or wrong in the world left-wing movement, but we have never given up this task. We have combined participation in the mass struggle and organizing at the workplace with theoretical and political criticism of revisionism, and we hope that our theoretical efforts, and that of other anti-revisionists, will be of use to workers and activists in South Africa and elsewhere who also face the need to build new movements and parties: movements and parties that differ from the SAPC and other revisionist parties in what they are fighting for, in how they are organized, and in how they related to the militant masses. In turn, the South African struggle will continue to be one of the inspirations for revolutionary work elsewhere.

Below we reprint two articles from a Detroit Workers' Voice leaflet that was distributed at the left-wing celebration of Martin Luther King Day in Detroit. One deals with the legacy of Mandela and the role of communism in South Africa. The other was the lead article for that leaflet, and it discusses the anti-racist struggle here in the US, and notes the lessons that the South African miners' struggle and NUMSA have for us here.

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**From the historic overthrow of apartheid to the Marikana massacre of striking miners**

**The divided legacy of Nelson Mandela**

The following two articles are from Detroit Workers’ Voice #110a, January 17, 2014.

On December 5, Nelson Mandela, the greatest leader of the African National Congress (ANC), died. The oppressed masses had built a number of organizations whose members fought courageously against apartheid, such as the ANC, the Pan-Africanist Congress, and the Black Consciousness Movement. The ANC ended up as the largest organization in the decades-long struggle that overthrew the racist apartheid system. The white racist regime in South Africa was a major blight on Africa and the entire world, and the anti-apartheid struggle was one of the major freedom struggles of our time. Mandela was one of the heroes of this struggle.

The communist movement was, since the mid-1920s, an important part of the struggle against the racist South African regime. To this day, the South African Communist Party (SACP) works closely with the ANC, and it was close with Mandela, who was a member at one time. Communism is not just the fight against economic oppression, but against tyranny and oppression of all types. Meanwhile the racist and imperialist American government had for decades backed the apartheid government as a bulwark against communism and African liberation movements.

The end of apartheid in 1994 marked a new departure for South Africa. It was a new dawn.

Yet on August 16, 2012, almost two decades after the fall of apartheid, years during which the ANC ruled South Africa,
thirty-four striking black miners were shot down by police at Marikana, South Africa, and many more were wounded. This massacre dramatized that while many ANC leaders had become millionaires, the majority of black people in South Africa still suffered from deep poverty. It showed that the class struggle was intensifying in South Africa, but the ANC and the SACP were now on the wrong side of the barricades.

This, too, was part of Mandela’s legacy. He had been one of the key figures who had led the ANC, as it came to power, to discard the promises of its famous “Freedom Charter”, which had called for radical economic change. Instead, the ANC government has acted as one of the foremost backers in the world of free-market fanaticism. If today the bourgeois governments honor the memory of Mandela, the Mandela they love is the one who became a defender of the privileges of the rich and an advocate of policies like those of the World Bank.

This shows the importance of the fight against revisionism, the political trend that talks in the name of Marxism and communism but nevertheless betrays (“revises”) their real meaning. It is revisionism, not communism, that rules in China and Cuba today, and Russia and Eastern Europe in the old days. This has had its effect in South African politics. Although many members and supporters of the South African Communist Party fought courageously and at great personal cost against apartheid, the party also came to follow closely the sold-out policies of the revisionist movement centered in the Soviet Union. And the example of the ANC regime shows how a new bourgeoisie can arise after a revolution; in the case of South Africa, the new ANC millionaires stand hand-in-hand with the traditional white bourgeoisie.

Let us be inspired by the historic victory of the South African masses in overthrowing apartheid, but let us also be committed to continuing the class struggle until liberation from poverty, inequality, and all oppression. Let us learn from the great struggle of the South African people, and from both the pluses and minuses of Mandela’s legacy. Let us build new organizations of struggle, committed to the revolutionary cause of the working class and attentive to the lessons of the historic movements of the past. Solidarity with the struggle of the South African working people of all ethnic backgrounds for a decent life, equality, and socialism!

For more on the history of the struggle against apartheid, see www.communistvoice.org/00SouthAfrica.html. For links to statements by activists of various backgrounds on Mandela’s legacy, see the second half of www.communistvoice.org/DJV-131215.html.

On Martin Luther King Day...

The struggle continues

Here we are, on Dr. Martin Luther King’s birthday in 2014, 46 years after his criminal assassination, yet millions upon millions of black people are in deeper poverty than ever, black schoolchildren are being funneled into prison at record numbers, and black youth like Trayvon Martin are shot down in the street for wearing a hoodie. The struggle against segregation accomplished marvels in destroying open discrimination, and it helped inspire a world wave of struggle for freedom around the world. But clearly the struggle is far from over. Legal segregation is gone — and let’s never forget that it existed and what sacrifices it took to bring it down — but there is still a long fight against racism ahead of us. Let’s learn from the struggle against segregation in order to inspire the anti-racist struggle today.

The struggle against austerity must include the struggle against racism

The struggle against segregation included a struggle for better jobs, higher pay, and good social programs. The struggle against racism reinforced the struggle for better conditions for all workers. But furthermore, the struggle of all workers could not move forward without fighting racism in unions as well as among employers. It’s no secret that the savage cutbacks in social conditions are motivated in part by racism against black, Latino and undocumented workers who bear the heaviest burden of those cuts.

Today the Second Great Depression has sucked the working class of all races and nationalities down into a desperate, deadly whirlpool of hopelessness. It has hit the black, minority and undocumented workers the hardest, but both black and white workers have been targeted. The profits of the large corporations have recovered, but for both black and white workers, the depression rages on, spreading joblessness, wage cuts for those still working, and the threat of hunger for retired pensioners and social security recipients. The struggle against racism is part of this struggle of the 99%, black and white workers together, against the devastation imposed on us by the 1%.

Solidarity with oppressed people all over the world!

The struggle against segregation included solidarity with national liberation movements in Africa and other struggles of black and other oppressed peoples around the world. Today our struggle must also include solidarity with those fighting against dictatorships and oppression, no matter where they are. We should continue to support the struggles of African peoples against dictatorships and against market-driven capitalist dictates directed by the World Bank and IMF. We should support Arab and Middle Eastern peoples fighting against entrenched dictatorships, including the Syrian people fighting for the removal of the dictator Assad, and the Iranian, Bahraini, Saudi and other peoples fighting for political rights. Where dictatorships have been overthrown, such as Tunisia and Libya, we should support the difficult struggle to learn how to build a new national life, and the efforts of workers of
these countries to develop united struggles against poverty and exploitation. Let’s reject with contempt the arguments of those who tell us to look back fondly on the old dictatorships, because they had some social programs; instead we should back the struggle for freedom.

**Let the rank-and-file unite against the pro-business politicians!**

The struggle against segregation had its weaknesses. In particular, many leaders including Dr. King were too close to the Democratic Party, one of the two big parties of our capitalist exploiters. Today we see that there are many black officials, and yet racism continues. There were black mayors in Detroit, and yet the city workers suffer wage cuts and layoffs and privatization, the police continue racist attacks, and the city’s population sees the shredding of basic services. There is a black Democratic president, and yet it’s still business as usual in privatizing the schools, cutting social benefits, and handing over billions to banks and corporations. Both the anti-racist and the anti-austerity struggles come up against the opposition of the pro-capitalist politicians, whether white or black.

So the path forward will include struggle against both parties of big business, Republicans and Democrats. We need mass actions against the continuing racism and the robbery of pensions, wages and jobs. We need new organizations of the workers and the oppressed to stand against the organizations of the rich. This can start with ordinary working people building networks in their neighborhoods and workplaces, where the nitty-gritty folks have their say and control the actions. Build networks of resistance to austerity!

The same thing will happen around the world. A month ago, at its congress at the end of December, the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA), the largest union in South Africa, declared that it will no longer support the ANC and the ANC-led government. (See, e.g., www.numsa.org.za/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/SNC-Declaration-final-copy.pdf, which lauds Mandela but denounces the ANC.)

The four unions which came together to form NUMSA in May 1987 were part of the important forces fighting apartheid. As part of the Congress of South Africa Trade Unions (COSATU), NUMSA backed the ANC in the fight against apartheid regime. But the ANC, when it came to power, abandoned the promises of its famous “Freedom Charter” and worked hand-in-glove with the World Bank, the IMF, and the South African corporations that had grown rich from exploiting black workers under apartheid. The result is that millions upon millions of black workers in South Africa, including mineworkers, live under conditions reminiscent of Detroit, with high unemployment, with even worse social services, and corralled into slums and worthless shacks – now no longer held there by apartheid, but by economic oppression. And the workers of South Africa are starting to say, “enough already!”

It is up to us here in Detroit to also break with false friends and take the path of struggle. If NUMSA can break with the ANC and say there has to be a change in South African trade unions, then workers and activists here in Detroit will also eventually see through the Democratic Party and stand for a change in the do nothing policy of the present trade union leadership.

Let us commemorate MLKING day by rededicating ourselves to the struggle against racism and austerity! Get organized in communities, workplaces, unions, and schools across the country!
Stop the coal trains!

The following article is from a leaflet of the Seattle Communist Study group calling on people to pack the hearings of October 17, 2013 in Tacoma and October 23 in Seattle.

Global warming is raising the seas, causing development of huge dust bowls, and record floods, mega-cyclones, and other extreme weather events are worsening. But the greenhouse gas emissions causing this, three quarters of which come from burning fossil fuels, are allowed to go on and on as if nothing is happening. In fact, after being in decline through 2008, U.S. oil production is again rising, with the largest rise ever recorded last year. Meanwhile, the dirtiest fuel of all, coal, remained the world’s fastest-growing fossil fuel even though this was below its historical averages. Indeed, global coal consumption rose 2.5% in 2012, half by the Chinese market; and it’s the operation of the unfettered market—and no way just in China—which is killing life on earth.

Thus, in order to boosts their profits, the U.S. coal capitalists are eager to ship coal from the Powder River Basin in Wyoming and Montana via rail cars to Pacific Northwest ports for shipment to China and Asia. But they must first win approval of Federal, State and local governmental agencies for building their proposed coal terminals. This would normally tend to be a rubber-stamp operation, but in these times of earth emergency increasing numbers of everyday people are standing up to say no coal shipments! Thus, there have been many protest actions in British Columbia, Washington, Oregon, and Montana, including by the Lummi tribe against the proposed Cherry Point terminal north of Bellingham, 2,300 people packing the Seattle hearings to denounce the proposed project before government officials in December, 800-900 again protesting in Seattle on September 21, and more. Big Coal has responded by shelving plans to build one of the port facilities, while intensifying efforts to gain approval for the five others. This shows the need to step up the movement even more, and we add our voices to those calling for really packing the upcoming Tacoma and Seattle hearings. Turn the hearings into forums of denunciation and protest!

The U.S. coal barons argue that since Indonesian and Australian companies will supply coal to China anyway (as they already are), environmental protests in this country are fruitless because the coal burning will continue no matter what. But this “forgets” that there are growing environmental movements in these countries, while in China itself there have been many mass battles against air and water pollution in recent years, and a number of victories. Another argument the coal capitalists are using is that their projects will create jobs, e.g., 4,400 at Cherry Point for two years of construction, then 430 permanent direct jobs. In this way they’re trying to pit unemployed and precarious workers against environmentalists, and some class-collaborationist trade union officials have joined them in this dirty game.

Of course, a government that spends Trillions to bail out bankers and build the largest military and spying apparatuses in the world could certainly afford to employ these workers on, say, renewable energy projects. But that would go against the neo-liberal philosophy that both Democrats and Republicans have now ruled with for several decades. Moreover, with movements also developing against more oil pipelines, fracking, and to shut down the Canadian tar sands, this sharply raises the necessity for the environmental movement to fight around a positive program that meets both energy needs as well as the needs of workers thrown out of work when polluting operations or industries are shut down.

There must be environmental planning and direct regulations, but with mass involvement

To the workers who have been forced into unemployment, we must add tens and eventually hundreds of millions of environmental refugees. Then we must consider that many large cities are simply going to have to be moved because of climate change, new power grids dependent on renewable energy sources will have to be built, new and cleaner mass transportation systems that go where the masses of people live and work be built, etc., etc. All this shows the necessity of fighting for planning by all levels of government in this country and globally. In times of deep crisis, like the world wars of the last century, capitalist governments out of their own interests instituted planning, and when the environmental crisis becomes catastrophic enough they’ll no doubt again resort to planning. But if this planning is left up to government bureaucrats, technocrats, corporate bosses and labor bureaucrats in secret meetings, then the interests of the majority of the people—national minorities, workers and poor—are going to be short-changed or worse.

Thus, the need to not only fight for environmental and economic planning, but to demand that the planning has the mass welfare as an independent goal. And this is only going to be possible when we have a strong working-class environmental movement demanding the people be let into all meetings in order to have their say, demanding that the masses not be made to suffer while the corporations go on with business as usual, and rallying the masses to oppose unjust plans or parts of plans, while also rallying their support for enacted measures that are truly beneficial to the environment and people. As long as the capitalist system of production remains, there will be heavy limits placed on the masses participating in overseeing government planning and regulatory policy, but the global-warming and other environmental crises are demanding this fight be waged now.

Direct regulations are a necessary aspect of planning. In the 1970s a significant section of environmentalists didn’t care if they infringed on the profit-making of the polluters, and through mass pressure they were able to win numerous good but limited (and bureaucratically applied) regulations by all levels of government. But with the rise of neo-liberalism even those regulations were increasingly pared down or gutted, more and more regulatory agencies were “captured” by the...
environmental-wrecking corporations, and today, the agencies left usually have so few inspectors, and their fines are so measly, that they’re laughable. Thus, the need for today's environmental movement to continue the fight for environmental regulations, and, moreover, regulations that guard the interests of the everyday people through mass involvement in their formulation and enforcement.

The need to oppose the market “solutions” of establishment environmentalism

To its credit, mainstream environmentalism (as typified by Al Gore) has helped sound the alarm about global warming. But in conscious opposition to the needed direct environmental regulations and planning it has led the movement into the ditch of reliance on market measures that are now proven failures, or will become so when implemented.

First of these is “cap and trade,” a complicated system of buying and selling pollution permits that is the centerpiece of the 1997 Kyoto Protocol. Although the United States never ratified this treaty, the much of the world that has has failed to meet the treaty's modest greenhouse gas emissions goals. Moreover, “cap and trade” has often made the situation worse. Just one example is that in order for the polluters to gain carbon “offsets,” they’ve been responsible for destroying rainforests and drying out peat lands in order to plant palm oil and sugar cane plantations for production of ethanol. But peat lands are natural carbon sinks, and when they're dried out to meet the new market demand they emit spectacular amounts of carbon dioxide. It's largely for this reason that Indonesia is now the third largest emitter of greenhouse gases on the planet.

Another very complicated market “solution” is the carbon tax, which has already been enacted in British Columbia and some countries, and which is being heavily pushed by leading establishment environmentalists in this country. But despite reimbursements, as in B.C., it’s a regressive tax that the energy corporations and polluters will pass on to their customers, while the working people suffer from it. Thus, it will tend to make environmentalism hated among substantial sections of the masses, while failing to accomplish environmental goals. (For fuller explanations of the “cap and trade” and carbon tax fiascos see http://communistvoice.org/41cAlGore.html and http://communistvoice.org/42cCarbonTax.html.)

We can stop the coal trains!

The fact that the coal companies are trying to pit workers against the environmental movement, the fate of regulations and planning in the past century and the need to fight for mass involvement in regulating and planning, and the fact that establishment environmentalism has followed neo-liberal politics into vainly seeking market solutions to the problem of carbon emissions all show that the class struggle and the environmental movement are linked. From the side of the working people and defending the environment we therefore think building up the trend of working-class environmentalism is necessary.

Continued burning of fossil fuels isn't the only cause of global warming, and carbon emissions aren't the only environmental problem. But a victory in the battle to stop coal shipments from the Northwest will be an important milestone for the environmental movement here and globally. And we think the coal trains can indeed be stopped.

Seattle Communist Study Group
October 14, 2013
Contact us at seattle.com.sg@gmail.com

For a working-class environmental movement!

The following article is from Detroit Workers’ Voice #109, Sept. 1, 2013:

Little improvement has been achieved on the environmental front. Natural disasters such as droughts and wildfires, hurricanes and tornadoes, melting of sea ice, the rise of CO2 in the atmosphere and rising world temperatures, the deepening of the Fukushima nuclear crisis – all show the impotence of the environmental measures of the capitalist establishment on a world scale. The corporations aren’t going to do what’s right out of the goodness of their hearts. There must be a force which can fight them success-fully. That force is the working class.

A mass working-class trend within the environmental movement is needed. All the current measures of the establishment environmentalists are market-based; they rely on convincing the polluters they can make more money by not polluting. In contrast, a working-class program would demand serious direct regulation and control and call for radical change in the present privatized government apparatus. Building such a trend is not easy. But we can’t just sit back, let the world be devastated and wait for the revolution to solve the environment for us. Nor will neo-liberal financial capital willingly regulate itself.

Many reformist trends have simply acted as pressure groups for establishment environmentalism. Some more militant environmentalists have built a valuable movement of protest, and have criticized certain market-based measures; but they have backed other market measures and generally have no critique of such major establishment environmental figures as Al Gore. Some environmentalists push a carbon tax, but the burden of a carbon tax will be shifted from the corporations taxed onto the backs of the workers; it must be fought.

Some environmental groups that look to market solutions talk about allying with the working class. They call for subsidies to the capitalists for green projects, call it “green
jobs” for the workers, and unite with the pro-capitalist labor leaders. This is sort of the idea of the BlueGreen Alliance of certain environmental groups and trade unions. But this naively hopes that the business class will voluntarily cure the environment.

A working-class class environmental movement will not rely on naïve hopes. It will demand environmental and economic planning — planning for the welfare of the masses as an independent goal alongside that of protecting the environment. It will mean seeking mass oversight over government planning and environmental decisions and oversight of corporate compliance with environmental regulations. It will denounce the present privatized government apparatus.

Without such oversight, the corporations will defy environmental regulations and planning will consist of squeezing the masses.

Working-class victories and planning can only be partial under capitalism, and government bodies will always be subject to regulatory capture. But constant struggle over these will eventually lead to a new revolutionary consciousness in the working class. This protracted struggle can be the bridge between revitalized programs and future utopia. However utopian this idea may seem at the present, it will look different as the world goes through major changes in the next few years.

Struggles break out against fracking

From Detroit Workers’ Voice #111, March 1, 2014:

Mass struggles have broken out recently against fracking — in the U.S., Canada and Romania in Europe. Fracking is a method used by the energy monopoly capitalists to extract natural gas from the ground. It poisons the groundwater and has been proven to cause earthquakes, but the greedy capitalists are working day and night to spread its plunder of the natural environment. Already much of central Pennsylvania has been devastated by fracking and the frackers have their sights set on upstate New York, Michigan and elsewhere.

Since this past fall the Mic Maq (Elsipotog) Native People of New Brunswick, Canada, have been blocking the fracking capitalists from drilling in their area. The Mic Maq have stood up to police assaults from the RCMP and are still fighting. In Romania people have carried on a militant fight against the frackers. Around the U.S. many groups are opposing fracking. Two films, Gasland 1 and 2, which have been shown recently in Detroit, have attacked fracking and called for a ban on it.

Spurred by the ongoing economic crisis, the energy capitalists have been stepping up their plunder of the environment. In addition to fracking, they are increasing offshore oil drilling (remember the BP disaster?), removal of dirty tar sands oil in Alberta, extension of leaky oil pipelines, hazardous transportation of oil by railroad car, removal of mountain tops in Appalachia in search of coal, etc., etc., all with the acquiescence of both the Republicans and the Democrats.

The capitalists are destroying our natural world. A working-class environmental movement is needed to fight back!
Behind the workers’ defeat at Boeing

Boeing should be making the concessions—
No to the blackmail!

Below is the SCSG leaflet of January 1, 2014 for the “Vote no!” rally of International Association of Machinists (IAM) Lodge 751.

Previous concessions forced on machinists and engineers have fattened Boeing’s profits, and only whetted the company’s appetite for more concessions. Thus, with 16 straight quarters of record profits, soaring stocks, and a record backlog of orders, Boeing is now fighting to blackmail Puget Sound machinists into accepting unprecedented concessions which they’ll be locked into until 2024, i.e., for half a generation.

Both the Democrats and Republicans in Olympia have shown they’re allied with Boeing by jumping to give it $8.7 billion in tax incentives, plus state-funded training help. Boeing workers and all Washington residents will pay for this either through tax increases or by having needed social services further cut under the plea “there’s no money” for them.

And the IAM leadership has aided and abetted the company’s brutal blackmail: First, while the present contract doesn’t expire until 2016, they conducted secret negotiations with Boeing, and then recommended the concessions-riddled proposal they sprang on the workers in November. Then, after the membership rejected that proposal by a 2-1 margin, the IAM leaders went back into secret negotiations to try to get Boeing to “sweeten” its bitter pill. But Boeing’s new offer was so rotten that the local leadership this time decided to defy the international and call for voting no. (Wroblewski [President of Lodge 751–CWA], who has a position to protect, also remembered the boooing, heckling and denunciations he justly received from District 751 members on November 13.)

We also call for voting NO! No elimination of defined benefit pensions! No raising of healthcare contributions! No measly one percent wage increase every other year! No concessions to Boeing whatsoever! With its huge profits and $10 billion designated for stock buybacks, it’s Boeing that should be making the concessions!

It should also be noted that even if the contract extension is ratified Boeing plans to continue its long-term program of moving production to low-wage states and countries. For example, in October it said it is placing significant amounts of engineering design work for the 777X outside Washington state, and in December it said it will eliminate up to 1,200 SPEEA jobs in Washington and fill them at five locations around the country, mainly in the South. Moreover, the December “Letter of Understanding” between Boeing and the IAM says “The parties agree that the Company may subcontract or outsource certain 777X wing fabrication and assembly work packages, in whole or in part...”

The other side of this is that not only is constructing an entire 777X plant elsewhere a billion-dollar project, but nowhere else has the trained workforce, training support network, and physical infrastructure in place that Puget Sound has.

Oppose joining the race to the bottom

What Boeing wants is to have workers of different states and countries competing with each other over who is going to accept the worst wages and conditions in order to have a job, i.e., the old race to the bottom. The only way to fight this is through national and international working-class solidarity, which means workers in Puget Sound and everywhere must not only stand up in resistance to the concessions demands of “their” employers, but fight for improvements of wages, benefits and conditions, as well as for good benefits or jobs for the unemployed. And the fact that so many workers in all industries applauded the machinists November 13 rejection of Boeing’s demands shows that the working class is increasingly realizing that this is the only path forward.

The trade-union bureaucracy which the IAM leaders are part of doesn’t believe in this, however. It’s supposedly too idealistic, whereas they’re “realistic” people. So where has their “realism” led? Since 1979 at Chrysler, the trade union leaders in all industries have over and over fought to foist concessions contracts on the workers by saying this would “save jobs.” But jobs have not been saved, with hundreds of thousands being eliminated in the auto industry alone. What’s been saved are the profits of the capitalists. Moreover, American wages and benefits have been driven so low that German and Japanese auto companies years ago began to set up plants in the southern U.S. to take advantage of the cheap labor there.

The labor officials’ treachery is premised on the theory that workers and capitalists have “common interests,” which inevitably leads to company unionism: what’s good for the company is good for the worker! Adding to this is that they’re well-paid business unionists, e.g., IAM’s Buffenbarger reports a yearly income of over $300 thousand—and like a corporate CEO, he and staff fly around the country in a union owned Learjet. Last year, District 751 members paid $25.5 million in dues to the international to support this kind of class-traitor unionism.

