

May Day 2016: Introductory report by David North

By David North
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The following speech was delivered by David North, chairman of the WSWs International Editorial Board and national chairman of the Socialist Equality Party (US), to the International May Day Online Rally held on May 1, 2016.

Comrades and friends,

Permit me to begin by placing this meeting, and, for that matter, the events through which we are passing, in a certain historical context.

Twenty-five years ago, the International Committee of the Fourth International published a May Day Manifesto in the immediate aftermath of the First Gulf War of February-March 1991. It stated:

“The post-World War II equilibrium of imperialism, which provided the political foundation for the massive worldwide expansion of capitalism, has broken down. It cannot be restored peacefully, for the relations between all the component parts that comprised the old equilibrium have been transformed. It is not a matter of the subjective desires of the individual leaders of bourgeois states, but of the objective consequences of economic and social contradictions, which are beyond their control.

“At the center of the disequilibrium of world imperialism is the crisis of the United States...

“Against the background of the worsening social crisis and its potentially revolutionary consequences, the drive of American imperialism to restore its position of world dominance constitutes the single most explosive element in world politics... The increasing recklessness and bellicosity of American imperialism represents, in the final analysis, an attempt to offset and reverse its economic decay through the use of military power—the one area in which the United States still exercises unquestioned dominance.”

The analysis of the International Committee of the deeper historical significance of the war contradicted the received wisdom of the time. The media and, of course, the academic specialists in international relations, accepted without reservation the claims of the US government that the invasion of Iraq was no more than a legal and necessary response to the August 1990 annexation of Kuwait, in violation of international law, by Saddam Hussein, the president of Iraq.

But the objective experiences of the past twenty-five years have vindicated the analysis of the International Committee. The invasion of Iraq marked the beginning of what is now a quarter-century of virtually ceaseless war. In the 1990s, the first war against Iraq was followed by US invasions of Haiti and Somalia. Cruise missiles were deployed against Sudan. On one or another pretext Iraq was subjected to repeated bombing attacks.

The decade was brought to an end by the US-led war against Serbia, in which the small Balkan country was subjected to a 78-day bombing

campaign. This was justified—again with the virtually unanimous assent of an endlessly gullible community of academics—as a humanitarian response to “ethnic cleansing.” Serbia’s acceptance, in June 1999, of the terms imposed by NATO, completed the fragmentation of Yugoslavia into seven debt-ridden states dominated by US and European imperialism.

As is now all too clear, the military operations of the 1990s were the initial tremors that anticipated the eruption of imperialist violence following the events of September 11, 2001. We are now approaching the fifteenth anniversary of the never-ending “War on Terror.” What is the political and moral balance sheet of the last 15 years? The United States has waged wars against Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya, Syria and Yemen. The total number of dead and wounded in these countries is in the millions.

The leaders of American imperialism may be justly accused of sociocide—the criminal destruction of entire societies. How, one must wonder, will the countries targeted by US imperialism recover from the devastation they have suffered? The last fifteen years have brought into common usage words and phrases such as “rendition,” “water boarding,” “drone strikes” and “targeted assassinations.”

In the White House, where President Abraham Lincoln composed the Emancipation Proclamation, the current occupant of 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue holds weekly meetings with his advisers to review so-called “kill lists.” Lincoln affixed his signature to a document that doomed slavery. Barack Obama signs papers every week that doom individuals to extra-judicial executions. Ironically, both Lincoln and Obama were trained as lawyers. But the contrast between these two presidents’ attitude toward constitutional principles and the value of human life mirrors the historical trajectory of the American state, from its democratic apogee under Lincoln to its imperialist nadir under Obama.

The quarter-century of war developed as a series of regional interventions, in the Middle East, the Balkans and Central Asia. The strategists of US imperialism were convinced that the massive military power at their disposal would secure, without too much difficulty, the “New World Order” proclaimed by the first President Bush in 1991. The dissolution of the Soviet Union had removed, they were convinced, the only significant obstacle to the unchallengeable hegemony of US imperialism. “Force works,” proclaimed *The Wall Street Journal* in the immediate aftermath of the first Persian Gulf War.

But the path to world domination was, as it turned out, strewn with unanticipated difficulties. The invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, despite initial military successes, have sparked growing resistance. In both countries the United States is caught in a quagmire from which it cannot extricate itself.

