

# Internationalist Notes

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'Election wheel',  
Woodcut, 1932. Gerd Arntz

## Wisconsin Protests Looking Back

The following article was sent for publication to *Insurgent Notes*\*. Since the time of writing this a federal circuit court judge has ruled against parts of the Act 10 legislation, in as far as it targets only certain sectors of the state workforce (teachers, clerical workers and blue collar workers). The newly installed Chief of Capitol police has had his tiny force which patrols the State Capitol grounds, arresting anyone showing up at the building with a sign. It cannot be emphasized enough that it was the unions and union militants, above and beyond the other radical reformists present at the protests, who put workers firmly on the conveyor belt to support for defeat within a neo-reformist framework of the Democratic Party. This effectively placed the entire focus of workers demands into the realm of auxiliary support for a ruling bourgeois faction.

The nature of the unions is one of achieving recognition in order to negotiate a deal with the employing class, placing unions within the orbit of that faction of the bourgeoisie most willing to strike a bargain with the unions. Neither reformism nor the creation of a separate radical union apparatus can alter this. In fact it was the most militant left-reformists who were the most loyal to the unions. The imperative here is to break from the perspective of making deals with capitalist devils towards the overthrow of capitalism itself. AS

A little over a year has come and gone since the protests in Wisconsin and already there are a half a dozen books out on the subject, all of the reformist liberal democratic variety. While all efforts have been expended on electing a Democratic Party governor, the effects of the cuts and rewriting of work rules is already being felt. The Democratic Party succeeded in asserting control from the start through the party apparatus and the state workers unions. When the portable toilets showed up it was obvious that the Democrats were in charge.

From the start the unions demanded only that the traditional bargaining structure remain intact. All the other austerity measures they agreed to accept. Since then changes to seniority and transfer rules have been pushed through, along with hefty increases in insurance and pension contributions taken out of workers take-home pay and an end to third-party grievance procedures. Those who would seek the governor's seat have opposed none of these measures.

The rewriting of popular history provides little background and leaves little room for criticism of the Democratic Party's own role in initiating these attacks on workers. From the previous Governor's "furlough days" to the current Governor's pay and benefits cuts. The energy of the thousands that gathered for the protests was effectively dissipated by its' own deference to the orators of bourgeois reformism. While the unions did not oppose the concessions, the absence of the union in the workplace has given credence to the general feeling that nothing can be done to oppose the capitalists of the state administration.

### Democrats and Unions Against the Workers

The official position of the unions from the start, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and American Federation of State County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME), was to have no strikes, or strike talk, from the union locals. The regional union umbrella group the South Central Federation of Labor did vote to give the go-ahead to a statewide strike but this was a token resolution while the real power lay with the international union headquarters and the Democratic Party circus. Many workers were more than willing to do this bare minimum in defending their immediate interests and didn't want to take another trouncing. Doctors from the UW Hospital came out to sign sick notes for workers who had walked out and have since been facing sanctions for their actions. Unsurprisingly, given the statements of the Democratic Party candidates, it looks as if the austerity measures signed into law will not be decisively reversed by any incoming Democratic Party ad-

## The Grand Spectacle: Capitalist Elections and the Permanent War

As Election Day approaches in the United States, it is important to evaluate the foreign policy of the current president, and place this administration within the contemporary imperialist framework. It will then become clear that the debate between representative political parties only centers around the interests of the ruling class specific to the current stage of capitalist decay. After pledging to change the course of American foreign policy, and to get away from George W. Bush's doctrine, Barack Obama has hardly done either. In fact, the president has not moved away from, but expanded on Bush's unilateral programs in the so-called "War on Terror". More importantly, Obama's administration has not changed the course of American foreign policy as they promised; they have merely given it a new outward appearance. This does not come as a surprise to those who understand the role of the state in supporting the imperialist project that is structurally embedded within the logic of capitalism. Nevertheless, there will be those during the course of the electoral spectacle who convince themselves that voting for the "lesser evil" is the most important thing to do. Rest assured no vote in the present electoral system will ever be able to catalyze a "democratic" revolution from below to end all wars. There is no "changing the course" of foreign policy.