What next?

Whether Boeing’s blackmail is rejected or accepted, machinists and workers in every industry will remain exploited wage slaves who the capitalists will continually try to blackmail into joining the “race to the bottom.” Moreover, this is in conditions where—since the official end of the Great Recession—capitalists across the economy are now raking in
Lessons from the Boeing machinists' struggle

The following article is from a leaflet of the Seattle Communist Study Group of January 18. For the full leaflet, see http://www.communistvoice.org/Sea140118.pdf.

Raking in record profits, and sitting on a backlog of 4,777 orders for planes, in November Boeing launched a campaign to extort more: if the machinists did not submit to unprecedented concessions demands, and the State of Washington to its demands for more tax relief, Boeing would move production of the new 777X to a lower-wage area of the country.

So the corporate prostitutes of both political parties rushed to give Boeing $8.7 billion in tax incentives plus state-funded training help, and on January 3 the machinists voted to accept a contract that does away with defined benefit pensions (which they won in 1947), raises workers' healthcare contributions, and under which starting pay for the bottom three pay grades will be at the state minimum wage at the end of the contract. Additionally, the workers are locked into this rotten contract for 10 years, while Boeing can still subcontract or outsource work under it!

This is a defeat for all workers, which the CEOs of other corporations will now try to outdo. More, the closeness of the acceptance vote — just 600 votes out of more than 23,000 votes cast — only highlights the need to draw lessons from it:

1) The Democrats are also corporate servants: Sen. Patty Murray mediated the secret talks between Boeing and the union; Gov. Inslee then called a special session of the state legislature to give Boeing another handout; Murray, Inslee, and the entire political establishment did propaganda that the machinists had to bow to Boeing's demands.

2) The role of International Association of Machinists (IAM) leaders was also to help Boeing: They went behind the workers' backs and negotiated with the company, then tried to rush through a proposal the rank and file had little time to study and organize against. After that failed by a 2-1 margin in November, the International scheduled the next vote to occur when many workers would still be away on the holidays. Meanwhile, the District 751 leaders who had been split over recommending a yes or no vote in November, did organize against the second proposal. But in a move that sabotaged the fight by the rank and file, they closed comments on their website.

This shows why machinists and all workers need to get organized independent of and against the Democrats and trade union apparatuses. Indeed, for the next ten years Boeing workers are going to have to fight on many shop and plant issues that the labor bureaucrats won't fight on. But the screening of the machinists is just part of the class offensive of the entire capitalist class. Thus, more than ever, Boeing workers should add their numbers to all of the progressive movements in society, and to building a truly independent movement of the working class.

*For a picture of what this work was like, see http://communistvoice.org/WAS8703CPUSA-UAW.html.

Seattle Communist Study Group
January 1, 2014
The Detroit city financial crisis  
No to cuts in workers’ pensions/health benefits!  
Oppose Orr’s anti-worker bankruptcy plan!

The following article is from Detroit Workers’ Voice #111, March 1, 2014, and was distributed among postal workers at the Fort Street postal facility and at the demonstration of over 300 city workers on April 1.

Detroit Emergency Financial Manager Orr has submitted his Plan of Adjustment to the bankruptcy court. It’s a plan to decimate the retirement and health care funds owed to city workers. It promises to reduce the workforce and wages. And the plan jeopardizes the financing of the Detroit Institute of Arts, a treasured part of Detroit culture. Prior to releasing the plan, Orr and the City Council also decided to privatize the trash collection system, another anti-worker disaster.

There are about 23,000 retired city workers who currently get modest pensions. The Plan would slash these payments by at least 26%. These pension cuts are supposed to be prohibited by the Michigan Constitution, but if workers challenge the cuts in court, Orr will increase the cuts to 34%! Retirees are already barely making it so this will spell financial disaster for many.

Health care benefits for retired workers would be radically changed. Under a new VEBA (Voluntary Employees’ Beneficiary Association) plan, the city would no longer be responsible for retiree health care coverage. Instead the city budget would pay an inadequate sum of money to the unions, who would then bear the burden of health care costs. A retirees’ committee negotiating with the city says city health care funding would greatly decrease under the VEBA. With less funds, workers are bound to see increased costs for premiums, insurance that covers fewer health problems, rising out-of-pocket expenses, etc.

The mass media has been praising how great Governor Snyder and the capitalist foundations are for volunteering about $800 million to reduce Detroit’s deficits and save the DIA. But it’s been spelled out that these “kindly” gestures are only going to happen if the unions give up their ongoing efforts in the courts against the bankruptcy proceedings. The so-called Grand Bargain of the capitalists is that the workers should just agree to get run over.

Orr’s plan does call for sacrifices from certain banks, creditors and bondholders, too. But that’s no reason for the workers to be targeted. The rich corporations and banks are the cause of the crisis, and they should bear the burden. Orr wants to squeeze the working people and make them suffer as much as possible. To counter this, the workers need to turn up the pressure on Orr.

How can that pressure be turned up?

Clearly, Detroit Mayor Duggan won’t help. He’s long made it clear he wants to cooperate with Orr.

The union leaders are still challenging the bankruptcy in the courts and this has irritated Orr and his friends, but even there the union officials wrongly targeted funding the DIA. While the court case drags on, the pressure on Orr is limited because the union leadership has generally refused to mobilize the workers into public protests, not to mention walkouts or other workplace actions. Rather, they have long been advocating their own alternative sizeable concessions package. Indeed, it’s a bad sign that just prior to the release of Orr’s bankruptcy plan, the AFSCME leadership agreed to employees paying several thousand dollars more for health care costs in 2014.

Despite the limits of the struggle so far, the rank- and-file workers and the poor have begun to make themselves heard in certain ways. AFSCME Local 207 organized a walkout of some water department workers in 2012, and this past July they called for a rally and picket against pension cuts and privatization. Presently there are a number of worker and community meetings and protests. The message is spreading that the problem is not the modest pensions and wages of the workers, but the profit-mad corporations, banks, and the politicians, Republicans and Democrats alike.

We workers face a tough road. But there’s no need to accept Orr’s measures as our fate. We can resist austerity. When protests occur, join in! Spread the news of the protests among your coworkers, among the rank and file in the unions and in the neighborhoods. Start to build networks and groups in solidarity with the city workers. Let’s reply to Orr, Duggan and Snyder with our own plan.

Hands off pensions and health benefits!  
Down with Orr’s Plan of Adjustment!  
Solidarity with the city workers!
Against water shut-offs

Continue the fight against capitalist austerity!
Orr’s plan is a crime against the workers and poor!

The following article is from Detroit Workers’ Voice #113, and was distributed at the demonstration of 1,000 people against water privatization and shut-offs on July 18, 2014. The demonstration was part of a widespread protest against water shut-offs, resulting in the Detroit Department of Water and Sewage announcing a brief 15-day suspension of shut-offs on July 21, the suspension later being extended until August 15. But the city government isn’t committed to allowing long-term access to water for impoverished Detroiters, and it has even interfered with volunteers who have been helping people negotiate their water bills.

Detroit Emergency Manager Orr knows no shame in his attempts to shove his city bankruptcy plan down the throats of the workers and poor. The results of city workers’ votes on whether or not to accept his anti-worker plan will soon be known. But the vote has been rigged in Orr’s favor. If the workers reject the present plan to attack their pensions, Orr promises to impose even greater cuts. And the sellout leadership of the unions have already declared their support for Orr’s present plan. It will take enormous fortitude by the workers to break out of this trap. But whatever the outcome of the vote, the struggle against pension cuts and other attacks on the workers must continue!

And while Orr tries to tighten the noose around city workers, the water department authorities, with his blessings, have launched a new phase in their attacks against the poor. In the past couple of months, the city has cut water service to over 11,000 residents and threatens cuts to tens of thousands more. The main victims are those with financial hardships who may owe as little as $150 for a 60 day period. Detroit Emergency Financial Manager Orr has submitted his Plan of Adjustment to the bankruptcy court. It’s a plan to decimate the retirement and health care funds owed to city workers. It promises to reduce the workforce and wages. And the plan jeopardizes the financing of the Detroit Institute of Arts, a treasured part of Detroit culture. Prior to releasing the plan, Orr and the City Council also decided to privatize the trash collection system, another anti-worker disaster.

Orr’s pension plans, old and new

The initial Orr plan to cut city workers pensions was shocking. The city workers’ pensions averaged a modest $19,000/year. Under Orr’s first plan, these pensions would be slashed 26% immediately. The new plan being voted upon by city workers recently is also atrocious though. The immediate cut would be 4.5% and cost-of-living raises would be eliminated. So even with modest inflation for ten years, the buying power of pension payments would decline another 20-30 percent. These pension plans were supposed to be protected by the Michigan Constitution, but the bankruptcy judge doesn’t give a damn. He’s only interested in helping Orr stamp on the workers. Orr has made it known to the workers that if they reject his “kinder” second plan, he’ll simply return to immediate giant cuts like the first plan. That’s the sham democracy of the vote conducted by the Orr dictatorship.

Bankruptcy plan to cut off water to poor residents

The city bankruptcy plan includes depriving the workers and poor of water. Those behind on their bills must pay soon or see their water cut off. At first glance that might seem fair. After all, a few months ago half of all the 323,000 accounts were delinquent. But is this plan really fair? NO!

Water bill rates have been soaring, doubling over the last decade. Meanwhile working class and poor people have been hammered with job and pay cuts, and large cuts in social benefits. Such citizens find it impossible or very hard to pay their water bills without gutting some other necessities. On top of that there are cases where impoverished people find their water turned off without proper notice. One other thing. Although the vast majority of delinquent are ordinary folk, as of March these delinquencies make up only half of the money owed to the water department.

The other half of the money ($175 million) is owed by a relative handful of businesses and industries. On average, each of these entities owed more than 10 times the amount of a residential homeowner or renter ($7,700 vs. $600). One golf course operator owes over $500,000! It seems the authorities have been looking the other way for a long time when it comes to the wealthy. While from April thru June there were almost 15,000 shutoffs at residences, as of July 9th there were no shutoffs at commercial or industrial entities even though a significant number of them had been issued shutoff notices. Others have not yet been issued notices.

It’s true that not all businesses are the same, and smaller businesses would feel the effects of the crackdown more than the big businesses. But this only emphasizes the general nature of the water shut offs and threats. It is a crackdown on those who can least afford to pay their bills.

City ends responsibility for retiree health care

EM Orr’s plan sought to end the city’s responsibility for employee health care. Now they have accomplished this through a deal with the sellout union leaders of AFSCME. With the recent ratification of AFSCME’s new 5-year contract the city negates the more than $4 billion it owes its healthcare fund and agrees to give the union about $450 million for accepting responsibility for retiree health care. Retiree
committees who had previously been negotiating with the city months ago said health care funding will greatly decrease under such a VEBA (Voluntary Employees’ Beneficiary Association). So the city emergency plan now insures that workers will see higher premium costs, rising out-of-pocket expenses, etc.

The AFSCME union leadership: partners in crime

City workers and other workers and activists are outraged by Orr’s bankruptcy plans. But they are being betrayed by the leadership of the unions. At first the union leaders put on a show of opposition. But now they are telling the workers they have no choice but to bow down and accept their whipping to avoid future whippings by slave master Orr. We have just seen how they accepted the end of city-provided health care. But traitors like AFSCME leaders Ed McNeil and Al Garrett call for acceptance of the whole rotten bankruptcy plan. Thus, Garrett states their recent contract agreements with the city are “the best path forward for city employees and retirees. They simply cannot risk the further serious reductions in pension, pay and job security if the Plan [Orr’s bankruptcy plan], and our collective bargaining agreements are not approved”.

The Republicans and Democrats vs. the workers

Orr was sent to decimate the masses of Detroit by Republican Governor Snyder. Together they are carrying out the so-called Grand Bargain. They, and various capitalist foundations, promise to help reduce Detroit’s deficits and save the Detroit Institute of Arts. But first the anti-worker onslaught must be accepted. So the “bargain” is the workers should be run over by the capitalists, the rich corporations and banks who caused the crisis.

Where then are the Democrats, the party that claims to be against Republican plans against the workers? Detroit Mayor Duggan is a Democrat and has pledged to cooperate with Orr. Snyder’s predecessor Jennifer Granholm instituted Emergency Manager laws similar to the law that allowed Snyder to send Orr to Detroit. Democrat president Obama has done virtually nothing. Basically the local Democrats are allied with the sellout union leaders.

The road ahead

With such powerful forces lined up against the workers and poor, the situation may seem hopeless. But the final verdict has yet to be rendered by the bankruptcy judges, and there may be opportunities to get changes in favor of the working masses. This rests on the struggle of the rank and file.

There is still great anger against Orr’s plan and that anger needs to be organized. Within the unions there have been some voices raised against the sellout leaders, and in 2012, AFSCME Local 207 organized a walkout of some water department workers. There have been many worker and community meetings, marches and other protests of the bankruptcy plan, including recent attempts to block vehicles sent to shut off water supplies. Related movements have broken out against house foreclosures and to raise the minimum wage to $15/hour.

The struggle against the Detroit bankruptcy plan has not been strong enough to reverse Orr’s plan, but it has caused the authorities to reconfigure some of the worst aspects, meaning the protests have had some effect. But even if the Plan goes through with little basic change, the beginning steps at organizing will not be in vain.

Stronger organization of the workers will be needed. Go directly to the workers and poor in the workplaces and communities. Such organizations must have no illusions in the capitalist parties and the present union leaderships and prepare for battle without them. That’s what will matter in the long battle against capitalist austerity.

Down with Orr’s bankruptcy plan!
No to water shutoffs!
Solidarity with the city workers! □
The federal budget crisis, and what to do about it

Class issues in the government shutdown of 2013

The federal government shutdown of October 16-18, 2013 is just a bad memory, but the haggling over further government cutbacks continue. All the major social programs are in jeopardy. The following article is excerpted from the presentation at the Detroit Workers’ Voice Discussion Group of September 29, 2013, as edited for circulation in the DWV email list of October 1, 2013.

We are now a couple of days away from a partial federal government shutdown. ... What it all means is that we are entering into a period of new political and financial crises. The two parties, the Democrats and the Republicans, are at each other’s throats, and they are willing to risk damage to the federal government and the economy in that fight.

Well, we have been in the midst of an economic depression for some time. Millions of people have lost their homes, their jobs, their pensions, their peace of mind. Even if you have a job, you may have a hard time earning enough to eat. In Detroit, we see threats to the pensions and health care plans of public workers; one cutback after another in schools and city services; and mass unemployment. All this is certainly cause enough for a political crisis.

What the parties are fighting about

But that isn’t what the parties are fighting about. They agree that the people should be allowed to suffer, and differ only about how deep the cutbacks should be. They are both parties of austerity. They have been haggling for several years over cutbacks to Social Security, Medicare, welfare, and other programs, which they sanitize by the neutral-sounding phrase of cuts to “entitlements”. They are trying to find a way to squeeze millions upon millions of workers harder, while pretending to be for the common man.

The Republicans, both the Tea Party and the other conservatives, are emphasizing the repeal of the expansion of health insurance under the Affordable Care Act, or Obamacare. Let the depression continue; let the climate deteriorate; let people go hungry: what the Republicans care about is repealing Obamacare. In 24 states they have managed to block the expansion of Medicaid [government-paid health care for the poor] that was specified under Obamacare, thus ensuring that millions of poor people won’t have access to basic health care. And they are determined to ensure that people don’t get government subsidies to buy private insurance either.

We’re in the middle of a depression, and also face the worst environmental catastrophe that has ever faced civilization. And what do the conservatives do? They have voted 41 times in the House to repeal or defund Obamacare, and now they threaten to Samson-like bring down the federal government to the same end. Clearly, in their mind, not only will the poor always be with us, they must be stripped of medical care as well.

They are especially upset because they figure this is their last chance to get rid of Obamacare. On October 1, Obamacare reaches the critical point where the health care exchanges for buying private insurance open. By January 1, millions of people among those who were previously uninsured will be insured either under the expansion of Medicaid to be in effect in 26 states or because they can get major subsidies allowing them to buy health insurance at a reduced rate. Millions of people will see that Fox News and the conservatives have been lying about Obamacare.

For their part, the Democrats and the Obama administration are determined to uphold the Affordable Care Act. This is the centerpiece of their legislative program; the accomplishment they can boast about. They are unlikely to give in on it.

But year after year they have conceded to cuts demanded by the conservatives in other social programs as well as carrying out their own privatization and cutback drive. They may or may not make a deal in the present budget fight; they may spurn a deal because they think that the Republicans are going to have egg on their faces if the House of Representatives forces a government shutdown or a government default, just as the Republicans suffered in the 1995-96 shutdowns during the Clinton administration. But they will continue to cut back on social services. The Clinton administration may have won the government shutdown battle of 1995-96, but it was this Democratic administration that spearheaded the end of “welfare as we know it”. Its mantra was that it would move everyone to jobs. It thus contributed in a major way to the suffering under this depression, where it’s clearly impossible for everyone to get jobs, and in which the length of unemployment will last far longer than the limit on how long a person may receive welfare in their life brought in by Clinton. Similarly, Obama may win the current budget battle over Obamacare, but it is his administration which has spearheaded the destruction of the public schools under “Race to the top”, a program which continues Bush’s “no public school left standing”, that is, “no child left behind”.

Obamacare

So let’s look closely at the Affordable Care Act. It is at the center of the current budget battle, and it is also the best thing the Democrats have to offer. Moreover, many of us will have to deal with the medical exchanges opening in October, or help friends and relatives deal with them.
Its pluses

The ACA has both positive and negative aspects. Let’s start by looking at its strong points, such as the following:

• It provides for an expansion of Medicaid to people or families with income less than 134% of the poverty line. This would have been for all states, but due to the conservatives on the Supreme Court, it has to be fought over state by state, and so far about 26 states will take part. This expansion will aid millions of people, not just the unemployed but also people with low-wage jobs.

• It provides for substantial subsidies for people purchasing health insurance through the new medical exchanges, if their income is less than 400% of the poverty line but more than 134% of the poverty line.

• It provides that private insurance plans can’t penalize or refuse people for pre-existing conditions. This means that a lot of people who are otherwise uninsurable will be able to get insurance. It also means an end to insurance companies canceling insurance when people really need it for major expenses, using the pretext that one supposedly forgot to mention some previous medical condition.

• While the plans have deductibles and copays, there is a maximum limit to how much one has to pay out of pocket (in addition to the insurance premiums) for health care in a year. This is $6,350 for next year. Clearly this limit will be a very heavy burden for many people, but it does protect against catastrophic expenses which could easily reach hundreds of thousands of dollars or even more.

For these reasons, Obamacare is likely to help millions of people. Thus it is likely that the ACA will grow in popularity as many people benefit.

Its minuses

But there are also negative features of this bill. The main problem is that the ACA is based on preserving and expanding private insurance, rather than providing a single-payer system or simply expanding Medicare, and its provisions were worked out hand in hand with the private insurers and health monopolies. This has consequences:

• A large percentage of health expenditures will continue to go to the profits of the private insurers and health monopolies, to huge salaries for health executives, and to maintaining the huge paperwork network built up to ensure that the health monopolies provide as little actual health care as possible.

• The standpoint of the bill is that cost control is to be achieved by ensuring that health expenditures are painful for the population. They are to be helped to have insurance, so that hospitals and health monopolies can get paid. But health care costs are still going to be painful. For one thing, all the health plans available under the ACA will require large deductibles or co-pays [except that people with incomes less than 250% of the federal poverty line may qualify for major reductions in deductibles, co-pays, and total out of pocket expense if they buy a silver-level plan]. There are four levels of plan that will be available through the health exchanges: bronze, silver, gold, and platinum plans. The bronze plans will pay for only 60% of one’s expense; the silver for 70%; the gold for 80%, and the platinum for 90%. Moreover, the subsidies provided by the ACA are based on the cost of silver plans; if one wants a better plan, one pays all the extra expense for it.

The pain will, of course, be borne by poor and working people, not the rich. The ACA will thus ensure that the rich continue to get better care than the poor. It will result in many contradictions: for example, the ACA is supposed on one hand to promote preventive care, and certain services are to be offered free under all plans; but at the same time, the cost of care will still deter many people from seeking it.

• Starting in 2018, the ACA will penalize so-called “Cadillac” health insurance plans. The idea is to ensure that nothing better than the so-called platinum plans will be available. This is to be achieved by a whopping 40% excise tax on plans with premiums exceeding $10,200 for individuals or $27,500 for families. So any unionized workers who have managed to maintain very good health plans will lose them.

• The plan will do nothing serious to stop the distortion of the quality of medical care by the big insurers, the big pharmaceutical companies, or other health monopolies. This is a major evil, but it is a story in itself and would require another meeting to explain all its ramifications.

• The plan is extremely complicated, so that people will have a hard time understanding what it provides or how to proceed. The result is that industry lobbyists and lawyers will have a field day in interpreting rules and regulations and writing new ones. Ordinary people will still have to protect themselves against the bad interpretations of private health companies over whether to cover various treatments.

Indeed, the ACA divides up the people into many different categories, each affected differently by the act. This will make it harder to fight for improvements in the act. I said that a person with health insurance will have to pay in any one year a maximum of $6,350 in addition to the insurance premiums: but does this include drugs? Does it include psychiatric treatment? Dental work? Orthodontic work for children? The answers aren’t that clear except that they will vary from plan to plan, and person to person.

The result of market principles

The Affordable Care Act thus has many problems; and some of these could have been avoided by following the single-payer health system used in Canada, which at least eliminates the private insurers. These problems are an example of what happens when trying to provide general services while maintaining privatization and market principles.

Yet this is the best the Democrats can do. When it comes to other programs, they directly sponsor their own
cuts to the conditions of working people. Obama backs replacing the cost of living index that determines Social Security payments with the so-called “chained CPI”, which means cutting future Social Security increases. Obama’s “Race to the Top” program is devastating the public schools, undermining teachers’ unions, eliminating community public schools, and subjecting students from poor families to a regimented system of education. Obama’s idea of a jobs program is to give subsidies to the auto companies and to banks, hoping that this will trickle down to the masses. Obama’s idea of reform is to bribe Wall Street to embrace it, and it’s no accident that the result is that inequality has soared under Obama as under Bush.

As far as their effect on the working class, the difference between the Republicans and Democrats is that between quick death with the Republicans, who would deny the poor access to medical care, and death by a thousand cuts by the Democrats. That is what they are fighting over in the budget fight.

**We have the resources to do better**

Why are both parties fighting for cuts? It’s not because the US isn’t rich enough to provide decent health insurance, and many other countries provide better health insurance than here. It’s not because there aren’t enough resources to eliminate poverty. It’s because while things have been getting worse for the workers, they have getting better for the CEOs and financiers and the entire so-called 1%. It’s because the resources are being monopolized by the rich. Both parties represent the bourgeoisie, the 1%, not the working masses. They both are determined to please the CEOs and exploiters.

The fact is that the present depression affects the different classes in our country differently. The bourgeoisie would prefer a booming economy, but they have managed to find the silver lining in the present depression. They are using the depression to cut wages and benefits, and they have restored the level of their profits to pre-depression levels. They are increasing the share of the national wealth that goes to them. It is the drive to constantly increase this share that lies behind the pressure for “entitlement reform” and for one cut after another in social programs.

The capitalists think the workers exist for one purpose only, to make money for the rich. They are slowly chipping away even at the right to retire, and they advocate that the retirement age should be increased. They said that the country can’t afford to have so many people retired.

