

Journal of the
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Revolutionary Perspectives 19

The Historic Failure of COP26



**Vaccines, Lockdowns
and Covid Passes**

Behind the Amazon Curtain

**Ukraine and Taiwan:
The Uncertainties of
Imperialism**

**The Many Faces of
the Capitalist Left**

Revolutionary Perspectives

*Magazine of the Communist Workers' Organisation
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The Challenges of 2022	1
The Historic Failure of COP26	3
Global Warming: IPPC Report AR6 – Writing a Death Warrant?	5
Vaccines, Lockdowns and Covid Passes: The Pandemic Goes On But So Does the Class Struggle	16
On Vaccines, the Vaccine Campaign, the Green Pass and Bourgeois Responsibility	19
Behind the Amazon Curtain: An inside look at exploitation within Bezos' fulfilment centres	24
Ukraine and Taiwan: Flashpoints in an Uncertain Imperialist World	27
Capitalism and Its Discontents: The Many Faces of Leftism	41

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The Challenges of 2022

In the last issue of RP we were aware that some readers might be sceptical about the existence of a global capitalist economic crisis which has now endured for more than five decades. More generally, however, the FACT that humanity is facing multi-faceted 'existential' threats, not just from a capitalist-created pandemic which is far from over, not only from climate change as a result of 'man-made' carbon emissions (not to mention wider destruction of the natural conditions for life on earth), but also, increasingly, from rising imperialist tensions and a growing arms race that now extends to outer space, is becoming impossible to deny. In this issue we have tried to analyse the latest aspects of these inter-linked phenomena from the only genuine anti-capitalist perspective: the standpoint of the social beings on whose labour power capitalism depends, the working class.

As for an update on the situation of the working class, we have no illusions about how far workers in general are still wandering in the wilderness without a political compass and with little experience of how to organise on their own account. This is not to say there haven't been any sparks of encouragement, notably amongst warehouse workers and in signs of a wider class struggle in the USA. The article here, written by an Amazon insider, captures the soul-destroying intensity of capitalist exploitation under today's conditions of individualised Taylorism which, paradoxically, is sparking off sporadic outbursts of more collective resistance. Meanwhile, the little-publicised struggle of oil workers and others over wages and conditions in Iran

surpasses all others in terms of determination, self-organisation and bravery against a vicious enemy. We have commented on all these on our website. Given what capital has in store for the working class in the coming year, it would be surprising if there are not more struggles for us to report on, and participate in, during 2022. The prospect of a doubling of the cost of fuel bills, plus more widespread 'consumer price' inflation as firms pass on their higher running costs to customers could encourage the revival of a wider collective struggle based on the recognition that we wage workers are all in this together ... We say 'could' because there are a lot of obstacles to break down, from the privatised way most working class people live their lives to the individualising of work patterns, before a fleeting class solidarity becomes deeper and more widespread.

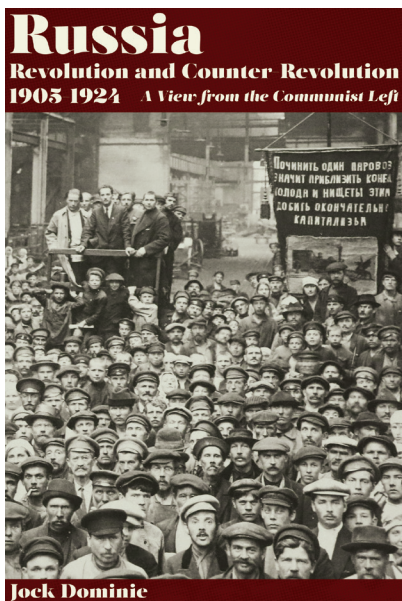
Undoubtedly, sooner or later, the collective class struggle spark will be lit again. For this spark to light the flames of revolution, the only way to save the world from capitalism, the workers of the world will need to have a political compass, a general awareness of the kind of new world they are fighting for and the major obstacles they must face on the way. In other words, they'll need to embrace the communist programme as it has been clarified by revolutionaries who have had to learn from the hard-earned, bloody experience of the working class and whose task now is to propagate that programme and win over as many would-be revolutionary militants as possible to the only real 'anti-capitalist' cause: world revolution. The starting point

for this is an historical one and involves would-be revolutionaries ditching so much of the counter-revolutionary detritus of the past which poses as “socialist”, as the article in this issue on *Capitalism and Its Discontents* makes clear. The historical

stakes are now as high as they have ever been. The world working class needs both its political consciousness and organisation if it is to save humanity from the path capitalism has laid out for it.

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The Historic Failure of COP26

We are republishing a text written before the start of the climate conference in Glasgow (COP26) which took a detailed look at the seriousness of the climate crisis and predicted the conference would achieve almost nothing. Events have confirmed this prediction. However, the failure of the COP26 indicates a deeper failure; the failure of the entire regime of the UN framework conference for Climate Change (UNFCCC) to deal with the climate crisis. It is clear our rulers are not going to respond either to the advice of their scientists or the massive protest movements which besieged the Glasgow conference. As the text we republish makes clear this is because they are driven by the demands of the capitalist system, demands for continual profit and continual capital accumulation which in turn is inextricably linked to continual growth. These are systemic demands. They are not political options our rulers can choose to ignore and therefore they will pursue them even if this means the destruction of the planet.

The irony of this situation is that sections of the bourgeoisie are aware of what needs to be done but as a global class they just cannot do it. The pathos of this predicament was illustrated by the UK president of the conference, Alok Sharma, who was choking back his tears as he read out what he clearly recognised was a completely inadequate final agreement.

Of course, those in power will not acknowledge the conference was a failure; instead they claim it has kept alive the prospect of limiting warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius this century. Those holding the levers of power are doing very well out of the present system. It is calculated, for example, that the richest 1% of the global population

are responsible for 15% of global GHG emissions, while the poorest 50% are responsible for only 6%¹, and hence have little incentive to change things. Instead they pretend, contrary to the science, that the slow minimal steps taken represent great strides towards a solution. They point to agreements such as those of halting deforestation, limiting methane emissions, new greenhouse gas (GHG) reduction pledges, and the zero carbon pledges. As a last resort they claim that another conference in 2022 will correct the glaring shortfalls. All of these so-called achievements have been comprehensively rubbished by various scientific bodies. When one remembers that the conference was supposed to reaffirm the route to a global warming of only 1.5 degrees Celsius by 2100 the analysis of future temperatures by the “*Climate Action Tracker*” (CAT) is the most damning.² The increases they calculate are as follows:

- 2.7 degrees Celsius. This will be the result of current policies. This is actually what the IPCC report AR6 predicts under its Shared Socioeconomic Pathway SSP2-4.5.
- 2.4 degrees Celsius. This assumes all the current GHG reduction pledges including those put forward at COP26 are met in full.
- 2.1 degrees Celsius. This assumes the pledges for 2030 and the further long term pledges are met.
- 1.8 degrees Celsius. This assumes all announced targets and net zero GHG emissions pledges are met.

None of these predictions meet the 1.5 degree Celsius target yet the conference communique claims it has been kept “alive.” The IPCC calculates GHG emissions must be halved from their present level by 2030 to meet the 1.5 degree target. All the present pledges will still result in double the required

emissions by 2030.³ The CAT points out that their analysis of the short and long term pledges show that they are random without any follow up plan and only 6% of countries have credible net zero targets. Similar demolition of the pledges on deforestation⁴ and methane⁵ emissions have been made⁶, but perhaps the most egregious failure is that of the use of coal, the most polluting of the fossil fuels. To meet the 1.5 degrees Celsius target the IPCC calculates coal must be phased out in the OECD countries by 2030 and globally by 2040. A host of countries refused to commit to this. India, for example, committed to phase out coal by 2070, 30 years too late. India, together with China, Australia, Indonesia, Vietnam and others, insisted the final communique was changed from an ambition to “phase out” coal to “phase down” coal. In other words making the pledge meaningless and coal can be burned without limit.

Put simply we are heading for a catastrophic temperature increase of between 2.4 and 2.7 degrees Celsius.

The capitalist system is in decline and has reached the stage where its own internal workings are causing it to suffer the equivalent of seizures. The 2007/8 financial crisis, and the Covid-19 pandemic are just the most recent. The climate crisis, however, might well prove terminal. Those sections of our ruling class who recognise the futility of the UN framework are casting about for other solutions. The Nobel Prize winning economist

William Nordhaus, for example, is advocating a regime of Carbon Pricing with a high price set for carbon. This, he proposes, is to be agreed outside the UN framework by a “Carbon Club” of the most developed countries⁷ who will then impose carbon tariffs on all imports according to their carbon content. However, this is likely to reduce profits considerably and has been opposed on this basis by other bourgeois economists. The capitalist class will not do things which are not profitable. The systemic demands of capitalism override everything else.

It is clear the bourgeoisie cannot solve this crisis but as the effects of the crisis start to impoverish and strangle more and more of the world’s working class we can expect more class struggle and struggle directed towards the overthrow of the system causing this crisis.

As the text we reproduce argues, what is required to solve the climate crisis is a change of historical proportions, otherwise as the system goes down it will take us all down with it. What is required is the overthrow of the present system and the replacement of capitalist relations of production by genuine communist ones leading to production for human needs. Only this will give us the means we need to save the planet. The watchword “Save the Planet – Destroy Capitalism” has never been more relevant.

CP

Global Warming: IPCC Report AR6 – Writing a Death Warrant?

The United Nations International Panel for Climate Change (IPCC) published its sixth Assessment Report (AR6) in August. This is a reworked and updated version of their last report AR5 published in 2013. It is much more confident in its assessments and its summary for policy makers is clearly intended to shock countries into promising drastic reductions in their emissions of Green House Gases (GHGs) at the international climate conference, the Conference of the Parties (COP 26), to be held in Glasgow in November. When one understands that such reductions are very unlikely to happen, the report reads like a death sentence, a harbinger of a new mass extinction.

It makes clear that human activity over the last five decades has altered the climate of the planet to an unprecedented degree and at an unprecedented rate. The GHGs already released into the atmosphere will take centuries, or even millennia to be reduced, and their effects will continue for a similar time-scale. Polar ice caps and glaciers will continue to melt, sea level will continue to rise, sea acidity will increase, deserts will extend and violent changes in the climate will increase in frequency. The UN general secretary Antonio Guterres, who, together with UK Prime Minister Johnson, is hosting COP26, said:

The world is on a catastrophic pathway to 2.7°C of heating.¹

What he means is that the present rate of GHG emissions is leading to an increase in global Mean Average Temperature (MAT) of 2.7°C above the average temperature in the period 1850 to 1900. Mean Average

Temperature (MAT), which is the temperature of land and sea averaged over the globe, will rise to about 16.45°C. This is well outside the climate niche of 11 to 15°C in which humans have survived and grown crops throughout their history. In fact, Guterres is being optimistic. The more realistic assessment provided by AR6 is a 3.6°C rise. Land temperatures are often double the MAT hence billions of people will be subject to continuous temperatures of around 29°C or more, which will make life unsustainable. Crops will fail and billions will be forced to try and migrate to higher latitudes leading to starvation wars and a breakdown of civilisation. All this will occur if the capitalist system of production remains the global system of production. But, of course, the UN and the IPCC will never say this. Their advice is based on the fundamental assumption that the capitalist system continues in one way or another. Under this assumption, the IPCC have produced an underestimate of what lies ahead since they admit that future increases in carbon dioxide (CO₂) and methane (CH₄) from wildfires, permafrost thaw and wetlands have not been taken into account.²

AR6 is, however, categorical that climate change is caused by human activity. What they do not specify, and indeed what most mainstream commentators on climate change dare not mention, is that it **is not human activity as such, it is precisely human activity under capitalist production relations of the last 200 years which is the direct cause of this catastrophe**. As we say in our initial assessment of the report:

...the problem is systemic and

*structurally intrinsic to capitalism itself.*³

If anything needs to be categorically stated it is that the climate disaster cannot be overcome while capitalism remains the world system of production. Capitalism needs to be replaced by a system of cooperative production for human needs before any reversal of the path to impending catastrophe can be achieved.

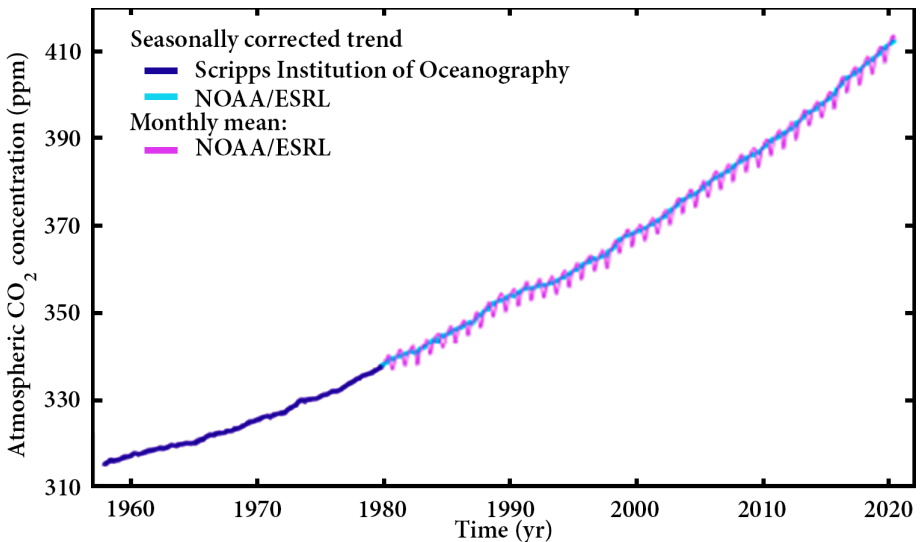
We intend to review the evidence presented by AR6 before considering how such a reversal could be brought about.

The Paths to Inferno

As is now well understood, human-generated, or anthropogenic, global warming is caused by emissions of GHGs, mainly CO₂ but also CH₄ and some other minor gases. These gases, because of their molecular structure, reflect long wave radiation from the earth's surface back to earth in a process called "radiative forcing" thereby interfering with the earth's ability to cool itself from

the radiation received from the sun. Once this occurs the earth enters a state of energy imbalance and tends to heat up, increasing radiation from the earth's surface until a new balance is reached. Radiative forcing is a natural process which has kept the earth warm enough for human life to evolve. Atmospheric water vapour, clouds and GHGs reflect long wave radiation back to earth's surface keeping the earth about 33°C warmer than it would otherwise be.⁴ Water vapour accounts for about 60%⁵ of radiative forcing but the amount in the atmosphere is dependent on temperature which in turn is dependent on GHGs. Concentrations of GHGs in the atmosphere have varied in the past and the climate has changed in response, but the present rate of change is completely unprecedented. Until approximately the Second World War the natural carbon sinks, particularly the oceans, and terrestrial sinks such as forests, kept the man-made GHGs in check. However, the rapid advance of capitalist production across the globe since 1945 has produced a similarly rapid increase

Graph 1



in the amount of GHGs human activity has added to the atmosphere. Since the 1970s this process has now become critical as emission of GHGs continues to increase. The radiative forcing from anthropogenic GHGs has increased by 18% since 2013.⁶ The graph shows the relentless increase in the concentration of CO₂ in the atmosphere. What it also shows is that all the COP conferences, from their start 26 years ago, and all the IPCC reports have produced no reduction whatsoever in the rate of increase in CO₂ concentration.

Graph 1 shows only CO₂ which is equivalent to only 74.4% of the total GHGs. Other GHGs, such as methane which itself makes up 17.3% of the total, are all much more potent reflectors of long wave radiation. Methane, over a 20 year period, is 84 times as potent as CO₂. If the other gases effects are converted into CO₂ equivalent and added to the CO₂ emissions a similar trend emerges. In 1990,

35 Gigatonnes (Gt) of CO₂ equivalent were released and today, 2021, the figure is approximately 50Gt; a 42% increase. The release of GHGs is directly related to the growth of the world economy. The figures for the growth of the global economy provided by the World Bank in constant 2010 \$ are shown below.