But retreat for American imperialism is impossible. Powerful objective forces and interests drive the United States toward ever more extensive—and reckless—military escalation. First and foremost, the economic crisis—especially since the crash of 2008—has grown more severe. Moreover, the international geo-political environment has become increasingly unfavorable.

The rapid growth of China as an economic and military power is seen by the United States as a major threat to its dominant global position. From the standpoint of Washington strategists, China is not only a direct threat to US dominance in the Asia-Pacific region. They also fear that China—as a consequence of its growing economic ties with America’s longstanding but untrustworthy European allies—may succeed in promoting a global realignment of economic and military forces unfavorable to the United States.

The American “pivot to Asia”—about which our comrades in Sri Lanka and Australia will speak later—seeks to both restrain the growth of Chinese influence in the Asia-Pacific and, if necessary, deprive China of access to Pacific and Indian Ocean sea-lanes upon which its economy depends. This is the cause of the growing tensions in the South China Sea.

However, the Asia-Pacific “pivot” is insufficient to secure America’s global hegemony. A substantial section of Pentagon and CIA strategists believe that the strategic isolation of China requires not only American control of the Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean regions. The United States must also dominate Eurasia, characterised in the textbooks of international geopolitics as the “world island.” This is the strategic objective that underlies the growing conflict between the United States and Russia.

International relations have reached a level of tension that equals, if it has not already surpassed, what existed in the late 1930s on the eve of World War II. All the major imperialist powers—including Germany and Japan—are increasing their military commitments. That a conflict between the United States, China and Russia could involve the use of nuclear weapons is already being acknowledged. It would be the gravest of errors to assume that neither the political and military leaders of the imperialist powers, nor their frightened adversaries in Beijing and Moscow, would ever risk the devastating consequences of nuclear war.

As a recent publication of an imperialist think tank warned, “*human beings cannot be counted on to act rationally—even by their own standards.*” The document is entitled *Rethinking Armageddon: Scenario Planning in the Second Nuclear Age*. Despite the fact that it is well understood that all the major powers possess enough nuclear weapons to destroy each other many times over, the document’s authors conclude: “[T]he delicate balance of terror preserved by mutual deterrence may be more fragile than is commonly supposed.” [1]

The danger of war arises from two essential and interconnected elements of the capitalist economic system: first, the private ownership of the means of production by monopolistic corporations and a financial oligarchy striving to maximize profits; and, second, the inescapable conflicts developing out of the objective reality of an interconnected global economy and the persistence of the nation-state system.

Exactly 100 years ago, in 1916, in the midst of World War I, Lenin—the future leader of the Russian Revolution—wrote his great treatise on *Imperialism*.

In opposition to anti-Marxist reformists like Karl Kautsky, who viewed imperialist war from a subjective standpoint—that is, as merely the outcome of incorrect policies on the part of the ruling elite—Lenin insisted that imperialism represented an objective stage in the evolution of capitalism. “Imperialism,” he wrote, “is the epoch of finance capital and of monopolies, which introduce everywhere the striving for domination, not for freedom.” [2] The drift toward dictatorship, Lenin explained, arose inexorably from the sharpening of imperialist contradictions. “The difference between the democratic-republican and the reactionary-monarchist imperialist bourgeoisie is obliterated,” he wrote. “Political reaction *all along the line* is a characteristic feature of imperialism. Corruption, bribery on a huge scale and all kinds of fraud.” [3]

Lenin’s analysis did not stop at proving that war arose out of the objective contradictions of capitalism. He demonstrated that the same

contradictions that gave rise to imperialist war also radicalized the working class and drove it onto the road of socialist revolution.

From this scientific insight flows the essential strategy of the struggle against war. The anti-war strategy of the working class proceeds not from the conventional calculations of bourgeois geo-politics, which are based on an assessment of the balance of power between national states. We proceed, instead, from an assessment of the balance of power between social classes. The fight against imperialist war depends upon the political mobilization of the working class. It is therefore the responsibility of the socialist movement to educate and raise the political consciousness of the working class so that it can wage war on war.

The program on which that fight is based must be anti-capitalist and socialist. War cannot be stopped without ending the economic system—capitalism—that generates military conflict. And, finally, the struggle against war must be international, uniting the working class and youth of all countries against capitalist exploitation and imperialist militarism.