But why is that? Is there a shortage of food, houses, and resources so that we need the aged to go back to work? On the contrary, this country can produce all that we need, and the problem is generally that there are so many things produced that the markets are glutted. If there really were shortages of goods and resources, then we would see everyone working, and we would see wages go up as the capitalists sour the country looking for employees and trying to bribe them to come over from other jobs. In that situation, many older people probably would love to work, and there would be no need to force them out of retirement by cutting pensions. Instead we see millions of people without work, and capitalists cutting wages right and left.

So what will happen in this situation if the aged are stripped of pensions and forced back to work? Will more goods be produced? Not at all. It will simply spread the competition for existing jobs over a larger workforce. But eliminating pensions would shift more resources from the workers to the rich, and this is what the capitalists are after. The capitalists aren’t short of labor; they are long on greed.

**Serious social programs**

If workers are to survive the depression, we need to unite on a class basis and demand the social programs and mass relief that the resources of this country can provide.

- We need to demand the end to trickle-down economics, and the provision of mass relief for the unemployed, the underemployed, and the people who have seen their homes foreclosed.

- We need to demand the end to the destruction of the public school system and the social safety net. This includes preserving the positive part of the ACA.

- We need to demand serious programs to preserve the environment and the climate.

But we should also take account of the fact that the present economic and political system is in crisis. The Republicans and Democrats may both agree on austerity for the masses, but there is a real fight between them. This fight looks like it is going to lead to a temporary government shutdown, and it’s going to continue afterward. It reflects that the bourgeoisie doesn’t know what to do about the current economic problems, and is squabbling among itself. It reflects the fact that market fundamentalism is bankrupt. It doesn’t have any answer to the depression other than austerity for the masses. It has proved to be nothing but a system for raping the people and the country.

**An end to the privatization of the government**

So we must demand an end to the privatization drive and to market fundamentalism. If the present social services are to be preserved and extended, then they have to be changed. The privatization of the government, whereby one government program after another is handed over to the private insurers and other corporations, must be ended. We need to curb the financiers and eliminate the complicated financial instruments that no one really understand. We need to fight against the needless complexity of the present programs, whereby the corporate lobbyists and monopoly interests pervert every program into its opposite, and instead insist on ones whose functioning is open to public inspection.
Right now it might seem that market fundamentalism has gone on forever and will last forever. But the infighting between Democrats and Republicans is a sign that the system is reaching an impasse. This growing political crisis will be painful for the masses as government services are restricted, and more cutbacks re enacted. But historically, crisis can be a harbinger of change.

Market fundamentalism is in crisis. The enactment of the ACA shows that government intervention is needed to solve various problems. But unless the working class organizes in its own right, what follows won’t be too much better. For example, we can see that the ACA preserves market fundamentalism in its design and methods, and this is going to lead to many problems. We need to fight not only for our immediate needs, but to influence the changes to come. We can’t just support any changes that come, but we need to maintain a critical attitude to them and to fight for the real end of market fundamentalism. This struggle over survival will still be a partial struggle, a struggle with the results of capitalism rather than the underlying system itself. It won’t yet overcome the underlying capitalist system which continues through one phase after another. But such struggles will be one means by which the working class will step-by-step transform itself and develop the class-consciousness needed to eventually challenge and overthrow the capitalist system itself.
Guest article:

Strategies of containment

By William T. Hathaway
www.peacewriter.org

Many of us on the left have been kettled at demonstrations: surrounded by a wall of police, herded into a small area, and prevented from reaching our goal. The term a translation of *kesseln,* the German military tactic of enclosing an enemy force within a tight cordon of troops and gradually wearing it down rather than attacking it directly.

But we are also kettled by the thought police, and that's even more insidious. This strategy of containment is used politically to confine potentially revolutionary energy into an area where it can't reach its goal. Instead of by cops, we are corralled by institutions that purport to be progressive or even socialist. This pseudo-left diverts our energies away from organizing a militant working class and towards supporting the Democratic Party. Democrat congressman Dennis Kucinich referred to this when he described his calls for a more peaceful US foreign policy as a way to keep peace activists within "the big tent" — the Democratic Party. The Democrats like to have a few seeming progressives like Kucinich in their ranks to create the illusion that they are the party of change.

They also have media and political groups on their periphery that are often critical of their policies but consistently promote the premise that this party is our only chance and with enough effort it can be made progressive. They spend their energy trying to convince the Democrats to move left. Their base is not in the working class but among slightly-left-of-liberal professionals who prefer progressive policies because they will benefit from them. They want to reduce the accumulation of wealth by the superrich and direct more of it in their direction and some of it down to the masses to ease discontent. As befits their class, they are well educated and have access to financial and political power. They communicate professionally and persuasively. Like the wall of cops, their message is clear: You must stay here. The only way to change the system is from within it. There is no alternative.

To prevent militant rank-and-file activism, labor bureaucrats also kettle workers into pro-capitalist unions tied to the Democratic Party. The union hierarchy exists to block independent action by the workers. The leaders speak with populist rhetoric, but to keep their privileged position they collude with employers to force lower wages and poorer working conditions onto their members.

The goal of these pseudo-left media, political groups, and unions is to hold us within capitalist institutions, thus rendering our efforts futile. The police kettle us physically and the pseudo-left tries to kattle us mentally, to keep us in the system.

"Working within the system" is a strategy promoted by the system itself in order to divert demands for fundamental change into superficial reforms. But this gradual approach has been proved to be a sham. Hard won improvements in wages, health care, and retirement benefits are being reversed under both Democrat and Republican presidents.

Instead of advancing Roosevelt’s modest reforms, the Democrats have undermined them. They have consistently served the needs of capital for imperialist wars and exploitation of workers. When they allowed wage increases in the 1950s and ‘60s, it was largely to stimulate domestic consumption. When they supported equal employment opportunities for women and minorities in the ‘70s and ‘80s, it was largely to expand the labor pool so corporations could reverse the earlier wage increases.

It’s not just greed that causes corporations to be vicious. The system requires this. Slashing labor costs is the only way they can maintain dominance in the face of low-wage competition from emerging industrial powers such as China and India. The corps are shifting their economic pressures onto the workers. They’ve lowered wages to the point where young workers are earning less than their parents did. The only “progress” is that now we all have an equal opportunity for the lousy jobs that are available.

The Democrats led this attack on workers when they were in office and colluded with it when they were in the opposition. Labor union leadership cooperated in this betrayal of their members. Throughout it all the pseudo-left clucked in disapproval but continued to support the Democrats. This pattern continues today.

But more and more people are now breaking free of these strategies of containment. A look at the historical record and the experience of our day-to-day reality show we’ve been kettled with lies. It has become obvious that capitalism can’t produce long-term prosperity for its workers. Its profits must continually increase, and it has three ways of generating those: exploiting our labor by paying us less than the value we have added to the product; innovating new ways to lower costs; expanding their markets. Now that these last two methods are approaching their limits, the exploitation must increase to produce the required profits.

Liberal prosperity was a feature of the Keynesian phase of capitalism, a 30-year bubble of better wages that occurred only in North America and Europe when it was necessary to stimulate consumer demand. But those conditions are gone and can’t return. The world market has become more important than the home country, and selling there requires low prices, which in turn requires cheap labor.

We’re now in the consolidation phase of capitalism, when global competition eliminates the less effective predators and wealth concentrates in fewer and fewer giant corps and the rest of us become their vassals. We have to overthrow this barbaric system and build a humane one or face an increasingly degraded life.

To direct this struggle successfully, we need a political program based on the lessons of history and a strategy for implementing it. We must use our unions back from the stooge (mis)leaders. We have to break decisively from the Democratic Party, that graveyard of social movements. We need media that inform the working class rather than delude it. And we must do all this internationally, coordinating our efforts with workers in

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other countries to build democratic socialism, where the people decide how the economic life of society will be organized. When the resources and productive capacity of the world belong to its people, they can use them to meet human needs rather than to generate private profits for a few owners. This is the challenge of our time, an historic battle for liberation. It’s an enormous job, but no more difficult than other evolutionary changes humanity has mastered.

**Struggle**

A magazine of proletarian revolutionary literature

*Struggle* is an anti-establishment, revolutionary literary journal oriented to the working-class struggle. It reaches out to “disgruntled” workers, discontented youth and all the oppressed and abused and supports their fight against the rich capitalist rulers of the U.S. and the planet. It is open to a variety of artistic and literary forms and anti-establishment views. We welcome works with artistic power which rebel against some element of the capitalist power structure or against the entire system itself.

In the current Fall-Winter 2013-14 double issue, vol. 29, #3-4:

**Commentary:**
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*Net worth measured by gifts, and two other poems by the same author
*Perpetuating 1967, [by TM], South Africa
*and more

**Essay:** Dying for health care

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Why “proletarian literature”?  

By Tim Hall

This magazine declares its material to be "proletarian literature." Why? There is a method to our madness. "Proletariat" is the name Karl Marx used to denote the revolutionary working class under capitalism. Revolutionary because it is the essential producing class and because capitalism can live only by grinding the workers incessantly, eventually driving them to make a revolution, no matter what the workers' current views are. The core of the proletariat is the industrial workers; vast numbers of other wage workers share much of the proletarian existence.

And what is that existence? To work on, producing the capitalists' unlimited wealth, that rises like a geyser from our labor, with only drops left for us. And to be ever-insecure, owning no means of production, always a couple of paychecks from homelessness, while all around us there is wealth aplenty. Even in the U.S., the most developed capitalist country, this insecurity is grievous. Millions here today are unemployed, desperately hanging on to unemployment benefits, at the mercy of the whims of the bloated, corrupt parasites in Congress.

Among the employed a section of workers has emerged — call-center employees and temporaries of various kinds — whose employment (and thus livelihood) is so insecure that it calls itself a "precariat." But this precariousness afflicts nearly all workers, even thus thought to be the most secure and "bribed" by capitalism. For example, among auto workers in Detroit in the 1980s, when left pessimists branded them "bought off," there was a very common saying: "our kids will never have these jobs," that is, they recognized that the system would destroy even their partial stability (itself interrupted by layoffs). And so it was. The UAW labor misleaders sold out the younger generation, and now those children, if they have jobs in auto at all, are working for half the pay of their parents. And a similar fate has arrived for the children of the postal workers.

The literature in Struggle embodies the pain, anger, passion and rebellion of such workers, who are the vast majority of the U.S. population and are the core of the oppressed around the world. And all the problems Struggle magazine deals with, from racism to sexism to imperialist war to environmental disaster, all are intimately linked to this relation of the proletarian mass to the capitalist exploiters; carrying through this revolution is the key to unlocking all the other problems; arousing the proletarian workers to fight on all these questions is key to advancing these struggle and to preparing the proletariat for revolution.

Leon Trotsky, a well-known leader in the Russian Revolution, asserted that proletarian revolutionary literature was impossible. This opinion is utterly bankrupt and only serves to discourage revolutionary writers.

In his book Literature and Revolution Trotsky asserts that the proletariat is too ground-down by capitalist labor to be able to produce its own literature. This opinion is antiquated and only applies where 12-14 hour workdays still predominate. Trotsky asserts that the proletariat does not have the hundreds of years to create its literature that the bourgeoisie had to create its own. This, too, is wrong: revolutionary proletarians have been creating songs and poems since at least the 1840s and we are 170 years down the longer-than-expected road, with a huge volume of literature endorsing the goals of the proletariat and socialism created in nearly all countries.

Trotsky asserts that the proletariat must spend all its time assimilating the existing culture of bourgeois society. But in a world where secondary education and literacy is very widespread, and where issues are constantly debated on myriad media and in classrooms, it only takes a few years for a worker to have a good initial grasp of the existing culture. And besides, if we are to consider the proletarians unable to absorb existing bourgeois culture, then how can they act in a revolutionary way on the political front, let alone in literature and art? No, this objection, too, must be dismissed.

Trotsky asserts that the proletariat cannot spare any time from the revolutionary struggle to create literature and art. This is ludicrous. Every revolutionary class has always created its own literature and art, its own culture, to sustain and inspire it in battle, to clarify just what its theoretical musings and passionate desires mean and where they must and will lead. In fact, literature and art, creative culture in general, is so crucial that there will be no proletarian revolution at all without a revolutionary culture, without revolutionary writers, artists, creators, imagining and portraying the liberation of the exploited class of proletarians and, with it, of all the oppressed of the world.

Trotsky regards his clinching argument to be that in the classless society to come — in a few decades, he thinks — there will be no proletariat, since there will be no classes. Therefore, no proletarian culture or literature. So there is no time to develop it and no future place for it, he says. This is bizarre. To think that a stable, classless society could be built without a vast revolution in the masses' thinking is absurd. Under centuries of class society, and harshly under capitalism, the dominant ideology imposed by the ruling classes has been "every man (yes, man) for himself, devil take the hindmost." The oppressed classes always harbored an opposite ideology — that of collective labor, "share and share alike." The proletarian revolution, burning through disasters, will, for the first time since prehistory, make that the general viewpoint and practice. Therefore, the new, classless society will be stamped thoroughly with the viewpoint of the proletariat, for all time once classes are abolished. Thus proletarian culture and literature have a long struggle ahead and a very long, glorious future as well.

Resolutely we march on. We will create, we are recreating, the revolutionary proletarian literature, despite the nay-sayers like Trotsky. The defeat of his pessimism, and the advance of revolutionary literature, are equally inevitable.
Reviving Nasser
A review of Gilbert Achcar’s *The People Want*

By Pete Brown


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What attitude to take toward the Arab Spring? This is a major question debated in left circles today. Some activists who cooperated in anti-war efforts in 2003-04 around the U.S. invasion of Iraq find themselves on opposite sides when it comes to the uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt and other Arab countries closely allied with Western powers, some Trotskyist groups and other “leftist anti-imperialists” find it easy to denounce the rebellions in Libya and Syria.

The rebellion in Libya succeeded in getting rid of Qaddafi, but in Syria the fight against the despot Bashar al-Assad is still going on. The rebellion began as peaceful demonstrations demanding reforms, but when Assad responded with bullets, the people began arming themselves and insisting on Assad’s departure. Many of Assad’s own soldiers, even generals, deserted him and joined the rebels. But Assad only escalated his attacks, using air power, artillery, and tanks against the rebels and nearby civilian areas. Around 100,000 people have been killed, and millions displaced. But still Assad could not suppress the rebellion, which was able to take and hold suburbs of Damascus. Assad then became desperate and attacked rebel-held areas with poison gas, killing hundreds with Sarin.

This sharpened the debate within left circles as to what attitude to take toward Assad and the rebels. Those who stand with the rebels, such as CVO, sympathize with the masses and their hatred for the ruling despot. But many so-called “leftists” and “anti-imperialists” think that because Assad is disliked by the U.S., there must be something good about him. So they join Assad’s cheering squad, helping him murder thousands of working class people. They’ve jumped to organize demonstrations calling to “defend Syria” and equate this with defending Assad’s regime – as if the regime is not itself the main enemy of the Syrian people. These “anti-imperialists” think the principle of self-determination gives national governments the right to murder their own people without criticism from others. They think NATO’s bombing of Qaddafi’s troops was a horrible crime, but they don’t see anything wrong with Assad bombing Syrian cities and towns. They have no sense of where the sympathy of working class people belongs, so we call them “non-class anti-imperialists.”

Gilbert Achcar is a professor specializing in Mideastern history and politics. Achcar is not part of the anti-revisionist left, and his views do not give a Marxist view of things even though Achcar quotes Marx repeatedly and seems to think of himself as a Marxist. But his book, *The People Want*, is worth looking at because Achcar is somewhat realistic in his assessment of the Arab Spring. Achcar has been an advisor to various Arab opposition groups and has helped gather support for them in Europe and America. In the U.S. Achcar is now affiliated with the MENA (Middle East and North Africa) Solidarity Network (website menasolnetus.wordpress.com) which is sponsoring a debut for Achcar’s book. Two main slogans of this organization are “Support revolution” and “Oppose intervention” (by the U.S., NATO, etc.). Addressing his book to leftists, Achcar argues that the status quo in Arab countries is rotten and ripe for overthrow by the masses who are sick and tired of languishing under despotic regimes. This includes the so-called “anti-imperialist” regimes of Qaddafi and Assad.

Achcar tends to prettify the movements and their bourgeois-liberal participants, and he is naively optimistic about their prospects. This is covered over with a lot of Marxist-sounding rhetoric which is partly exaggeration and partly just noting a few facts. So there are limits to how much activists can take from Achcar. But his opposition to the non-class anti-imperialists and their diehard support for Qaddafi and Assad is refreshing.

“Neo-Patrimonial” Regimes

Achcar takes the concept of “patrimonial” regimes and extends it to “neo-patrimonial” regimes. Examples of patrimonial regimes are traditional monarchies set up or supported by Western imperialism as guardians of the Middle East in Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Iraq, etc. after World War I. Achcar says these regimes are all beset with tribalism, sectarianism and regionalism. The ruling family is not just a nuclear family but an extended family including a clan and tribe. The rulers promote their own sect or brand of religion over others, politicizing the split between Sunni and Shiite Islam. And the rulers promote the interests of their own home region over others. Achcar considers these traits backward survivals of a previous era but also universal features in the Arab world that give it a unique “modality.”

Some Arab countries – notably Egypt and Iraq – underwent revolutions that overthrew the Western-leaning monarchs and replaced them with more secular regimes. Thus Achcar considers Nasserism as modernizing and secular and having some leftist tendencies, though he also recognizes dictatorial tendencies in Nasserism.

What makes Achcar different from the typical “Qaddafi
leftist” is the recognition that these revolutionary regimes degenerated in the ensuing decades. In Egypt, Anwar Sadat (who succeeded Nasser) reversed Nasser’s more popular policies, made peace deals with Israel and the U.S., revived Islamism and even brought the Muslim Brotherhood into government to some extent (though the Brotherhood’s extremist wing eventually killed him). After Sadat, Mubarak continued doing away with any leftist tendencies in the regime, promoted the Israel-U.S. alliance, and opened Egypt to neo-liberal trade and investment. Mubarak also began promoting his own family and grooming his son as a possible successor. Similar backward slides were made by Saddam Hussein in Iraq, Hafez el-Assad in Syria and Qaddafi in Libya. Thus these countries saw the construction of “neo-patrimonial” regimes, semi-monarchies in which one family dominated and promoted the interests of its own clan, religious sect and region. Achcar argues that these regimes were not that different from the Western-allied monarchies of Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Morocco, etc.

Achcar couples this with a theory of the economic foundation of these regimes. Throughout the Middle East, he says, governments rely on income from oil and natural gas and other mining concerns. As a result, governments do not depend on working out compromises between groups of capitalist interests the way they do in more developed capitalist countries. Governments have a steady income stream from mineral concessions and don’t see the need to consult different industries, much less the masses, about how to devise taxation. Hence they don’t consult anyone on policy either. The rulers concentrate on handing out concessions to their family and tribe, regional and religious cohorts. Giving favors thus exacerbates differences and causes the groups left out to nurse grievances against the regime.

This is the background to the Arab Spring. It wasn’t just a whim on the part of the masses, nor was it simply a desire for some superficial political change. Despots like Qaddafi in Libya and Assad in Syria had been discriminating against regions, religious groups and clans for decades, and this had built up intense hatred against them. Former friends and allies had been left out of the crony capitalist regimes and had turned against their former colleagues. Like Suharto in Indonesia and Marcos in the Philippines, the rulers eventually became isolated to such a degree that their overthrow was practically inevitable as soon as some match could ignite the tinderbox.

Achcar oversimplifies the differences between countries, but he has a point about how opposition to the regimes built up over decades. He tends to overlook the differences between Arab countries like Egypt, with its large urban population and massive poverty, and the oil emirates. But as Achcar points out, even Egypt – though it doesn’t have a lot of oil – derives a large portion of its income from natural gas concessions. And Egypt also derives a significant amount of income from the oil emirates themselves, which give foreign aid, loans, investment money, etc. to Egypt. So Achcar considers them all one of a piece. And though the Egyptian regime was a military dictatorship rather than a feudal monarchy, Achcar argues that it was devolving politically and socially into a regime more like an oil emirate. The same was true of the Qaddafi and Assad regimes.

**Achcar’s Support for the Mass Movement …**

Capitalism has developed quickly in all the Arab countries, but Achcar insists that it’s different than in Western countries because it’s centered on oil production. The regimes’ reliance on oil concessions allows the survival of feudal, anti-democratic traits. These need to be overcome before these countries can develop in a “normal” way. So Achcar says democratization is the specific “modality” of revolution today.

Achcar endorses the mass movement as it exists in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Syria, Bahrain, etc., while also opposing intervention by Western powers. He says (truthfully enough) Western imperialists have supported reactionary, anti-democratic regimes in these countries for decades. Achcar ridicules the Western powers’ call for democracy and “good governance” as hypocritical and absurd, given the “bad governance” nature of the regimes they have supported. He argues the regimes could not be reformed and turned into models of democracy – the rulers and their cronies simply would not allow it. They had to be overthrown.

He also argues against the “leftist anti-imperialists” who think of the regimes in Libya and Syria as exceptions to the Arab “modality” and who characterize those regimes as progressive or anti-imperialist. Achcar shows that Qaddafi and Assad were just as anti-democratic in their own way as the pro-West regimes of Mubarak in Egypt or Ben Ali in Tunisia. Qaddafi and Assad practiced tribalism, sectarianism and regionalism just like the monarchs and emirs of the Arabian peninsula.

This is where Achcar’s book makes a contribution to the present debate about the Arab Spring. Achcar laughs at the notion that Qaddafi was in any way anti-imperialist, as he made oil and gas deals with European powers and cooperated with the CIA’s rendition program. Qaddafi was also notorious for cooperating with Italy’s anti-immigrant program, helping Italy imprison African refugees and return them to Africa via Libya without so much as a hearing on their humanitarian needs or refugee status. And Achcar laughs at the stupidity of the position, “the enemy of my enemy is my friend”; but this is exactly the position of some Trotskyist groups who think that a ruler who has contradictions with Western imperialism is therefore a friend of anti-imperialists. Some Mideast rulers were notorious enemies of leftists despite their contradictions with the West. Achcar helps bring a dose of reality to the debate within leftist circles with his support for the mass movements and his noting basic facts about the crony capitalist regimes in Syria and Libya.

**… Based on His Theory of “Modality”**

Achcar’s support for the democratization movements is welcome, but it doesn’t need a special theory of “modalities” to justify it. Achcar thinks capitalist production in Arab countries is held up by special forces that need to be overthrown in a revolution before Arab countries can undergo “normal” capitalist development. Achcar feels the need to prove Arab countries have a special “modality”, in order to justify supporting the overthrow of existing regimes, a “revolutionary” movement not directly connected with the
transition to socialism. To that end he tries to prove that Arab countries have not developed as they should.

But Achcar exaggerates things in this attempt. He paints Arab regimes as economically incompetent, subject to “Islamic barbarism,” and by implication paints Western regimes as economically healthy and politically and culturally progressive. This is only implied; in his other activities Achcar has participated in attempts to build alternative left parties in Western countries and opposed imperialist intervention in Arab countries. So it’d be wrong to say Achcar regards Western regimes as healthy and progressive. But that would be the logical conclusion judging from this book.