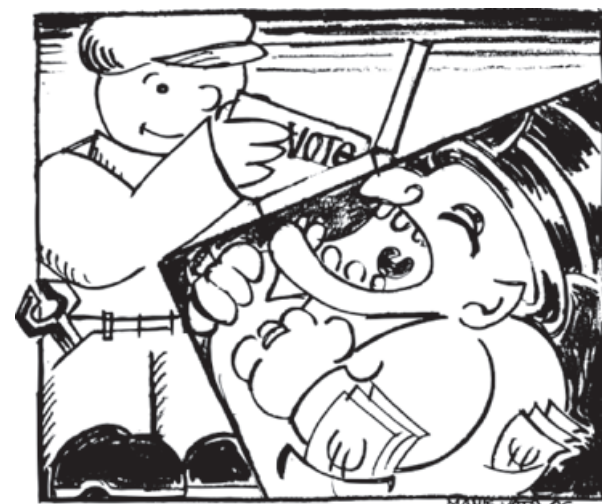
### The Historical Precedent for the Current Framework

Control of the Gulf has been the cornerstone of the global imperialist project for decades. The key ingredient of this project is the quest to control the world's oil supply, the major contemporary source of global financial wealth. Iraq has been in constant turmoil since the first oil reserves were discovered during its time as a British protectorate. It is a highly coveted strategic location in the Middle East, and also has large reserves of water and natural gas. In 2000, before 9/11 and before the toppling of Saddam Hussein, the Project for a New American Century (the neo-conservative think-tank which pulled the strings of Bush's top advisors) issued a report, titled "Rebuilding America's Defenses," which outlined their strategy for the future. The infamous report resolved that the United States must increase its military presence around the globe for, "the preservation of a favorable balance of power in Europe, the Middle East and surrounding energy producing region, and East Asia." 5 Brushing aside the cloaked rhetoric, this entailed pursuing complete control of the Gulf in order to weaken America's chief rivals by securing the vast oil reserves in the Middle East and Africa. "While the unresolved conflict with Iraq provides the immediate justification, the need for a substantial American force presence in the Gulf transcends the issue of the regime of Saddam Hussein." 5 This unquestionable need for a strong American (or otherwise) presence in the Gulf is not rooted in a moral duty to liberate humanity from conservative religious zealots. Rather, it is an economic and strategic imperative in the imperialist epoch of capitalism which forces national bourgeoisies to compete over the division of the world's resources, to constantly search for new investment opportunities, and to maintain the rate of profit by any other means necessary.

Put quite simply, US foreign policy since the end of the Cold War can be seen as an attempt to assert its imperial presence in the face of the prolonged capitalist crisis of profits, an increasingly unified Europe, and an increasingly powerful China. The most recent major developments in the crisis, the bursting of the latest debt bubble during the second half of the last decade, have only exacerbated this need for operations abroad, and President Obama has taken the helm in one of the most militarized presidencies in American history. It is important to understand that war is not merely a matter of policy and tactics, but is a crucial and necessary weapon for the survival of the capitalist class.

### Obama's Ramped-Up Initiatives

Barack Obama has more than quadrupled the number of armed drone strikes authorized since the Bush administration. Using new technologies, Bush's pretense of executive privilege, proxy forces, elite special ops teams (essentially global death squads), and clever language designed to exploit legal loopholes, Obama is now directly involved in a number of highly secretive shadow wars being waged in at least 4 different countries, in which the president himself presides over a weekly "kill list", and personally hand-picks who will be the next victim of extrajudicial murder, by remote control or otherwise.<sup>3,4,6</sup> While the "official" narrative is that only known terrorists are targeted and no non-combatants have been killed by drones, the reality is not so black and white. The Pentagon and the CIA define a combatant as "any military-aged male in the vicinity of an attack".<sup>2</sup> White House officials consistently flip-flop over what is and is not known about civilian casualties, while conveniently clouding the differentiation between operations which target "specific individuals" and "signature strikes" (strikes aimed at groups, or entire facilities).<sup>2</sup> With such vague and subtle diversions, it is hard to trust any official figures on civilian casualties by drone attacks. Between the various media outlets and research organizations, estimates of civilian deaths by drones, many of them women and children seen as collateral damage, hover around 20% of the approximately 4,000 killed since the program began in 2002.<sup>1,2,3,4,7</sup> According to the Bureau for Investigative Journalism, in Pakistan alone, between 2004 and 2011 at least 44% of the low estimate 385 noncombatant casualties in drone attacks were children.<sup>8</sup> However, our argument is not a moralistic one, and we must not dwell on the figures regarding civilian casualties of war. The purpose of this exercise is to expose the blatant hypocrisy of the ruling class which uses moralistic provocations to justify their aggressive military campaigns abroad. We internationalists, on the other hand, are not on the side of some abstract moral imperative such as peace or universal love; we are on the side of the survival of the human race and its collective liberation from the constraints of an irrational state of affairs, which sacrifices our species on the altar of the accumulation of our own dead labor.



