

Political training in South Africa under “lockdown”

“SOCIALIST REVOLUTIONARY WORKERS PARTY

We are born of class struggle, in the fight to demolish the capitalist system that insists on the continued exploitation of most of society by a few humans. We seek to educate, agitate, mobilise and organize the working class into our political organisation.

The working class must fulfil our historic mission: to defeat imperialism and capitalism, establish a Socialist South Africa, Africa and World, as a prelude to advancing to a truly free and classless society: to a Communist South Africa, Africa and World!” (SRWP homepage)

It turns out that political organising and education can take place a lot more effectively than some comrades feared online, even during “lockdown” when physical gatherings of any size are impossible within the state’s arrangements for dealing with Covid-19. Some of the resources which have assisted imperialism to step up exploitation across the globe, such as computer technology and modern communications, are also tools in the hands of the workers’ movement.

At time of writing, the Socialist Revolutionary Workers Party of South Africa (SRWP) has just contributed to members’ political education online with two talks on Marx and the early beginnings of capitalism by SRWP Deputy General Secretary Dr. Vashna Jagarnath and a session with Vijay Prashad of Transcontinental: Institute for Social Research and Chief Editor of LeftWord Books.

Vijay Prashad’s contribution on “CoronaShock & Imperialism” on 23 April 2020 is the one I would like to discuss here. It can

be viewed on the SRWP Facebook page, so I urge the reader to do that, and I will make no systematic attempt to summarise his contribution here. It contained a number of important and useful observations.

Although Vijay Prashad only makes a couple of passing references to the Covid-19 pandemic, he does lay out succinctly an analysis and a conception of present-day imperialism. Unfortunately, very informative though this presentation is, it does not shed light on how and why, in the course of the political struggle between the working class and the bourgeoisie at an international level for more than a century now, we got to the point which society has reached today. Vijay Prashad merely lists as objective facts the changes in features such as technology, communications and banking and finance which facilitate the current form of imperialist plunder. Nor does his presentation refer to or illuminate the aims of the SRWP stated above: "our historic mission – to defeat imperialism and capitalism, establish a socialist South Africa and World", etc.

His references to the class struggle are all about forms of it which can be contained within the framework of existing bourgeois society. These are either trade union struggles over the extraction of surplus value in the form of "unpaid labour time", or the politics of pressure on the bourgeois state to set limits on the rapacity of the bourgeoisie, provide welfare and other essential services, and so forth. These have been historically very significant ways in which the class struggle between bourgeoisie and proletariat has been waged, and indeed continue to be so. However, it has always been the understanding of Marxists that the culmination of this struggle must be what is expressed in the aims of SRWP set out at the head of this article.

In the globalised economy described by Vijay Prashad, these two forms of struggle are held in check for reasons which he describes lucidly. His economic analysis of the workings of

imperialism is linked to certain considerations of class relations, but the political issue of the revolutionary overthrow of capitalist society, of which imperialism is the highest expression, and progress towards a higher, Communist society is not mentioned.

But it was for precisely that purpose that Lenin wrote his famous little book: *Imperialism, the highest stage of capitalism*, early in 1916.

Vijay Prashad does refer to the book. He notes that Marx and Lenin viewed imperialism as being rooted in the political economy of capitalism. This is to his credit: there are those on the left who try to separate the two completely. However, in presenting Marx and Lenin's views on the matter, Vijay Prashad carefully steers around some core issues and mishandles others.

Vijay Prashed discusses certain topics which Lenin dealt with in *Imperialism*, but leaves other vital matters out. He (Prashad) picks up Lenin's description of the changes on the world scale within capital accumulation as the 19th century ended and the 20th century opened as "concentration of production and monopolies"; Vijay Prashad refers to the "finance capital and the financial oligarchy" which Lenin dealt with, and he also mentions the "export of capital". (These are all section headings in Lenin's book).

By the way, Lenin also mentioned "the division of the world between ... powerful trusts" and comments that this: "does not preclude redivision if the relation of forces changes as a result of uneven development, war, bankruptcy, etc".(1) He also devoted a whole section of his pamphlet to "Division of the World Among the Great Powers"(2) which catalogues the forms this took 100 years ago; the forms have changed but the essence remains today!

But Lenin's *Imperialism* is about so much more! For a start,

Lenin emphasised that the development of imperialism is a dead end for capitalism:

“Monopolies, oligarchy, the striving for domination and not for freedom, the exploitation of an increasing number of small or weak nations by a handful of the richest or most powerful nations – all these have given birth to those distinctive characteristics of imperialism which compel us to define it as **parasitic or decaying capitalism**”(3). (My emphasis – BA)

In discussing the concentration of production and the growth of enormously powerful industrial and financial monopolies Lenin noted:

“Capitalism in its imperialist stage leads directly to the most comprehensive socialisation of production; it, so to speak, drags the capitalists, against their will and consciousness, into some sort of a new social order, a transitional one from complete free competition to complete socialisation.”(4)

Lenin believed that the “new social order” of imperialism is a contradictory one, a “transition” from complete free competition to complete socialisation. He certainly did not believe that the necessary outcome (complete socialisation) can be achieved by methods which leave the social, economic and political power of the bourgeoisie intact. The transition will not take place spontaneously or without the deliberate destruction of the bourgeois social order as thoroughly as the bourgeois revolution destroyed the feudal social order that preceded it.