Achcar overlooks capitalist development that has occurred in the Arab countries and doesn’t see their backward features existing in Western countries. He describes Arab rulers as simply piling up oil income and investing their money in Europe, the U.S., etc. This, he says, is what accounts for their high levels of unemployment; instead of investing in domestic industry and hiring native workers, the “rentier” regimes squander their money in conspicuous consumption or send it overseas. But the fact that the emirates have a class of non-productive rich parasites sitting on top and holding back progress doesn’t make these countries unique. Crony capitalism, racism, etc. are not unknown in Western democracies. Achcar laughs at the antics of the emirs, that they squander money on constructing tall buildings, etc. But in fact a good deal of capitalist development has occurred in the oil emirates. These regimes are not just feudal sheikdoms ruling over a collection of agricultural/pastoral tribes. They run modern corporations and media empires like Al-Jazeera as well as oil concessions.

Look at Syria. Assad has discriminated against Sunnis (Assad’s base of support is the Alawite sect), and Assad has favored his own family above everyone else, handing out government concessions and jobs to his brothers, cousins, uncles, etc. Nonetheless there has been a good deal of capitalist development in Syria. In the last twenty years the rates for births, deaths, fertility and infant mortality have dropped considerably, so the structure of Syria’s population tends more and more to resemble a European country’s. Cancer has become one of the leading causes of death, which is an achievement for a developing country and shows that its people have been able to make headway against age-old problems like parasites, infectious diseases, etc. Syria’s GNP per capita has increased by two and a half times; this is a faster growth than the U.S., even though Syria’s absolute numbers are still way behind. Syria has quadrupled its production and consumption of electrical energy in the last twenty years, while U.S. electrical production has gone up by about one-half. Literacy in Syria has jumped from less than two-thirds of the population to about 85%. While the number of telephones in the U.S., per person, has tripled, in Syria it has multiplied by over 13 times. And even though Assad has tried to limit the spread of satellite TV in Syria, the number of TVs per person has quadrupled. Meanwhile the structure of Syrian industry has changed, with agriculture declining and financial services increasing.

Thus Syria has undergone capitalist development even during the crony regime of the Assads. This doesn’t mean the regime is progressive or anti-imperialist. Assad maintains close relations with imperialist powers like Russia and tries to position himself as a regional player in the Mideast. What it means is that capitalist development is not a one-way street with “normal” progress toward greater democracy and social equality. Similar statistics could be cited for other Mideastern countries, including Saudi Arabia. These statistics show the source of increasing pressure on the regimes, as the masses coming more in touch with modern technology and organization demand more political rights.

Achcar uses comparisons with South Asia and other areas to make it sound like the Arab countries have uniquely high rates of unemployment. But with unemployment at 25% in Spain, even higher in Greece, and chronically high in Britain, etc., it’s hard to see that the Arab countries are that unique. Even in the U.S., where official unemployment is now down to 7.2% from its high a few years ago, underemployment is endemic, and the real unemployment rate is probably at least double the official figure. Unemployment is a universal feature of capitalism, including in South Asia and other regions. In fact poverty is so pervasive in South Asia, and jobs so difficult to find, that many workers emigrate to Arab countries to get any kind of job at all.

Achcar is correct to criticize the backward features of crony capitalist regimes. Nonetheless capitalist development has been rapidly proceeding, including in Libya and Syria. Land reform which first helped many peasants has been turned into capitalist agriculture that drives people away from their villages to linger among the unemployed in large cities. Neoliberal trade and investment and the hiring of cheap foreign labor, deprived of rights, enriches a few while impoverishing many. This process is similar to what’s happening in South Asia, East Asia, Latin America and other regions. And it’s similar to capitalist development in Western countries.

Achcar makes it sound like overthrow of the existing regimes will usher in an era of social peace, harmony and “normal” capitalism. But the masses will still be faced with massive problems as removal of the crony capitalist regimes will intensify, not eliminate, the class struggle. Achcar makes it sound like the resulting regime will be a happy coalition of workers, capitalists, poor peasants, etc., everyone working together happily as long as they aren’t misled by “Islamic barbarism” or interrupted by imperialist intervention. He’s right that democratization will be of great benefit to workers, as it can help the efforts to build and strengthen independent organizations. But workers will still be faced with the dictatorship of capital and the need to confront it daily. Similar democratizations in recent years – in Mexico, South Africa, South Korea, Indonesia, the Philippines, the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, etc. – have shown that such a transition opens the door to a wider class struggle but does not end it. Keeping that in mind would help activists maintain a realistic picture of prospects for the Arab Spring.

Strategy for the Future

Achcar sees how rotten the crony capitalist regimes are. He supports the mass movements enthusiastically and rejects criticism of them. Compared to the diehard defenders of
Qaddafi and Assad, this is refreshing coming from a “leftist anti-imperialist.” But it doesn’t answer questions of strategy within the opposition movement itself. Democratization is the big issue in Arab countries today, and for workers this means pushing the movement as far as possible and building an independent trend in its midst. Simply pushing over the movement will not help strengthen it and make democratization easier and faster.

Achcar directs his internal criticism of the movement only at the Muslim Brotherhood, not even at political Islam in general. He distinguishes the Brotherhood from the “moderate Islamist” party AKP of Turkey and attacks the Brotherhood for its cultural backwardness and pro-capitalist ideology, which he shows to be consistent with the dominant neo-liberalism. But he overlooks the pro-capitalist orientation of the bourgeois liberals and “moderate Islamists” themselves. This is crucial, especially now that the liberals’ opposition to the Brotherhood has led them into supporting the revival of open military dictatorship in Egypt. With their support of the military’s overthrow of the Islamist president Morsi, the liberals have led the movement in Egypt into a blind alley. Without an independent trend, workers are faced with the choice between supporting military dictatorship or supporting the Islamists. Dealing with political Islam is important, but the liberals’ way of doing it led to disaster. Achcar is correct that Morsi had no solutions to the economic problems facing the Egyptian masses, but the same can be said of the military despots who pushed him out.

This is illustrated by the strike by workers at Egyptian Iron & Steel, one of Egypt’s largest public sector companies. Since 2000 the number of workers at this company has been reduced from 28,000 to 12,000. And in recent years the government has been cutting back on pay and benefits for the remaining workers. In the last year this has reached the point where the government doesn’t even meet contractual obligations to the workers, holding back part of their pay and benefits. So the government’s move toward neo-liberal cutbacks has continued despite the change in regime. Fed up with these cutbacks and fed up with their do-nothing union, the workers began a slowdown in late November and carried out a strike in December.

This shows the importance of independent organization for the working class. Disorganized as they were, workers could not hope to dominate the movement in Egypt soon and push it towards socialism. But at the least activists could work to build workers’ organizations and to distinguish these from the organizations of bourgeois liberals and to show workers that the liberals’ policies are no better than the Islamists’. And they could use their organizations to push for economic and political reforms.

It’s not that Achcar opposes moves toward working class independence. He supports the moves toward trade union independence that occurred in Egypt and Tunisia and shows that these were crucial in developing the political opposition in past years. He expresses hope that independent trade union centers in those countries will become bases of electoral coalitions that can win national elections, and he says, “The consolidation of democracy itself presupposes the existence of a strong workers’ movement independent of the state.” (p. 240)

And he shows that the absence of a strong workers’ movement in Libya and Syria made it more difficult for the opposition to get started and gave the regime the chance to nearly smother them with violence. But Achcar suffers from the same confusion as many other opportunist groups in his inability to distinguish genuine independent trends from social-democratic or Nasserite trends. In this respect he lags behind the movement, hoping for the emergence of a strong workers’ movement but not helping build one.

Achcar’s book was finished in 2012 shortly after Morsi’s election as president, and he’s intent on showing what’s wrong with Morsi’s program. But Morsi’s Islamism was not the only problem for workers. They still faced the deep state left over from decades of Mubarak, Sadat and Nasser to contend with. This deep state has reared its ugly head again and reasserted martial law, slaughtering hundreds of Morsi supporters along with others who opposed the military coup. Despite supporting their own form of strict Islamism, various Gulf states backed the overthrow of Morsi. And Obama and other Western leaders go along with the military regardless of their professed regard for democracy.

But Achcar’s book lacks any warnings of the military’s possible comeback or about the liberals’ connivance with it. He’s only worried about “Islamist barbarism” and leaves readers with the impression that workers must at all costs ally with the liberals against the Brotherhood; anything else may subject Egypt to “barbarism.” Thus he neglects the prime necessity of building an independent workers’ movement.

**Nasser Updated?**

As the opposition to “Islamist barbarism”, Achcar promotes the Nasserite party Karama and its leader, Hamdeen Sabahy: “Sabahy has manned his post in every battle against the Sadat and Mubarak regimes. … [In a presidential election] field defined by two Islamic candidates (Morsi and Aboul-Fotouh) and two men of the old regime (Shafiq and Amr Moussa), all of whom had incomparably bigger campaign treasuries and better media coverage, he came in third after Morsi and Shafiq, garnering more than 20% of the ballots cast …. His score in the … two main urban centers was still a bigger surprise: here he out-pollled all the other candidates, taking 27.8% of the votes in Cairo and 31.6% in Alexandria.” (p. 238) Achcar goes on: “Sabahy’s election results demonstrate the existing left’s potential in a profoundly ‘Islamized’ country such as post-Nasser Egypt … He gives the lie, in the clearest possible fashion, to all those who take it for granted that a left that defends socialism has become a negligible quantity …” (p. 239)

Sounds good. But what is Sabahy’s politics exactly? “Sabahy proclaims his allegiance to the ideals of Nasserism without defending the Nasserite regime’s dictatorial nature. His electoral program included measures for consolidating democracy … [and] revival of the state’s role in development to be financed, notably, by raising taxes on profits.” (p. 239)

This is the politics Achcar supported in the presidential election of 2012 and which he still defended as of fall 2012, when Sabahy was organizing opposition to Morsi’s new Islamist regime.
Achcar says Sabahy stood for “consolidating democracy”, but this is hard to see from Sabahy’s own electoral program. The main thing he was known for on this front was his opposition to elections until after a constitution had been written, while the Islamist candidates like Morsi were content to rest on their popularity and go ahead with elections before a constitution had been written. Liberals like Sabahy raised this issue to try and slow down the rush toward elections which they knew the Islamist candidates would have an edge in. Sabahy also made a big deal about separation of powers, insisting that a new constitution should have limits on presidential powers and should guarantee oversight by an independent legislative branch. He thought this would limit the masses’ infatuation with Islamism and allow the liberals to supervise day-to-day operation of the government. Sabahy thought the ideal regime would be one where the Islamist president was counterbalanced with a liberal-dominated parliament. He never discussed how the ensuing gridlock would be resolved.

In his campaign Sabahy never raised the problem of the enduring deep state and the independent military, which is practically a state within a state. With its fingers in various enterprises, the military controls a large part of the Egyptian economy as well as holding a monopoly over armed violence. The question of civilian control of the military was never an issue with previous presidents, since they came from the military themselves. But the post-Mubarak regime raised this problem sharply, and Sabahy never addressed it except to say he favored Nasserism over Islamism.

Other issues of democratization were never raised, or at least not stressed, by Sabahy. What about the role of religious minorities, women’s rights, the release of political prisoners, the repeal of Mubarak’s “emergency” laws, etc.? It’s absurd to say Sabahy stood for “consolidating democracy” when he didn’t campaign on these issues.

On the economic front there was a pretty clear demarcation of Sabahy from Morsi. While covered over with Islamist rhetoric, Morsi stood for more neo-liberalism, more free markets, and more suppression of the workers’ movement – simply a more pro-capitalist extension of Mubarak’s policies. Sabahy on the other hand stood for a revival and extension of Nasserite state capitalism, of spending more on state investment and hiring more workers by state enterprises. To finance this Sabahy proposed higher taxes on the rich and in particular proposed a one-time levy of 10% on the estates of rich Egyptians (the upper 1% of the population). These were popular proposals and helped Sabahy win votes among the urban masses. They also won the enmity of neo-liberal partisans like the New York Times, which warned in an article of December 26, 2012 (“First fighting Islamists, now the free market” by David Kirkpatrick) that “Among Egypt’s opposition figures, Mr. Sabahy has the biggest base of support in the streets”, but that “he is an outspoken opponent of free-market economic moves in general as well as of a pending $4.5 billion loan from the International Monetary Fund that economists say is urgently needed to avert a catastrophic currency collapse.” The Times much preferred “other more Western-friendly voices of the opposition, like Mohammed ElBaradei, the former United Nations diplomat, and Amr Moussa, the former foreign minister.” But they were worried that “[N]either has Mr. Sabahy’s following at the grass roots, and he speaks for a segment of the Egyptian public deeply suspicious of free markets and, especially, the IMF.”

This confirms what Achcar was saying about Sabahy’s popularity. But it also shows the importance of building a workers’ movement independent of Nasserism as well as political Islam. Some of Sabahy’s economic prescriptions were popular, but by tying them to Nasserism Sabahy ended up tailing the bourgeois liberals and backing a resurgence of the militarist deep state.

Ever since the overthrow of Mubarak a very sharp struggle has been going on over the outcome of the democratic struggle. It would be a gigantic step forward for the workers to develop and strengthen independent organization that puts forward their own demands as part of this struggle. But for workers this means pushing democratization as far as possible. It doesn’t mean just a few economic reforms and a written constitution with 18th-century separation of powers. Beyond the call for free and fair democratic elections, it would include: workers’ right to organize independent unions; workers’ organizations built on a secular, non-sectarian basis; workers’ right to strike; people’s right to demonstrate, free speech, free press, etc.; women’s rights; freedom of religion and the rights of minorities; dismantling the “independent kingdom” of the military and bringing it under civilian control; support for workers’ economic demands as well as other oppressed sections of the population.

Achcar promoted Sabahy as a “socialist”, but Achcar’s idea of building a pro-socialist trend is to support Nasserism and hope that a genuine socialist trend will eventually emerge. But if building an independent workers’ movement is not taken up as a conscious project by leftists, the workers’ movement in Egypt will remain swaddled in Nasserite confusion.

**Post-Coup Confusion**

A good example of Nasserite confusion is the military coup of June 2013, which the liberals generally supported but then, when it became more obvious what the military was up to, they split in all directions. Prior to the coup the Nasserite Sabahy had become one of the leaders of the National Salvation Front, a coalition of secular liberals which planned to run against the Islamists in parliamentary elections. But as elections approached and the liberals saw themselves outmaneuvered by the Islamists at every turn, they decided to boycott. They called for delayed and reorganized elections, and to this end they led demonstrations that threatened to paralyze the country. At this point the military intervened and overthrew Morsi on June 30.

One of Sabahy’s co-leaders of the National Salvation Front was Mohammed ElBaradei, who actually helped plan the coup. He acted as the designated negotiator for the liberals and met with the head of the military, Defense Minister Abdul Fatah al-Sisi, in the days before the coup. He helped al-Sisi work out a transitional government. He was present when al-Sisi announced the suspension of the constitution and the removal of Morsi from power, and a couple weeks later ElBaradei was named vice-president responsible for international relations.
A number of other political groups, human rights organizations and political parties – even including some Islamists – supported the June 30 coup. But as the military cracked down on dissent, this flock of chickens began to fly the coop. For July 24 al-Sisi called for massive demonstrations in support of the coup to intimidate the Islamists. At this point, put off by the military’s offensive, some groups began to have second thoughts and to withdraw their support for the coup. Then on August 14 the military organized massive attacks on Brotherhood supporters, killing at least 525. At this point ElBaradei decided he’d had enough; he resigned his post as vice-president and fled the country.

So liberals began flying in different directions. But through it all the Nasserite Hamdeen Sabahy remained a staunch supporter of the military, even after the killings of August 14. In interviews afterwards Sabahy insisted that “We will stay hand in hand, the people, the army and the police.” And he confidently predicted, against all evidence, that “Egypt will not return to the times of Mubarak.” (Euronews, 8/21/2013)

Through the storm of international criticism Sabahy busied himself rounding up support for the military regime from kings and emirs of the Arabian peninsula. And he worked to cover up the need to push forward democratization against the military as well as the Islamists.

[Since the article was written, Sabahy consented to run as the only opponent for al-Sisi in the presidential election of May 26-28, 2014. The election was held under the repressive conditions that have prevailed since the military coup, and it was just an empty facade to hide the military dictatorship. No real opposition is legally allowed in Egypt; opponents of the coup languish in jail; and the press and TV have been purged. But al-Sisi needed to run against someone if the election was to have even the faintest appearance of legitimacy, and Sabahy consented to be al-Sisi’s fig leaf. Even so, so few people voted that it was an embarrassment for the government, which extended the election for an additional day. The official results gave Sabahy 3% of the vote.—CV]

Thus events have quickly moved beyond what Achcar discussed just one year ago. It’s hard now to understand how anyone could have promoted Sabahy as a “leftist” and “socialist” as Achcar did. This shows the importance of building independent workers’ organizations with a program opposed to both the Islamists and the bourgeois liberals. The liberals have succeeded with their idea of how to deal with the Islamists – bring back the military. Now it’s the workers’ turn to have their say on how to deal with political Islam as well as with the military deep state. Instead of looking for what kind of bourgeois trend to hook up with – neo-liberal, state capitalist, Nasserite, etc. – working class activists should concentrate on building a movement that stands opposed to these trends. The confusion among liberals can actually work to the advantage of working class activists if they use it to promote the need for a trend based on the workers themselves.
The Syrian uprising and the American left

On July 7, 2013 the “Detroit Workers’ Voice” Discussion Group held a meeting to discuss the Syrian uprising and the attitude of the left to the Arab Spring. The invitation to this meeting stated the following:

Outside powers — such as the governments of the US, Russia, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and so on — regard the fighting in Syria as a proxy war with different Syrian factions serving the interests of this or that outside interest. Some outside powers are arming the Syrian dictatorship and helping it torture and kill more people; others are providing some support for those groups they like in the opposition, and debating whether to provide more arms or even a no-fly zone. But in reality, the heart of the struggle in Syria is an uprising of the majority of the Syrian people against decades of oppression by the Ba’ath party dictatorship of Hafez al-Assad, and then his son Bashar al-Assad. During the decades of this dictatorship, no independent political life has been allowed in Syria. It is only through overthrowing this dictatorship that the Syrian masses can have some say about their lives.

The US and other imperialist powers want to keep their influence on the Middle East. They worked with the Assad dictatorship in the past; one notorious example is that the Canadian and US governments colluded to send the Canadian citizen Maher Arar to Syria to be tortured. The Russian and Iranian governments still want to see the outright victory of the Ba’ath dictatorship, but US imperialism and other powers are afraid that Bashar’s massacres are now bringing instability to the Middle East, and they would prefer to see some type of negotiated solution. None of these powers trust the Syrian people; all of these powers are oppressors of the Middle Eastern peoples. But the Syrian rebellion, in order to survive, has had to utilize the contradictions among these powers.

There is also the danger of fundamentalist and sectarian forces coming to the fore in the struggle and imposing themselves on the Syrian people; a similar danger has existed throughout the Arab Spring, in Egypt and Tunisia as well as Syria. And the Assad dictatorship itself has done the utmost to inflame sectarian hatreds, as a way of retaining some support. But there are not only sectarians in Syria, but also a popular movement, which is persisting in the face of horrible obstacles, and which has resisted fundamentalist demands. This movement was not a creation of outside powers or the fundamentalists, but represents the attempt of the Syrian masses to stand on their own feet and to begin to deal with their own problems. It is not a socialist movement, and it is not even a unified movement, but it is a legitimate and important part of the Arab Spring. The democratic and non-sectarian elements in the Syrian movement deserve the support of working people throughout the world.

Meanwhile those forces on the left who have for years supported dictatorships in the name of “anti-imperialism” have vilified the Syrian uprising. They are dragging the noble name of anti-imperialism through the mud. They are in effect saying that the defeat of the Arab Spring would be an anti-imperialist victory, and they are pretending that one can support the people in some of the countries of the Arab Spring, while supporting the dictatorships in the others. This shows that the differences in the left aren’t simply tedious haggling over obscure doctrines, but concern whether one sides with the working people or their oppressors.

The Syrian uprising and the "National Days of Action" of June-July 2013

The presentation at the meeting of July 7, edited for publication, was as follows:

I am happy to welcome you here tonight. The subject is the rebellion in Syria, and the attitude of left-wing organizations towards it.

The left-wing is supposed to support the struggles of the people against the rich and privileged, and against dictatorships and injustice. Yet we find that today there are thousands of people fighting and dying for freedom in Syria, and many prominent left organizations in this country are opposed to it. They have organized three weeks of “National Days of Action”, from June 28 to July 17 [2013] in opposition to this struggle. They are misleading workers and activists at these demonstrations by not openly talking about the Assad dictatorship, but nevertheless vilifying the Syrian rebellion as the creation of outside powers; they are silent about the outside money, arms, and reinforcements flowing to the Assad dictatorship; and they imply the rebellion is a US/NATO/Israeli war on Syria. So this leads to the question of what is going on in Syria, and what does it tell us about those left organizations that are opposing the struggle against the Assad dictatorship.

History of the dictatorship in Syria

The struggle in Syria concerns a genuine uprising of the local population against a dictatorship that has lasted for over four decades since 1970. This is the dictatorship of first Hafez al-Assad, and then, from the year 2000 when Hafez died, the rule of his son, Bashar al-Assad. During this period, the Syrian people haven’t had any political rights. There were no independent trade unions and certainly no right to strike. There was no right to an independent press. There was no right to any
mass organizations independent of the ruling Ba’ath so-called Socialist Party.

Things hadn’t always been this way in Syria. At one time, there had been vigorous mass struggles. After World War II there was a tumultuous popular movement. In 1946 Syria won independence from France, and working class strikes forced major concessions and positive labor legislation. A variety of social movements grew and contested for influence: trade unions, the nationalist movement, Nasserists, the Syrian Communist Party, etc. But the Ba’ath Party, which originated as an attempt to block communist influence, came to power in 1966, and Hafez al-Assad turned it into a durable dictatorship in 1970. It called itself a socialist party, but real socialism means that the working majority of the country settles its affairs, while the Assad dictatorship based itself on ending all action by the working class. All organization was supposed to be under the control of the ruling party and the Syrian state. All opposition was ruthless suppressed, and in 1982, the Syrian regime turned the city of Hama into a graveyard, killing tens of thousands of people, in order to repress an Islamist revolt.

Under Ba’ath rule, a group of state-connected crony capitalists enriched themselves. The Assad dictatorship also carried out some industrialization and economic development, and it provided some subsidies for the population as a whole, the development of social programs such as health and education, and a certain redistribution of the land. The plots of land may have ended up too small to support a family; and there was no help given to the peasants for irrigation or mechanization. But still, the villages had a certain economic life

**Bashar al-Assad takes over**

In 2000, when Hafez died, and his son Bashar took over as dictator, Bashar began neo-liberal reforms, privatization, and the cutting of social benefits. Peasants, craftspeople, small manufacturers were in trouble. Workers saw their wages cut and subsidies cut. Two-tier systems were pushed for health and education.

Then a drought hit more than half of Syria in 2006-2011, partially due to climate change, partially due to the regime’s development of commercial agriculture, which accelerated the dangerous depletion of water tables. The drought, combined with neo-liberal reforms, resulted in hundreds of thousands of people fleeing the countryside for the city. There had never been political rights under the dictatorship, but now it was also harder and harder to make a living. This spread massive discontent throughout the country. It not only spread in the cities, with their impoverished arrivals, but throughout the countryside. This would provide a basis for the rapid spread of armed opposition in the countryside which occurred later.

**The Arab Spring comes to Syria**

Thus the outbreak of demonstrations in Syria in 2011 was a legitimate part of the Arab Spring. It was the masses rising up against a hated regime. It was sparked not by outside fundamentalists and foreign powers, as some would have you believe, just as Southern racists used to say that the civil rights movement was the result of outside agitators, but because the people had had enough. They were standing up to resume their historic role as a people with a voice. The Free Syrian Army, the military core of the resistance, was formed out of soldiers who deserted from the regular Syrian army.