## Strategic Maneuvering

During his 2008 campaign, Obama relied heavily on support from the anti-war liberals who made up his voting base. However, Obama's critique of the wars in the Middle East was never based on an analysis of imperialism and class. This allowed him to rally behind the idealistic pacifist rhetoric of the mainstream left, and simultaneously remain a committed puppet of American imperialism. Obama's presidency has virtually neutralized anti-war dissent and channeled its energy toward supporting his version of a more "diplomatic" war on terror, or a "kinder, gentler machine gun hand" (Neil Young). The Obama campaign phenomenon has created an army of rabidly jingoistic and apologetic followers who are blind to global realities. The psyche of empire in this country has rarely been so deeply entrenched, and the active collaboration of left reformist bourgeois elements has been instrumental in its establishment. In the coming election, the dialogue will not be of an anti-war president versus a pro-war president, but will be two pro-war capitalists trying to convince voters that their strategy is the best to further American interests abroad. The candidates argue before the declassified voting public where and against whom to go to war against next.

## The Bottom Line

It is time for American workers to realize that no bourgeois election is ever going to end the permanent capitalist war. By voting, we are merely legitimizing the system that needs war and exploitation in order to survive. While the world's major imperialist powers are sharpening their knives over the resources of the developing world, while the crisis and the costs of said imperial wars continue to compel the capitalist class to push austerity on the masses, and while the current profit-driven system shows no intention of changing its ways even in the face of imminent ecological catastrophe 9, the American media continues to propel the false dichotomy of the political left and right. This year, as always, the voting booth will alienate workers from each other and rob them of their voice. Rather than participate in the elections of the ruling class, we must organize to put the struggle back on our own terrain, in the workplace and in our communities, to build a militant struggle and implement true working class power.

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## Links

- [1] <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/politics/second-reading/the-case-against-obamas-drone-war/article4414874/>
- [2] <http://blogs.independent.co.uk/2012/06/08/obama%E2%80%99s-drone-wars-strain-the-liberal-principles-he-espoused-in-2008/>
- [3] [http://www.cjr.org/feature/covering\\_obamas\\_secret\\_war.php?page=all](http://www.cjr.org/feature/covering_obamas_secret_war.php?page=all)
- [4] <http://www.guardian.co.uk/comment-isfree/2012/jun/11/obama-drone-wars-normalisation-extra-judicial-killing>
- [5] <http://www.newamericancentury.org/RebuildingAmericasDefenses.pdf>
- [6] <http://www.wired.com/danger-room/2010/09/cias-afghan-kill-teams-expand-u-s-war-in-pakistan/>
- [7] <http://counterterrorism.newamerica.net/drones>
- [8] <http://www.thebureauinvestigates.com/2011/08/11/more-than-160-children-killed-in-us-strikes/>
- [9] <http://www.rollingstone.com/politics/news/global-warnings-terrifying-new-math-20120719>

ministration and union recognition and bargaining agreements could hinge directly on which party occupied the Governors' Mansion. This state of affairs would be convenient for the politicians of the Democrat's ruling fraction, as this would place unions in a more subordinate position.

The main reason the state workers unions achieved any limited collective bargaining recognition from the state was because of the 1972 Federal Postal Workers strike. Across the US many of the clerical and blue-collar workers unions that had existed since the 1930s achieved this limited recognition from the state in the interests of maintaining capitalist order. The agreement contained in it a 'no strike' clause in exchange for 'collective bargaining' with the state government as an employer.

This is not to say that public workers did not take action in all that time, usually it meant the total isolation of any strike move as it began to break out. In such circumstances waves of "blue flu" occasionally occur. The Madison teachers began with a strike for recognition back in 1976 and were for many years a union body independent of the AFL-CIO. This changed in the years immediately prior to the protests when they finally allowed the American Federation of Teachers to swallow them. Of the three teachers strikes in Wisconsin in the 1970s, the 1977 Racine Teachers strike and the Hortonville teachers strike 1974 were both deeply isolated and bitter. The growth of the teachers unions at the time was the product of a good deal of militant sentiment among workers and was successfully channeled through the unions and into the Democratic Party.

