

The global crisis of capitalist rule and the strategy of socialist revolution

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In the founding document of the Fourth International, *The Death Agony of Capitalism and the Tasks of the Fourth International*, written and adopted in 1938, Leon Trotsky summed up the character of the epoch as expressed in the political crisis of class rule in all the major capitalist countries:

The bourgeoisie itself sees no way out. In countries where it has already been forced to stake its last upon the card of fascism, it now toboggans with closed eyes toward economic and military catastrophe. In the historically privileged countries, i.e., in those where the bourgeoisie can still for a certain period permit itself the luxury of democracy at the expense of national accumulations (Great Britain, France, United States, etc.), all of capital's traditional parties are in a state of perplexity bordering on a paralysis of will.

Without much modification, this passage serves well as a description of the world situation as the year 2018 draws to a close.

In Britain, Prime Minister Theresa May is essentially a political corpse, having barely survived a vote of no confidence from her own Conservative Party last week. The British ruling class remains wracked by internal divisions over Brexit two and a half years after the referendum backing a decision to leave the European Union. May is hoping for some arrangement with the EU that will mollify her opponents within the Conservative Party, while the Labour Party headed by Jeremy Corbyn is seeking to avoid any measures that would further destabilize the government and encourage popular opposition.

In France, the banker-president Emmanuel Macron is perhaps the most reviled individual in the entire country, with approval ratings hovering just above 20 percent, down 27 percentage points over the past year. There is enormous popular support for the demands of the "yellow vest" protesters, to which Macron responded once again over the

weekend with mass arrests and tens of thousands of riot police on the streets of French cities.

In Germany, Chancellor Angela Merkel has resigned as leader of the Christian Democratic Union (CDU), which she has headed for 18 years, though she intends to remain chancellor until 2021. Under the Grand Coalition government of the Christian Democratic Union/Christian Social Union (CSU) and the Social Democratic Party (SPD), the German ruling class has fostered the extreme right, making the fascistic Alternative for Germany (AfD) the official opposition party and a dominant political force in the country. Under Merkel's leadership, Germany has developed into the most unequal country in Europe, as the ruling elite revives a military agenda of aggressive great power conflict.

In Australia, the ruling Liberal-National coalition government is hanging by a thread. There is civil war within the Liberal Party following the political coup that ousted Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull in August and replaced him with Scott Morrison, the seventh prime minister in just over a decade.

Then there is Sri Lanka, which has seen an extraordinary turn of political events over the past seven weeks. This involved the illegal firing of Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe by President Maithripala Sirisena, the appointment of former President Mahinda Rajapaksa to take his place, the dissolution of parliament, a Supreme Court ruling declaring the dissolution unconstitutional, and, yesterday, the reappointment of Wickremesinghe by Sirisena. Lest anyone conclude that this reversal marks an end to the political crisis, Sirisena, shortly after swearing in the prime minister he had previously sacked, denounced him as corrupt and a threat to the nation.

The most intense political crisis, however, is in the United States, the center of world imperialism. The Trump administration is increasingly besieged, struggling over the past week to appoint a new chief of staff to replace the fired Gen. John Kelly. Trump faces a series of criminal and civil investigations into his private companies, his charity and his inauguration committee. The president's former personal

lawyer, Michael Cohen, was sentenced to three years in prison last week, while the parent company of the *National Enquirer* and its chief executive have supported claims by Cohen that Trump was personally complicit in violations of campaign finance laws during the 2016 election.

The Democratic Party, while increasingly aggressive in its palace coup maneuvers against Trump, is deathly afraid of doing anything that will stoke popular anger. Dominant sections of the ruling elite contemplate with foreboding the tasks that lie before it—including great power conflict and dealing with growing social unrest—and see in the Trump administration a government unequal to the challenge. “Every one of us wades through his wreckage of norms,” lamented *New York Times* columnist Frank Bruni on Sunday, “is unsteadied by his assault on truth, braces for whatever happens next and knows that it may have much greater and longer consequence for us than it does for Trump.”

Yet any destabilization of Trump or constitutional crisis can encourage what is most feared—the intervention of the working class. Hence the Democrats’ vacillation between threats of impeachment and demands for a more aggressive policy against Russia, on the one hand, and groveling pleas for Trump to work with them in implementing his regressive and militarist agenda, on the other.

The universality of political crisis—and to the above list many more countries could be added—is itself of immense objective significance. Whatever the national peculiarities, the destabilization of political institutions in every country is driven by the same crisis of the global capitalist system.

Ten years after the financial collapse of 2008, there are growing signs of renewed economic crisis. The Chinese economy is slowing sharply, Europe is in stagnation, and the United States faces the possibility of a recession next year. The ruling class is resorting to policies of economic nationalism and trade war, particularly the American ruling class. Such measures not only offer no way out of the economic blind alley, they fuel geopolitical conflicts that threaten world war.

Above all, there is the growth of social inequality, mass discontent and, increasingly, open class struggle. The ruling class is casting about for some means of stopping the inevitable tide of events—whether through internet censorship, ever more nakedly directed at social opposition, or by means of repression and violence, including the promotion of fascist and extreme nationalist movements. The frenzied drive to rearm and prepare for wider wars is, moreover, driven in large measure by the desire to direct internal social tensions outward.

A year that has seen significant expressions of working-class struggle throughout the world is coming to a

conclusion with the yellow vest protests in France, a strike by a hundred thousand tea plantation workers in Sri Lanka, a mass demonstration of tens of thousands of teachers in Los Angeles, California and other expressions of social anger.

The struggles by workers are developing in opposition to the existing political parties and the trade unions. Such was the case in France, where the yellow vest protests developed through social media and outside of the control of the unions. In Sri Lanka, workers greeted the Ceylon Workers Congress’s “back to work” order last week with protests and the continuation of the strike before it was finally shut down on Friday.

For the working class, the critical question is to develop its own organizations of struggle and political leadership. It cannot allow itself to be channeled behind any faction of the ruling class. It must take political power into its own hands.

Important advances were made over the past week, with the establishment of a steering committee of rank-and-file committees of autoworkers and other sections of the working class in the United States, and the establishment of an action committee to coordinate and organize the struggles of Sri Lankan plantation workers. In both cases, the emergence of independent organizations of working-class struggle developed under the leadership of the International Committee of the Fourth International and its national sections, the Socialist Equality Parties.

In founding the Fourth International, Trotsky concluded from the conditions and political experiences of the preceding period that the “historical crisis of mankind is reduced to the crisis of revolutionary leadership.” So it is today. In response to the global crisis of capitalist rule, the working class must advance its own strategy of world socialist revolution. The leadership of this world movement is the International Committee of the Fourth International.

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