If one goes beyond the slurs by the apologists of the Assad dictatorship and shallow newspaper articles, then one can find information about how the rebellion has organized itself. It has carried out in some towns the first real elections that the people there had known. It has sought to set up local authorities, and then found that these authorities had to deal as well with the issue of ensuring the food supply. For example, some committees have sought to regulate the price of bread, so it wouldn’t rise beyond what people could pay, and to arrange a compromise between the farmers, who would like to charge high prices during war-time shortage, and consumers, who want to survive. These committees differ from town to town. There is no uniform authority. But there is an impetus to organization.

**The danger of fundamentalism**

The regime says that the opposition is just Sunni fanatics and is overrun by foreign Islamic fundamentalists. In fact, the main opposition, including the Free Syrian Army, stands for a secular Syria. But there has long been an Islamist movement in Syria; indeed it was the Muslim Brotherhood that had suffered the Hama massacre of 1982; and there are fundamentalist groups in Syria that are fighting against the regime. In part because they have found it easier to obtain weapons from outside powers than the Free Syrian Army, and are better financed so that they could purchase weapons from whatever group obtained them, they have achieved a disproportionate influence in the Syrian opposition. They have committed bloody sectarian acts against Syrian minorities and have sought to take over various of the local councils, but they have been unable to dominate the opposition to the dictatorship. The rest of the opposition has resisted them and organized repeated demonstrations against them. There have been struggles over which flag is flown in liberated towns, against the imposition of Islamic law, and against atrocities committed by the fundamentalists.

[Since this presentation, the struggle over fundamentalism has become a full-scale military conflict. The extreme fundamentalists of the ISIS have launched a major assault against all other groups in Syria, and they have sought to consolidate an oppressive rule in the areas they control. But resistance to this continues, and is hamstrung in large part by the lack of sufficient weapons and supplies for the secular forces and the more moderate Islamists.—*CV]*

So there is a danger of fundamentalism in Syria, as there is also in all the countries of the Arab Spring. But the fundamentalists do not determine the character of the Syrian resistance.

Meanwhile, it is other Islamic fundamentalists that are the strongest outside supporters of the Assad regime. The theocratic government of Iran provides arms, training, and perhaps troops for the Assad regime. And Hezbollah in Lebanon.
which is a fundamentalist organization which has dominated the Lebanese resistance to Israel, has sent thousands of its followers to fight for Assad, and has been important in recent Assad victories.

The Assad regime plays one section of the people against another

More generally, Syria is an ethnic and religious mixture, and the Assad regime, over its decades of existence, has based itself on a system of discrimination. It mainly gives special privileges and the best positions to the Alawite minority, and then promotes itself as the protection for the Alawites and other minorities. The regime has achieved some success in this devious plan, but, nevertheless, a number of Alawites and people from other minorities have stood up against the regime. There have been sectarian massacres in the uprising and civil war, but the regime has been guilty of most of them, and it is the regime which has sought from the beginning to convert the ongoing struggle into an ethnic battle.

One example of the regime’s nature is that, while it promotes itself as a protector of minorities, it has for decades discriminated against the Kurdish minority, the largest non-Arab minority in Syria. It has denied many of them citizenship, making them stateless and also barring them from the social services open to Syrian citizens.

In brief, the Syrian uprising is fairly typical of the Arab Spring as a whole. We do not glorify the uprising and present it as a socialist, or even a radical democratic, revolution. It is but the first step to overcoming the problems of the past in Syria, but a necessary first step, and a step which has cost the heroic sacrifice of thousands and tens of thousands of Syrians. The problems afflicting it, such as dealing with the Islamist influence, are similar to those elsewhere. It is not a united uprising, and it is composed of a number of different groups and trends. But its basic goal is political freedom. This uprising has seen thousands upon thousands of ordinary people stand up to fight against this regime, thousands upon thousands with stories of being tortured by the regime or seeing their relatives murdered, thousands upon thousands with stories of how the regime bombarded their villages as retaliation for being part of the resistance, or simply to punish them for being near an area where the resistance was.

Should anti-imperialists support dictatorships and torturers?

So why would various left organizations oppose such a struggle? They say they stand for democracy. Why would they support a regime of torturers? And why would any activists be taken in by the stands of such organizations?

These groups oppose the Syrian democrats in the name of anti-imperialism. And activists see that various US allies and, to a lesser extent, US imperialism itself have provided a certain amount of arms or other support to the Syrian uprising. We all know that US imperialism has engaged in one dirty invasion and intervention after another, one war abroad after another. So it’s natural for many activists to think that the only thing going on in Syria is another imperialist dirty war.

What gets ignored is the interest of the Syrian masses. And what’s glossed over is that various imperialists are giving arms to the Assad regime, and that the US imperialism has worked with the Assad regime. For example, Bashar’s father, Hafez al-Assad, backed the US imperialist Gulf war against Iraq in 1990-81. The world imperialist agencies, like the IMF and World Bank, favor the type reforms that Bashar al-Assad made starting in 2000. US imperialism found Assad so reliable that they colluded with the Canadian government to send the Canadian citizen Maher Arar to Syria to be tortured. Even Israel, despite its antagonism toward Syria and every Arab regime, nevertheless regarded the Assad dictatorship as a guarantee of stability for the Syrian-Israeli border.

[Since the presentation, the Morsi presidency in Egypt was overthrown in a military coup on July 3, 2013. The new military government immediately began violently repressing demonstrations, carrying out mass arrests, and cracking down on any dissident activity. It also resumed close cooperation with Israel to isolate the Palestinians in Gaza, and reimposed a strict blockade on Gaza. Assad has established close relations with the reactionary Egyptian military regime. The campaign of the Egyptian, Saudi Arabian, and Assad governments, and other repressive Arab governments, against the Muslim Brotherhood has helped give Israel the opportunity to carry out the current “Operative Protective Edge” in which it devastates Gaza and has killed well over 1,000 Palestinians already.— CF]

However the Assad regime was closer to Russian imperialism than to US imperialism. It has ties with both the imperialists of the West and the East, but it provides a base on the Mediterranean for Russia and has historically been backed more closely by Russia than the US. And many left groups back the imperialists of the East against those of the West, and call this anti-imperialism. These groups don’t oppose all imperialism. They prefer to back one imperialist power over another then to put their faith in the Syrian people; they don’t believe that, when free of dictatorship, the Syrian working people will eventually oppose all imperialism.

The Assad regime is also close to the Iranian regime, and a number of left groups think that the theocratic regime in Iran deserves support. It doesn’t matter to these groups that the Iranian regime has bitterly oppressed the Iranian people for decades, and imprisoned and murdered many left-wing activists. All that matters to them is that the Iranian regime has differences with US imperialism. It doesn’t matter to these groups that Iran is itself a major power with its own would-be imperialist interest. These groups don’t have faith that the Iranian people, and not the regime, is the real basis for anti-imperialism in Iran. And so these groups think the close relationship between the Syrian and Iranian regimes is yet another reason to support the Assad dictatorship and oppose the Syrian uprising.

Real anti-imperialism is based on the struggle of the people

We call such stands non-class anti-imperialism. Real anti-
imperialism promotes the liberation of the people from all imperialist oppression. Non-class anti-imperialism has lost faith in the working people, and looks for something positive in reactionary regimes. It drags the noble name of anti-imperialism through the mud by associating it with the massacres and atrocities of notorious oppressors. It turns anti-imperialism into a reason to oppose popular struggles around the world, rather than to support them. It is an anti-imperialism without the working class, or even against the working class.

The non-class anti-imperialists say positive things about the struggles in some of the countries of the Arab Spring, such as Egypt and Tunisia, but not in others, such as Syria and Libya. But if they followed their own principles consistently, they would have had to oppose the overthrow of Mubarak in Egypt or Ben Ali in Tunisia. The fact is that US imperialism, once it saw that Mubarak’s days were numbered, sought to ease him out of his position. And since the overthrow of Mubarak, US imperialism has continued its financial support of the post-Mubarak governments. The main factor in the overthrow of Mubarak was the struggle of the Egyptian people, and their hatred for the decades of his dictatorship. But every outside power, including US imperialism and Islamic fundamentalists, sought to influence what happened. If they were consistent, shouldn’t the left groups that oppose the democratic struggle in Syria have also opposed the democratic struggle in Egypt and declared it to be a “US war on Egypt”? But the non-class anti-imperialists aren’t consistent in their principles. Their real plan is siding with one imperialist against another. Since Mubarak was closer to Western imperialism than to Russian, Indian, and Chinese imperialism, the non-class anti-imperialists didn’t mind Mubarak’s overthrow. The non-class anti-imperialists have certain imperialist and reactionary powers they like, and certain imperialist and reactionary powers they dislike. They think that siding with one against the other is anti-imperialism, and don’t realize that it really is servility to the imperialist system.

The intervention debate

What about the debate among American politicians over whether to provide more arms to the Syrian rebellion or even a no-fly zone, as in Libya previously? If we support the Syrian rebellion, should we take part in this debate? But if you listen to what these politicians and Obama administration officials are saying, they are not asking what serves Syrian interests, but what serves American, that is US imperialism, interests best. And we are not for advancing US imperialism; we are opposed to it. We think it is legitimate for the Syrian rebellion to get arms where it can, but we know that whatever US imperialism does, it does for its own interests.

The US and European powers haven’t been enthusiastic about the rebellion against Assad. Despite what the leaders of the “Days of Action” say, the US, NATO, and even Israel are rather worried about a victory for the Syrian uprising. They agonize over whether a rebel victory would be worse for their interests than accommodation with Assad. They are used to dealing with Assad, and see that Assad still appeals for Western support. Some imperialist strategists ask, why should the US leave things to the uncertain and unknown outcome of the democratic struggle, when there are so many different trends fighting the Assad regime?

[It’s notable that Obama has spoken of the support of working people for the Syrian rebellion as a reason to prevent them from getting weapons. In an interview on National Public Radio on May 29, he said: “When you talk about the moderate opposition, many of these people were farmers or dentists or maybe some radio reporters who didn’t have a lot of experience fighting.” He didn’t see the importance of supporting “farmers or dentists or . . . radio reporters”, but was looking for some other way to intervene. He repeated this idea in a news conference on June 19, referring this time to “former farmers or teachers or pharmacists” and deprecating their prospects “against a battle-hardened regime, with support from external actors that have a lot at stake”.— CV]

In fact, the Obama administration would prefer that an international conference impose a negotiated solution to the Syrian uprising. The main interest of the US and many outside powers is that the war in Syria is destabilizing the region, sending hundreds of thousands of Syrian refugees into neighboring countries, and stirring up such issues as the Kurdish national question. Their aim isn’t democracy in Syria, but to calm things down. They would like to prevent any radical changes in Syria.

[Those supposed anti-imperialists who are campaigning to prevent the opposition from getting any weapons from the US or other outside sources are not a radical opposition to imperialism. On the contrary, they are paving the way for Syrian affairs to be settled by anyone but the Syrian farmers, workers, teachers. And by so doing, they are not just backing various imperialist forces aside from the US, but also siding with one faction of US imperialism versus another.—CV]

The real task of anti-imperialists in the US is neither to prevent the Syrian rebellion from getting weapons, nor to argue about what course in Syria is best for American interests. Instead anti-imperialists should both expose US and other imperialist interests and provide solidarity for the Syrian rebellion. The more imperialist interests are exposed, the less influence the imperialists will have over what happens in Syria, despite whatever arms they provide and to who. And we saw, for example in Libya, that US imperialism was disappointed in that, despite the no-fly zone and NATO intervention, neither the US nor NATO could get a base in Libya after Qaddafi fell.

We need to have working-class solidarity with the secular and democratic majority of the Syrian uprising. The more imperialist interests are exposed and the more the truth about the Syrian uprising is known, its problems but also its overall democratic content, the harder an international conference will find it to impose an undemocratic solution on Syria.

A genuine revolt of the people

In conclusion, the Syrian uprising is not the product of outside powers, but is a genuine revolt against decades of denial of rights. If the people in Syria and other Middle Eastern countries are able to break free of the old dictatorships, this will result in increased political life. The resulting regimes won’t be radical; they won’t solve the region’s economic problems; but instead controversial issues
that were pushed underground for years will now be fought over more openly. The working class will be faced with uniting on a class basis, developing militant organization which really stands for its interests no matter what the regimes do, and waging a class struggle. This is the real path towards strengthening anti-imperialism in the Middle East.
A new assessment of an old trend:
Trotskyism as the equally evil
twin of Stalinism

By Joseph Green

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A detailed study of Trotskyist theory is a large topic, which I and others have dealt with in a number of articles in the anti-revisionist journal, Communist Voice. We have developed over the years a critique of Trotskyism that not only differs from the old Stalinist critique, but shows that Trotskyism is, in large part, the flip side of Stalinism. This conclusion stems not just from theoretical study, but from what we have seen as we have carried out communist work among the working class.1

Trotskyism purports to be the Leninist answer to the Stalinist betrayal of socialist principles. The savage murder of Trotsky and numerous Trotskyists by Stalinist agents reinforced the idea that Trotskyism is the most serious opponent of Stalinism. Yet the Trotskyist movement has never established a viable alternative theory and practice to Stalinism. Most of the Trotskyist movement believes to this day that the Stalinist state-capitalist regimes were “workers’ states”, however repulsive (“degenerated” or “deformed”) they may have been. The structure of many Trotskyist organizations is no less a caricature of centralism than was that of the old Stalinist parties. And both Stalinists and Trotskyists have repeatedly supported vicious dictatorships in a parody of “anti-imperialism.” Despite the different catchwords, on issue after issue the differences are only skin-deep.

The present crisis in the Marxist and working-class movements derives not only from weakness. It is in large part a theoretical and ideological crisis, and Trotskyism as a major section of the revolutionary left is bound up with that. How it is criticized is, therefore, as important as that it is criticized. There has been a good deal of outrage this year directed against the Socialist Workers Party (UK) and some other groups, but the critics often take Trotskyism to be what it claims to be, Leninism. This throws out the baby with the bathwater. It is as bad as dropping socialism in the name of opposing Stalinism, or dropping democratic principles in the name of opposing Western imperialism.

The ugly workers’ state

One way that most Trotskyist groups echo Stalinism is in their defense of oppressive regimes that claim to be socialist as workers’ states. They denounce the Stalinist regimes in vehement terms, but insist that they are workers’ states just the same.

The Bolshevik revolution was a turning point in world history. It gave rise to the first protracted attempt by revolutionary workers to replace capitalism by socialism. This electrified workers around the world, making Leninist communism into a world movement. However, by sometime in the 1930s, the working class had lost control of the politics and economics of the Soviet Union. The state sector of the economy was dominant, and yet the working class controlled neither the economy nor the state.

What’s the overall economic and class nature of such a regime? If the Stalinist regime and other state-capitalist countries were really socialist, or in the process of moving towards socialism, then their atrocities -- the removal of political rights from the working class, the attempt to eliminate a number of small nationalities, the mass repression and political murders, etc. -- occurred on an economic basis of socialism. If so, this suggests that socialism was a failed system that should never be implemented again.

But in our studies of the Stalinist system in Russia and the Castroist system in Cuba, we found that they differed economically from both socialism and any transition towards it, and we think this holds true for all the state-capitalist regimes. Despite the domination of the economy by the state, these countries lacked the social control of production that Marxism regards as a key feature of socialism. Their economies were ravaged by the anarchy of production, with the incessant clash of competing small-group interests at the expense of the general interest. Indeed, this anarchy and competition was evident within the state sector itself. Private interests fought within the state ministries and split the ruling officialdom. Thus, the lack of workers’ control over the state sector wasn’t just a political issue: it affects the economic nature of the state sector. The Stalinist system didn’t consist of a good, socialist economy combined with poor political decisions taken by a faulty leadership. Instead its economic basis was capitalist, albeit a new form of capitalism.

But that is not the way it is seen by most Trotskyists. They view state ownership as socialist in and of itself, no matter whether the workers control the state sector or not. Indeed, the eminent Trotskyist Yevgeni Preobrazhensky argued

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1Here I will outline only some of the inadequacies of Trotskyism. For more detail, including documentation from Trotsky’s works, see the four-part article “An Outline of Trotsky’s Anti-Marxist Theories” available at <http://www.communistvoice.org/00TrotskyOutline.html>.
viciously in his 1926 book *The New Economics* that the state sector is socialist even if it runs according to all the usual capitalist categories (profit, rent, interest, etc.)

Trotsky himself held that given that the tsarist bourgeoisie was no longer in power, state ownership of the means of production showed that the Soviet Union was a workers’ state. In his famous work *The Revolution Betrayed* (1936) he called for a “political revolution” in Russia, not a “social revolution.” “Don’t change the economic and social system, just give it Trotskyist leadership” -- that was Trotsky’s program. Indeed, as late as 1933 he addressed a secret appeal to the leadership of the Soviet Communist Party to allow Trotskyists back into the party leadership in exchange for which he promised Trotskyist support in eliminating the “mistrust” that the Stalinist system had engendered.2

Some Trotskyists do not agree with the theory of the ugly workers’ state. In particular, the late Tony Cliff of the Socialist Workers Party (UK) regarded the Soviet Union as state-capitalist. Despite this, like other Trotskyists, Cliff still saw state ownership as essentially socialist in and of itself. He held that the Stalinist economic system would have operated in a unified way as a socialist economy should, had the Soviet Union not needed to trade with the outside capitalist world. For Cliff, internal class contradictions in the Soviet Union were not the main source of the anomaly in its economy.

In his 1990 book *The Life and Death of Stalinism: A Resurrection of Marxist Theory* Walter Daum of the League for the Revolutionary Party attempted to go beyond Cliff by returning to Trotsky.3 In it he put forward a theory of “statified capitalism,” his name for state-capitalism. Daum tries to show that the system’s evils arise from within itself, not simply from foreign trade. But his reliance on Trotsky’s writings leads him into a series of contradictions. Was the Stalinist economy centralized? What he says on one page is contradicted on the next. Did it manifest anarchy of production? On one page he gives examples of this, and on another he advocates the “national capital” approach in analyzing the Soviet economy. He thus implies that the state sector essentially operated as a unified whole, a point of view similar to Cliff’s.

**State ownership**

In their theorizing of ugly workers’ states, Trotskyists refer to regimes where the old bourgeoisie has been dispossessed. But Trotskyism also holds that there is something socialist about the state sector in a market capitalist country. In *Results and Prospects* (1906) Trotsky contrasted the 8-hour day, as something which “by no means contradicts capitalist relations”, with the nationalization of industry, which he mistakenly believed went beyond capitalism because it involved “the socialization of production.”

Nationalization was also a key part of Trotsky’s famous transitional program. Trotsky denounced the Marxist division of working-class demands into a “minimum program” of reforms which might conceivably be achieved under capitalism and a “maximum program” of socialist society, replacing the “minimum program” with “a system of transitional demands.” The essence of these is contained in the fact that “ever more openly and decisively they will be directed against the very basis of the bourgeois regime.” He thought nationalization would strike a blow against the foundations of capitalism.

In fact there are different types of nationalization and different circumstances in which these different types occur. A social revolution will make use of nationalization. But ordinary bourgeois economies do too. Indeed, even in these days of rampant privatization, capitalist economies still have large state sectors. Nationalization may be a useful reform that provides more services to the masses, or it may be a bourgeois scheme in the service of monopoly capitalist interest. In a transitional situation, when capitalist society is starting to crumble and the revolutionary movement is growing, extensive nationalization really might help undermine the bourgeoisie. But at other times, it indicates at most a change in the form of capitalism. Simply calling one’s demands “transitional” no more makes them or the situation transitional, then calling a bus an airplane would give it the ability to fly.

Trotsky’s glorified view of nationalization he holds in common with Stalinism, old-style reformism, and even bourgeois economics. This is part of why he could not understand the class nature of the consolidated Stalinist economy. His view makes it hard to understand the different forms that capitalism takes. It might seem plausible in these days of market fundamentalism. But even today, conservative capitalist governments make use of the temporary nationalization of banks and of other state takeovers in order to preserve, rather than undermine, the capitalist system.

**Party concept**

Stalinist parties are known for their repulsive organizational practices, both in their relations with those outside the party and in their internal life. Similarly, Trotskyist sectarianism has been notorious in the left for decades. Trotskyist rhetoric on factions is different from Stalinist rhetoric on the monolithic party, but their practices are not very far apart.

Trotsky never had a clear conception of party-building. Over the years he vacillated between denouncing party-building and demanding it, but either way he mainly identified it as centralism. In the years prior to his joining the Bolsheviks, he usually opposed party-building and centralism and talked of them as “substitutionists.” He denounced Bolsheviks as seeking to impose an “orthodox theocracy” and to erect obstacles to workers’ initiative. Similarly, he opposed

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2 It’s hard to know which is more astonishing: that Trotsky imagined Stalin might accept his offer, or that he thought such a leadership shuffle would make a difference. For more about Trotsky’s maneuver, see the sub-section entitled “The Reversion to Fractionalism” in “An Outline of Trotsky’s Anti-Marxist Theories, Part Four,” available at <http://www.communistvoice.org/35cTrotsky.html>.

as factionalism the building of organization united around a revolutionary strategy and tactics, while promoting himself as “non-factional”. But after he joined the Bolsheviks, he emphasized centralism above everything else, backed the idea of the militarization of labor, and was something of a martinet. His hagiographer Isaac Deutscher speaks of him as “one of the sternest journalists.” Nevertheless, when he found himself in the minority, in the name of democracy he amended his view of centralism to allow for factions that fight for the party’s leadership.

Later, when Trotsky formed the 4th International, its Statutes focused mainly on the rights of the International Executive Committee (IEC) and the smaller International Secretariat (IS). Democratic centralism is mentioned, but defined only as submission to the decisions of these bodies. There is, for example, no mention of the elective principle, either with respect to the national Trotskyist organizations or the world leadership of the 4th International. At most, the Statutes say that the “International Conferences” should be composed of “delegates, or their mandated representatives, of all sections.” In practice, the composition of these conferences was decided mainly by the IEC and the IS. True, many Trotskyist organizations have some kind of elections, but Trotsky’s legacy leads in the direction of arrogant bureaucracy.

Now, centralism is essential for a party that seriously intends to carry out a revolution. But it is also a notable feature of many bourgeois and reactionary parties. When centralism is detached from the other aspects of a working class party, it becomes oppressive.

Lenin saw centralism and discipline as connected to other aspects of party life and to the level of the class struggle. For example, in “Left-wing” Communism, An Infantile Disorder (1920), he raised the issue of how the discipline of the proletarian party is maintained and reinforced. One key factor was the devotion to the revolution of the party members, but it was not the only one. Another was that the party was able to stay “in close touch with, and to a certain extent, if you like, to merge with the broadest masses of the toilers.” It was also necessary to have correct political strategy and tactics, and moreover, that “the broadest masses have been convinced by their own experience” of this correctness. Thus he viewed the party’s internal life and level of discipline as connected not only to the convictions of its members, but also to those of the masses around the party. Lenin warned that “Without these conditions, all attempts to establish discipline inevitably fall flat and end in phrase-mongering and grimacing.” (Ibid., Chapter II)

Evolution of the party

Trotsky’s ideas about party building focused on centralism and the fight for leading positions. Marxism has a broader idea. When Marx and Engels saw that the workers needed to form their own political party if they wished to be free of capitalist exploitation, they focused on what type of party was needed, not just on who was the leader. They sought to build a type of mass organization that had never been seen before. The Communist Manifesto (1848) had been written for the Communist League, but that organization turned out to be too narrowly based. Marx and Engels sought a political organization that was connected to the economic and strike struggles of the workers. The party was also to organize nation-wide political agitation and to bring the workers into all aspects of the revolutionary movement. This was not what political factions or parties previously had been. The First International provided a broader link to mass struggles than the Communist League ever had and inspired workers around the world, but it lacked cohesion, and workers were in large part enrolled in it en masse, rather than individually. The parties of the Second International, at their best, were actively involved in political agitation and their members were expected to take more part in party life than was ever known before.