Capitalism requires continual accumulation to enable the system to keep functioning and this is recorded in growth of the world economy. While the global population has more or less doubled since 1970, going from 3.7bn to 7.79bn, the global GDP has increased by a factor of four (300%) as shown on the graph above. The increase in GHGs is directly related to the increase in global output, which, in turn, depends on energy and consequently CO₂ production. Table 1 below shows the increases in production in physical measures, not currency, of some of the main GHG emitting

Graph 2

Gross World Product

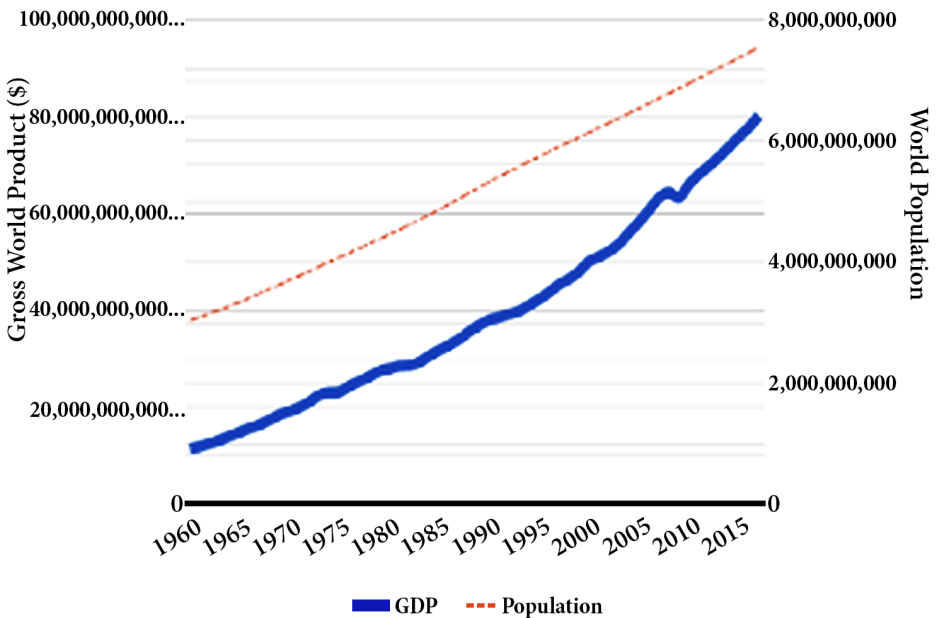


Table 1

Product	1970 annual production	2020 annual production	% increase in period 1970-2020
Steel	595 million tonnes	1878 million tonnes	210%
Cement	0.6 billion tonnes	4.1 billion tonnes	580%
Oil	2490 million tonnes	4296 million tonnes	70%
Coal	3554 million* tonnes	7575 million tonnes	110%
Natural gas	1224 billion m ³ **	4015 billion m ³	228%
CO2 concentration in the atmosphere	327 parts per million	420 parts per million	29%

*Figure for 1978

** Figure for 1973

products in the period 1970 to 2020.

The average increase of these five products in the period is 240%. The *Financial Times* reports that we are now using three times the amount of energy we used in the 70s, a 200% increase which is not far distant from the average increase of the five products listed above.⁷ Even in 2020, after all the hype about renewables, 84% of the global energy still came from fossil fuels.⁸ It is hardly surprising that, in the same period, CO2 concentration in the atmosphere has risen from 327ppm to nearly 420ppm, according to the December 2021 measurements at Manua Loa observatory in Hawaii. This represents a rise of 29%.

The graphs reproduced from AR6 SPM.1, shown as Graph 3 below, illustrate clearly two things. The first graph, which plots the rise in surface temperature in the timespan of 2000 years of human civilisation, shows unequivocally how the dramatic rise in surface temperature coincides exactly with the period in which capitalism becomes the dominant global system of production, 1850 to 2020. As we point out above, it is not human activity as such which is leading to an inferno on earth, it is precisely activity under the capitalist production system which is doing this. The second graph shows how this process has really accelerated with the

massive growth since 1970 spurred by the increased globalisation of the system. This was the response to falling profit rates which in turn led to the breakdown of the post-Second World War international financial system which had linked all currencies to the dollar and tied the dollar to gold. The resulting floatation of currencies, and liberalisation of capital movements, allowed capital to scour the globe for cheaper labour power. The strategy finally arrived at was the restructuring of Western economies which turned them into predominantly service economies. Production of many industrial goods was transferred to areas which used even more fossil fuels to produce them. The output of CO2 was also increased by the long lines of transport to get those goods to the richer markets in the USA and Europe. Since the 1970s, global trade has increased massively. According to the World Bank merchandise exports, in current US dollars, have gone from \$302 billion to \$17.69 trillion in the period 1970 to 2020!⁹

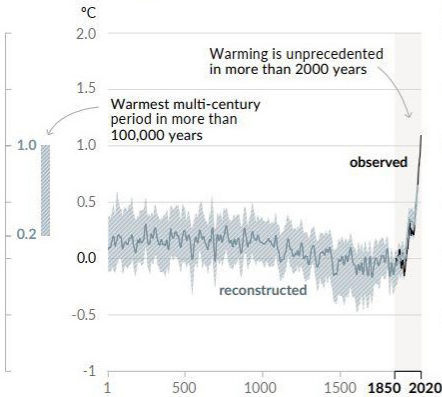
So, what of the future?

AR6 analyses five, what it calls, Shared Socioeconomic Pathways (SSPs) with differing rates of increase or reduction in GHGs leading to different levels of radiative forcing in the year 2100. The very high emissions pathway

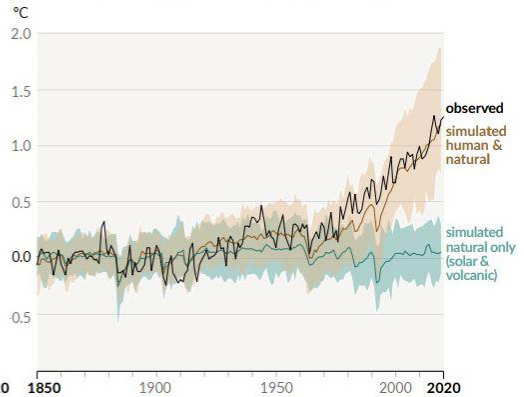
Graph 3

Changes in global surface temperature relative to 1850-1900

a) Change in global surface temperature (decadal average) as reconstructed (1-2000) and observed (1850-2020)



b) Change in global surface temperature (annual average) as observed and simulated using human & natural and only natural factors (both 1850-2020)



(SSP5-8.5) sees emissions doubling from the present level by 2050 and the high (SSP3-7.0) sees emissions doubling by 2100. An intermediate pathway (SSP2-4.5) has emissions remaining more or less constant until 2060 and then declining to about a quarter of the present level by 2100. There are 2 low emission pathways (SSP1-2.6) and (SSP1-1.9) which see emissions falling from the present to zero by 2080 and 2060 respectively and thereafter going negative via carbon capture. These pathways are shown in Graph 4 below. None of these pathways achieve the Paris goal of zero emissions by 2050.

Which pathway are we on?

A UN report published in mid-September showed that the pledges made at the Paris Conference, put the world on course to increase emissions by 16% (compared to 2010) by 2030 whereas climate scientists calculate that emissions must fall by 45% by 2030 if warming is to be limited to 1.5°C by 2100.¹⁰ The bulk of new energy investment in the coming period is going into fossil fuels. The US, for example, has allowed drilling for oil offshore in Alaskan waters with approximately \$323bn

to be spent on this in the next 4 years, the UK has sold drilling licences for the Cambo field north west of the Shetland Islands, whose emissions are calculated to be equivalent to 16 coal fired stations¹¹, meanwhile China is planning 43 new coal fired power plants,¹² India is opening new coal mines and so on. In the year 2020 the IMF reported that the fossil fuels industry was subsidized to the tune of \$16.1bn every day or \$5.9tn for the year!¹³ In the period 2020 to 2021 the G7 countries spent only \$147bn on renewables.¹⁴ In short, there has been no halt to existing extraction and planned future extraction and use of fossil fuels since all the famous pledges were made in Paris in 2016. This is despite the International Energy Agency (IEA) pronouncement that:

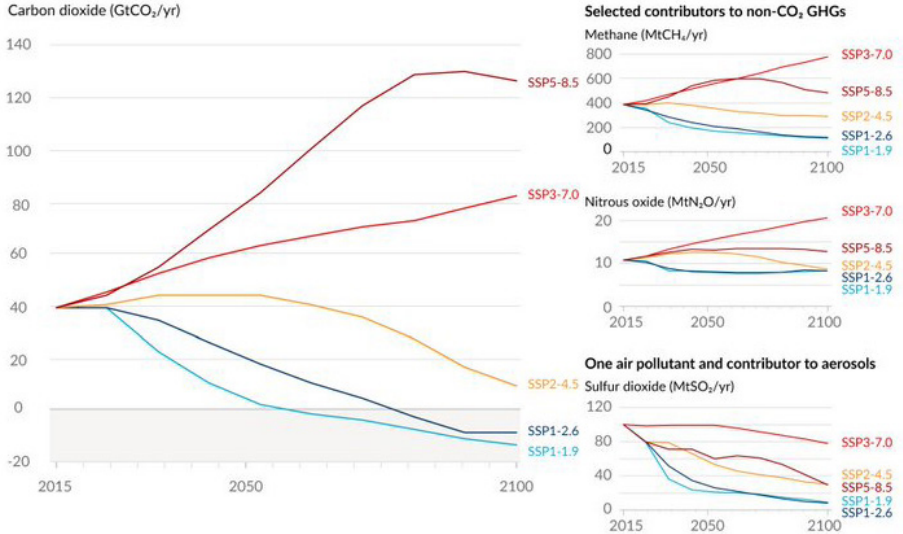
No new oil, gas or coal fields should be tapped if the world is to stay within the 1.5°C this century.

Fatih Birol, the executive director of the IEA, said:

Graph 4

Future emissions cause future additional warming, with total warming dominated by past and future CO₂ emissions

a) Future annual emissions of CO₂ (left) and of a subset of key non-CO₂ drivers (right), across five illustrative scenarios



This is shocking and very disturbing. On the one hand, governments today are saying climate change is their priority. But on the other hand, we are seeing the second biggest emissions rise in history. It's really disappointing.¹⁵

All this indicates that the two low emissions pathways, SSP1-2.6 and SSP1.9, are simply wishful thinking and quite unachievable. This has been recognised by the UN Secretary General, Guterres, when he said that the world was on course to 2.7°C of heating which is the intermediate SSP2-4.5 pathway. As we have indicated above there is absolutely no indication of emissions being stabilized at the present levels as this pathway assumes, in fact they are being increased at almost the same rate as over the last two decades. The intermediate pathway therefore

also appears to be wishful thinking. We are more likely headed on one of the higher pathways, most likely SSP3-7.0 with a catastrophic 3.6°C warming by the end of the century. AR6 has tabulated the pathways and the predicted temperature rise in a table SPM 1 which we reproduce as table SPM1 below.

The report states there is a linear relationship between CO₂ concentration in the atmosphere and surface temperature. Each 1000Gt of CO₂ raises the temperature by 0.45°C. However, if tipping points are crossed, the amount of GHGs could rise exponentially as the increased temperature releases more GHGs and the carbon sinks collapse, in turn reducing sequestration of carbon. Tipping points represent the stage at which a process fuels itself and becomes irreversible. One tipping point is likely to trigger another. Tipping points which already appear to have

Table SPM1

Scenario	Near term, 2021-2040		Mid-term, 2041-2060		Long term, 2081-2100	
	Best estimate (°C)	Very likely range (°C)	Best estimate (°C)	Very likely range (°C)	Best estimate (°C)	Very likely range (°C)
SSP1-1.9	1.5	1.2 to 1.7	1.6	1.2 to 2.0	1.4	1.0 to 1.8
SSP1-2.6	1.5	1.2 to 1.8	1.7	1.3 to 2.2	1.8	1.3 to 2.4
SSP2-4.5	1.5	1.2 to 1.8	2.0	1.6 to 2.5	2.7	2.1 to 3.5
SSP3-7.0	1.5	1.2 to 1.8	2.1	1.7 to 2.6	3.6	2.8 to 4.6
SSP5-8.5	1.6	1.3 to 1.9	2.4	1.9 to 3.0	4.4	3.3 to 5.7

been passed today include the melting of both Arctic ice and the west Antarctic ice sheet, and the bleaching of coral reefs. Melting of polar ice leads to greater adsorption of solar radiation due to reduced reflection from the ice and hence greater warming. This in turn leads to thawing of the permafrost and release of stored methane which in turn makes for further temperature rise. The interaction of tipping points is shown in diagram 1 below. It is easy to see how this process leads to exponential runaway heating.

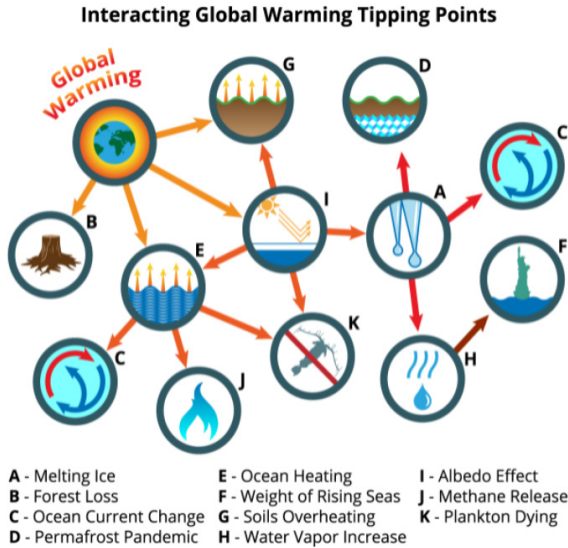
Some organisations consider the IPCC is painting a deceptively over-optimistic picture of the situation. Job One for Humanity, whose diagram of interacting tipping points we reproduce below, estimates that the temperature increase of 1.5°C is already locked in because of the concentration of CO₂ and other GHGs already released. They calculate that if we go into the range of CO₂ concentrations between 425ppm and 450ppm we are on a path to between 2°C and 2.7°C warming. This is actually the IPCC pathway SSP2-4.5, the intermediate pathway. If the world enters this pathway we will encounter catastrophic consequences over which we have no control.¹⁶ There will be massive climate disruptions, crop failures, attempted migrations and the death of billions of people. All we could do at that stage is to try and adapt to the mess capitalist production has created. As we are now at a CO₂ concentration of approximately

420ppm we have only a few years to avoid this. If we do not, as seems likely, we are heading for a sixth mass extinction.¹⁷

The Pathway to Extinction

As mentioned above, capitalism requires continual accumulation of capital to continue to operate. At its heart, capitalism is a system based on maximising profit, calculated in financial terms. This translates into a constant drive to cheapen the cost of raw materials, lower the cost of labour power (wages), increase the productivity rate (output per 'man' hour), and increase the amount produced. All this is in the wider context of constant competition to increase 'market share' as well as creating 'new markets'. This translates into 'growth', even though at this stage in capitalism's present accumulation cycle an increasing part of this growth is simply financial and it does not mean overall growth in wages. A global growth rate of 3% leads to a doubling of the global economy in 25 years and a doubling of that again in the next 25 years. In fact this is what has happened in the last 50 years; the global GDP has increased by a factor of four. The capitalist system requires perpetual growth yet the resources of the planet are finite. You don't have to be a climate scientist to see that this is just not sustainable. The latest calculation is that global capitalism now requires 1.75

Diagram 1



planets to sustain its annual use of the earth's replaceable resources. Capitalism's relationship with nature is like a vast Ponzi scheme, using up resources which cannot be replaced to enable profit making to continue. Marine and terrestrial ecosystems are the sole sinks for anthropogenic carbon emissions, but capitalist growth is destroying these faster than ever before.

The oceans form the largest eco-system on earth and are responsible for removal of over 30% of the CO₂ produced and generate the same percentage of the oxygen in the atmosphere. However, the dumping of municipal and chemical waste and plastics into the sea is destroying marine life, and causing the oceans to become more acidic. In 1940 the ocean pH (the logarithmic measure of acidity) was 8.2 and it is now 8.04 which represents a 45% increase in acidity. This is not simply destroying corals, it is destroying planktonic animals and plants which regulate the planet. Since the 1940s, 50% of all this marine life has been destroyed! Marine life removes carbon

from the atmosphere by converting dissolved CO₂ into calcium carbonate (chalk) which sinks to the ocean floor when the animals die. Destruction of planktonic life prevents this process and allows the dissolved CO₂ to remain as carbonic acid lowering the pH and killing more marine life and so increasing the buildup of CO₂ in the atmosphere. The Global Oceanic Environmental Survey team calculates that, if the pH drops to 7.95, a tipping point will be reached which will destroy 80% of planktonic animals and plants. This will have devastating consequences, increasing CO₂ concentrations in the atmosphere, driving up global heating, reducing concentration of oxygen and consequently threatening most life on earth.¹⁸

The destruction of animals and plants on land is more widely reported than those of the oceans but also more or less ignored by our rulers. Global warming is, however, destroying land eco-systems at an unprecedented rate. Plants and habitats for animals and insects on which our lives are dependent

are vanishing daily. Already we are seeing massive problems building up. An example is the Amazon rainforest, which for centuries has been a major sink for carbon, has now become a net emitter of CO₂ because of forest clearance and fires.¹⁹

The UN Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services reports that one million animal and plant species are now threatened with extinction and climate change is one of the main reasons.²⁰ The World Wildlife Fund reports that the extinction rate is now between 1,000 and 10,000 times faster than the natural extinction rate, and between 200 and 2,000 species are going extinct every year. What is not known is the rate of extinction of insect species but it is clear that insecticides and industrial farming are killing off insects, notably bees. 75% of the world's food crops depend on insect pollinators and 23% of this crop is at risk from lack of pollinators.²¹ As with climate change itself the rate of extinction is unprecedented. While, on the one hand, global warming is altering temperatures and weather patterns preventing us from growing food, on the other, killing off the insect pollinators makes crops which do grow fail to yield food. Humanity is a part of nature so destruction of the ecosystems in which we live and extinction of natural species would inevitably lead to the extinction of *Homo sapiens* itself. It is as if we are on a juggernaut heading for a cliff.