There are many signs of a growing anti-capitalist political radicalization of the working class and youth throughout the world. Perhaps the most significant is the fact that millions of American workers, in the recent series of primary elections, cast their vote for a candidate who had identified himself as a socialist. Of course, the “socialism” of Bernie Sanders is little more than warmed over liberalism. But Sanders attracted support not because of his political opportunism, but because he was perceived by workers to be advancing, to use his own words, a “political revolution” against social inequality. The basic narrative of American political exceptionalism—that the working class will never turn to socialism in the United States—has been refuted in practice. A new chapter in the history of the American class struggle is beginning. Socialism, suppressed for so long in the United States, is entering a period of explosive growth.

It is precisely at the point when the contradictions that beset globally integrated capitalism attain extraordinary acuteness that the capitalist class, striving to rally the masses in support of imperialist war, does all in its power to whip up a nationalist frenzy. In the United States, Trump proposes to “make America great again” by building a wall across the borders of the United States and deploying unlimited military force against its enemies, foreign and domestic (especially immigrants). He plans to restore America to economic health with stronger borders and bigger bombs. In reality, Trump’s vision of a “Fortress America” is a dystopian nightmare that can be realized only through dictatorship and war.

“Trumpism” is by no means an isolated, purely American, phenomenon. There are many Trumps to be found all over the world. A common feature of contemporary capitalist politics is a resurgence of nationalism in its most chauvinistic form. The rise of the UKIP party and the Brexit campaign in Britain, the electoral successes of Marine Le Pen in France, the victory of the ultra-chauvinist Freedom Party in the first round of the Austrian presidential election, express a desperate attempt to find a nationalist refuge from the contradictions of globalized capitalism. But no such refuge exists. In no country can nationalism provide a viable alternative to imperialism and capitalist oppression.

The experiences of the past quarter century allow one to assess the consequences of nationalism. Let us consider the fate of the nations that emerged from the dissolution of Yugoslavia. The unemployment rate among Macedonian youth is 50 percent. In Slovenia, youth unemployment is 24 percent. In Croatia, 44 percent of youth are without jobs. In Montenegro, youth unemployment stands at 41 percent. In Bosnia, the youth unemployment rate is over 57 percent. In Serbia, 49 percent of youth are unemployed. In Kosovo, youth unemployment is over 60 percent!

Aside from the catastrophic results of nationalist projects, the

reactionary policies of national separatism have played a key role in providing the United States, Germany, Britain and France with a means of exploiting and inciting national, ethnic and religious separatism as a pretext for imperialist intervention, as has occurred in Syria and Libya.

The solution to the crisis of world imperialism can be found only through the political mobilization of the working class—on all continents and in all countries—in an internationally unified struggle against imperialism.

The persistent scourge of imperialist-sponsored national oppression can be resolved only through the unification of all sections of the working class. The historic task that confronts the working class is not the establishment of new national states, torn out of the rotting carcasses of older national enterprises, but the creation of a unified and integrated world federation of socialist republics. The only viable perspective is that elaborated by Leon Trotsky in his theory of permanent revolution. He wrote in 1928:

“The completion of the socialist revolution within national limits is unthinkable. One of the basic reasons for the crisis in bourgeois society is the fact that the productive forces created by it can no longer be reconciled with the framework of the national state. From this follows on the one hand, imperialist wars, on the other, the utopia of a bourgeois United States of Europe. The socialist revolution begins on the national arena, it unfolds on the international arena, and is completed on the world arena. Thus, the socialist revolution becomes a permanent revolution in a newer and broader sense of the word; it attains completion, only in the final victory of the new society on our entire planet.” [4]

In conclusion, the purpose of today’s rally is to issue a clear call for the development of a mass international movement of workers and youth against war. This urgent task is inseparably linked to the building of the Fourth International as the World Party of Socialist Revolution. We urge all those who are taking part to listen carefully to the speakers, and, if you agree with the perspective and program they present, to join the section of the International Committee of the Fourth International that is active in your country. If such a party does not yet exist, take up the fight to build a new section of the world Trotskyist movement in your country, and become a conscious participant in the struggle against imperialist war and for socialism, upon which the future of humanity depends.

Footnotes:

[1] Andrew F. Krepinevich and Jacob Kohn, *Rethinking Armageddon: Scenario Planning in the Second Nuclear Age* (Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2016), pp. 14-15

[2] *Lenin Collected Works*, Volume 22 (Moscow, 1974), p. 297

[3] *Lenin Collected Works*, Volume 23 (Moscow, 1974), p. 106

[4] *The Permanent Revolution*, 1928

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