The Leninist Third International went further. At its best, its parties were not simply more centralized than Second International parties, but also fostered more independent activity from their members, more theoretical consciousness, and more participation in revolutionary action. However, these parties were built in a hurry under exceptionally trying conditions, and were not always at their best. Stalinist revisionism eventually corroded them, but before that they allowed the working class to become a political force in a way never seen before.

If I and others support party-building, it is because we have seen that party organization empowers class-conscious activists and workers. The party-like organizations I have been in, such as the Marxist-Leninist Party, USA of 1980-1993, were not perfect, but they unleashed our potentialities as well as those of the workers and students we worked among, in a way other organizations had not. Small and limited as the organizations of the last period have been, they gave voice to a revolutionary standpoint not otherwise represented. They allowed us to take part in the theoretical struggle in a way we could not have dreamed of doing individually. We did not join in order to fight for leadership, but to take part in the class struggle. Many activists today are anti-party because of horrible experiences in Trotskyist and Stalinist organizations, and because they have nothing else to measure this experience against. I can sympathize with this, but if the working class and revolutionary activists are ever going to run the world, we are going to have to learn to build our own organizations first.

Ultimately, though, whether the working class needs a Leninist party depends on what it wants to accomplish. If one is satisfied with action limited essentially by what is acceptable to the class-collaborationist trade union leaders and reformist social organizations, then one does not need a communist party. If one wants an organization that can rally workers at one workplace after another in struggle, despite the treachery of today’s reformist bureaucrats, one that can bring new conceptions to the mass movements, then one will see the desirability of party-building. If one sees the struggle with the trade union bureaucracy as simply a factional struggle for leadership positions, one might imagine that the Trotskyist conception of organization will do. But if one sees the role of

the party as greater than that, then the Trotskyist conception has to be set aside.

Non-class anti-imperialism

Lenin associated anti-imperialism with the struggle of millions upon millions of people for liberation from oppression. When he wrote in *Socialism and War* (1915) that a war between Britain and India was a just war on India’s part, regardless of who attacked first, it was because “in China, Persia, India and other dependent countries […] we have seen during the past decades a policy of rousing tens and hundreds of millions of people”. War is the continuation of politics by violent means, and one judged a war by looking to the politics that had for years preceded that war.

Trotskyism and Stalinism, however, separate anti-imperialism from the mass struggle for freedom. They have become notorious for supporting bloodstained oppressors as anti-imperialists. This is what I call “non-class anti-imperialism,” an anti-imperialism without the local masses. The Trotskyist groups have competed in giving “military, (but supposedly) not political” support to these tyrants, such as Saddam Hussein in Iraq, Qaddafi in Libya, and even the Taliban in Afghanistan. They may denounce these tyrants in extreme language and oppose them up to the moment war breaks out. Still, they claim that during a war with Western imperialism, these tyrants bear the anti-imperialist banner and should be given “military support.” They do not see the politics of the war as the continuation of the politics that led to the war.

This is an “anti-imperialism” that goes against the interests of the working people. Their interests are subordinated to the interests of the local tyrants for the duration of the war. The non-class imperialists pretend that it was impossible to support the Iraqi people against both the Saddam Hussein regime and the US imperialist invasions. They thought that the intrigues of outside powers were more important than the uprising of the Libyan people to overthrow Qaddafi, who had suppressed all political life in Libya for decades. Now they find similar reasons to oppose the uprising of the Syrian people against the brutal Assad dictatorship.

The various Trotskyist groups have supported non-class anti-imperialism on many of these issues. Trotsky’s stand on the Italian invasion of Ethiopia in 1935-1936 has repeatedly been cited as support for this practice. Now, it was essential to back Ethiopia, but Trotsky had a hard time explaining why. He didn’t understand the complicated situation facing the masses in Ethiopia, and so ignored it. Instead, in a letter that has become a key part of the Trotskyist canon, he declared that it was necessary to make “a choice between two dictators,” Mussolini or Haile Selassie (*On Dictators and the Heights of Oslo*, April 22, 1936). He waxed eloquent about the potential greatness of the emperor Haile Selassie, compared Selassie to past revolutionary figures that Trotsky admired, and dreamed that the victory of “the Negus” (the Emperor) would not only be a defeat for Italian imperialism, but for “imperialism as a whole.” He even imagined a Selassie victory might serve to spur “the rebellious forces of the oppressed peoples” of the world.

On May 2, 1936, just ten days after Trotsky’s comments, Selassie fled Ethiopia for England. Yet Trotsky never reconsidered his position. Neither have his followers. To this day, the Trotskyist movement still regards his comments on Ethiopia as the gold standard for anti-imperialism, and ignores what actually happened there.

As a matter of act, it was not Selassie who led the continued Ethiopian resistance to occupation, but movement called the Patriots. In consequence of their struggle, Italian fascism never conquered the entire Ethiopian countryside. By way of contrast, it was not until 1941 that Selassie, with the help of British bayonets, returned to Ethiopia. The Patriots weren’t a revolutionary movement, but they wanted reforms, not a return to absolutism. Selassie, however, was able to restore his power. This was a tragedy for Ethiopia and for the neighboring Eritrean people, whom Selassie would annex.

Trotsky had at least supported the right side in the war, even if history has not been kind to his hopes for a revolutionary autocrat. But his reasoning has encouraged modern-day Trotskyists to back notorious dictatorships with the dream that they might play the liberating role which Trotsky imagined for Haile Selassie.

What Haile Selassie was to Trotsky, the Emir Amanullah of Afghanistan was to Stalin, Amanullah was concerned to obtain, and ensure against British interference, Afghanistan’s independence. He also sought changes in Afghan politics and society. The Soviet Union established relations with Afghanistan under Amanullah as part of its support for the anti-colonial movement. So far, so good. But in his influential work *The Foundations of Leninism* (1924), Stalin went out of the way to describe Amanullah as objectively a revolutionary. His struggle, according to Stalin, was a “reserve of the revolutionary proletariat” and presumably part of a “common revolutionary front” with world socialism.

Now, unlike Selassie, Amanullah was no absolutist, but a reformer who was eventually deposed by a reactionary uprising in 1928-29. But by Stalin’s reasoning, it is irrelevant whether he was absolutist or not, since “the revolutionary character of a national movement under the conditions of imperialist oppression does not necessarily presuppose the existence of proletarian elements in the movement, the existence of a revolutionary or a republican program of the movement, the existence of a democratic basis of the movement.” In reality, there is not just a difference between revolution and reaction, but between the revolutionary movement and various intermediate and reformist currents. But Stalin’s reasoning obliterates such distinctions within the anti-colonial movement: everything is revolutionary. Here again, Trotskyist and Stalinist theory show remarkable similarities. No wonder both the Trotskyist and Stalinist trends back non-class anti-imperialism, however much they may differ on which regime to back at any given time.5

5 I have discussed these examples in more detail in the article “Anti-Imperialism and the Class Struggle” available at [http://www.communistvoice.org/29cEmir.html](http://www.communistvoice.org/29cEmir.html). The discussion there comes in the course of considering why it is (continued...)
Adapting to new world developments

Marxism is not a set of finished formulas, settled a century ago. But over and over again the Trotskyist movement shows that it is unable to adapt and extend Marxism to deal with the problems of our times. Here, as elsewhere, they are as dogmatic as the Stalinists. The Trotskyists think they have found the answer to everything in a set of mechanical patterns like “permanent revolution,” “no socialism in one country,” “no stage-ism,” “political but not military support,” “united but not popular fronts,” and “transitional demands.” They back up these slogans by endlessly refighting the old battles with various Stalinist ideologues of the past. They have turned revolutionary theory into scholasticism that serves to intimidate activists who are not experts on all the movements and debates of the past. I have criticized many of the Trotskyist formulas over the years, but perhaps the worst aspect of Trotskyism is its hidebound method.

As a result, Trotskyism has stumbled before many of the most important features of the contemporary world. Let me give a few examples.

**Imperialism:** Many features of world imperialism have changed dramatically over the last century. Imperialism still exists and devours millions upon millions of people through war, sanctions, propping up brutal regimes, and economic rape. It is as great a monster as ever, but some of the ways imperialism manifests itself have changed. For example, at one time the majority of the world’s population lived in colonies and semi-colonies, while today a majority of the world’s population lives in imperialist, would-be imperialist, or major regional powers. In order to build a genuine anti-imperialist movement and uphold the class approach set forth in Lenin’s *Imperialism, Highest Stage of Capitalism* and other works, one has to take account of such changes, not gloss over them.

But the Trotskyist movement tends to assume that only the countries that were imperialist in the past can be imperialist today. They have often given “military, but not political” support to would-be imperialist powers, essentially to one imperialist bloc against another.

**Democratizations:** In a number of countries in the last several decades, from the old Soviet bloc to the current Arab Spring, long-standing dictatorships fell. This has been a major current of mass struggle, but these regimes were brought down neither by socialist revolution nor by profound democratic social revolutions. Even when protracted armed struggle was involved, the result has been liberalizations or democratizations, not social revolutions. A vicious racist system like apartheid might fall and state-capitalist regimes and other hollowed-out tyrannies collapse, but the immediate results are usually depressing governments that simply join in market fundamentalist frenzy. Yet these struggles are essential steps in the long road towards liberation, and they open the way to a renewed and more conscious class struggle.

The Trotskyist movement has been unable to provide orientation for what socialists should do during democratizations. Such things are not envisioned in Trotsky’s theory of the “permanent revolution.” Thus, in the Arab Spring, various Trotskyist groups only support struggles they imagine as social revolutions that might lead to workers’ regimes. Their expectations are repeatedly disappointed, but they never learn from this experience. The Trotskyists have no theoretical basis that would allow them to assess realistically such struggles and judge what revolutionary activists should strive for when socialist revolution is not imminent. This reinforces the Trotskyist tendency to non-class anti-imperialism and leads to opposition to some of the important struggles of our time.

**Global warming:** The protection of the environment is one of the crucial struggles of our time. Every year the situation becomes more serious. The earth burns, while the bourgeoisie dallies. If something serious is to be accomplished, it is necessary to make the environmental movement into one of the fronts of the class struggle.

It is not enough to oppose the global warming denialists. Bourgeois environmentalism is incapable of dealing with the crisis. Al Gore, the UN’s Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), and a number of other establishment figures warn about the danger of global warming and other environmental catastrophes, and that has played a certain role, but they advocate futile market measures that will themselves lead to disaster. Yet even eco-socialists and the more militant trends within the environmental movement, who carry out important mass protests and criticize some cap and trade measures, have not disassociated themselves from Gore-style programs or may themselves advocate the pricing of goods at their supposed “true value”. Criticism of Al Gore tends to be restricted to either his other political stands, or his role in pushing cap and trade. His overall environmental program (including the carbon tax) is rarely scrutinized.

The Trotskyist and Stalinist trends are bankrupt in the face of establishment environmentalism. Some Trotskyists and Stalinists denigrate environmentalism in general as green capitalism, while declaring that nothing can be done until the environmental problem is solved under socialism. Most of the others seek to win over a section of the environmental movement without pushing for a conscious differentiation from establishment environmentalism. They don’t understand the particular way in which the environmental crisis will eventually force the issue of environmental and economic planning, and they fail to prepare the masses for the coming struggle over the different ways in which planning and its enforcement will be carried out.

This has been just an introduction to the new critique of Trotskyism. I have left out consideration of many Trotskyist shibboleths in order to focus on some issues relevant to recent debates on party-building, imperialism, the Arab Spring, and the attitude towards state ownership. But I hope that this article will give the reader some idea of how closely related Trotskyism is to Stalinism: one can’t criticize one too deeply without criticizing the other. Also, I have tried to show that, while anti-revisionists oppose the way Trotskyism and Stalinism have distorted the meaning of what Marx, Engels,
and Lenin set forward, we do not aim to simply go back to the past and repeat old formulas. We aim to bring Marxism into the present and prepare for the future. We pay serious attention to history, but we are first and foremost activists who aim to help the working class rise up and change the world.

Support the working people of Ukraine against Russian intervention, Western austerity, and local oligarchs

Continued from the front page

By itself, this situation would have been complicated and difficult enough. But, in addition, the Russian government began a brutal intervention into Ukrainian affairs. It would not accept that the Ukrainian people themselves would decide whether to move closer economically to the EU or Russia. It has demanded the right to determine Ukrainian affairs; and it is trying to dismember the country. It has flooded the airwaves of eastern Ukraine with wild denunciations of the Ukrainian government as illegitimate, fascist, and committing genocide against Russian-ethnic Ukrainians; for three months it declared that Yanukovych was still the legitimate president of Ukraine; it has annexed Crimea; it has threatened Ukraine with a troop buildup on the border; it has encouraged and supplied Russian separatists in eastern and southern Ukrainian, who have declared independent regimes in Donetsk and Luhansk Oblasts (provinces); and it has treated the independence of Ukraine as a joke. These Russian actions aren’t the sole cause of the current divisions among the Ukrainian people, but they are the main reason why these differences have led to armed conflict in eastern Ukraine.

The US government and the EU have imposed some sanctions against Russia for the annexation of Crimea and intervention in eastern Ukraine. But the interests of the Western capitalist governments aren’t the same as those of the workers of Ukraine. If Ukrainian workers rise up en masse against austerity, the western governments will oppose them more harshly than they oppose Russian intervention. Indeed, the EU and IMF have already imposed the same brutal program for squeezing Ukrainian working people as has been made against the workers of other countries.

Ukrainian workers face a difficult situation. They have to deal with Russian intervention, the austerity that the new government is implementing, the threat of ultra-nationalist and far right groups, and differences among themselves. But how can they handle these things? The Ukrainian left is just as split over the path forward as the left-wing is anywhere in the world. It was not able to form an influential section of its own within the anti-Yanukovych movement. The progressive and class-conscious activists in Ukraine still face the task of developing a mass political movement which will appear to the masses as a serious working class alternative. Without that, the masses will again and again be presented only with the alternatives of the different bourgeois factions.

But this doesn’t mean that it was wrong for the people to rise in struggle today. If the Ukrainian people hadn’t stood up against the corruption and authoritarianism of the Yanukovych government, they would have been reduced to the level of pawns in the hands of whoever sought to trample upon them. If the Ukrainian people don’t resist the efforts of the Russian government to dominate their affairs, they will lose the fruits of independence. The years since independence in 1991 may have been economically hard ones, combined with incessant political and nationalist squabbling, but there also has been a revival of political life among the Ukrainian people. Ukrainian workers are also facing a long and hard struggle against austerity, but this may also bring a new opportunity to form a militant class movement and reconstruct their unions and political organizations so that they are really independent of their own bourgeoisie, as well as that of the West, and that of Russia.

The looming economic crisis

The economic misery of the masses is the background to the present crisis. The dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 saw Ukraine and over a dozen other republics becoming independent countries, separate from Russia. But Ukraine, Russia, and the rest of the former USSR fell into a deep economic slump. The replacement of state-capitalism by market capitalism didn’t result in the promised prosperity, but greater inequality. In Ukraine as in Russia, the sell-off of state enterprises to individual owners resulted in the fabulous enrichment of a handful of privileged exploiters; the richer these new “oligarchs” grew, the more insecure the mass of workers. The major politicians either represented the oligarchs,

6When I refer to the Ukrainian left, I am not referring to the Communist Party of Ukraine (CPU). The CPU is the renamed Stalinist party from the old days; it still doesn’t know if there were atrocities committed in the old state-capitalist days in the USSR; it postured against Yanukovych and the Party of Regions, but then (continued...)
or used their positions to loot the country and become oligarchs themselves.

In the 1990s, the Ukrainian economy contracted by more than half, and workers’ wages, pensions, and savings were devastated by hyperinflation. Ukraine resumed economic growth in 2000, but before the economy could even recover its highest former level, it was hit hard by the world financial crisis of 2008. The different presidencies wanted to impose austerity measures: both the Yushchenko administration from the “Orange” movement that had opposed Yanukovych in 2004 and for a time raised wages and pensions, and the Yanukovych administration that came to power again in 2010. But, because of mass outrage, they couldn’t go far with austerity. Nor was there progress on any more appropriate way to deal with the economy’s problems. Corruption remained rampant; industry concentrated in eastern Ukraine continued to stagnate; small-scale agriculture in western Ukraine bogged down; and the government’s financial problems festered.

This economic privation has profoundly affected politics. Ukraine gained independence in the midst of an upsurge of worker militancy, including strikes by miners in east Ukraine. There was major hope for change and progress; an overwhelming majority of the Ukrainian people looked forward with anticipation towards Ukrainian independence, including Russian ethnic workers in east Ukraine; and working people believed that, after years of enforced silence, they would exert a real influence on the country. Then came the long years of crisis in the 1990s, the continuing corruption, and the domination of the country by a handful of rich oligarchs. It has left the working people without a clear path forward, and with many influenced by bourgeois nationalist trends, whether Ukrainian or Russian.

In this situation, the paths being considered were the alternatives set forward by the Ukrainian bourgeoisie: to forge closer economic relations with the European Union, or to join with Russia and its planned “Eurasian Union” of former constituents of the USSR. Both plans involved closer political as well as economic ties. Time was running out before a looming Ukrainian default on its debts, and the Yanukovych government was desperately looking for a large loan from somewhere, anywhere.

It might seem strange that anyone would want to move closer to the EU, given how austerity is racking Greece, Spain, and other countries. Ukraine lacks for jobs, and many young Ukrainians go abroad for work. They see much higher wages and better social conditions in neighboring EU countries. They see that one doesn’t have to hand out a bribe in every situation: to the traffic cop, to get into the proper school, or to get a job. Many Ukrainians expect association with the EU to bring progress in cleaning up corruption and modernizing the country. They see the EU not as it is increasingly becoming, the arena of a bitter class struggle, but as they hope it will be.

The alternative was to join the Eurasian Union which Russia was building. In Russia, too, wages are higher than in Ukraine, although the corruption is similar. Aside from that, a sixth of Ukrainians are of Russian background, even more speak Russian as their native language, and Ukrainian industry has close ties with Russian markets. But there was less hope that a deal with the Eurasian Union, as opposed to one with the EU, would bring modernization; and many feared deepening interference by Russia in Ukrainian affairs. The Yanukovych government sought votes on the basis of Russian nationalism and represented the rich oligarchs of eastern Ukraine, such as the so-called Donetsk clan, so it might have been expected to back joining the Eurasian Union. But many oligarchs feared being eaten up by the more powerful Russian oligarchs; they thought a deal with the EU was safer; and they believed that Ukraine could continue to balance between east and west while making this deal. So the Yanukovych government itself took to exploring the EU deal.

In reality, neither the EU nor the Eurasian Union can solve Ukraine’s problems; and certainly neither deal would be on terms favorable to the working class. The EU’s neo-liberalism will squeeze Ukrainian workers as it has squeezed other European workers, while the Eurasian Union centers on Russia, whose economy depends largely on exports of gas, oil, and weapons to stay afloat and whose politics are authoritarian, definitely worse than those of Ukraine. The EU’s economic liberalization will squeeze Ukrainian firms, but such squeezes in Ukraine, and in Russia’s industrial sector too, too have been seen since 1991.

But what about Ukraine simply staying out of either economic group and refusing loans from east or west? The bourgeoisie wouldn’t consider this, but it is a natural question. However, by itself, if nothing further were done, if the oligarchs were allowed to continue to squeeze the life out of the Ukrainian economy for their own private profit, staying free of both blocs wouldn’t avoid catastrophe either. The Ukrainian government was facing bankruptcy; it had fallen well behind in paying for Russian gas; it had no idea what to do about it except beg for aid from the outside; and the oligarchs were keeping things under their control.

So one way or another, no matter whether in one or the other bloc or no bloc, a deeper crisis was on the agenda. The Ukrainian economy is going to face major changes fairly soon. Some major industries are likely to suffer badly, and agriculture was likely to face changes too. How could Ukraine retain its social benefits throughout this crisis, including free higher education, pensions, and an indexed minimum wage? How could it do better in providing relief and jobs for the unemployed? What would happen to the Ukrainian coal industry, which only survives on huge subsidies and is likely to be devastated in the next few years? For that matter, how could it pay attention to environmental concerns, including the need to eventually eliminate coal mining and other dirty energy? There would need to be major changes, not only in taxation policy, but in how the economy was run and how economic decisions were made.

So dealing with the deepening economic crisis is not just a technical problem of tinkering at the edge of the economy:

7The industry survives mainly through huge subsidies from the central government. But the EU is ruling out subsidies for coal mining in Europe by 2018; Russia apparently ended most subsidies for coal by 2005; and Ukraine may not have the money to pay for subsidies much longer anyway.
it is a class issue. Powerful interests like things in Ukraine as they are. The oligarchs have looted Ukraine and become rich, and they insist any change should preserve their wealth, not eliminate their status as ultra-rich exploiters. The foreign capitalists, from the EU or Russia, also only want change that serves their interest. Until the Ukrainian workers form a powerful political trend truly of their own; until they acquire a consciousness of their true interests and of the real nature of the different bourgeois trends, the economic alternatives will be restricted to those offered by the oligarchs. Only the class struggle can put some limits on what the capitalists will be trying to do. But the development of this new consciousness among the workers won’t drop from the skies: it will only develop gradually as the masses try repeatedly to influence political life. Hence the importance of the people rising up, even in their present political disarray and despite the petty-bourgeois character to their actions, against the governments that disappoint them.

From the “Orange Revolution” to Euromaidan

Indeed, despite the economic hardships since separation from the Soviet Union in 1991, independence has gradually fostered a certain political life among the Ukrainian people. The political freeze that characterized life under Stalinist state-capitalism has slowly broken up. Ukrainians have chafed at the rampant corruption and the political disappointments, and there have been continual squabbles between the two main ethnic groups, Ukrainian and Russian, and yet a certain common life has developed and a certain passion for change and modernization, especially among younger people formed by the years since 1991.

In the course of this, there have been two major attempts at change since the economic doldrums of the 1990s. They were not movements of the united working people against all of the privileged elite. Instead the elite itself was divided, and one section of the elite began a struggle against the other. But this gave an opening for a large section of the masses to express their discontent.8

The first of these attempts was the “Orange Revolution”, which was the wave of protest from November 2004 to January 2005 which prevented then Prime Minister Yanukovych from stealing the 2004 presidential election. The protesters hoped that this movement would bring something new, free up the political system which had until then centered on a national president with vast powers, and lead to economic progress. But the Orange administration that came to power did not accomplish much. There was no major economic change. And it did not end corruption. Being a government of the oligarchs, it didn’t infringe on their interests. It did raise wages and pensions, but the Orange leaders fell into corrupt squabbling among themselves. This opened the way for Yanukovych to win the presidential elections of 2010 and return to power. This ushered in another bleak period of quasi-authoritarian rule.

In power again, Yanukovych knew how to fabulously enrich himself, but he didn’t know how to deal with Ukraine’s economic problems. He vacillated between associating with the Eurasian Union or the European Union. In 2010 he was already demanding major cuts in social programs. By 2013 he was close to a deal with the European Union, and then, for no better reason than Russian intimidation, broke off the talks. This abrupt reversal triggered the outbreak of “Euromaidan”, a protest movement centered on the central squares (“Maidan” means square in Ukrainian) of the capital city Kyiv (or Kiev).