The Only Way to Stop the Juggernaut

Capitalism is a class-divided society in which the aim of production is profit. The bourgeoisie, who control this society, understand that reversing global warming is equal to massively reducing profits. Their basic premise is that capitalism will continue since it is the natural order of things and any

mitigation of global warming can only be made within the logic of capitalist production. The unspoken view of our leaders is that reversing global warming is simply too expensive to undertake. Hence the succession of COP conferences serve only to provide camouflage for this position while emissions steadily rise and the average temperature increases. Though our bourgeois leaders are both corrupt and liars, it is not because they are corrupt and liars that they do the opposite of what their scientists advise. It is the way the system operates which compels them to act in this way. The system requires both profit and continual accumulation of capital demanding, continual expansion of the production of commodities, and our leaders are simply doing what the system demands. Since it is the system itself which is driving this process, we can see why attempts to reform it via Green New Deals or civil protests and disruption, as pursued by Extinction Rebellion in the UK, will also fail. As long as global capitalism rules the world, we will continue the headlong route to the inferno and mass extinction. To avert this, we need a change of historical proportions. The historical alternative is basically: either the breakdown of capitalist civilisation, through global warming or war, leading to massive destruction of human life, with a few isolated human communities remaining thus bringing about a new form of barbarism, or, alternatively, the replacement of capitalist production by a higher form of production and a new form of social organisation. How can the second alternative be achieved?

As in all class-divided societies the ruling bourgeois class will defend the basis of their wealth and the privileges it brings them to the bitter end. The only class able to overthrow the system is the exploited class, the working class, whose labour supports the entire system. Capitalism has created a world economy with a global working class whose collective social

labour also provides the outlines of a new society. The new society will be one of freely associated producers where the means of production are socialised and production is for human needs. It will be a global society without classes, without wage labour, without borders, and without the need for profit and the accumulation of capital. We call such a society a genuine communist society but it has nothing whatsoever in common with the version of capitalism which existed in Russia until 1991 where, as we state in our document *For Communism*:

*Capitalist categories like wage labour, money and exploitation persisted. A new ruling class ... subjected the proletariat to brutal exploitation. The myth that the USSR was 'socialist' and that statification equals socialism was one of the enduring illusions of the epoch.*²²

A communist society will be a society of abundance where all human needs are met, but this will only be achieved after a period of transition in which the disastrous legacies of capitalism are eliminated. To achieve satisfaction of the world population's needs some production sectors will need to grow while others, the useless, wasteful or positively harmful production sectors of capitalism, like armaments, are eliminated or turned to useful production.²³ At present about a third of the world's population, many of them living in the so-called richer countries, lack even the basics needs of life such as food security, housing, energy, clear water and sanitation. The entire global economy will be reoriented to satisfy these needs. Instead of profit, human need will be the watchword. Obviously some growth will be required for this but the elimination or redirection of the useless and waste sectors will enable this to be achieved without increases in GHG emissions. This reorientation of the global economy will provide

the basis for a sustainable relationship with nature and enable the climate crisis to be seriously tackled. The question we are often asked is, "how can the exploited working class become a revolutionary class fighting for such a higher form of social organisation?" Here we can only sketch out the broad outlines along which we see this developing.

The climate crisis comes on top of the long running economic crisis caused by falling profit rates, which has already reduced working class consumption and living conditions. The ruling class' response to the climate crisis is to argue that individual cuts in consumption and higher energy costs are required. This inevitably pushes up food and other prices. This is the inexorable logic of capitalism. What it amounts to is loading the costs of the climate crisis onto the shoulders of the working class in the hope that this will solve the problem. As our living conditions become ever more intolerable, the material basis for a fightback will mature. The climate crisis will inevitably lead to more class struggle. We argue that a fight for basic living conditions, which capitalism cannot grant, will be the basis on which the consciousness of the need to overthrow the system itself will develop. The contradictions of the system will develop in all their fullness. Unemployment and the immiseration of workers will coincide with massive productivity increases which could provide for the needs of all. Food shortages will exist while crops are left to rot or fed to animals. This will generate a situation of class war. However, for economic struggles against the effects of the system to be successful they need to take an anti-capitalist direction and question the whole rotten system. The working class needs to be conscious of its history and to have a programme for the creation of the new society. To achieve this a revolutionary political organisation, rooted in the working class, which can operate as a guide to a new society is required. While we cannot

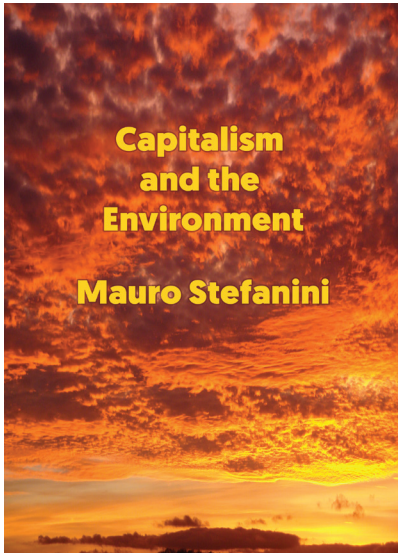
control the material conditions which precipitate future struggles, we can direct our efforts to forming a global class political organisation. This is the key issue today. It is also the only hope for a successful fight against the climate crisis.

The efforts of those fighting global warming will inevitably fail as long as capitalism remains the global system of production. Hence, the only effective fight against

the climate crisis is the fight to build a genuine communist society and a political organisation to assist in the overthrow of the present system. This is what the Internationalist Communist Tendency is fighting to do and it is the only way through which we have a hope of reversing the horrendous damage capitalism is inflicting on planet earth.

CP

A version of this article can already be found on our website where you can find all the footnotes.



Capitalism and the Environment New Edition

... the central nub is that a system based on alienated labour, devoted to growth (increased profits) and subject to periodic crises which exacerbate the drive to cut costs whatever the human or environmental price, cannot find an effective way of combating global warming. In short, these articles are as relevant today as when they were first written. They remain relevant because they provide a framework and give body to our argument that only when capitalist relations of production are eliminated, when money is a thing of the past and a world-wide human community produces for need instead of commodities for profit, can the environmental problems which capital daily exacerbates be seriously tackled

Our late comrade Mauro Stefanini was one of the first to recognise the dangers of global warming and all the more immediate consequences of the environmental devastation created by modern capitalism. He eventually put these into articles published originally in 1994. We have translated and reprinted them here in a new edition which also includes a list of our main publications on this issue up to 2021.

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Vaccines, Lockdowns and Covid Passes: The Pandemic Goes On But So Does the Class Struggle

The article which follows comes from the November Annual General Meeting of our Italian affiliate, the Internationalist Communist Party (Battaglia Comunista). It reiterates what all the affiliates of the Internationalist Communist Tendency have said from the beginning of this pandemic; that the virus is not only the result of developments within capitalism but that the capitalists, by putting profits before people's lives, have also vastly increased the death rate. Officially the global figure is now close to 5.5 million but this is a massive understatement. *The Economist*, for example, now reckons that the real excess death rate is 17 million.¹

Currently the overwhelming number dying are the unvaccinated. Thus getting the vaccine is a no-brainer. It can not only spare the individual from a horrible death or life-changing debility, but also can help to control the spread of the virus by not leaving space for new variants to develop, and thus reduce the length of the pandemic for us all. As the document which follows says, it is the socially responsible thing to do. If we were already in a socialist society we would have no hesitation about persuading everyone to get vaccinated. But we live in a class society, and for both the bourgeoisie and the petty bourgeoisie profit comes first. At the beginning of the pandemic the bourgeoisie who dominate the political system tried to ignore the virus. At first the danger was talked down as if it were just the common cold. Once Covid revealed what it could do, we were told "herd immunity" would eventually halt the spread of disease. As a result tens of thousands died from contagion in their workplaces or in their care homes

where the danger was multiplied by Covid cases released from hospitals. In the UK, and elsewhere, PPE was inadequate (when it did exist it was often past its sell-by date so they just stuck new stickers on with new dates). Test and trace was also a disaster despite the boasts about being "world-beating". It was only when the epidemic threatened to overwhelm the health systems that had been underfunded for decades (and thus threatened to become a threat to the entire capitalist system) that lockdowns, and other social distancing measures, were brought in.

Lockdowns forced states everywhere to conjure up the money to pay for furloughs but most of the money went to business. In the US, for example, Congress passed the \$2.7 trillion CARES Act but only \$610 billion went to households – the rest went to firms. Whilst the rich got richer (US household wealth has risen by \$18 trillion since the pandemic began) those petty bourgeoisie in every country who either didn't qualify for support schemes or did not feel they got enough from the state, started to scream the loudest. First they denied Covid was a threat and happily followed populist leaders who said the same. Like the bourgeoisie itself, they were unmoved by the numbers dying at work, and when the vaccines came along they were the first to refuse them, to spread all kinds of conspiracy theories about them, and the scientists who developed them. In a shifting scenario like a pandemic, science naturally has to be guarded about the hypotheses it puts forward. Some research can appear to contradict earlier theories as new data becomes available. It is a perfect situation for conspiracy theory and rumour, so easily

circulated on social media, to take root and flourish. Burning 5G phone masts in the early days of the pandemic was little more than a repeat of the late 19th century hysteria that came with the mainstream use of electricity being blamed for influenza outbreaks.

In Australia our comrades reported that:

Since July (2021), there have been regular protests and riots (known as “freedom rallies”) cropping up in major cities and in some smaller towns around Australia ... Attendees at these events not only are against mandatory vaccination and opposed to the pseudo-lockdowns implemented by the state but they also by and large don’t want workers to be paid to stay home, to keep ourselves and those around us safe. This same crowd also rejects masks and vaccines in general. Indeed, many of them minimise the threat posed by the coronavirus or even deny, against all empirical evidence to the contrary, that it exists.

These rallies have been dominated by elements of the petit-bourgeois, who care little or nothing about the well-being of workers and are instead acting out against the forced closure of their businesses during the lockdown, which for them means smaller profits. Small-business owners within affected industries, such as construction, are chief among these. It is this same social element that has been peddling several anti-Semitic conspiracy theories and enthusiastically embracing the most virulently xenophobic figures in the far right.²

Unfortunately this has also touched some elements of the working class around the world. This is partly attributed to the mismanagement of the pandemic in many states. In Italy the Draghi government has perhaps employed the most draconian version of the European Digital Covid Visa or Green Pass.

To get it you have to be either fully vaccinated, recently recovered from Covid or tested negative within the previous 72 hours. Originally designed to facilitate travel throughout the EU, it became necessary for all travel or to enter places of public entertainment. As of 15 October all Italian workers had to have it to enter the workplace or face suspension and/or dismissal. This led some workers, perhaps fearful of the Green Pass being used as an excuse to lay them off, to strike and demonstrate. Some port workers in Genoa, Trieste and Ancona have struck and demonstrated against the Green Pass. In Genoa this was no more than 300 (and the videos show outside supporters making the most noise in front of the picket). However in Trieste (in Friuli-Venezia Giulia province), a stronghold of the political right, only 40% of port workers are vaccinated against Covid and at least 5,000 demonstrated (although it is not clear how many were actually workers as here too many came from “outside”). The organisers actually turned away contingents from the fascist Forza Nuova and CasaPound because they had trashed the offices of the main union, the CGIL in Rome the previous week. The irony of one banner which carried the slogan of “no to the fascistic Green Pass” or seeing fascists chanting against “dictatorship” has not escaped us.

Comrades report the same from other countries, like France and Germany, where the banners of anarchists, the capitalist left and fascists mingle in demonstrations.³ These popular non-class movements reminiscent of the “yellow vests” in France are now declining in the face of the now overwhelming evidence that vaccines save lives. But not before some political organisations claiming to be “revolutionary” and “libertarian” have lined up with the “No Green Pass” campaign, supposedly a campaign for “freedom” against the state.

Yet what kind of freedom are we talking about here? Individualistic, petty bourgeois,

anti-statism is not the basis of our opposition to the capitalist state. The assertion of the individual right of the unvaccinated to do what they like is not a liberating idea for the majority of workers. Nor is the idea that we stop carrying out all the other measures of social distancing, mask wearing, hand cleaning, etc. As the WHO keep saying, in a pandemic “no one is safe until everyone is safe”. Irrespective of what the capitalist state decrees, our first responsibility is a collective one – to each other. Unfortunately much of the collective strength of the working class has been lost in the last four decades of retreat in the face of an onslaught from our capitalist masters. Their notion of “liberty” is the freedom to exploit without any form of restraint (such as health and safety measures) and to avoid any social responsibility for the consequences of their actions. This idea of individual freedom gives those with wealth the power to determine the fate of all of us (just look at the way lobbying groups and those who fund the ruling parties get contracts and the laws to suit their interests). It is based on a lie. We are not all equal before the law as the law costs money, and is in any case based on the protection of property rights. Under this system (with a few high profile exceptions) the more you have of it the more “justice” you can obtain. The poor go to court at their peril.

This individualistic approach to “freedom” has gained traction the more fragmented the world working class has become. The break up of larger production units, the impersonal anonymity of firms owned by financial predators like hedge funds, the adoption of the gig economy, zero hour contracts, the subcontracting of work so workers have to become “self-employed” and so on, have all deliberately undermined the conditions for collective action. In the course of this, workers’ wages as a share of the wealth they create have declined globally for the last 40 years. And the more that we concede the more the capitalists come back for more. The Green Pass is not our big problem (especially if you just get vaccinated) but the imminent reduction in the purchasing power of wages, and the general increase in precarity, will not end unless we collectively fight back in the coming period. As the document which follows makes clear, this is the real task which internationalists have to focus on. We are already seeing in the US and Iran⁴ that some workers have begun that task but there is a long way to go because the only real solution to all the problems, which this system is intent on foisting on us, is its destruction. That demands a much clearer political compass than that offered by the “No Green Pass” activists.

On Vaccines, the Vaccine Campaign, the Green Pass and Bourgeois Responsibility

The Vaccines

Vaccines have shown they contain the infection and drastically reduce the number of hospitalisations and deaths. This of course has its limits due to the fact that only a part of the population has been vaccinated, as well as the failure to apply a series of other interventions necessary to limit and contain the pandemic, but these do not invalidate the fact that the numbers of infections, hospitalisations and deaths are currently significantly lower than in the same period last year. The newly infected are overwhelmingly unvaccinated, and the number of serious and very serious adverse cases due to vaccines is, in any case, massively lower than equivalent situations of seriousness due to Covid in the unvaccinated. Given these statistics (this winter it will also be interesting to see how the pandemic fares in Italy and Portugal, which have the highest number of vaccinated in Europe, compared with the tendency in the least vaccinated countries), we strongly maintain that vaccination should be shared and disseminated as a primary public health measure.

Those who do not get vaccinated increase the risk of contagion, not only for themselves, but also for their workmates and family members, as well as for the general population (as it seems that the viral load of the unvaccinated is greater, and more contagious, than that of the vaccinated). The most serious consequences of the disease have hit social classes across the board, of course, but especially the working class. The pandemic has raged amongst the countless proletarian and dispossessed masses of the “developing

countries”, in the immense slums that surround their cities, but also in the greatest imperialist superpower on the planet, the USA. Those masses, our class brothers and sisters, have been, and continue to be, deprived of the first and, for now, the most effective tool for containing and combating the pandemic, the vaccine. It is yet another demonstration of how the bourgeoisie is a parasitic social class, with no concern for public or general health, but only its own economic interests, i.e. profit.

However, affirming the need for the maximum diffusion of vaccination practice does not stop us criticising, as we have always done, both the methods of bourgeois management of the pandemic (bent on maximising profits, containing the costs of any health measures and seizing opportunities to restructure the labour market) as much as the alleged “opposition movements” to vaccines, or to the Green Pass, which, in the name of an ambiguous “anti-system” attitude, and despite the fact that there may be elements in them that claim to be communist, are in fact, above all, vehicles of the worst irrational reactionary and obscurantist ideologies, which divert the conflict towards conspiracy theories, towards “another kind of capitalism”. But let’s proceed in order, starting with the application of the Green Pass.