## A Class on the Retreat?

The conflict between the default control mechanism of social protest and the desire to fight on the part of workers was definitely present. The pall of the old left hangs over social protest in the hostility towards all political organizations other than the Democratic Party. The bourgeoisie gets to have its political organizations but if workers try to form their own revolutionary organizations that would be somehow "totalitarian". Given the political environment where anti-communism is still the common political denominator. Everything that is the opposite of anything "socialist" is the highest virtue. The ghost of Communism still haunts the bourgeoisie in its overly conspicuous political absence. The use of American flags to show that one isn't "anti-American", the talk about a "middle class" instead of talking about a working class, the use of phrases like "the 1%" to describe the capitalist class, reducing the common situation in which workers find themselves to a patronizing folksy neo-reformism. It is ironic that

Governor Walker threatened to call out the National Guard if state workers went on strike as the Democratic loyal opposition had already pacified them.

Crushing American Federation of State County and Municipal Employees in its birthplace, where AFSCME Local 1 was founded, was meant as a powerful message to workers that all 'resistance is futile'. Large sections of the capitalist media painted this state-workers version of Woodstock as if the Bolsheviks were storming the State Capitol building itself. A handful of incidents involving minor damage and wear and tear were blown out of all proportion to make it wrongly appear as though there was actual violence occurring. The hostility towards the state workers was pretty evident when religious fundamentalists and handfuls of Tea Partiers came down to deliberately provoke fights, walking up to people and insulting them. The fact that the protests had gone on for a week, where the numbers of protesters were from 80,000 to 120,000 before the national capitalist media was reluctantly forced to take notice.

For any capitalist enterprise in the wealthy imperialist power centers the dominant mode of thought in controlling labor costs has increasingly focused on what is termed "legacy costs", that is to say having to pay the pensions and benefits the employers agreed to pay. Bankruptcy is one of the standard ways of achieving this in any enterprise from the State of California to General Motors. In Wisconsin it meant a massive cut in take home pay as the employee "contribution" to health insurance and retirement benefits was increased dramatically. The lowest tiers of the Wisconsin state civil service, the workers earning starting wages from \$11.28 to \$12.229 USD per hour, were hit the hardest as the increase employee "contributions" was an across the board cut affecting those workers with the least ability to cope with the loss in income.

The passing of the austerity bill, made it such that the union could only bargain on wage increases up to but not beyond the rate of the Consumer Price Index of inflation. Gone was any bargaining over working conditions or anything else. Certification elections for unions were to take place every two years. Most of the unions on the UW Campus decertified themselves and took up side bargaining with the university authorities themselves as the teachers unions took up collective bargaining agreements with the individual public school districts.



*Th. A. Steinlen— 'May 1871'. From Le Chambard Socialiste, May 26, 1894. Woman on the barricades of the Paris Commune.*

Over a year has passed and most workers have pinned their hopes on a recall election in the belief that it will reverse some of the measures implemented by the state government under the Walker administration. It was the Democratic Party, who gave workers rolling layoffs called "furlough days". To trust the unions to defend our immediate interests as workers when they were pledged to "no strike" from the start and were willing to give every single concession solely for a seat at the table to participate in the austerity measures was an error of habit for workers who are used to handing over their struggles to one faction of the political representatives of the bourgeoisie or the other and know of no other realistic options for waging their own struggles.

Walker accomplished exactly what the capitalists wanted, a massive reduction in labor costs in the public sector. There is little chance that workers will willingly choose a revolutionary unknown over a reactionary 'lesser of two evils' unless there is a strong enough revolutionary voice present. At the protests workers took the first steps in recognizing a need to fight in their interests but could not take the next step in realizing that their interests are diametrically opposed to the capitalist class its political representatives. Revolutionaries can take a first step by organizing territorial workers groups to open a space to build up that revolutionary voice.

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\* <http://insurgentnotes.com/>

**Internationalist Notes is a quarterly broadsheet published by the Internationalist Workers' Group.**

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*"We are called internationalists because we believe that the interests of the exploited are the same all over the world, and that communism can not be achieved in a single geographic area, a myth peddled as true by Stalin. We, are therefore, bitterly opposed to Stalinism in all its varieties, for too long taken to be communism, both by the bourgeoisie and many generations of workers who looked to it in good faith when the ownership of industries, distribution, land, etc.. went from private to state hands, leaving capitalist relations and its components (commodities, money, wages, profits, borders etc.) largely intact. This was not communism but a particular form of capitalism, state capitalism. After 1917 the economic blockade of the Soviet Union and the failure of the world revolution in the West meant that the revolution was transformed into its opposite, eventually becoming an imperialist bloc that would collapse after only seventy years."*

**Internationalist Communist Tendency— About Us**



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