At first the movement wasn’t anywhere near as large as during the former “Orange Revolution” of 2004. But from the start, Yanukovych used force against the protesters, and harsher and harsher anti-protest laws were passed. On the night of November 30, the brutal Berkut special police dispersed demonstrators from Independence Square in a particularly savage attack; and there was worse to come. This bloodletting infuriated larger and larger numbers of people; it was the trigger for the outpouring of pent-up discontent with the Yanukovych presidency.

The movement was not restricted to Independence Square or the city of Kyiv. It was popular throughout western and central Ukraine, and had some, if much less, support in eastern Ukraine. It was another attempt by the masses to have some say over what happened to Ukraine, and not simply to accept whatever officials or politicians said.

Thus Euromaidan, based on demanding an agreement with the EU, turned into what some just call “Maidan”, a generalized protest. Everyone had their own grievances: against corruption, against the oligarchs, against the politicians, against the savage repression, or against Russian bullying of Ukraine. There was a widespread demand for what was regarded as “European” values and rights, but the common denominator among all protesters was the demand that Yanukovych must go. It embraced people from across the economic spectrum, but while workers participated, they didn’t do so in large numbers or put forward a distinct political standpoint.9

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8 It often happens that a national crisis is accompanied by a split in the ruling class, and one ruling class faction may seek to mobilize the masses against another faction. This is true even when there is a revolutionary situation (which there is not in Ukraine today). Lenin wrote that, “generally speaking”, in a revolutionary situation, “there is a crisis, in one form or another, among the ‘upper classes’, a crisis in the policy of the ruling class, leading to a fissure through which the discontent and indignation of the oppressed classes burst forth.” This is one of the factors leading to “turbulent times” where the masses “are drawn both by all the circumstances of the crisis and by the ‘upper classes’ themselves into independent historical action.” (“The Collapse of the Second International”, Section II, Collected Works, vol. 21, pp. 213-4, emphasis as in the original) In Ukraine, however, the masses have not yet succeeded in developing their own “independent historical action”; this is the secret of the disappointing results of the major political struggles.

9 Workers, of course, would have a hard time staying for days and weeks at the squares. Unless their plants were on strike, they would lose their jobs. But the main problem is that the Ukrainian working class movement suffers from the same organizational and political crisis as workers movements elsewhere. Far and away the largest union center is the Federation of Trade Unions of Ukraine (its
On the whole, it had a petty-bourgeois character.

Maidan had many glaring deficiencies. There was the failure in the general consciousness to recognize the simmering class struggle in the EU, or the class basis of Ukrainian politics. And there was the dominant nationalist rhetoric. Hence, despite the almost universal distrust of demonstrators for all the major politicians and factions, and the hatred for the oligarchs, the bourgeois nationalist opposition parties were its political leadership anyway. The biggest opposition parties were Batkivshchyna (the All-Ukrainian Union “Fatherland”), which had been a major participant in the “Orange” revolution, and UDAR (the Ukrainian Democratic Alliance for Reform), led by the former boxer Vitali Klitschko, the standpoint of which is close to the parties of European Christian democracy, such as the present ruling party in Germany. There was no new political trend being built. Once again, a mass outpouring was fighting old abuses, but unable to do much more than back one ruling class faction with another.

Worse yet, the two main opposition parties, Batkivshchyna and UDAR, were in a coalition with a far right or fascist party, Svoboda (“Freedom”). Svoboda and some other far right elements, such as the even more obnoxious Pravyi Sektor (“Right Sector”), were only a tiny part of Maidan numerically, but they had a major role in the self-defense units that fought the police and in the organizational arrangements for the square occupation.

Clearly Maidan was a movement with many different aspects, with the bourgeois leadership seeking to reap the benefit of the struggle. In Ukraine today, without a left capable of being a major factor in the protests, it was unlikely that the movement would start out as anything else.

Shocking as this mixture is, many social movements around the world have a similar disparate character. Different class trends have always tried to make use of popular movements and issues. But today there is a particular offensive by far right trends. Far right and fascist groups like the Ukrainian acronym is FPU), with 8.5 million members. It is a carryover from the old Soviet trade unions, which were tools of the ruling Soviet bourgeoisie. It has neither a tradition of struggle, nor would it be able to stand up against concerted pressure from Russian nationalism. The Confederation of Free Trade Unions of Ukraine (KVPU) stems from the miners strikes in east Ukraine and elsewhere in the Soviet Union starting in 1989. It was spirited and militant, but didn’t know what to demand as the replacement for the old Soviet system. It also suffered when the period of militant strikes came to an end several years later. Strikes might then take place as a brief token affair, carried out with agreement by local management, to pressure the central government in Kyiv to increase its subsidies for the particular industry. It is a relatively small union center (in 1997 it had 18 member unions with 148,000 workers total). It supported Maidan, and it made some attempts at organizing strikes as part of Maidan, but they didn’t work out. It is still active in east Ukraine, among other places, and is opposed to the separatists.

However, the Trade Union Building in Kyiv was a center for protesters during Maidan. It was burned down by Yanukovych’s police on the night of Feb. 18-19. But this didn’t mean that an influential program of working class struggle had been formulated or spread inside Maidan.

On the other hand, far right movements had a major role in the self-defense units that fought the police around the world have a similar disparate character. Different class trends have always tried to make use of popular movements and issues. But today there is a particular offensive by far right trends. Far right and fascist groups like the...
or that Maidan was a bourgeois conspiracy. In the present situation, it would have been impossible for the working masses to have brought a radical government to power. They weren’t sufficiently organized or class-conscious for this; nor, for that matter, do the Ukrainian workers or the left presently have a reasonably clear idea of what such a government should do, if it were formed.

What would be possible is for the working class and left-wing activists to continually put pressure on this government and contest its policies, and those of the capitalists which it represents. The widespread skepticism in Maidan towards the government is already an advance from the more passive mass attitude at the time of the Orange revolution. This might provide some room for a protracted struggle in the course of which the left-wing movement could seek to clarify its own stands, rally the masses around definite policies, and build a mass, radical working class movement.

An alternate view of the situation was put forward by the supporters of the ousted president Yanukovych and by the Russian government. According to them, with the overthrow of Yanukovych there was no longer a legitimate or elected government in Ukraine. There supposedly had been a fascist coup; Euromaidan was a fascist movement; and the only way to make things right would either be to reinstate Yanukovych or to disarm Ukraine.

But the Maidan uprising was neither fascist nor a coup. It was not the act of a small group taking over the government, but the entirely proper and legitimate protest of the Ukrainian people against the corrupt and repressive administration of Yanukovych. Moreover, he was deposed by an almost three-quarters vote of the elected Ukrainian national parliament, the Verhovna Rada (literally: Supreme Council). If the Rada wasn’t a gang of unelected fascist adventurers during the period when it was backing Yanukovych and approving his demands to eliminate the right to protest, it’s hard to see how it became unelected fascist adventurers when the same Rada deposed Yanukovych, reinstated the right to protest, appointed an interim government, and set early elections for a new president for May 25. These elections have taken place, and Petro Poroshenko was elected. Yet the claim is still made that this is an “unelected” or “unconstitutional” government. Meanwhile, there will probably new parliamentary elections later this year, rather than waiting for the parliamentary term to end in 2017.  

Overall, the Ukrainian political system has been only partially democratic since independence in 1991 (and not democratic at all prior to independence), excessive powers being concentrated in the president, and the new government is only slightly changed from the previous one. But one of the first things done by the Rada as Yanukovych fell was to restore the 2004 Constitution, which meant somewhat reducing presidential powers in favor of the parliament. A few days later, on February 26, the Rada abolished the Berkut, or special riot police that were used by Yanukovych to savagely attack demonstrators. The government also began criminal investigation of the system of titushky used by Yanukovych, titushky being government-paid thugs who were used to attack opponents in an anonymous manner. The government, as part of austerity, is also cutting personnel in law enforcement agencies. And, with respect to the issue of federalism, the government has indicated willingness to replace the appointment of governors by the president with their election. This is not the building up of a fascist state.

The government is also proceeding with the Association Agreement with the European Union, as a majority of Ukrainians probably desire, but a quite sizeable minority oppose. It will come with a price that hurts people, although much of this price was going to be paid in any case. The government is firmly neo-liberal and is immediately implementing the austerity measures demanded by the EU and the IMF. These measures will squeeze the masses and have already been opposed by some workers’ actions. They involve raising energy prices, cutting government services, instituting various taxes, floating the foreign exchange rate, and freezing the minimum wage (which otherwise would be adjusted each year) despite the fact that the cost of living will sharply increase this year. 12,000 social workers were among the first to see their jobs eliminated, and perhaps 80,000 law enforcement personnel will be eliminated too. Of course, if the Ukrainian government is forced to pay higher prices for Russian gas, as Putin has been demanding, it will add to the pressure on the Ukrainian economy: Russian-imposed austerity and repaying Russian loans is as painful as Western-imposed austerity. Meanwhile, at the end of May it was announced that 38 of the state-owned coal mines (the state sector presently comprises about 50% of the Ukrainian coal industry) will be auctioned off.

As well, the Orange politicians of Batkivshchyna have committed the serious crime of taking on the fascist Svoboda party as a junior partner in the government. Several ministers are from Svoboda, and a post had also been offered to Pravyi Sektor, but was declined. The Baktivshchyna ministers prob-

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12 Prime Minister Arseniy Yatsenyuk announced on July 24 that he was resigning. This is part of a political process that may lead to new parliamentary election. On July 25 Volodymyr Groysman was appointed Acting Prime Minister.
ably believe that they have kept Svoboda in line, and the post-Yanukovych government has not been a fascist administration, but a center-right one. But including the far right in the government legitimizes them, as well as being a sword hanging over the heads of the masses. And this has been going on for a long time: the Orange politicians have been making agreements with Svoboda for ten years. This is another illustration of why the masses need a movement separate from and opposed to the bourgeois political parties. 14

So, adding it all up, the Kyiv government is legitimate, but it is one which represents the Ukrainian capitalists and is led by an oligarch, Petro Petroshenko. It does not satisfy the demands of the Ukrainian masses, and like all Ukrainian governments, it is only partially democratic. 15 But not all opposition to this government is opposition from the left. What is needed is opposition that helps the working class organize, and opposition that is based on serious alternatives to government policies. Defense of the previous Yanukovych government is opposition from the right, and it is essentially a demand to take Ukraine backward and reinstitution a more repressive state.

14 So far, Svoboda doesn’t seem to have picked up support recently despite its participation in Maidan. The combined presidential vote on May 25 for the candidates of Svoboda and Pravyi Sektor was about 2%. This has been cited by a number of supporters of the Ukrainian working people, but it shouldn’t be a signal for complacency: Svoboda’s vote in local and parliamentary elections has been much larger than its presidential vote — its high point was 10.44% in the 2012 parliamentary vote. Still, there are indications that voters in western Ukraine, who had elected Svoboda to a number of municipal positions, are starting to become disillusioned with it, regarding it as just another group of self-seeking politicians.

However, Oleh Lyashko, of the eponymous “Radical Party of Oleh Lyashko”, picked up 8% of the presidential vote. The Radical Party is said to combine left-sounding demands with ultra-nationalism; it does not have fascist symbolism, yet it accepts far right elements as candidates. But even if one adds together the votes for the Radical Party, Svoboda, and Pravyi Sektor, the combined far right vote hasn’t grown as of the May 25 election.

Thus, so far the anti-Russian far right in Ukraine hasn’t obtained the level of support of fascist parties in certain European countries or Russia. But dangerous times are coming for Ukraine. Moreover, there are Russian nationalist factions which should be counted as part of the far right or fascist forces, and they are active in the leadership of the secessionist “republics” in east Ukraine. Indeed, many of the largest and most obnoxious European fascist parties are pro-Russian. And whether pro- or anti-Russian, the far right forces will seek to make the most of the intensifying civil strife in Ukraine.

15 Among other things, there has been consideration in the Rada of banning the Communist Party of Ukraine and/or the Party of Regions, and the government has referred the matter of the CP of Ukraine to the courts. Even if there should be legal grounds for this, based on connections to the secessionists, it would be a disastrous step and would be retaliation of Ukrainian bourgeois nationalists against Russian bourgeois nationalists. It isn’t justified just because there are similar actions by the Russian nationalists and Stalinists against their opponents. Such bans retard the process of the working population learning how to politically assess and oppose the various bourgeois parties of different sorts, including the revisionist “communist” parties.

16 I have taken the view that Antimaidan comprises three entirely distinct movements from an article by the anti-fascist blogger Anton Shekhovtsov. See “Extremism in South-Eastern Ukraine”, 7 May 2014, www.opendemocracy.net/od-russia/anton-shekhovtsov/dangers-of-extremism-in-southeastern-ukraine-far-right-eurasianism-slavic-unity. He lists the sections as “(1) protest groups mobilised by social grievances, (2) supporters of Ukraine becoming a federal state, and (3) Russian ultranationalists pursuing separatist ideas.” He points out that “the extremists now seem to have hijacked Anti-Maidan protests in the most problematic regions, and it is their extremism and ultranationalism that make Anti-Maidan in, for example, Donetsk Oblast so violent. Pro-Russian extremists take journalists and international observers hostage, abuse, torture and brutally kill people.”

Antimaidan

One of the deficiencies of the movement against Yanukovych was that it only had weak support in eastern and south-eastern Ukraine, which were strongholds of Yanukovych’s Party of Regions. In those areas most people had come to have a low opinion of Yanukovych, but especially among the Russian ethnic population there was widespread skepticism about the political forces in the rest of Ukraine. As well, people in these areas tended to favor joining the Eurasian Union while those elsewhere tended to favor associating with the European Union. Some people, especially younger people, in the east and southeast took part in Maidan, but on the whole the population was passive.

The Party of Regions made an attempt to organize counter-demonstrations against Euromaidan: this was the beginning of the so-called Antimaidan. The main part of this was a series of four rallies held in Kyiv between last November 2013 through January 2014. These actions were much smaller than those of Maidan, and sometimes people were paid, or received school credit, for attendance. Aside from the rallies in Kyiv, a few more were held in east Ukraine or Crimea, but even fewer people attended.

These events petered out at the end of January, while Yanukovych was still in office and Maidan was still active. But after Yanukovych fled, Antimaidan revived in a new form. It gained more support from below, but not on the basis of backing Yanukovych. The movement had several different motivations.

For one thing, the new government immediately enacted austerity measures, and this gave rise to discontent and protests. The cuts in the government workforce affect all Ukraine, but presumably particularly affect areas such as east Ukraine, which had been the recipient of patronage from the Party of Regions. Indeed, the disbandment of Yanukovych’s brutal riot police, the Berkut, itself left many east Ukrainians unemployed, and formations of uniformed ex-Berkut took part in Antimaidan actions. Economic protests were not restricted to Antimaidan, however, but also took place among Maidan supporters. And there are also purely economic strikes of miners in east Ukraine. For example, the miners on strike at Kryvyi Rih are fighting about solely economic demands, and their union, the Independent Union of Miners, supports Maidan and has repeatedly been attacked by Russian
Another motivation for Antimaidan is the view that the rest of the country had been living off east Ukrainian industry. This idea, encouraged by the Party of Regions, downplays the extent of the crisis of east Ukrainian industry and the size of the subsidies that it had been receiving from the national Ukrainian government. Such viewpoints have fueled the demand for federalism. The extensive powers of the Ukrainian president had included appointing the governors of oblasts (provinces); it would indeed be more democratic for them to be elected. But federalism can have a number of different meanings.

Finally, there was also the separatist section of Antimaidan. A minority of the population in eastern and southeastern Ukraine support joining Russia. Earlier polls indicated that far more people in this area are opposed to secession. They may be upset with the policies of the Kyiv government or suspicious of the Ukrainian army; they may be of Russian background; but they regard themselves as Ukrainians. However, what is very widespread in these regions is passivity and the feeling that one is being put upon by all the political forces, even those few, one favors. As well, time will tell whether people’s sentiments have changed as a result of the several months of fighting in the region.

The oligarchs who had been associated with the Party of Regions benefitted from Antimaidan. The need to find support in east Ukraine encouraged the Kyiv government to turn to them as people with influence and/or positions in that region; it gave them bargaining power with Kyiv. But they didn’t want east Ukraine to be actually detached from Ukraine, and they didn’t want to see their businesses damaged by armed gangs. People still argue over what position the oligarch Rinat Akhmetov took towards the secessionists. But when his companies were threatened, he organized steelworkers and others from his employees to go on joint patrols with the police in Mariupol and several other cities taken over by the secessionists. They worked to ensure order, but did not challenge the overall secessionist control of the cities.

The separatists and ultranationalists had only limited support in east Ukraine, and yet they obtained the leadership of Antimaidan. It is now associated with them, and it revolves around what they do. They allow no opposition in the areas they control, while elsewhere their scare stories about the horrible Ukrainian masses out to drink Russian blood dominate the viewpoint of Antimaidan. The ascendancy of the separatists is in large part due to Russian government backing for secession: this is a material backing, including weapons and personnel, and not just sympathy. And it is also due to the people of east and southeastern Ukraine being betrayed by the political forces that have spoken in their name, such as the Party of Regions and the Communist Party of Ukraine; these forces have traded mainly in distrust of non-Russian working people.

Left to itself, the complicated relations between Maidan, the new government, and Antimaidan would have resulted in some sort of accommodation. That is how things often have been since independence. And in the first days after the fall of Yanukovych, a move in this direction began. At first, in a spasm of bourgeois nationalism, the Rada irritated the Russian ethnic population by voting to repeal a language law from 2012, but the government immediately reconsidered, and then-Acting President Alexandr Turchynov vetoed the repeal. The government at first considered pushing aside those oligarchs based in east Ukraine who had backed the Party of Regions, but in a few days — realizing the weakness of its support in that part of the country — it reversed itself and sought deals with them. That’s not a very glorious accommodation, and it reinforced the character of the new government as another government of the oligarchs. But at the same time, it was a concession to Antimaidan. And attempts at accommodation are still taking place, such as the consideration of changing the

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17The Communist Party of Ukraine is nostalgic for the old system, doesn’t recognize any of the crimes of Stalinism, and won’t discuss the great purges or the famines or the mass deportations of entire nationalities. It also is still a capitalist party, as was the CPSU, but now includes private businessmen as well as those connected to state enterprises. Many of the parties descended from the CPSU in other former republics of the Soviet Union embraced local nationalism, but the CPU’s 1995 program opposed the existence of Ukraine as an independent country. The CPU supported Russian nationalism instead, and looked to reuniting the countries that had separated after the collapse of the USSR. The Donbas and Crimean sections of the party seemed to be the most fervent Russian nationalist sections of the CPU. But in general, one of the ways this nationalism might be expressed was through talk of the unity of the Eastern Slavs, the traditions of whose civilization it holds to be expressed by the part of Ukrainian Orthodox Church that is loyal to the Moscow Patriarchate (as opposed to the Kyiv Patriarchate). So here are “communists” who back the Orthodox Church, so long as it is the supposed true Russian church. (See Andrew Wilson, “Reinventing the Ukrainian Left: Assessing Adaptability and Change, 1991–2000”, in The Slavonic and East European Review, vol. 80, #1, Jan., 2002, pp. 29, 35, 52.)

19The Communist Party of Ukraine is descending from the local Ukrainian branch of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. The Bolsheviks Revolution was a historic event in world history, and it led to the development for a time of the most revolutionary and widespread movement of the world working class that had ever been seen. But over time, and certainly when the Stalinist system was consolidated in the Soviet Union, the CPSU lost its revolutionary and communist character. It became the ruling party of a state-capitalist system, the party of the bureaucrats and managers. It still bore the name “communist” and claimed the heritage of the revolutionary working class movement, but this was now a false flag. It had become the party of the new state-capitalist class.

20Antimaidan has had fierce rhetoric against the oligarchs, as probably most Ukrainian politicians, even those most tied to the oligarchs, engage in. But things aren’t always what they seem on the surface. Antimaidan naturally isn’t fond of those oligarchs who make deals with the new government, and the secessionists are opposed to those oligarchs who oppose annexation by Russia. But they explicitly restrict their bombard against the oligarchs to the “pro-Kyiv” ones.
Constitution to allow for popular election of governors.

**Russian imperialism**

But Russian intervention has upset the balance in Ukraine. It’s responsible for Antimaidan turning into a secession movement, and this not only threatens to dismember Ukraine, but to embitter relations between the Ukrainian and Russian peoples.

Why has the Russian government done this? Ukraine posed no threat to Russia. It doesn’t have the military strength to be a threat, nor the desire; millions of Ukrainians have family ties in Russia, and Ukraine as a whole mainly seeks relations with both east and west. Ukraine’s main worries with respect to Russia still remain ensuring that its borders are respected, continuing commercial relations, and maintaining the flow of Russian natural gas.

Russia intervened in Ukraine not out of self-defense, but because Russia is an imperialist power. It is ruled by the Russian bourgeoisie, and like the bourgeoisie of all great powers, like the American bourgeoisie, it seeks to dominate, bully, and exploit other countries. The Russian bourgeoisie, military officialdom, and bureaucrats remember the days of the Soviet Union when American and Russian imperialism were the two superpowers that sat on top of everyone else. It regards it as unfair that it no longer can intervene in the affairs of other countries around the world in the same way as before. Putin complains that the Russian government’s interests in Syria, Libya, Iraq, Kosovo, etc. have not been respected by other imperialists. This is not a defense of the peoples of these countries, who have suffered from many of Putin’s friends, such as the bloody Assad dictatorship in Syria, but a demand for Russia to be recognized as an equal partner at the imperialist table.

To help achieve this, the Russian bourgeoisie has been looking for ways to reestablish its influence over all the republics that became independent when the Soviet Union dissolved in 1991. It regards these countries as part of its natural and legitimate sphere of influence. It isn’t doing this in order to reestablish the social and political system of the USSR. The Russian bourgeoisie is quite happy with the tremendous wealth it has gained since the fall of the Stalinist state-capitalist system in the USSR. What Putin and the Russian bourgeoisie want to restore is Russian dominance over its neighbors. So when then President Yanukovych seemed about to sign an agreement with the European Union, Putin stepped up pressure on Ukraine. Then when Yanukovych was overthrown, which Putin did not want, Russia intervened without hesitation, and unmarked military personnel were sent into Crimea.

Historically, the Ukrainian nationality was an oppressed nationality for several centuries, and Ukraine was ruled by several countries, mostly Russia. During this period, the Tsarist government sought to “Russify” the Ukrainian people, replacing the Ukrainian language with Russian, and Ukrainians were regarded as “little Russians”. Tsarist Russia was a notorious “prison house of nations”, and the Ukrainians were only one of many oppressed nationalities. The Bolshevik revolution, however, resulted in a major change in national policy. The Ukraine and various other republics in the Soviet Union were declared to have the right to self-determination, and for a period of time a policy of “indigenization” (including “Ukrainianization”) was followed — there was promotion of the language and culture of formerly oppressed nationalities. But as the revolution died out and was replaced by Stalinist state-capitalism, the Ukrainian people were again subject to Russification. This is why today far more Ukrainians speak Russian than are ethnically Russian. It’s not that there’s anything wrong with Ukrainians speaking Russian today: the mixture of languages and ethnic backgrounds in Ukraine is a positive feature of present Ukrainian culture. But this is how the Russian language achieved its current position in Ukraine.