The Green Pass

The positions taken on vaccines (and “the right to freedom of treatment”) and on the Green Pass have literally split groups and movements (if not families or friendships), in a totally cross-class way. The Green Pass

has a dual purpose: on the one hand – as a simple document – it is a tool that has proved useful and positive in massively increasing the number of vaccinated; on the other hand, it represents a hateful tool of blackmail, discrimination and punishment against those workers who, for some reason, have not got vaccinated, by imposing the cost of testing on them. In short, it represented the “fig leaf” behind which the bourgeoisie hides the shame of not having implemented any other health measures (besides the vaccine and the Green Pass) to limit and contain the pandemic. In short, yet another cowardly bourgeois hypocrisy.

We understand the need for vaccination to be accompanied by a document certifying the successful execution, or the negative outcome of the swab, especially for those workplaces considered high risk, such as healthcare and the care sector. However, we refuse to accept the identification of this certification (or whatever you want to call it) with the Green Pass: the first might be useful in certifying vaccination (or the negative result of a test) but the bourgeoisie would then have the problem of how to manage these workers; the second combines this useful purpose with an unacceptable targeting of the working class – wage cuts, suspension, dismissal, etc., in order to make us bear the costs and the consequences of their mismanagement of the pandemic. The bourgeoisie has no “moral” title (though it has, of course, the power) to invoke and impose punitive measures against those workers who do not adopt behaviour aimed at mitigating the risk of infection. This is because the bourgeoisie caused the pandemic (and deaths) to spread in the spring of 2020, and have not implemented adequate measures subsequently. Indeed, it has taken advantage of the conditions created by the pandemic to perpetrate the attack on workers and defend profits. Having clarified these aspects, it now makes sense here to re-propose

and update our criticisms of the bourgeois management of collective health and of the movements that have developed in recent months, with particular attention to the “No Green Pass” movement.

The Virus is Capitalism

Capitalism is primarily responsible for the Covid pandemic. Whether or not it was the result of leap for animals to humans or a leak from a laboratory experiment, doesn’t much matter. The virus has found the most effective ways to expand its rapid spread through the capitalist system’s productive and social structures. Decades of cuts in health spending, and very polluted and congested mega-cities, have all favoured the spread of the virus which followed the trade routes of the globalised capitalist economy.

The approach of the bourgeois states towards the pandemic was too little, too late (when not in open denial of the danger), thus fostering a multitude of avoidable deaths. A pandemic had been predicted for years by many scientific committees, yet the bourgeoisie has hampered research, reduced hospitals to a minimum, cut beds and both medical and nursing personnel. This not only happened in Italy, but in all the “advanced” countries, not to mention those of the “periphery”, where the health provision was already largely inadequate.

Bourgeois Management of the Pandemic

During the lockdowns of spring 2020, with the gamble of the ATECO codes,⁵ most of the industrial proletariat continued to work, and therefore the virus circulated. In the summer of 2020, the race to reopen the accommodation and recreational facilities, with the bourgeois sectors most linked to tourism and hospitality clamouring “to

go back to doing what could not be done”, was the basis for the spread of the second and third wave in the following autumn/winter. The British case, where masks and social distancing was ended in July 2021, is a good example. Returning to Italy, almost two years after the start of the pandemic, no significant practical changes in the structure of how we live and work have yet been implemented. School classes have not been reduced (starting with the so-called “hen coops”)⁶ with schools just advised to keep the windows open (!). The number of public transport runs (for students and commuters) have not increased, no air purifiers have been installed in public places, the track and trace system has not been strengthened in order to limit and contain outbreaks. Containment and prevention measures have not been prepared for subsequent waves, despite the fact that they were, and still are, widely predictable. On the other hand, precarious work has increased with the Covid contracts and the times and methods (see again the school with the three cases needed today) of the quarantine have been reduced.⁷ In the meantime, healthcare spending has remained virtually unchanged, with the result that hospitals are congested and numerous hospital operations, including serious ones, continue to be postponed indefinitely. In healthcare, with the new Covid precarious contracts and the savings made by postponing a whole series of operations, profits have grown. The bourgeoisie made a clear choice: the virus cannot be eradicated in a time frame that suits the demands of capital therefore we just have to live with it. For capital, the pandemic is an opportunity to strengthen its policies.

The Vaccination Campaign

Vaccinations, in the richest countries, started late and with many problems, especially with the AstraZeneca “mess”: in Italy

first recommended to teachers and law enforcement agencies, then suspended for the “under 60s” following some serious adverse events, suspected to be related to the vaccine.⁸ The way in which the bourgeoisie manages the vaccination campaign must be denounced in terms: of patent restrictions, of the limits placed on research, etc. and even of the rich countries letting “their” doses expire whilst most of the world’s population still has no access to vaccines. Above all, this opens the door to the development of even more dangerous variants of the virus.

Despite these critical weaknesses, from the available data so far, it is obvious that in countries where the number of vaccinated is greater, such as Italy and Portugal, the incidence of the virus is at a minimum, while in countries where the number of vaccinated people is much lower the numbers of deaths and in intensive care is higher.

Vaccines and Safety at Work

The logic behind the bourgeoisie’s pandemic policy runs the risk of reproducing and favouring new catastrophes. For the sake of the safety of workers and of our class, here and in the rest of the world, we must start from the obvious observation that vaccines are necessary, but at the same time we must denounce our rulers for lowering their guard on health and safety in general (as seen in the growing number of accidents at work) and the pandemic in particular: masks and sanitisers are now used less, social distancing is not observed. The vaccine is a first line of defence, at the moment by far the most important, but it is not the be-all and end-all. This means we strongly denounce the following: working from home is made difficult (let’s leave aside the problems for the workforce related to this new form of work), the State has not paid for tests by making them free for both workers without a Green Pass and for all those people

who, for whatever reason, fear they may have come into contact with the virus. The movements “against the Green Pass” – mostly animated by sectors of the petty bourgeoisie – and its conservative or openly fascist ideology unfortunately drag in minority fringes of the confused and disoriented within the working class. Limiting their denunciation to this single issue, they play the bourgeois game by focusing the whole question of workers’ safety around the false dichotomy: “Green Pass yes – Green Pass no”. They ignore all the other problems of workers’ insecurity from the increasingly frequent deaths at work to non-application of health and safety measures, from precarious contracts for undeclared work, to lack of employment insurance!

The Pandemic: The Responsibility of the Individual and the System

On an ideological level, the bourgeoisie, to conceal its enormous responsibility for the pandemic, has from the start used one, and only one, line: the responsibility for the proliferation and spread of the virus, of the dead and those hospitalised in intensive care is to be down to individual behaviour. It is true that many appeal to individual freedom when talking about getting vaccinated, and this is a delicate subject (although collective health has to prevail over the doubts of individuals), but from our point of view, based on available data that the vaccine is effective, we believe that bourgeois responsibility must be strongly denounced, both for the spread of the virus and in the inadequacy of measures to deal with it. The bourgeoisie moves in the contradiction between avoiding closures and letting the virus circulate, and wisely chooses the maximum result with the minimum expense: i.e. vaccinating without carrying out other safety measures. Indeed, they are using the opportunities generated by the epochal event of the “Covid Pandemic” to

carry out the restructuring that the system needs in order to face the new phase of the crisis that is opening up before us. Asking the bourgeoisie to act in any other way would be to take on the illusions of radical reformists, who put forward demands that capital could never accept, even if we were not in an era of structural crisis (full wages for the unemployed, drastic reduction of hours with the same salary, etc, the usual shopping list). This does not mean resigning oneself to capitalism and its laws but, on the contrary, giving even more force to the denunciation of bourgeois society and spreading the awareness that the interests of the bourgeoisie and the proletariat are irreconcilable, to the point where it becomes, literally, a question of life or death. The pandemic and the impending environmental catastrophe are clear demonstrations of this.

The “No Green Pass” movement

In the weeks after 15 October 2021, a movement against the Green Pass developed which then found its expression in the Saturday demonstrations and the strike that blocked Pier VII in Trieste from 15 to 18 October. We have three basic criticisms of this movement: the first is its “popular and inter-class” character. In fact, you could find everyone in it, from shipping contractors to workers, from priests to “new agers”, from fascists to anarchists, all united by the same struggle against the Green Pass. The movement does not therefore have a class character; although some sectors in hospitals, in the port of Trieste, and a few in Genoa and other ports, have joined in. None of them ever clearly posed the question of class, that is, they have not linked criticism of the Green Pass to the general attack on working conditions, precariousness, safety at work, cuts in wages and pensions, the increase in exploitation – seen by the bosses as a necessary

condition for economic recovery – as well as the contraction of the “welfare state”.

The second is that since it lacks any reference to class and let alone revolution, the movement could thus only end up where it started, in the arms of confused, cross-class, individualistic, if not openly reactionary sectors, generically called “anti-system”, moved by “conspiracy” theories and an irrational conception of the world. What we have seen on the streets is the rejection of any class logic, which did not even mention capitalism by name. The narrow and ambiguous horizon (many criticise vaccines tout court and make reactionary conspiracy ideologies their own) of this movement characterises it as episodic and with reactionary characteristics; the “refusal of politics” was one of its characteristics and where, as in Milan, a confused “left” was more massively present, this led it to move away from minimal class demands to line up with petty bourgeois ideology, anti-system in words but always demanding a phantom “freedom” within a capitalist economic framework.

The third is that it is only from the world of work and from the defence of class interests that a resumption of the struggle can start. We are well aware that the fuse can be lit from anywhere, but if the movement does not immediately take up a class position, that is, if the class does not emphasise its immediate and general interests, giving strength to its own revolutionary party, every movement is destined to be reabsorbed by the system. This is even more important given that these protests had little or no class content from the beginning. Instead they fueled confusion and legitimised the presence on the streets of the most reactionary elements.

Communists and what awaits us

As the bourgeoisie has decided, we will continue to “live with the virus”. For this reason it is necessary on the one hand to be cautious, to continue to take all precautions, beginning with vaccination, but the vaccine itself, fundamentally, if not for criticisms mentioned above, is not a terrain in which class consciousness can mature or grow. Our class is facing epochal problems such as defining the imperialist fronts in a new possible war; a war that would be the final solution to an equally epochal economic crisis (and perhaps of life on the planet); the background to this scenario is the climate crisis which capitalist governments are unable to solve; in the foreground, on the other hand, is our class that must find in itself the reasons to shake off its slumber and give life to a new opposition to cuts, sacrifices, precariousness, and that needs to find for itself a solid political reference point. It is a banality to say that this cannot come from just anywhere, certainly not from those who make their own “conspiracy theorists”, reactionary and anti-communist, but not even from the political and trade union world of radical-reformism, regardless of the subjective intentions of those who are a part of it. It is therefore up to us internationalist communists to present a viable alternative of general opposition to the system and, beyond what we have written, we do not believe there is much more to say about vaccines and the Green Pass. So, after an intense discussion that involved the whole organisation, we turn the page and proceed to build an alternative that can represent a banner around which we can all gather in the long night of the class struggle, but also of the capitalist crisis.

Wednesday, November 17, 2021

Due to constraints of space, the footnotes for this article will be found on our website version.

Behind the Amazon Curtain: An inside look at exploitation within Bezos' fulfilment centres

Like many employers out there, Amazon does not appreciate outside investigators or any other curious observers having a peek inside its fulfilment centres (FCs). Of course, it propagates images and videos of efficiency, happy employees, and high quality products to the outside world — sometimes it even gives us a look inside, but always only on its own terms. The Amazon FC, less than a factory yet more than a warehouse, is a strictly controlled work environment. These centres are used for receiving items from vendors and manufacturers, processing and packing them into orders, then finally sending them out to customers using drivers who provide the Amazon Prime service. There are over 175 of these places across the world, more than 40 of which are based in Europe. According to Amazon, these FCs should be a clear testament of their technological innovation. The reality, however, is much less glamorous than the corporation's promotional materials.

At one particular FC there have been issues with running water for months. Even after the place was closed for an entire day due to “maintenance”, taps in staff toilets continue to regularly cease running and some on the upper floors simply never have hot water, which becomes especially unpleasant in the winter months. Not being able to wash your hands, a basic and crucial aspect of workplace hygiene, makes absurd Amazon's firm anti-coronavirus measures (face masks have to be worn by workers for the entire duration of their 10+ hour shift, a rule which remained in effect at FCs even before the arrival of the Omicron variant when restrictions in the

country were greatly easing up). Other technical troubles included leaks in the roof, cracks and gaps in the floor, frequent IT and machinery issues, and many others. All of this does not really inspire confidence in Amazon's image as a company of pioneering technological advances.

There are different types of FCs, ranging in size from about 400,000 to 1,000,000 square feet, but within each standard the layout remains largely identical across continents. In this one there is a ground floor (P1) for shipping and receiving, packing, HR, staff canteen, first aid, main entrance, etc. and three more floors (P2, P3, P4) primarily for stowing, picking, and packing. It is these upper floors that feature the AR (Amazon Robotics) floor, a massive caged area where robotic devices called “drives” transport and store “pods” (metallic frames with a softer interior divided up into compartments that carry products). The drives used at this FC weigh 136 kg each and can carry pods weighing hundreds of kilos more. This part of the process is fully automated, but stowing inbound items into and picking outbound ones from pods is done by humans at stations located around the edges of the AR cage. Some of these are ARSAWs (Amazon Robotics Semi-Automated Workstations).

Amazon did not actually start using so much automation in its warehouses until 2012, when Bezos acquired the Massachusetts-based manufacturer of mobile robotic fulfilment solutions Kiva Systems (later renamed to Amazon Robotics). This move has allowed the American giant to increase productivity in its FCs, making it possible to store 40% more

inventory. With Kiva's stations and drives utilised at some of the Amazon workplaces, faster product transportation throughout the facility means a quicker pace of work. All "Amazon Associates" (workers), often called "Amazonians" by the company, are issued with a badge that has their unique login, barcode, and photographic ID on it and must be carried by the worker at all times. The vast majority of the tasks performed by human labourers at this FC are done through stations and thus closely monitored, as everyone must log into a station with their badge in order to commence.

Each employee's performance is tracked via "takt times", how long it takes to scan a picked or stowed item, how fast totes are replaced, how much idle time occurs, and so on. Associates are told to not sign out when going for toilet breaks — this means that if the time spent away from the station is too long or WC breaks happen too often then a team leader will come to ask you what is going on. Two breaks of 30 minutes each (one paid, the other unpaid) are given for a 10h 30m shift. In reality, breaks are closer to 20 minutes as they are tracked from last to first scanned product and walking times are long due to the sheer size of the FC. Your performance is measured against set targets; although leadership make a big show of not caring about you meeting your targets in the first few weeks so that you can "focus on quality as speed will come with time", after a certain period they do certainly care about how fast you work for them. However, it is not hard to tell that the bad press Amazon has been getting (for its horrendous treatment of workers, among other reasons) has led to some changes in company policy.

Working at Amazon, every step of the way, you are reminded that this corporation apparently cares so much about you and your well-being. Seasonal events (Halloween, Christmas, etc.) and themes based around

identity (Black History Month, LGBT+ Pride, military veterans) often feature some kind of giveaway with cupcakes and pins or a free t-shirt... One wonders why anyone would fall for these cheap tricks when the wealth of Jeff Bezos grew by £58.52 billion during the COVID-19 pandemic, so he could in fact give all of his nearly 1.3 million employees (250,000 of which work full-time in these centres) a bonus of £43,000 and still be left with a few billion more pounds than he had when the crisis started! Regardless, the charade of a friendly corporate entity is maintained throughout the FC in other ways. A "Voice of Associates" (VOA) board is located near the HR and leadership areas on P1, where employees can write down suggestions. Though the illusion of being listened to falls apart rather quickly when the VOA board is flooded with blunt messages from staff fed up with nothing being done about ongoing issues. Not being able to take additional days off during the extra demanding winter holidays season, when everyone is expected to do mandatory overtime, also takes its toll.

The extent to which one can be honest and confrontational at Amazon is, however, quite limited if they intend to keep their job. A file is kept on every single worker and employees are encouraged to inform on each other. Safety is listed as the main concern, but in truth this goes straight out the window whenever associates rush to meet their goals. Amnesty Floor Monitor (AFM) staff deal with much greater risk, as only they and Reliability Maintenance & Engineering (RME) are allowed on the AR floor to collect fallen "amnesty" products, and fix basic drive issues. Even among them health and safety is secondary when it comes to keeping your response times low, and sorting out problems as quickly as possible, so that efficiency is not greatly affected. In training everyone is told to not lift drives after an amnesty responder at another FC lost their fingers in the procedure,

but practically all AFMs end up having to lift the robots at least a little in order to get the job done; everyone in Amnesty knows this, but officially pretend it is absolutely forbidden and never takes place.

One day at the FC an AFM had an accident on the AR floor and the whole level was brought to an emergency stop, after which the worker was rushed to hospital. Actually, even before the amnesty responder left the premises, 'leadership' began looking for ways to pin the blame onto the injured employee. A disgusting, but sadly all too typical reaction of our bourgeois overlords. Bodily strains, physical and mental exhaustion, small cuts on the hands, and all sorts of other injuries are commonplace at this workplace, but many are never reported. The Amazon stance towards, or against, trade unions is familiar to most. Unions are not a tool of revolutionary struggle despite their loud claiming otherwise, as they were created to mediate worker disputes with the ruling class, and today those deeply involved within trades unions are often too preoccupied with their own careers to not sell out the workers they claim to represent. Even the smaller and apparently more radical unions are limited to lesser and more reformatory actions instead of making any progress in the fight for a better future. Nevertheless, at Amazon direct workers' action and organising together with proletarians from other sectors is not only the more radical (and effective) option, but in effect the only real choice.

An Amnesty Floor Monitor, armed with a Kindle tablet and logged into the application through which they can view a virtual map of the Amazon Robotics cage, has the ability to basically put an entire floor of the fulfilment centre out of service! An effort like this coordinated with other AFMs could greatly reduce the amount of workers' unpaid labour, at least for a time. A simple blockade of the FC entrances to stop trucks from entering or leaving the area, especially if carried out

with the involvement of Amazon associates, can also effectively render the facility useless as far as receiving merchandise and sending out orders goes. Even with all the draconian measures used to keep a watchful eye over them, in the end — just like with any other industry — it is the hundreds of thousands of Amazon staff who have the power to make a real difference. It is they who are being exploited, it is their labour power that makes all these services possible, and it is they who, guided by a new internationalist revolutionary organisation, can push our species into a new era.

Soon it might be too late, as our planet screams for mercy. No amount of greenwashing and bragging about electronic vans can change the fact that Amazon, like many other capitalist goliaths out there, is contributing to this devastation massively. Stock that does not sell is not stored at FCs, as it takes up space for items that could still be sold for a profit. Amazon offers to send these unwanted products back to the original vendors/manufacturers (presumably for a price), otherwise the items are "disposed of"... In practice, this means that mountains of things are chucked out just because no one bought them in a specific time window. Automated facilities like these FCs, when utilised properly with the planet and people in mind, have great potential as centres for distribution of food and other goods in a global society that produces for human need instead of profit. Capitalism abuses these systems to achieve increased productivity, thus greater exploitation, but we could instead make them serve us as they could reduce the amount of time people would need to contribute in order for society's real needs to be met. Whether such places continue to be managed by greed and used to destroy life on Earth is ultimately up to all of us — the world working class.

Nikopetr
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Ukraine and Taiwan: Flashpoints in an Uncertain Imperialist World

Climate change is only one of many threats to our future. Life is already hell for millions trying to survive on low wages or no wages at all, who face both environmental degradation and wars over dwindling basic resources. Imperialist powers stoke these into devastating conflicts which force millions to become refugees, kicked from pillar to post, often dying in their search for a secure existence.

Nowhere on the planet is immune from danger. A stagnant capitalist economy that survives on an increasing mountain of debt (like Evergrande in China, which is currently under threat of defaulting) is intensifying imperialist rivalries. The slow death agony of the system is now manifest in so many ways. The post-World War Two order that was imposed by the US in 1945 has been breaking down since the post-war boom ended, which forced the dollar off the gold standard in 1971. Today the increasing rivalry between China and the US stretches from South America, via the Middle East and Africa, to the South China Sea.

Imperialism and the Pandemic

So we wrote in our last agitational broadsheet *Aurora*, which was distributed in the COP26 demonstrations in Glasgow, and across the UK.¹ Obviously in a short piece of a few hundred words we could not expand much on matters there, but here we want to reflect on recent developments in the international arena to try to put them in perspective. The pandemic has stripped away any notion that the current way of life, mode of production, or whatever you like to call it,

offers humanity a future. As we showed in our last issue (*Revolutionary Perspectives 18*) the global capitalist system got lucky over the vaccines.² Due to the work of a few derided and/or underfunded scientists, plus the sense of international responsibility of others, the nature of the virus was scientifically identified and new vaccines produced in record time.³

But what followed was an unseemly scramble amongst the wealthier states to ensure that they got the bulk of the vaccines. Despite the repeated injunctions of the World Health Organisation that “no-one is safe until everyone is safe”, the US under Trump forbade the export of any material that might be used in vaccines (including the glass for the vials that carry them) whilst others, like the UK, smugly congratulated themselves that they had contractually cornered vaccine supplies early to fulfil their exclusive national needs. The consequences are still with us today, over a year after the first vaccine was licensed. Whilst enough vaccines have since been created to vaccinate the entire world population more than once, half the world’s population have not received a single one. And thus the mutations keep on coming⁴ making the game of catch-up in a pandemic, which some virologists think might be around for years,⁵ all the more prolonged.

Capitalism as a social system thus continues to be found wanting in its response to the virus. To internationalists this is no surprise. Leaving aside the greed of “Big Pharma”,⁶ we live in a world of competing profit-seeking enterprises backed by the states in which they are primarily located. It has been thus since the late 19th century, and we call this intertwining of capital and the

national state, “imperialism”.

Imperialism is no longer just a question of colonial domination of a territory by some advanced capitalist state. No state today exists outside the capitalist order (whatever juvenile Stalinists might try to argue about Cuba, China or North Korea) and all participate in the imperialist world order in some form, whether as the dominant global power like the US, a nascent challenger like China, a former world power like Britain, or a client state trying to manoeuvre for its own advantage between the leading imperialist powers. They all have their own national interests which are identical with the interests of the leading capitalists in each state, whatever the precise political form of that state.

Imperialist rivalry continues to evolve even in a pandemic. Indeed, it could be argued that under the radar of the pandemic they have intensified. Certainly if we believed all the stories in the Western press about the threat of Russian expansionism towards Ukraine or China’s imminent invasion of Taiwan, then the threat of global war is as close as it has ever been in the last six decades. During the last three of them of course, it has been the Western powers, under their alias of “the international community”, who have led the way in invasions, as in Iraq, Afghanistan and Libya. This does not prevent them claiming to be the “good guys”, promoting democracy and human rights against corrupt dictatorships. Let’s just state it bluntly: In an imperialist world all the actors are driven to become rapacious powers fighting their own corner. There are no “good guys”. But to properly evaluate where we are in history we need to take a step back, and analyse how we got to here.

The Cold War

There is a lot of journalistic speculation about a new “Cold War” (sometimes between the US and its allies, sometimes with China,

and sometimes with Russia). This is an understandable analogy, since both sides openly call the other aggressors, but it overlooks an important difference. The rivalry between the USSR and the USA after 1945 was not of the same order as today. Some claim that this rivalry remained a “cold” war only because both sides had acquired nuclear weapons by 1949, so did not dare to have a direct conflict, but this is only part of the equation. The essential point is that both emerged from war in 1945 having massively expanded their imperial reach. They were in a sense “contented powers”, and thus had more to lose than gain from any direct conflict with each other. Nuclear weapons only gave more weight to that calculation. At the same time the massive devaluation of capital which World War Two had allowed a new cycle of accumulation to start. Indeed, for almost thirty years after 1945, the world economy experienced its longest and greatest boom. In this context of a booming world economy dominated by two “superpowers” a new world order gradually emerged. The Cold War imperialist game thus developed according to certain unwritten rules, all predicated on the need to avoid a direct conflict. Instead it became a war of manoeuvre. It was way more predictable than the current situation, which is the culmination of series of factors starting with the end of the post-war boom in the 1970s. This downward shift in the capitalist accumulation cycle eventually brought about sweeping economic restructuring, and the turn to financialisation and globalisation which involved the transfer of Western investment to China’s low wage economy, thus stimulating its rise as the motor of the world economy. Last, but not least, was the dramatic collapse of the USSR in 1991. Thus we live in an infinitely more complex world than that of the post-1945 era.

The material basis of the original Cold War rivalry stemmed from the fact that the USSR’s imperialist order rested, not just on

its obvious military occupation of Eastern Europe, but on the concomitant economic bloc it created. The US calculation at Yalta, Tehran and Potsdam was that its largely intact productive apparatus would guarantee an economic dynamism that would simply overwhelm the rest of the world, including whatever states came under the control of the half-devastated USSR. However this was not what happened. After looting Eastern European states of their industrial plant, Stalin, despite promises made at Yalta that free elections would be allowed, put Communist Parties loyal to Moscow in control in every one of them before 1948. But the real blow to US imperialist expectations was that the USSR's satellite economies were immune from dollar domination (which was to reign supreme in the rest of the world after Bretton Woods)⁷ because they were protected by non-convertible currencies. This was the main reason why the USSR refused to allow any of them to accept Marshall Aid which was designed to shape the post-war world to the needs of the US economy. It would have opened up Eastern Europe to the West if it had been accepted there. The erection of this impenetrable trade barrier could be considered the first act of the Cold War on the USSR side.

However, the real first act of the new imperialist world order had already been carried out by the USA, with the bombing of Hiroshima on 6 August 1945. Apologists for US imperialism always maintain it was a strategic necessity to bring about the Japanese to surrender without further loss of US military lives (always conveniently put at "half a million", or more than twice the total number of civilians who died in the immediate aftermath of the bombing of both Hiroshima and Nagasaki). This is a smokescreen – even the US' military thought the deployment of nuclear weapons unnecessary. Japan was no longer in a position to resist and the firebombing of Tokyo had been so intense

that more died there than in both nuclear attacks. No, the real reason was to force a Japanese surrender before Russia could advance into China and Korea. At Potsdam Stalin had promised he would declare war on Japan three months after the surrender of Germany.⁸ As Germany had surrendered on 8 May, the date for the Soviet entry into the war in the Far East was set for 8 August. Stalin, ever a formalist when it came to international agreements about spheres of influence, could be expected to keep his signed word. He had famously refused to believe that Hitler had invaded the USSR in June 1941 (thus breaking the Nazi-Soviet Pact of 1939), and he stuck by the territorial agreements he signed with Roosevelt and Churchill during World War Two. He stuck by his Potsdam promise to the letter too. The Soviet Union thus declared war on Japan precisely on 8 August.

It was the final blow for the Japanese military caste but some of them continued to argue against surrender, even after a second atomic bomb was dropped on Nagasaki the day after the USSR entered the war in the East. Japan finally capitulated on 15 August, and within 24 hours the 730,000 Japanese soldiers of its Kwantung Army in Manchuria surrendered to the Red Army. Their 1,155 light tanks, 5,360 guns, and 1,800 aircraft were handed over to Mao Zedong's Chinese Communist Party, thus tipping the balance of power in China in his favour (although they came with an injunction from Stalin to do a deal with the Nationalists). Meanwhile the Red Army advanced into Korea and could have taken the whole peninsula but, much to the Americans' surprise, Stalin accepted their proposal to divide the peninsula along the 38th parallel, even though the US had no troops on the ground in Korea at this point.

These were indications that Stalin considered the wartime alliance as still in force, but it did not last long. Even before Stalin started imposing governments on Eastern Europe,

Churchill, the former British Prime Minister was announcing at Fulton, Missouri in 1946 that an “iron curtain” had now fallen across Europe. By 1947 the US was now announcing the Truman Doctrine which was exclusively about the “containment of communism”.

When China, “a quarter of mankind” “went communist”, and then the US lost its nuclear advantage when Soviet scientists developed the atomic bomb in 1949, the alarm bells started ringing in Washington. The US’ first response was to set up NATO and other alliance systems across the world to “contain communism”. The new world order was now basically defined.

Neither the USSR (which had emerged from the defeat of a proletarian revolution in the 1920s) nor China (where Mao’s victory had nothing to do with the proletariat), was “communist” in the sense that Marx understood the term. From 1928 on Stalin gradually developed a militarised productionist state capitalist economy, which concentrated on heavy industry to produce weapons (starting with the Five Year Plans) but which failed to satisfy many of the basic needs of the population. “Development of the productive forces” under Stalinism did not include development of the lives of workers as it had for Marx. Exploitation continued and a new ruling class of *nomenklatura* emerged who could pass on their privileges to their families in this command economy version of capitalism. Marxism was also reduced to teleology under Stalinism. In the Stalinist world-view “actually existing socialism” represented the future for humanity, whilst the crisis-prone Western states would “inevitably” “fall like ripe fruit” (Khrushchev). The USSR thus did not directly seek to further expand its territorial control but, instead, supported with money and weapons any local bourgeoisie across Africa, Asia and Latin America that sought to shake off the dollar domination which, after Bretton Woods,⁹ held sway everywhere except in the

Soviet bloc.

However, “containment of communism” also demanded that the USA carry out more active intervention around the world. Campaigns of assassinations, subversions of elected governments and military campaigns to maintain its empire characterised US foreign policy throughout this period. This was all done in the name of democracy and freedom, yet the United States ignored the USSR’s suppression of workers’ rebellions in Poland, East Germany and Czechoslovakia between 1953 and 1968. Under the rules of the game they were within “the Russian zone”, so all that could be attempted was covert CIA support for subversive elements there (like the Catholic Church in Poland). By contrast the US directly prosecuted wars in Korea and Vietnam whilst the USSR was only present “by proxy”, and the USA did not hesitate to overthrow the governments of places like Guatemala, Chile, Grenada and the Dominican Republic who threatened to nationalise US firms. The pattern was the same in all of them. They either feared that yet another state would go behind the “iron curtain” of non-convertible currency, or that their investments would be lost to some nationalist, and nationalising, government.

This policy of intervention led to the unsuccessful attempt to unseat the nationalist regime of Castro in 1961. It not only failed but also led to Castro’s hasty espousal of “Marxism-Leninism” in order to court USSR protection. Getting a foothold in “America’s backyard” was the biggest gain for the USSR in the post-war period but it brought about the severest imperialist crisis that the Cold War produced. It was a confrontation over nuclear weapons (although it should be pointed out that it was not “a nuclear confrontation” as such). In 1962 the USA not only had almost nine times as many nuclear weapons as the USSR, but some were even stationed on the USSR’s border in Turkey. Khrushchev

had thought to redress the balance by secretly deploying a similar threat only 90 miles from Miami, but the new missile sites were photographed by U-2 spy planes in October 1962. After a 13 day stand-off the dispute was resolved, with the USSR withdrawing the missiles in return for a US public promise not to invade Cuba. Secretly the USA also agreed to withdraw its nuclear missile systems from Turkey, a fact not revealed until 1971.

The fact that the issue did not develop into a war (let alone a nuclear one) was down to the same factors which still operated in 1962. Cuba was the first state to declare itself pro-USSR outside the Eurasian landmass, so the stakes were high. However the post-war boom was at its height, and the USSR's position was that one day it would inherit the world anyway (this "peaceful coexistence" was seen as a passive position by Mao Zedong's China, leading to the split with Moscow). When Kennedy pronounced the blockade of Cuba to prevent warheads reaching the island he called it a "quarantine", as a "blockade" would have been recognised as an act of war. In Moscow, Khrushchev feared the US would invade Cuba so Russian troops there were told to resist by all means – except nuclear weapons. The US on the other hand feared an invasion of Cuba would lead to the USSR overrunning Berlin. Both sides were on nuclear alert, but neither was prepared to be the first to strike, though in more desperate circumstances one or both might have contemplated it.

Fast forward to 1983. By then the post-war boom was over. Most western countries were faced with "stagflation", that combination of unemployment and inflation that brought strikes and struggles across the West in the 1980s. This compelled states to begin the process of restructuring that would lead to the shift of investment and jobs to the East. The USSR though was in even worse shape, thanks to the economic stagnation, waste and corruption of the Brezhnev years. Its

rate of growth had more than halved, from the 5.7% per annum in the immediate post-war period, to 2.6% in the Brezhnev years. An indication of the breakdown of Cold War norms had already taken place. For the first time since 1945, the USSR felt compelled to defend its imperialist interests by invading a country outside its bloc when Brezhnev went into Afghanistan in 1979. The consequences were to be momentous. Not only did it become a graveyard for thousands of Russian conscripts, but in a complete role reversal, US support for Islamic fighters, the Mujahideen, led to Afghanistan becoming the USSR's Vietnam.

It also put an enormous strain on the USSR's economy. When Brezhnev died in 1982 the head of the KGB, Yuri Andropov, took over. By then Reagan, by ignoring the soaring US budget deficit was years into a new arms race (sometimes called the Second Cold War) with the USSR. The USSR was already spending a quarter of its GDP on the military, whilst the US was spending much more, but only 6% of its GDP. With its annual growth rate down the USSR was already badly overstretched. Against this background NATO carried out its biggest ever military exercise (code named "Able Archer 83") in Europe, targeted at the USSR. It was so extensive that the USSR believed that an attack was imminent. The KGB was tasked with monitoring it. Its report brought Andropov to conclude, with some foresight, that:

The US is preparing for war, but it is not willing to start a war. They are not building factories and palaces in order to destroy them. They are striving for military superiority in order to 'check' us and then declare 'checkmate' against us without starting a war. Maybe I am wrong.¹⁰

He wasn't. His perception not only summed up the nature of the Cold War, but

also the need for the USSR's bureaucracy to reform. However, within months Andropov was dead, and due to resistance of the old hardliners in the Politburo, it would take two more years before Andropov's protégé, Gorbachev, would be in a position to start those reforms, under the slogans of *perestroika* and *glasnost*. It was too little too late and not popular. The process would be sabotaged at every stage by the ruling class *apparatchiks* of the *nomenklatura*, who in the end tried to get rid of Gorbachev but succeeded only in bringing down the USSR itself.