The achievement of independence in 1991 was an important event for the Ukrainian people. But the Russian bourgeoisie isn’t reconciled to this, and regards that Ukrainian policy should be subject to its approval. This is the only way in which it can understand friendly relations between Russia and Ukraine. With true colonialist mentality, it doesn’t see that hostility between countries is created by the demand for domination. It doesn’t see that the more that Russia abandoned the colonial policy of the past, the more the ties of friendship between the Russian and Ukrainian peoples would grow. But if the Russian government should succeed in slicing off east and southeastern Ukraine as well as Crimea, then whatever remained of Ukraine might well nurse an abiding fear and hatred of Russia for years and years.

**The annexation of Crimea**

The first act of Russian military intervention in Ukraine was the annexation of Crimea. Immediately after Yanukovych fled Ukraine, pro-Yanukovych armed “self-defence squads”, set up in previous weeks in order to oppose Maidan, now put pressure upon the Crimean government. Demonstrations for and against the new government broke out in Crimea. Within a few days, the Russian government sent unmarked military personnel throughout Crimea. These were the so-called “Martians” or “little green men”, people allegedly from nowhere.

The little green men occupied Crimea, blocked Ukrainian military installations, seized the Crimean Verkhovna Rada (parliament), and suppressed opposition throughout Crimea. Men from the Berkut riot police, disbanded by the new government in Kyiv, took part in this. Sergey Aksyonov was installed as Prime Minister: he was from a Party, Russian Unity, that had obtained a mere 4% of the votes in the last Crimean election.24 A referendum on the status of Crimea was set for May 25, but then moved forward to the earlier date of March 16. Meanwhile more unmarked Russian military personnel arrived.

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24One presumes that a more popular politician, and one without Aksyonov’s links to organized crime, could have been found in the secessionist ranks. Surely someone from the Party of Regions, which had obtained almost half of the votes in the last Crimean election, would have been eager to be Prime Minister. The selection, instead, of Aksyonov suggests how stage-managed the entire process was.
The referendum was held under oppressive conditions. Journalists, supporters of Maidan, and anyone but secessionist enthusiasts, were intimidated. Ukrainian TV stations had been taken off the air, and replaced by broadcasts from Russia. It was repeated over and over that Russians were under imminent threat in Ukraine. The referendum question was odd, and did not allow one to vote for the status quo. And unlikely vote tallies were announced; given that the Crimean Tatars, comprising 12% of the population, were adamantly against Russian annexation, the vote tallies could only have been true if both the Russian and Ukrainian ethnic populations voted almost unanimously for annexation.

True, the referendum was overseen by observers who gave it a clean bill of health. But these were from far-right parties. They included, for example, Bela Kovacs from the Hungarian fascist party Jobbik; Enrique Ravello who was originally from the Spanish neo-Nazi CEDADE but moved over to the racist, far-right Plataforma per Catalunya; Luc Michel, who was at one time in the French neo-Nazi Fédération d’action nationaliste et européenne, but is now a leader of the Belgium-Based Parti Communiste National-Européen, which, as “National Bolsheviks”, pretends fascism is communism.

This process of annexation violated Russian and Ukrainian law, to say nothing of any reasonable procedure. But bourgeois law is not the highest authority for the working class movement, so the question arises of whether the annexation implemented the right to self-determination of oppressed nationalities.

First of all, what was the oppressed nationality in Crimea? This has to be, first and foremost, the Crimean Tatars. This was originally their homeland, not that of the Russians or Ukrainians. But several centuries of Russian occupation have reduced them to a minority in Crimea. There was a resurgence of the Tatars during “indigenization” and “Tatarization” in 1923-28, but later on Stalinist state-capitalism brought renewed and intense tragedy to the Tatars, culminating in the removal of all of them from Crimea on May 18, 1944; they were deported to distant locations in the Soviet Union, and those in the Red Army were mainly demobilized and sent to labor camps. This was an immense crime against them, and an attempt to eliminate their nationality. For years even after Stalin’s death, they still couldn’t return to Crimea. It wasn’t until the mid-1980s that they could start to return. Although so far about 250,000 have returned, they still face the question of regaining their lands and status.

So it’s not surprising that the Crimean Tatars are opposed to the annexation of Crimea by Russia. The Russian government tried to win them over with promises. But sure enough, following the annexation of Crimea, just about the first thing done by the new Russian administration was to announce that many Tatars would be required to move again, although this time it was supposed to be to other areas in Crimea. Their political leaders face harassment and repression. And thousands of Tatars, despite the attachment to Crimea that brought them back to the old homeland, have fled Crimea to Ukraine. Thus the annexation of Crimea has been a brutal act against the national rights of the Tatars.

What about the Russian ethnic population of Crimea? It was the dominant nationality in Crimea, being 58.5% of the population and powerful politically. There were certain guarantees for the Russian language, as the Crimean Constitution states that “In the Autonomous Republic of Crimea, Russian, being the language spoken by the majority of population and the language acceptable for purposes of interethnic communication, shall be used in all spheres of public life.” There undoubtedly is a definite section of the population that would like to join Russia, and this includes some Ukrainians as well as Russians. But it’s not clear if this is the majority of Crimeans.

In 1991 a majority of Crimeans voted, albeit only by a modest margin, for Ukraine to be independent from Russia. In the following years, there was haggling over autonomy. Moreover, since then, the economic hardships and unsettled situation in Ukraine may have changed minds, particularly in the older generation. On the other hand, it seems that those who have grown up since Ukrainian independence seem to identify with Ukraine. There have been a series of opinion polls over the years on whether Crimeans would prefer union with Russia, and their results varied. It seems that the answer to the question varies according to the circumstances of the time.

This means that an attempt to deal with the national issue, rather than simply grab a piece of Ukraine, would involve having a serious process for Crimeans to consider the issues at stake, and for the various groups to put forward their views. It would be important, if the result was not to be oppressive, that the process was done in close consultation with and respect for the Crimean Tatars. And it’s not clear what the outcome would be. Nor is it clear that it would be the same as that of a referendum held in the midst of a political crisis, with a new government just having taken power in Ukraine, with rumors and passions waxing hot, and with the little green men calling the shots.

What happened was, instead, that the Russian government simply raped Ukraine; it was imperialism in action.

**Russia and the far right**

The Russian government has draped its intervention against Ukraine in anti-fascist colors, but, as we have seen above, it was various European far right and neo-Nazi groups that were

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22 There were two options, one for uniting with Russia, and the other for “the reinstatement of the 1992 Constitution of the Republic of Crimea and for the status of Crimea as part of Ukraine”. But the 1992 Constitution, which had lasted a matter of days, might be taken as declaring Crimea independent of Ukraine. It was the 1998 Constitution of Crimea which was in force in 2014 when Russia moved in.
eager to help it annex Crimea. This was no accident. For some time Putin and the Russian have been developing ties with a number of the most notorious far right groups in Europe, such as the neo-Nazi Golden Dawn in Greece, Jobbik in Hungary, and the National Front in France.

This friendship for the far right is reflected in Russian and pro-Russian news agencies fawning on groups like the National Front of France. ITAR-TASS, in a story about the friendly reception of Russian sailors in France and the French deal to sell warships to Russia, makes a point of saying that “France’s National Front has welcomed the Russian sailors’ visit.” Indeed, it dwells at length on the pro-Russian views of the National Front and of its president, Marine Le Pen (the youngest daughter of its founder, Jean-Marie Le Pen). 24 The Voice of Russia, Russia’s international radio service, carried an exclusive interview of ITAR-TASS with Le Pen that promotes her views on the “total transformation of Europe, and consequently, the disassembling of the European Union” and her support for Russia’s position on Ukraine. There is no criticism of Le Pen, but just praise. 25 The pro-Russian news agency RT (formerly known as Russia Today) has also carried favorable coverage of Le Pen, promoting the National Front as allegedly the force standing against austerity, fawning that “the human element retains special importance for Le Pen”, and promoting her defense against the charge of being racist.

Thus Russia is helping a section of the European far right infiltrate the movement against austerity and come closer to taking state power. In this partnership, Russia gets an ally in its efforts to dismember Ukraine and, more generally, to be taken more seriously by the other imperialists. For its part, the far right sees Russia as an ally in the fight against the presently-dominant section of the Eurobourgeoisie. And both sides share conservative values such as contempt for democratic rights, rabid nationalism, chauvinism towards immigrants, and hostility for gay people.

There is also a Russian far right movement, which is influential among Russian nationalists and the Russian government. Among the Russian nationalist and ultra-nationalist trends are the following:

* Vladimir Zhirinovsky’s so-called Liberal Democratic Party, which is an ultra-nationalist party that has been accepted as legitimate in the Russian Duma (parliament). In the last Duma elections it received 11.67% of the vote, and it has had one of the vice chairman positions in the Duma ever since 1994. Among other things, it stands for expanding the borders of Russia to include Ukraine and other former Soviet republics, and in the present crisis Zhirinovsky has called for dividing up Ukraine among the neighboring countries. The LDP poses as a loud-mouthed opposition party, but Zhirinovsky is also regarded as an ally of Putin who says outrageous things that Putin couldn’t. 27

* The Communist Party of the Russian Federation, led by Gennady Zyuganov, which is the successor of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. It is nostalgic for the Stalinist system; it doesn’t recognize the crimes of that system; and it regards that oppressive state-capitalist system as socialism. Nevertheless, it doesn’t intend to go back to that system; rhetoric aside, it has come to terms with the present form of the capitalist system. It’s communism is just a form of Russian nationalism, and it is the party of the “red-brown” alliance, that is, “red” alliance with the ultra-nationalists and the far right.

* The “National Bolshevism” of Edward Limonov and Aleksandr Dugin and Eduard Limonov, which seeks to combine fascism with some communist symbolism, thus completely negating communism. While real communism is internationalist, for Russian Bolshevism it is Russian ultranationalism. Dugin is an influential theorist of neo-Eurasianism, which dreams of a vast Russian empire throughout Eurasia. One observer of the fascist movements comments that: “While Dugin is sometimes associated with Putin’s regime, Dugin himself hates Putin as he considers Russian president too liberal. Dugin’s plan is to exert ideological influence on Putin’s authoritarian state and provide it with the fascist ideological underpinnings disguised as Eurasianism.” 28

The Russian far right may denounce the government in ringing tones, but it serves as non-official shock troops for Russian expansionism, doing what the Russian government can’t officially do. The strong position of In Ukraine, the threat of the far right comes from both pro-Russian as well as anti-Russian elements.

**The secessionist movement in east Ukraine**

Encouraged by success in Crimea, the Russian government went after East and Southeastern Ukraine. This is the region Putin, imitating the Tsarist colonialists of old, calls “Novorossiya” (New Russia), a name then taken up by the secessionists. Whatever the equivocations in Putin’s public statements, designed to deter sanctions from Western governments, he spurred on the separatists. Boris Kagarlitsky, a prominent Russian leftist who dreams that the People’s Republics of Donetsk and Luhansk are carrying out the social

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revolution, writes that “Representatives of the Donetsk republic and of the movements of the Ukrainian south-east show up constantly in Moscow, where they are received warmly and with goodwill. Meetings for them are organised with journalists and Duma deputies.” 29 Kagarlitsky then laments that the representatives supposedly return empty-handed; he ignores the stream of Russian nationalists crossing the border to fight in Ukraine; the provision of Russian weapons and supplies, including sophisticated anti-aircraft systems; and the concerted campaign by Russian TV streaming into east Ukraine.

The so-called People’s Republics of Donetsk and Luhansk have a notably repressive character. Having complained that the overthrow of Yanukovych was a mere coup, the organizers of the Donetsk and Luhansk republics apparently decided to do that themselves. These “governments” were not established as the result of either elections or mass demonstrations, but simply by armed groups seizing public buildings. There were no elections of governors and other officials, and it might not even be clear who was supposed to be in power. One armed gang or the other might simply replace one group of secessionists who were supposedly in charge with another: on May 29 the Vostok Battalion, a group with many fighters from outside Ukraine, evicted the local separatists from a government building in Donetsk, accusing them of looting a nearby grocery.

The events in Slovyansk, a city within Donetsk Oblast, are also notable. The secessionists took it over in mid-April, and held it until early July. Vyacheslav Ponomarev, the owner of a soap factory, declared himself mayor, while the elected mayor, Nelly Shtepa, was detained, and it’s still not known what’s happened to her. Many other people were arrested as well. Simon Ostrovs’ky, a correspondent for the international news channel VICE News, was held for four days, accused of being a spy, and beaten; he saw a dozen other prisoners in the same basement with him. There was no formal procedure against detainees, who just vanish, and may or may not turn up again. Even just speaking Ukrainian could make one a suspect. Then on June 10, it was Ponomarev’s turn. On the orders of the secessionist “defense minister”, Igor Strelkov, Ponomarev himself was arrested, and it’s still not known what became of him.

Political opposition is not tolerated by the secessionists. On April 28, about 2,000 opponents of secession held a peaceful demonstration in the city of Donetsk in which they carried Ukrainian flags and chanted slogans like “Donetsk is Ukraine”. They were attacked by thugs with baseball bats, truncheons, and iron rods (the police were present but faded away and allowed the attack), and several were kidnapped for a day in an attempt to make them confess falsely to being members of Pravyi Sektor. 30 After this, there were no more attempts at pro-Ukrainian rallies.

The repression extends to unions as well. For example, coal miners and unions in east Ukraine are split in their views, with the Union of Coal Workers being close to Yanukovych and tjdhe Party of Regions, while the Independent Trade Union of Coal Miners of Ukraine (NPGU) backed the movement against Yanukovych. On May 28 somewhere between several hundred and a thousand coal miners took part in a pro-secessionist demonstrated in Donetsk. But the NPGU opposes the secessionists, and reports attacks by them on its members and attempts by them to loot workplaces. 31 In mid-May steel workers in Mariupol and several other cities organized joint patrols with the police, and enforced order against the looting and bullying carried out by the secessionists (but left the secessionists in ypower). Meanwhile coal miners at Makiivka, which is near the city of Donetsk, refused to take down the Ukrainian flag, and organized a self-defense unit to protect their mine from retaliation from the secessionists. 32

The one vote organized by the secessionists was a referendum on May 11, with the question “Do you support the declaration of state independence of the Donetsk (Luhansk) People’s Republic?” The method used was similar to that in Crimea. The question was ambiguous, the actual Russian word used in the referendum having the meaning of either full independence or autonomy. There was no opposition allowed, and those forces opposed to the vote carried out a silent boycott. The vote was held in the midst of a major upheaval, so that people might be swept away by their emotions, or vote based solely on their attitude to immediate events. And it was timed to take place prior to the Ukrainian presidential elections of May 25, which the secessionists refused to allow to take place in their region. On May 25, the secessionists in Donetsk stole the ballot boxes for the presidential election and famously put them on the street, marked as trash receptacles: a better symbol of their attitude towards people’s rights could hardly have been found.

The program of the secessionists

In late June, the secessionist regions merged into the “Union of the People’s Republics of Donetsk and Luhansk”, and adopted a constitution. If it is the same as the draft constitution that was made known in May, it has the following features:

* establishes a state religion: the Russian Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarchate), which it recognizes as the “cornerstone of the state religion of Russia.

30(...continued)


32http://observerukraine.net/2014/05/09/makiivka-miners-confront-the-separatists/
of the Russian world”;
* says that nothing in the constitution should be taken to limit the right to restrict other “religious sects”;
* states that “any forms of perverted unions between people of the same sex are not acknowledged, not allowed, and will be prosecuted” — thus not only outlawing same-sex marriages, but repealing Ukraine’s decriminalization of gay and lesbian relationships;
* outlaws abortion from the moment of conception, with no exceptions whatsoever; and
* repeatedly identifies itself as part of the “Russian world”, and states that public authorities “while exercising their powers and performing of their duties, fully consider and respect traditional religious, social, cultural and moral values of the ‘Russian World’.”

Kagarlitsky and various other apologists for the secessionists pretend that they may well strike at the oligarchs and capitalism. But the constitution endorses “private property” and the right to use one’s property in “entrepreneurial activity”. Borotba, a would-be left-wing organization which has taken part in the secessionist movement, complained that the draft constitution put all forms of property, private or state, on the same level, and listed private property first. It said that such a constitution would mean that the secession regions “will be merely a second edition of Ukraine as we have known it since 1991, except with Russian nationalism substituted for Ukrainian”. But don’t worry, Borotba is sure to find some reason to keep supporting the secessionist movement anyway.

The “traditional” values promoted in the constitution were, manifested in how the secessionists appealed to the people of east Ukraine. Agreement with the EU was denounced as bringing same-sex marriage, and a number of gay people have fled from east Ukraine to safety elsewhere in Ukraine. Russian news reports repeatedly reminded people that such Ukrainian politicians as Yulia Tymoshenko and Arseniy Yatsenyuk are partially Jewish, while some anti-EU posters in eastern Ukraine portrayed caricatures of orthodox Jews. There was also reported to be harassment of Romani people in Slavyansk.

Western imperialism

Meanwhile, the Obama administration and the EU are posing as friends of the Ukrainian people. But all they have in mind is supporting their own interests.

They are looking forward to extending Western market-fundamentalism into Ukraine. They are extending the minimum of loans necessary to entice Ukraine to enter into a program of austerity. And they expect to extract every penny back from Ukraine.

But suppose these measures force more unemployment and poverty through Ukraine. After all, Ukraine already is a poor country with low wages: there isn’t much to cut. Will the EU do anything to help Ukraine support those who lose their jobs and income? Of course not — they haven’t helped the workers of EU countries, and they aren’t going to help Ukrainians either. Ukraine is a country with ties both to Europe and Russia, and the majority of the population would prefer to keep it that way. Many Ukrainians, whether they supported a deal with EU or Eurasian Union, did so in the belief that it wouldn’t rule out ties with the other side. But the EU doesn’t aim to make this easy or provide special arrangements for Ukraine to do this. If the West isn’t sure whether it wants Ukraine in NATO, it’s not because it knows how divisive this would be for the Ukrainian people, but simply because the US and EU don’t want to have the obligation to defend Ukrainian borders.

Both the US and Russia regard influence over Ukraine as part of a geopolitical game. For Russia, a Eurasian Union, with Ukraine its crown jewel, would be a base for projecting power around the world. Meanwhile the West would like to block Russian maneuvers and shift Ukraine into the Western sphere of influence.

But the Ukrainian crisis mainly affects the Ukraine. It needs to be judged on the basis of the rights and welfare of the Ukrainian people. The Russian intervention in Ukraine has called the independence of Ukraine into question, and the Ukrainian people have the right to maintain that independence. The real motives of Western powers needs to be borne in mind by Ukrainian workers, but they do not discredit the right to self-determination of the Ukrainian people.

Moreover, the Ukrainian crisis was not the result of a Western plot to destroy Russia. Imperialism is a vicious system which breeds conflicts among countries which can break out rapidly, and there are continual squabbles between the bourgeoisie of the big powers over spheres of interest. But for some time the capitalist rulers of Russia and the West have been working together in a number of ways. They have collaborated in building new and more terrible weapons of destruction, and even as the Ukraine crisis proceeds, French President Hollande insists that France will honor its deal to sell Russia an advanced warship, the amphibious assault ship (also called a helicopter carrier) Vladivostok, in October. The EU now buys 30% of its natural gas from Russia, even though this makes it dependent on Russia for essential energy supplies. The major Western oil companies, Exxon and BP, have so far shrugged at sanctions against Russia and have extended their relations with Rosneft, the Russian state-owned oil company.

The Ukrainian crisis is upsetting this accommodation between the great powers. For the imperialists, every conflict is a trial of strength to see how the pecking order among big powers should be readjusted. But the fundamental divide in the world isn’t between the Western capitalists and the Russian
ones; it’s between the capitalists as a whole and the workers of the world, with inequality increasing in both Russia and the West, and with the big powers of both east and west seeking to bully the weaker countries. So the goals and preoccupations of the imperialists, whether of the east or the west, are not the goals and preoccupations of progressive people. Instead class-conscious workers and activists need to support just causes no matter what minor adjustments they cause in the imperialist pecking order.

In particular, it is not anti-imperialist to support one imperialist against the other. It is not anti-imperialist to either support Russian imperialism’s claims to a historic sphere of influence, or Western imperialism’s claims to be friends of democracy and freedom. It is fantasy to believe that if only the big powers respect each other’s right to dominate the proper quota of smaller countries, then world peace will be preserved. Instead we should be concerned with building contact and support with Ukrainian workers and their struggle, and for supporting the Ukrainian right to self-determination. For both Western and Russian imperialism, workers are nothing, profits and geopolitical maneuvers are everything. For genuine anti-imperialists, the people’s struggle is everything, and geopolitical “realistic politics” is nothing. The fight against imperialism doesn’t mean sharing with the imperialists their exaggerated assessment of the significance of each minor change in geopolitical alignments, and becoming left-wing versions of Henry Kissinger. The fight against imperialism requires rejecting imperialist “realism” and having solidarity with progressive struggles and working class movements around the world.

**Solidarity with Ukrainian working people!**

The Ukrainian people face many complex problems. The overthrow of a corrupt and hated president, Viktor Yanukovych, has turned out to usher in a period even more difficult than that of the struggle against him. But the more difficult the movement, the more important it is to give the workers and activists support, and to learn from what happens to it.

Some people say we shouldn’t support the Ukrainian working people because Western governments and NGOs have been involved with the “Orange Revolution” and then Euromaidan. But it’s hard to find any major struggle in the world that the imperialists of east and west haven’t tried to influence. By supporting the working people and their attempts to set forward their own aims, we concretely oppose the orientations set forward by the bourgeoisie of the east or the west.

Some people say that we shouldn’t support the Ukrainian people because their struggles may upset the Russian imperialist sphere of influence or be utilized in its own interest by Western imperialism. But the key question isn’t which imperialists might temporarily benefit from the struggle of the Ukrainian people. The important thing is the struggle of the Ukrainian working people. In the long run, it is only the development of the class struggle which will undermine the imperialisms of east and west.

Some say that we shouldn’t support the Ukrainian people because they are all fascists, while Russia holds tight to the anti-fascist banner. But the Ukrainian people are not fascists, and far right and fascist groups, no matter how much they try to insinuate themselves into the people’s struggle, are having a hard time gaining influence. Meanwhile the Russian government is not anti-fascist, but allied with many of the largest fascist parties in Europe. It has relations with the National Front in France, Jobbik in Hungary, and Golden Dawn in Greece. It has relations with various of the far right and ultra-nationalist groups in Russia, and far right and militarist Russians have flocked into East Ukraine and spearheaded the separatist movement.

Some claim that no progressive people should have supported the struggle against Yanukovych because that would mean supporting the bourgeois leadership of Maidan, or that opposing Russian interference in Ukraine would mean that one supports all the actions of the central government in Kyiv. But the only way to oppose the bourgeois forces from the left is to create a specifically working class trend within the important and legitimate mass struggles. Not just in Ukraine, but throughout the world it is the task of class-conscious workers and left political activists to learn how to build such independent trends.

At this time, the Ukrainian workers, like workers elsewhere, aren’t clear on the path forward. Like people elsewhere, they are influenced by bourgeois nationalist ideas and the dominant capitalist ideologies of the present-day. But since Ukraine became independent in 1991, the working people have done a lot more thinking for themselves, rather than just accept what was handed to them, and they have won at least a certain space for political life. They will not willingly surrender this to the local oligarchs or to the pro-Russian secessionists; nor are they likely to passively accept the austerity championed by the EU. The Ukrainian workers will eventually find their way to building a movement that truly speaks for them. Their struggle deserves our support.

*By Joseph Green*
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