The New World Order

In a Kremlin speech in 2005 Vladimir Putin characterised the collapse of the USSR as the "greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the Twentieth Century."¹¹ The years that followed the break up of the USSR were characterised by triumphalism in the West, summed up in the ironic echo of Stalinism that we had arrived at "the end of history."¹² A KGB officer in Berlin at the time, Putin subsequently had to observe the Eastward march of NATO and the EU right up to the old Russian borders. Russia not only lost the satellites of East Germany, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Poland, Romania and Bulgaria but also Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, Azerbaijan and the Central Asian republics. The Russian state could do little at this point as its economy was undergoing "shock therapy" on the advice of prominent US economists. Following the economic stagnation of Gorbachev's *perestroika*, Yeltsin attempted to impose a more deep-seated restructuring of the Russian economy, one that had taken the West 20 years to accomplish, in a matter of months. It was a disaster which not only saw Russian GDP fall by 40% by 1999, it also saw 45,000 state enterprises sold off for a song to those who already had strong political (as well as criminal) connections, creating a class of oligarchs who were

literally a law unto themselves. It culminated in a financial crash in 1998 which led to the devaluation of the rouble, and further misery for a population whose life expectancy was falling. Putin regards this period as one where the West "blatantly tricked" Russia by promising not to extend NATO right up to Russia's borders.¹³ Instead NATO and the EU enthusiastically integrated all the former Eastern bloc states, and parts of the old USSR, apart from Belarus, Moldova and Ukraine, into their orbits. It is something Putin is determined to halt, and, if possible reverse, which is why he now talks of defending Russia's "historic territories" like Ukraine.

Putin replaced Yeltsin in 2000. He first had a few local matters to deal with. His first act was to pass a law guaranteeing Yeltsin and his family immunity from prosecution. He then ruthlessly crushed Chechen separatists militarily, and at the same time gave Chechnya a degree of autonomy under his chosen appointee. He gaoled Mikhail Khodorkovsky and dismantled his Yukos empire, as a warning to other oligarchs that they either support him, or would face the full force of the state. The rest of society would suffer the same treatment in the course of time, and assassination of opponents, at home and abroad, would become state policy. However, the economic recovery that followed devaluation, based on high energy prices, although it made Russia one of the most unequal countries on the planet,¹⁴ initially made Putin genuinely popular at home.

Nevertheless Western hubris continued. The "colour revolutions" in Ukraine and Georgia which overthrew governments favourable to Russia in 2004 were financed and supported by Western elements.¹⁵ The "revolutions" further confirmed the process of the encirclement of Russia as both were accompanied by direct moves to incorporate them into NATO (and in Ukraine's case the EU as well). These were the first challenges to Russia under

Putin, but with a stronger economy he was in a better position to respond. The first dispute was, on the surface, a commercial one but in an imperialist world there is no such thing as a purely commercial dispute. Ukraine received cheap gas (and got some gas in lieu of transit fee payments for Russian pipelines to Europe) from Russia. However in the winter of 2005-6 Gazprom (with Putin's support) accused Ukraine of siphoning off gas intended for the EU and demanded that they now pay "the market price" for gas. Oil and gas was central to the economic recovery of Russia. They accounted for 70% of Russia's export revenue at this point and still today account for 40% of the Russian budget revenue. Such dependence on energy revenue means that every move the Kremlin makes has to be carefully calculated. Russia wants to use the energy question to put pressure on both the EU and its closest neighbours to prevent any further deterioration in its geopolitical power, yet cutting off gas supplies not only means lost revenue, but could prompt the Europeans to look elsewhere (US LNG from fracking being one option pushed by Trump in his time) over the longer term.

In 2006 gas was actually cut off for 3 days until a compromise was reached on 4 January, when Ukraine agreed to pay more, and not to prevent Russian gas reaching the EU states. This did not prevent a further confrontation over gas prices in 2009. We analysed this situation at the time as being more sinister for the EU than the previous crisis. Putin (talking for the allegedly private company, Gazprom) has always refused to sell gas on the "spot market" (i.e. for immediate use in an emergency) and will only honour long term contracts. The 2006 and 2009 crises were really about demonstrating to the EU that the pipeline through Ukraine was unreliable, and that the Germans in particular should sign up to the Nord Stream pipeline going directly from Russia to Germany (and not through

ex-USSR satellite states like Ukraine, Poland and Belarus) to get a reliable supply. We noted at the time,

Throughout the Cold War, the USSR did not once cut off the gas supply. Contrast this with today. For the EU, January's gas crisis has only emphasised that Russia is ready to use energy as a political weapon. The era of blatant antagonism towards Russia without consequences has come to an end and rampant anti-Russian member states like Poland and the Czech Republic will have to be curbed ... On the gas front, Ukraine is in no position but to accept whatever Russia says and this will inevitably increase Russian influence. (Though the wrangling between pro-Western and pro-Russian factions amongst the ruling class is set to continue).¹⁶

The wrangling of the factions in Ukraine continues to this day. In Russia, as we saw, the state has largely forced its oligarchs into line. This is not so in Ukraine, where, in 2013, 50 or so oligarchs controlled 45% of the economy¹⁷ and the politicians. Some are based in the Ukrainian-speaking West and others in the Russian-speaking East (especially the Donbass). The rivalry between them in the face of a series of economic crises¹⁸ (especially after the speculative bubble burst across the global economy in 2008) has undermined any concerted response to Russian manoeuvres. The consequences would become clear in 2014 but before we look at that we should take in the impact of the other "colour" revolution – the "Rose Revolution" in Georgia.

In Georgia the pattern was the same but the outcome transformed Russian imperialist prospects. The overthrow of Eduard Shevardnadze, once Gorbachev's Foreign Minister, as President of Georgia, opened up calls for Georgia to be admitted to NATO.

The South Ossetian and Abkhazian parts of Georgia refused to recognise the rule of Tbilisi, and in 1996 Russia had joined in the sanctions on Abkhazia imposed by the Commonwealth of Independent States. This had been set up by Yeltsin as a successor organisation to the USSR. After the Rose Revolution Putin decided to end these sanctions, and in 2008 Russian troops moved into Abkhazia to support the separatists. Saakashvili, the new Georgian President, responded by attacking South Ossetia (believing that NATO hints of support would morph into real aid). Russian troops performed poorly but they still succeeded in invading Georgia, and NATO did nothing. Russian imperialism was making a comeback, and the invasion of Georgia was part of the recalibrating of the balance of power in the old USSR's territory, as we noted at the time:

The Russians have also made some headway in restoring their authority in Central Asia (where the US has had to abandon at least one base). Last year as well they joined with China and Iran in the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation which is aimed to counter US attempts to control the oil and gas of the Caspian Sea. At the same time, Russia has backed away from any support for sanctions against Iran and restarted the building of the Bushehr nuclear power station.

However, the invasion of Georgia from South Ossetia by the Russian Army represents a new departure. The Russian invasion on August 8th was undoubtedly provoked by the rocket attacks of the Georgian Army on Tskhinvali but there is no doubt that the Russians were ready. The US has a base in Georgia and has trained the Georgian Army. 2000 Georgian troops who made up the third largest contingent in Iraq were flown

back in US transports to assist in the defence of Tbilisi. The Russian action is a calculated direct challenge to the US. The latter, boxed in by its commitments in Afghanistan and Iraq, is reduced to issuing pious statements.¹⁹

It was the same in 2013-14 in Ukraine. The pro-Moscow Yanukovich had been kicked out by the “Orange Revolution” but the divisions amongst his opponents led to his re-election in 2010 promising to stay out of NATO but to work in association with the EU. When, in 2014, he suddenly reneged on the association agreement with the EU, demonstrators began to occupy Independence Square (Maidan) in Kyiv and after several were killed Yanukovich fled. Putin, emboldened since Georgia, sent Russian troops secretly into Eastern Ukraine to assist the pro-Russian elements there. 14,000 have so far died (and are still dying) in the fallout. Donetsk and Luhansk still remain outside Ukrainian government control whilst Putin subsequently invaded and annexed Crimea. This is the first open re-occupation of former USSR territory by Russia. Ukraine was not part of NATO (although its troops had taken part in NATO exercises) so there was no formal obligation for a divided Europe and US to act.²⁰ The most they could agree on was sanctions, which clearly have had little impact.

So why is Putin mustering large bodies of troops on the Ukrainian border for the second time this year? It all started with the Biden administration signing an agreement to supply Ukraine with \$125 billion of weaponry in April 2021. The Pentagon openly declared that this was for “defence against Russian aggression”.²¹ This was put on hold in June so Russian forces began to stand down, only for half the package to be reaffirmed by U.S. Secretary of Defense, Lloyd Austin, on a visit to Kyiv in October. The Russian troop build-up thus resumed. And the USA is not the only

NATO power arming Ukraine. Turkey has sold drones which Ukraine used in October to destroy separatist artillery in Luhansk.²² And the British, ever seeking arms deals around the world, have also got in on the act by selling missiles to Ukraine. And to affirm their loyalty to the Western Alliance (i.e. curry favour in Washington) the Royal Navy sent the Type 45 destroyer, HMS Defender, on a deliberately provocative route within 5 miles of the Crimean coast.²³

Both Putin and the West are thus playing at what used to be called in the first Cold War, “brinkmanship”. It is part theatre and part serious, and of course always leaves room for “misunderstandings”. What Putin has seen is that the US has retreated from its previous position as the world’s policeman. In the last decade or so it has withdrawn from Syria (Russia has saved the Assad regime as a result), Iraq and Afghanistan, leaving behind only chaos and misery. He is aware that the West, and the Europe is divided over how to deal with his pushback against the last 30 years of NATO expansion. He is also aware of Russia’s relative weakness against the combined forces of NATO. The Ukrainian conscript army itself is the third largest in Europe (over 700,000 troops), and is undergoing reform and reorganisation, which, with new and sophisticated weaponry from NATO powers, will make it more effective. Putin worries that Ukraine may soon be strong enough to recover the Donbass. He knows too that there are some situations in which neutrality is more important than action. Thus, in the Caucasus in 2020 he remained neutral in the Armenia-Azerbaijan war, allowing Erdoğan’s unconditional support for Azerbaijan to bring about the rapid defeat for Armenia.²⁴ It seems he has learned from Afghanistan – via both Brezhnev’s adventure in the 1980s and the twenty year US debacle there – that any military action has to be sudden, short and sharp. The added advantage of this is that

the Western powers have no settled policy on how to deal with a more aggressive Russian policy in its own backyard, and where there is always the possibility of exploiting the differences between them over such issues as Nord Stream 2.

Trump famously made these divisions worse by his criticism of some of the most important NATO “allies”. Biden has since mended some fences with European allies, but there are still fears in Europe that the US will make some deal with Putin without consulting them, and then leave them to sort out the consequences. Blinken, the US Secretary of State has already conceded that Nord Stream 2 will come on line in 2022 (although the new German government has so far not sanctioned it) although it did get outgoing Chancellor Merkel to agree to the threat of more joint sanctions if Russia starts cutting off supplies of gas to Ukraine.

The USA really wants to concentrate on the far more dangerous threat to its global dominance that comes from China. Although the rhetoric is different, “the pivot to Asia”, and the need to cut the *faux frais* of its imperialist reach elsewhere, are about the only issues which unite the bulk of the US ruling class (from Trump to Biden). As part of the need to concentrate on China, the ignominious retreat from Afghanistan was negotiated by the Trump administration whose concessions to the Taliban undermined the Afghan government²⁵ to the point that only a massive re-commitment of US troops would have preserved it. Biden was just as critical of the futility of the Afghan adventure as Trump, so did nothing to prevent the Kabul debacle. Although there is much bluster about “red lines” and “serious consequences on both sides, the prospect of meetings in Geneva in January and a face to face between Biden and Putin in February, should ensure that the current theatre around Ukraine will go on into the new year. As a token of this Putin

withdrew 10,000 troops from the “exercises” on Christmas Eve, which still leaves an estimated 90,000 on Ukraine’s eastern border and in Crimea. However, whilst the US is more focussed on “the threat from China”, and wants to deal with Russia separately, the distinction may be harder to maintain given recent developments between these two states. In the last year in particular Russia and China have been seeking closer cooperation.

Russia/China and the USA

It was not always so. Despite sharing a Stalinist past (for only 7 or so years, it has to be said) the People’s Republic of China and the USSR/Russia have never been very close. They even fought a seven month undeclared war in 1969, which some sources claim was much closer to nuclear conflict than any rivalry between the USA and the USSR.²⁶ Today there are now a lot of material reasons why the two largest powers in Eurasia are being drawn together, and their separate rivalries with the US has given these added impetus since the Russian move into Crimea in 2014.²⁷ In 2020 the value of Russian-Chinese trade stood at \$103 billion but the two states have signed an agreement to double this in four years.²⁸ Russia is China’s main supplier of weapons and is the second largest source of its oil. In addition, China has at least a 20% investment in the Yamal LNG plant in the Arctic Circle and the Power of Siberia pipeline, a \$55bn gas project that is the largest in Russian history. Both will deliver gas to China. The Yamal LNG will be delivered via icebreakers that can cut through ice 2.5 metres thick to traverse the Northern Sea Route,²⁹ whilst the Power of Siberia pipeline, the largest Russia has ever constructed, has a branch to China from Blagoveshchensk although it will only open in 2022, four years behind schedule.³⁰ Indeed, with global warming, the Arctic Circle has become an area of opportunity for both powers offering a

faster route for Chinese exports to Europe. As our Canadian comrades recently noted:

*The polar silk road is attached to China’s massive Belt and Road Initiative which seeks to institute massive infrastructure projects throughout Asia, Africa and Europe to greater tie the world economy to Chinese capital and openly challenge American capital.*³¹

China not only hopes to build a port at the mouth of the River Dvina in Russia, but additionally to benefit from the mining of the rich deposits of nickel, iron, lead, zinc, phosphates and gold to be found in Russia’s Arctic regions.

Since 2014 US sanctions against both states have ensured that China-Russia rapprochement has gone beyond economic cooperation. Whilst the US was scrambling to get people out of Kabul in August, the two countries were engaging in “large-scale joint exercises for the first time inside China”.³² In October, Chinese and Russian warships held joint manoeuvres in the Pacific completing a near circle around Japan’s main island in the process. Then on November 19, both militaries sent bomber flights into Japanese and South Korean air defence zones, “*forcing Seoul to scramble its fighter jets in response*”.³³ Four days later the Defence Ministers of Russia and China then signed a “roadmap of closer military cooperation” for the next four years citing US aerial threats as the reason.³⁴ It adds that the two countries share a desire to counter a perceived U.S. ideology “of militarism, interventionism and the forcible imposition of U.S. values on other countries.”³⁵ And of course this new military alliance is “a contribution to peace”.

If that sounds familiar it is because we have been subjected to exactly the same propaganda from the US and its allies. Although they remain the most powerful forces on Earth, both economically and militarily,

together accounting for 60% of the world's expenditure on arms, they want to keep it that way. As Biden made clear earlier this year:

*On my watch China will not achieve its goal to become the leading country in the world, the wealthiest country in the world, and the most powerful country in the world.*³⁶

However in the Indo-Pacific the US does not have any alliance like NATO, with its integrated command and control structures. In fact, the only one of America's Asian treaty alliances that has such a structure, is the one with South Korea. During the Cold War the US did try to set up a NATO-equivalent in the region called the South-East Asia Treaty Organisation, or SEATO. This however never became a real military alliance, and lacked the common foe the USSR represented in Europe, so it was wound up in 1977. The US is now trying to nudge the NATO allies to take up more of the cost of the military expenditure in their own backyard against Russia, whilst it is also trying to build towards a series of alliances against China that might, in time, amount to the kind of close cooperation enjoyed by NATO states.

It is not difficult for the US to build a picture of "a Chinese threat". Stories of Chinese military exercises simulating an invasion of Taiwan, or the constant overflying of Taiwan's airspace, all add to a genuine picture of a much more assertive China.³⁷ The building of artificial islands in the South China Sea, the insistence that this is virtually China's *Mare Nostrum* and the disputes with Japan, Vietnam and the Philippines and other states in the region are real enough. China's maritime militia (hundreds of fishing boats with guns) are used to enforce China's claim to control various islands whilst not being officially part of the state apparatus.³⁸

At the same time the US is stepping up

the ideological issue too. The repression of the Uighurs in Xinjiang and the dismantling of democratic opposition in Hong Kong, as well as the increasingly authoritarian control which President Xi wields over the Chinese Communist Party, all fit the US "we defend democracy" narrative. In February 2021 Biden made this more explicit.

*We're at an inflection point between those who argue that ... autocracy is the best way forward and those who understand that democracy is essential.*³⁹

By playing on these military and ideological threats the US has been ratcheting up alliances, both formal and informal, as part of its manoeuvring to hold on to its position in the great game for world domination. These include the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) which includes the USA, Australia, Japan and India, the Five Eyes intelligence sharing organisation of the English-speaking states of the USA, UK, Australia, Canada and New Zealand, and most recently, the US controversial deal with Australia and the UK, AUKUS.

The Five Eyes operation is basically the US keeping its allies informed about what it has learned of Chinese advances but the Quad has organised joint naval manoeuvres annually throughout the Asia Pacific region since the 1990s. The 2020 exercise took place off the Malabar coast and significantly had the added presence of the navies of New Zealand, South Korea and Vietnam. It was during this exercise that the creation of a "NATO" for the Asian-Pacific region was first openly discussed. A further step towards a new anti-China dominated alliance in the Pacific came this year with the formation of AUKUS. Our comrades in Australia summed up its aims:

On September 15th, as part of revamped efforts by the US under Biden

*to gather its allies against China, Biden, Morrison and Johnson signed the AUKUS pact, which not only involves Australia to now be building nuclear submarines at the Corp in Osborne, South Australia, but also entails enhancing military interoperability, new forms of meetings and engagements between defence and foreign ministers and officials, and deeper cooperation across cyber, applied AI, quantum technologies and undersea capabilities.*⁴⁰

And to round 2021 off Japan and the US have now concocted a plan in the event of a Chinese attack on Taiwan:

*Under the plan, the US marine corps would set up temporary bases on the Nansei island chain stretching from Kyushu – one of the four main islands of Japan – to Taiwan at the initial stage of a Taiwan emergency and would deploy troops ...*⁴¹

These alliances enormously help to consolidate US power particularly against the perceived growing challenge from China. There are many ironies in this contradictory situation into which imperialism has stumbled. Not least is that the rise of China was predicated on the injection of massive doses of Western capital which could not find sufficient profit levels at home after the 1970s. Cheap Chinese commodities produced by the highly exploited Chinese working class, not only allowed Western economies to restructure in the face of a global economic crisis of accumulation, but also led to the creation of an economic giant which openly claims it will become the world's dominant power by 2049, challenging the very country from where its initial capital came in the first place. It certainly undermines the capitalist notion that trade, especially “free trade” promotes

enduring peace, but then the whole history of imperialism has already amply demonstrated this. The shock in the West is that China's embrace of “the market” has not automatically led to the collapse of the Communist Party's rule. It was assumed it would go the way of the USSR. More than thirty years since the Tiananmen massacre, Party rule seems as strong as ever.

The real fear for the US is that China's economic growth will give it a basis for transforming power relations. At the moment this seems a long way off and the dollar still rules supreme in world trade with no serious rivals, just as it has since 1945. However there are worrying signs for the US. China's much trumpeted Belt and Road initiative has been analysed in these pages before, but now 142 states are signed up in various ways to it. There are problems with many of these countries but the project continues. At the same time, Trump's withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership has opened the door for China to sponsor an alternative trade bloc, the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP).

*The RCEP trade bloc is the world's largest, both in terms of population and GDP, roughly accounting for 30 percent of the global total for each. The RCEP member countries are Australia, Brunei, Cambodia, China, Indonesia, Japan, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, New Zealand, Philippines, Singapore, South Korea, Thailand, and Vietnam. This equates to a market value of close to US\$25 trillion and a total consumer base of about 2.5 billion, of whom an estimated one billion are middle-class consumers. That is roughly the equivalent of 3 x the United States.*⁴²

The trade bloc aims to reduce tariffs to zero on 92% of traded goods of its members

so, although there are many economists who think it will not amount to much, it is a potential game changer. China has recovered from the pandemic faster than expected. Its annual exports were up 22% in November 2021 which is its highest growth in a decade. On the other hand the Chinese real estate sector is in crisis after the 6 December default of the Evergrande conglomerate. The Chinese property sector accounts for about a third of total economic output so this is bound to have a detrimental effect on overall growth figures for 2022.

Even without the pandemic, the current situation thus lacks some of *the predictability* of the post-war rivalry between the USSR and the USA. Whilst Putin is openly trying to redress the balance of power on the Southern and Western borders of Russia⁴³, the US has also dubbed China a “revisionist” power. On its own the US still has, at least on paper, enough military might to take on not only Russia and China, but the next 5 ranked powers in the world as well. Its military budget will rise to \$750 billion this year but whereas this was 6% of its expenditure in Reagan’s time that figure now represents 15% today. It is unlikely to diminish given both the seriousness of the perceived threat (naturally talked up by the military and the industries that get the contracts) and the constant development of new types of weaponry. There is in fact an arms race in cyber warfare, in drone warfare and in missile defence systems going on at some pace, all driven by the fear of losing a strategic advantage in any field.

Most worryingly is the increased notion in all the military forces that low yield tactical nuclear weapons can be used on the battlefield. In February 2020 the US conducted a military exercise which simulated using a submarine-launched nuclear weapon against Russia⁴⁴ (which US intelligence believes is also looking at the same possibility). Additionally China is credited with new weapons which could override the US 5-1 superiority in

aircraft carriers such as the Dongfeng-41 (“East Wind”) “carrier-killer” missile,⁴⁵ while its recent test of a hypersonic glide vehicle⁴⁶ which it is claimed launched a missile whilst travelling at five times the speed of sound, has only added more intensity to the arms race. The question begged by all this is “where is it leading us”? You cannot eat weapons nor can they be used to create anything. As tools they have limited use for hunting down the Earth’s declining wildlife, but other than that they only make money for those who sell them to the many warring parties in the world’s “local” conflicts from the Sahel and Syria to Ethiopia and Yemen. They bring misery to millions but the scale of today’s suffering will be nothing compared to what the system is now preparing.

The boom after the Second World War was predicated on the massive destruction of capital which allowed a new cycle of accumulation to begin. The extent of that destruction was enough to ensure that no power would lightly engage in generalised warfare. The costs had to be weighed in the balance. However the boom came to an end in the early Seventies, and the system has staggered from one expedient to the next to survive. The transfer of much productive capacity to China was just one of these, but today this has simply reproduced an imperialist rivalry of the most dangerous kind, with new alliances and a new, highly sophisticated, arms race in many fields. It cannot be predicted when this will lead to a more generalised conflict, although Admiral Davidson, the outgoing head of US command for the Indo-Pacific, openly declared that it would be within “the next six years” (as he, of course, called for an increase in the military budget).⁴⁷ The system is inexorably taking us down that more than dangerous road. The actual flashpoint might not be either Ukraine or Taiwan, but in these uncertain times nothing can be ruled out. This is a struggle for mastery over the planet, and it will not go

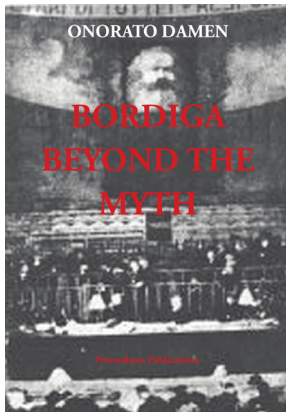
away. As our Italian comrades concluded in a recent article on Taiwan:

It is obvious that capitalism is preparing a new conflict of global significance and is not afraid of pushing the planet to the brink, not only on the environmental level, but now openly also on the economic and social level. Even if sometimes unconsciously, capitalism pursues the idea which every sensible human being instinctively hates and rejects: the idea of destruction, as its

salvation, its resurrection. By devaluing capital and obtaining the much desired “creative destruction” according to the famous Schumpeter definition, capital would then have paved the way to restart a new cycle of accumulation as after previous wars, regardless of the effects that this “regeneration” would have on the planet and on its population.⁴⁸

Jock

Due to constraints of space, the footnotes for this article will be found on our website version.



Bordiga Beyond the Myth

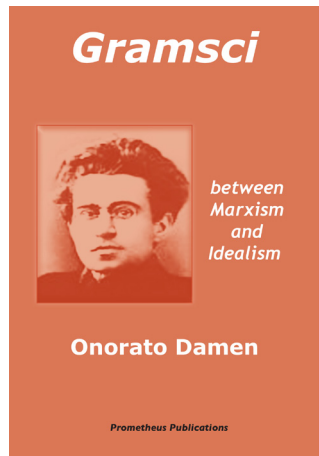
£5

The originality and importance of this volume – in a expanded edition including new documents and editorial notes, from the two previous editions: 1971 and 1977 – mainly lies in the documents that throw permanent light on the distinctive development and perspectives of the “Italian Left” over decades (among the most tragic in modern history) in the history of international communism.

Gramsci between Marxism and Idealism

£7.50

The present volume is the product of Damen’s considerations on Gramsci’s shortcomings as an analytical and practical Marxist which he evidently wrote over a period of years. The structure is loose because he died before he completed it and the draft chapters were only discovered posthumously and



Capitalism and Its Discontents: The Many Faces of Leftism

No one today can deny that capitalism is in crisis. It is apparent not only in the sphere of economic and international relations, but also in the very relationship between humanity and nature itself. More and more working people, particularly young people, no longer see a future for themselves under the current status quo. The search for alternatives has naturally summoned up the old quest for socialism and communism once again. But the meaning of these terms has always been a political battlefield and it remains so today.

From Utopian to Scientific Socialism

In the early nineteenth century, when capitalism was still in its infancy and before the working class was yet a force to be reckoned with, utopian socialism constituted an ideological challenge to the already dominant liberal and conservative ideas of the time. The likes of Robert Owen, Henri de Saint-Simon, and Charles Fourier exemplified this current. In reaction to the horrors of industrialisation, they devised alternative ways of organising society through cooperatives, communes, credit unions, mutual aid, etc. By doing so they hoped to show the superiority of socialist principles in the here and now, and convince the ruling classes to adopt the same practices. Not being based on the actions of the working class but on the ideal of making life better for humanity as a whole, such reformist experiments proved to be short-lived – either collapsing due to internal pressures, or being simply reabsorbed by the capitalist order. The

early message here was that you cannot build anything substantial or different as long as capitalism's basic laws still apply.

While Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels appreciated the various criticisms that the original utopian socialists directed at existing society, they sought to give socialism a much firmer basis. Having come to terms with their own idealist past, Marx and Engels realised that: “*The [written] history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles*” (*The Communist Manifesto*, 1848). This was the basis of the materialist conception of history. After showing how the capitalist class, the bourgeoisie, had risen to overthrow the feudal order they concluded that the abolition of the capitalist mode of production in its turn would have to be carried out by a particular class: the proletariat. Uniquely placed without any vested interest in capitalist society, the proletariat lives by selling its labour-power for wages which by no means correspond to the new value acquired by the capitalist. This very exploitation is the source of all capitalist profit. Socialism was to no longer be the domain of religious sectarian fantasies or individual blueprints for a future society and how to get there, but the knowledge-based, conscious expression of a proletarian movement as yet not fully mature. In order to distinguish themselves from their contemporaries, Marx and Engels used the terms communism, or scientific socialism. They dedicated their lives to explaining what capitalism is and how it functions in order to make the proletariat conscious of the conditions of its own emancipation. As such, their declarations regarding what socialism would actually look like were mostly of limited and

negative character: a global association of free and equal producers, where free development of each is the condition for the free development of all, where national borders, the state, the wages system, private property and class divisions have been abolished; a society whose maxim is “*from each according to their ability, to each according to their needs*”.

What they also made clear in the *Communist Manifesto* was that this could only come about via “the forcible overthrow of all existing social conditions”. In 1848 the working class, the proletariat, was not yet numerous enough, nor organised enough, to do this. However, in the two decades that followed, the scientific socialist outlook found its confirmation in the development of a modern industrial proletariat. This announced its historic mission in the Paris Commune of 1871. Although lasting only 72 days, and confined to a single city, it was the first proletarian (although not yet strictly “socialist”) attempt to “storm heaven”. It confirmed the revolutionary idea that “*the working class cannot simply lay hold of the ready-made state machinery, and wield it for its own purposes.*” (*The Civil War in France, 1871*). The state had to be smashed as part of the revolutionary movement towards the creation of a communist society.¹

Marx and Engels may have provided the working class with a withering critique of the capitalist system but they knew that this was not enough. If the ruling ideas in every epoch were those of the ruling class then the working class could only overturn this when their own experience of exploitation led them to come together to fight politically for a new world. This is why they made major contributions to the Communist League, the First International, and what would later become the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD). Marx’s famous words that “*the emancipation of the working class must be conquered by the working class themselves*” was not, as

is sometimes asserted, an affirmation that workers don’t need political organisation – these words are in the draft rules (1867) of the First International after all. It is a straightforward statement that the working class has to have its own political body outside of any influence of capitalist factions. The First International, riven by disputes between followers of Marx and Bakunin, collapsed. In its place socialist organisations claiming adherence to Marxism now appeared on a country by country basis. In 1889 they came together in a Second International. The proletarian movement was now creating mass parties and trade unions of its own through which hundreds of thousands of workers would be schooled in the materialist conception of history, in the study of economics, politics and even literature, art, philosophy and so forth.

The Ambiguous Path of Social Democracy

It looked as though a revolutionary political movement based on materialist thinking was now encompassing the mass of the working class. Not all was as it seemed however. Unbeknown to many at the time, Marx and Engels were kept in the dark and their views were even censored by the German party leadership², but they expressed their frustrations and criticisms mostly in private letters and unpublished manuscripts. The Anti-Socialist Laws in Germany after 1878 provided an excuse for the reformist wing of the movement to start revising the socialist programme to fit within the confines of the law. The likes of Eduard Bernstein went as far as to deny the need for a revolutionary overthrow of capitalism altogether, arguing that workers were now becoming citizens, that there was no inherent tendency to economic crisis, and that capitalism would simply evolve towards socialism. The role of the party

would be to work towards political democracy, while the trade unions and cooperatives work towards economic democracy.

This kind of revisionism was challenged by the revolutionary wing of the Second International, represented most famously by Vladimir Lenin and Rosa Luxemburg. They argued that the conquest of political power by the working class was a prerequisite for socialist transformation. That seeking to end capitalism purely through social reforms was not a slower, more peaceful road to the same goal, but the abandonment of that goal.³ And when voices within social democracy began to abandon internationalist principles, by making excuses for colonialism, or arguing that one imperialist bloc was “more progressive” than another, Lenin and Luxemburg reiterated that the main enemy — the bourgeoisie — is at home. They defended the resolutions of the congresses of the Second International which bound social democracy to oppose war through class struggle.

By 1914 imperialist tensions, economic pressures, and working class militancy created a situation where world war became the preferred option for the ruling classes. This was to be the ultimate test for social democracy — which it failed miserably. The SPD, the biggest and most influential party of the Second International, voted war credits to the Kaiser and the trade unions agreed not to strike against the war effort. The revolutionary wing of the movement began to regroup, but it was only thanks to the 1917 revolution in Russia, which first brought down the Tsar, then handed power to the workers’ councils (soviets), that a Third International was finally founded. The Bolsheviks were one of the few social democratic parties which stuck to their internationalist principles and played an indispensable role in that revolution. Ever since the Russian workers had discovered the idea of soviets in 1905 they had promoted them as the working class alternative to the

fake democracy of capitalist parliaments. In the first six months after the October Revolution they thus expanded the numbers of soviets, brought in the working class principle that elected delegates could be recalled at any time, and encouraged workers’ control of production. It became a model for revolutionaries across the world to follow.

The Legacy of the USSR

The Russian Revolution helped put an end to the First World War and, through its example, it unleashed a revolutionary wave across the world. Workers’ councils and communist parties sprang up to unite, organise and lead the struggle. In countries like Germany, Hungary and Finland workers attempted to take power directly but were violently suppressed. Soviet Russia itself was hit hard by the economic crisis it inherited from capitalism before being dragged into a brutal civil war fuelled and financed by international capital. The Bolsheviks won but it was a Pyrrhic victory. The need to fight a war in time of economic crisis led to the abandonment of the militia system of the armed workers’ councils in favour of a Red Army and a secret police, the Cheka, outside soviet (and indeed Party) control. Soviets ceased to be elected and often were replaced by their executive committees. By 1921 the revolution had arrived at an impasse as a one party state gradually emerged out of the hopes of 1917-18. Despite the existence of various oppositions both inside and outside the Communist Party, further degeneration was now on the agenda. By the time Soviet Russia was christened the USSR, early revolutionary dreams were already being shattered. The defence of the USSR was now being promoted as the *raison d’être* for the Third International.

If social democracy had already before the war began to transform the meaning of “socialism” to be synonymous with a capitalist

welfare state, then by the 1930s the USSR bound the idea of “communism” to the Gulag. It did not matter that the German Revolution was violently crushed principally by an SPD which still could claim, in sociological but not political terms, to be a “workers’ party”, or that long time revolutionaries were eliminated one by one during Stalin’s purges. As if to add insult to injury, fascism emerged in defence of the capitalist order under the guise of national socialism. It was the midnight of the century, crowned by the mass industrialised slaughter of the Second World War. What had emerged from the Russian revolutions was not “socialism” in the sense understood by Marx and Engels as a community of “freely associated producers”. The statist tendencies already intrinsic to every country in the imperialist epoch which opened at the end of the nineteenth century now adopted a new more centralised form. The armed might of the state became indispensable to the survival of the system; mass parties and trade unions were utilised to more effectively either mobilise or discipline the class behind the national state. In the Stalinist variant none of the categories of capitalism were eradicated. Wage labour continued though the boss was now the state, not some private individual. What remained the same was the capitalist productionist goal of increased profits and growth based on the continued appropriation of the unpaid labour of the working class. It was not socialism or communism but Stalin baptised it as “actually existing socialism” — a step on the road to communism.

This lie was useful to the USSR as the post-war boom unfolded. After 1945 the world was divided into “capitalist” (i.e. US) and “communist” (i.e. USSR) spheres of influence. The USSR was now at the head of the second most powerful imperialist bloc. Its alternative vision of capitalist development, premised on rapid industrialisation and near-total state ownership, served as an inspiration for the

bourgeoisie of various regimes, particularly on the capitalist periphery. Of these, China and Cuba are most notable here for not only outliving the USSR itself but also keeping alive the illusion that it is possible to have “socialism in one country”. Apart from the very few who continued to swim against the current, preserving the historical programme of working class self-emancipation in prisons and in exile in the 1930s and 1940s, among them our ancestors in the Communist Left, the twentieth century largely succeeded in extinguishing the vision of socialism and communism as a global cooperative commonwealth without states, the wages system, private property or class divisions.

We Are All Socialists... Again

Although capitalism’s post-war boom had ended in the early 1970s⁴, the collapse of the Stalinist USSR in 1991 gave rise to the notion that there was now no alternative to capitalism as epitomised by the United States. The financial crash of 2008 was a turning point. It put to bed all narratives about the “end of history” and the final victory of capitalism. It made talking about capitalism and potential alternatives to it acceptable again. The coronavirus pandemic has only exacerbated the crisis of this fragile debt-ridden system. It required a swift response from capitalist states the world over, not unlike during times of war: trillions were pumped into the markets, certain sectors were nationalised, workers were furloughed, and borders were closed. The threat of environmental collapse on the horizon, now looming more than ever, only adds further anxiety regarding the future. No surprise then that more and more have embraced “socialism” as the answer. But, as we have seen from the above, it is not the first time in history that “we are all socialists now”. And just as before, the meaning of this socialism is often reduced to state control,

trade unionism, workers' self-management, and "anti-imperialist" support for various regimes deemed less powerful in the global pecking order.

On one hand, there is the stamp that utopian socialism left. Today, building the new world in the shell of the old still remains the guiding motive of so-called prefigurative politics. Whether it is small social centres and squats, cooperatives, or larger "autonomous" communities (Zapatistas, Rojava, etc.), left liberalism and certain forms of anarchism spread the illusion that the world can be gradually transformed by oppressed minorities carving out their own niche within the system, without getting rid of either the wages system or the capitalist state.

Then there is the revival of Stalinism driven by generations born well after the collapse of the Eastern Bloc. Whether it serves as an infantile caricature of radicalism aimed at upsetting liberal sensitivities, or a more serious defence of the military and industrial "achievements" of "actually existing socialism" does not matter here. The end result is propaganda for regimes which have not only crushed more than one working class movement throughout history, but have also been based on the continuing exploitation of labour.

Even social democracy has not died of shame. Despite its hideous past in assisting in the massacre of revolutionary workers, it still has its "pragmatic" followers who continue to be drawn by the quest to manage decrepit, increasingly inequitable capitalism a little more humanely for workers. They have in fact largely abandoned the working class (workers don't vote enough) to seek an electoral base in identity politics, without much success, it has to be said. However despite the recent failures of left wing parties old and new, the more desperate leftists are taking consolation that the current crisis has at least proven the likes of Jeremy Corbyn and Bernie Sanders right

about public spending.

Trotskyism, which in theory poses as an alternative to both social democracy and Stalinism, has ironically rather served to legitimise both, through its recruitment strategies, entryism, and defence of various states, be they "anti-imperialist", "deformed" or "degenerated". In fact, Trotsky always retained the view that statification of the means of production, even under Stalin, was a progressive measure towards socialism (hence his critical support for the USSR in the Second World War). The only thing wrong with it was the personnel managing it. As Commissar for War, Trotsky more than any other Bolshevik promoted the creation of a state based on a standing army which replaced the militias – the armed wing of a genuine workers' movement. And his continual search for a mass movement led him back to the social democrats in his famous "French turn" in the 1930s which started the whole dishonest entryism of Trotskyism into social democratic organisations.

Outside the realm of organised leftism – the various left liberal, social democratic, Trotskyist, Stalinist and Maoist groups still in existence today – there now exists a more numerous virtual sphere which reproduces ideas haphazardly borrowed from a wide variety of academics, alternative media and internet personalities. It would be a waste of time to closely analyse here the likes of Richard Wolff, Michael Parenti, Jacobin, Novara Media or random YouTubers. Suffice it to say, for the most part, they represent nothing new but simply recycled and rebranded ideas from the past. And the crisis of capitalism provides a lucrative field for these quick-fix solutions. Vote for this party, join this organisation, sign this petition, buy this product, donate to this cause, etc.

The Working Class is the Key

In this context, it can feel like the Communist Left is just another option on the marketplace of ideas. But we do not promise anything, except what the working class can consolidate through its own struggle against capitalism and its appendices. What all these currents of leftism have in common is that they announce themselves as realistic and pragmatic. They are alternatives within the present state of things, reactions against the financialised and speculative capitalism of today which largely question its effects, not its basic causes or *modus operandi*.

We are under no illusion that through debate with the left of capital we can convince its followers to join our ranks *en masse*. Nor would we necessarily want that. The key here is the revival of class struggle, by which we mean wage workers organising collective resistance on their own account. It is too early to say whether we are witnessing the beginnings of such a revival now. Generally in the old capitalist heartlands we have a working class still unable to free itself of the trade union straitjacket, which cannot even offer us all a fair day's wage for a fair day's work, but at best some of us a "less worse" short-term settlement. Meanwhile in the capitalist periphery we are seeing mass struggles of a largely spontaneous nature, which while explosive and sometimes able to bring down governments, have not yet found a way to begin to pose an alternative to capitalism. The main exception here is possibly Iran, where following years of strikes and protests, workers have now created their own "coordinating councils", the first step towards truly taking the struggle

Notes

1. See <https://www.leftcom.org/en/articles/2021-03-18/1871-2021-vive-la-commune>
2. There are many examples. The last was in

into their own hands. Whether or not Iran proves to be the trigger for a more class-conscious "anti-capitalist" movement, the fact remains that for any movement to act as a beacon for the rest of the world it must take a political leap forward, not just in essential organising form (as the soviets in Russia did in 1905) but in its wider political objectives (albeit not immediately attainable and even though voiced by only a minority). Without such a challenge to the existing order the communist programme will remain relegated to the zone of "interesting ideas", still dominated by the illusion that state control is a step to communism.

The ideas we defend, that continuous red thread of lessons gained from struggles of the past two centuries, have to be up to the task to serve the movements of the future. An important part of that process remains collective discussion at an international level to which we invite all our readers. Without an understanding of what it is we are fighting against, and what it is we are fighting for, there can be no coherent collective action.

Dyjbas

December 2021

Some Further Reading:

Class Consciousness and Revolutionary Organisation

<https://www.leftcom.org/en/articles/2018-06-30/class-consciousness-and-revolutionary-organisation>

Trotsky, Trotskyism, Trotskyists

<https://www.leftcom.org/en/articles/2000-10-01/trotsky-and-trotskyism>

Stalin and Stalinism

<https://www.leftcom.org/en/articles/2003-08-01/stalin-and-stalinism>

1895 when Engels having been asked to write a new introduction for a German version of *The Class Struggle in France*, complained to Paul Lafargue:

“...Liebknecht has just played me a nice trick. He has taken from my Introduction to Marx’s articles on France of 1848-50 everything that would serve him to support the tactics of **peace at any price and of opposition to force and violence**, which it has pleased him for some time now to preach, especially at present when coercive laws are being prepared in Berlin. But I am preaching these tactics only for the Germany of today ... and [they] may become inapplicable tomorrow.” (Marx-Engels Selected Correspondence, *op. cit.* p.461, *emphasis in original*)

For a longer account see Chapter 4 of our pamphlet *Class Consciousness and Revolutionary Organisation* (see the further reading list above)

3. At this point in the struggle against Bernstein, they were supported by Kautsky,

then considered the “Pope of Marxism” but Kautsky’s actual position was that the victory of socialism was “inevitable” so that all workers needed to do was to struggle for reforms (the minimum programme) until the time when capitalism collapsed. Not surprisingly Bernstein and Kautsky would unite in the Independent Social Democratic Party of Germany during the First World War. They did not consider imperialism to be a new stage of capitalism and advocated pacifism in the war, until things “returned to normal”.

4. We have written about this in numerous articles but most recently in <http://www.leftcom.org/en/articles/2021-08-15/1971-2021-50-years-since-the-usa-renege-d-on-bretton-woods> and <https://www.leftcom.org/en/articles/2021-09-13/the-end-of-bretton-woods-a-contemporary-analysis>



Platform of the
Internationalist
Communist
Tendency

**Platform of The Internationalist
Communist Tendency**

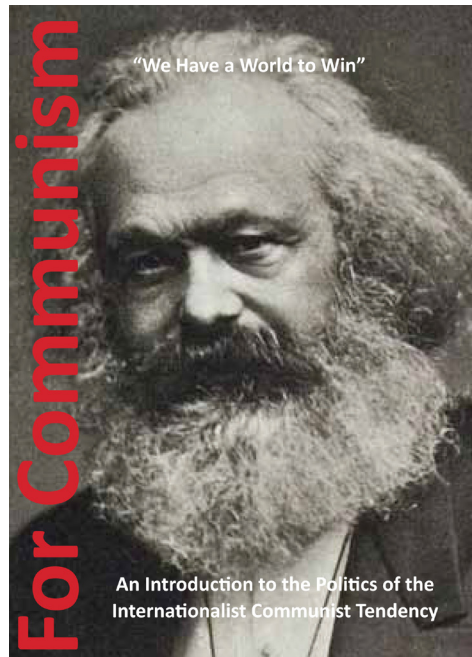
*An updated (2020) version of the
Platform of the Internationalist Com-
munist Tendency is now
available.*

*Only £1.00 + postage from the CWO
address (or bookshops when open).*

For Communism

*An introduction to the politics of
the Internationalist
Communist Tendency is now
available.*

*Only £3.00 + postage from the
CWO address.*



The Internationalist Communist Tendency

UK: The Communist Workers' Organisation produces *Revolutionary Perspectives* (a six monthly magazine) and *Aurora* (an agitational paper)
BM CWO, London WC1N 3XX

Italy: Il Partito Comunista Internazionalista produces *Battaglia Comunista* (a monthly paper) and *Prometeo* (a quarterly theoretical journal)
CP 1753, 20101, Milano, Italy

USA: The Internationalist Workers Group
IWG, P.O. Box 14485, Madison, WI 53708

Germany: Gruppe Internationalistischer KommunistInnen produces *Socialismus oder Barbarei* and *Germinal*
de@leftcom.org

France: *Bilan&Perspectives* produces a journal of the same name
ABC-LIV, 118-130 Av. J. Jaures, 75171 Paris Cedex 19

Canada: Klasbatalo produces *Mutiny/Mutinerie*, a broadsheet in English and French
www.facebook.com/Klasbatalocollective klasbatalocollective@gmail.com

Our Books

Bordiga Beyond the Myth £5
The originality and importance of this volume – in a expanded edition including new documents and editorial notes, from the two previous editions: 1971 and 1977 – mainly lies in the documents that throw permanent light on the distinctive development and perspectives of the “Italian Left” over decades (among the most tragic in modern history) in the history of international communism.

Gramsci between Marxism and Idealism £7.50
The present volume is the product of Damen's considerations on Gramsci's shortcomings as an analytical and practical Marxist which he evidently wrote over a period of years. The structure is loose because he died before he completed it and the draft chapters were only discovered posthumously and eventually published in 1982

Russia: Revolution and Counter-Revolution 1905-1924 £12
The “socialism” that eventually emerged from the 1917 Russian Revolution had nothing in common with the vision of Marx. This history explains how a genuine workers' movement from below degenerated into a new form of state capitalism. Its legacy remains the discovery of workers councils (soviets) as the basis for a new social organisation, alongside the need for a revolutionary programme to politically unite the class, against all the distortions of the various defenders of the existing order.

About the Communist Workers' Organisation

The Communist Workers' Organisation is part of the Internationalist Communist Tendency which was inspired by the Internationalist Communist Party (Battaglia Comunista). Formed during the Second World War in 1943, the PCInt. condemned both sides as imperialist. Its roots go back to the Italian Communist Left which had fought the degeneration of the Communist International and the Stalinisation imposed on all its member parties. Today there are ICT affiliates in several countries.

We are internationalists. We believe that the interests of the exploited are the same all over the world, and that communism cannot be achieved in one country, a myth peddled by Stalinism. Stalinism was never 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. We are opposed to all (Trotskyists, Maoists) claims that state capitalism in whatever form is socialism.

We aim to be a political reference point for the working class, first of all for those who are tired of the unions, all unions. This does not mean giving up on the fight to defend immediate interests (wages, hours, work rates, etc.). But the

unions are now a tool to control the class struggle and manage the labour force on behalf of capital. Today, any 'self-organised struggle', has to go outside of and against the unions. However, rank and file unions are a blunt instrument for workers. Even when they win a particular battle if they settle into a permanent existence they must accept the legal and economic framework imposed by the state. Any attempt to maintain a permanent body to defend workers' immediate economic interests will fail.

The only permanent body the working class can establish today is the political organisation, which is not only possible but essential. The starting point for this must be recognising that the general interest of the class lies in getting rid of capitalism. This is only possible through a revolution, i.e. the overthrow of the existing state and establishment of a new form of political power by the proletariat. The road to revolution does not mean the futile attempt to win control of the existing state via elections to parliaments or local governments which are means for the capitalist class to exercise its rule. History has shown us that the forum of our "democracy", the bodies of power of the revolution, will be the workers' councils, (or soviets) – mass meetings in which delegates will be entrusted with specific mandates and will be recallable at any time. But these potentially revolutionary organisations will be undermined by capitalist forces from within if they do not have a clear programme aimed

Our Pamphlets

- The Platform of the Internationalist Communist Tendency** £1
Revised English version (including postage in UK)
- For Communism** £3
An Introduction to the Politics of the CWO
- Class Consciousness and Revolutionary Organisation** £4
“Consciousness” is one of the most important issues for the working class and for revolutionaries. Our approach is unashamedly historical and attempts to draw out the real experience of the working class in its struggles of the last two centuries.
- Trotsky, Trotskyism, Trotskyists** £3
How Trotsky, who made an enormous contribution to revolutionary practice, ended up giving his name to a movement which returned to the counter-revolutionary errors of Social Democracy.
- Stalin and Stalinism** £1
The lie that the former USSR was “really existing socialism” remains a potent weapon against the working class. Here we examine the origins of the regime that came out of the defeat of the October Revolution as well as the motivations of Stalinism.
- Holocaust and Hiroshima** 50p
Examines how the nature of imperialist warfare comes to inflict mass murder on the world through an examination of these seminal events.
- Capitalism and the Environment (by Mauro Stefanini)** £2
Translated from Prometeo these show that our late comrade was ahead of his time in analysing the unsustainability of capitalist production.
- Spain 1934-39: From Working Class Struggle to Imperialist War** £3
Reprint of key CWO articles long out of print and translations of contemporary documents from the Italian Left in exile. New introduction.
- Platform of the Committee of Intesa 1925** £3
The start of the Italian Left’s fight against Stalinism as Fascism increased its grip.
- South Africa’s New Turmoil** £2
Analysis of class relations in the period after the fall of apartheid thrown into relief by the strike wave which followed the Marikana massacres.
- 1921: Beginning of the Counter-Revolution?** £1
Kronstadt, adoption of the NEP, banning of factions, the failure of the March Action in Germany and the adoption of the united front policy, made 1921 a highly significant year in the degeneration of both the Russian and international revolution