He devoted a significant part of the book to a critique of socialist theoreticians, such as Karl Kautsky, who thought that a stable and peaceful form of imperialism could be attained without violent disruption. Lenin had learnt his Marxism at the feet of such Marxists of the Second (Socialist) International as Kautsky, but at the outbreak of World War I

they found themselves on opposite sides!

One of the problems socialists face today is the prevalence, in public discourse and indeed of peoples' minds, of reformist approaches to imperialism, attempts to rein in the system's truly degenerate and destructive features and achieve a system of peaceful and progressive nation-states without attacking capitalist social relations at their root.

Lenin wrote in 1917 in a new preface to *Imperialism*:

"This pamphlet was written with an eye to the tsarist censorship ... It is painful, in these days of liberty, to re-read the passages of the pamphlet which have been distorted, cramped, compressed in an iron vice on account of the censor"(5)

Nevertheless, what stands out in reading the pamphlet, even as published in 1916 under the whip of the censor, is Lenin's extremely plain language when he is dealing with former Marxists like his own respected teacher and guide, Karl Kautsky, who now proposed that a peaceful and fruitful way forward would be possible under imperialism:

"No matter what the good intentions of the English parsons, or of sentimental Kautsky, may have been, the only objective, i.e., real social significance of Kautsky's 'theory' is this: it is a most reactionary method of consoling the masses with hopes of permanent peace being possible under capitalism, by distracting their attention from sharp antagonisms and acute problems of the present time and directing it towards illusory prospects of an imaginary 'ultra-imperialism' of the future. Deception of the masses – that is all there is in Kautsky's 'Marxist' theory".(6)

And yet it was a version of Kautsky's theory which came to dominate in the Communist International after Lenin's death and the defeat of Lenin's followers by the bureaucratic caste which later took control in the Soviet Union.

The main expressions of the Kautsky-inspired politics of Stalin and his supporters were (1) asserting the possibility of building socialism in a single country, relying on "peaceful co-existence" with the imperialist powers, (2) the abandonment of revolutionary politics in the richer capitalist countries in favour of reformism ("Popular Fronts" and reformist socialism) and (3) the limitation of the revolutionary struggle of those peoples oppressed and subjugated by imperialism to national independence under their "own" bourgeoisie (the "Third World project").

Any analysis of imperialism which does not address these issues is bound to be of limited value because it leaves too many vital questions untouched. Imperialism exists today in the extreme form that Vijay describes in part. But imperialism has only been able to rot every more deeply because the working class and the masses have been disarmed politically by Stalinism. It was the Stalinist politics of the SACP leaders which led to South Africa's first democratically-elected government being firmly in the hands of big business and big financial groups. And these are precisely the question which were raised by the decision on the part of the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (Numsa) in 2013 to split the reactionary, Kautsky-inspired alliance of Cosatu, SACP and ANC and find a way back to the genuine, Marxist policies of Lenin.

It is important to emphasise these points because without accounting for the fate of the Bolshevik project, the seizure of power in 1917 and establishment the Communist International and its eventual fate, there can be no all-round understanding of imperialism in its current iteration. If imperialism survives until today and takes on even more extreme and even absurd forms, it is because of the degeneration and collapse of that Leninist project.

Without studying and understanding that, the historical account of imperialism is simply reduced to "one damn thing after another", with no connection or thread of continuity,

and consequently the collapse of the USSR is simply an objective “event”, a false step in history, at best a convincing reason why nobody can now ever look beyond the limits of the imperialist system. And yet that system is in front of our eyes falling into the ever-deeper forms of “decay and parasitism” that Vijay Prashad describes so vividly.

That is why Vijay Prashad can regard the epoch of imperialism such as Lenin described it as being over and done with, replaced by a new period of “globalisation” defined by new and in his view specifically different forms of financial capital from the ones Lenin analysed, involving more than just the “export of capital” but actually “new ways” in which capital accumulates. If the imperialism Lenin defined is over and done with, then so are the tasks it posed in front of the working class and the masses by that period.

This is how Lenin presented dialectically the changes between capitalism in the nineteenth century and capitalism at the beginning of the twentieth century:

“Half a century ago, when Marx was writing *Capital*, free competition appeared to the overwhelming majority of economists to be a ‘natural law’. Official science tried, by a conspiracy of silence, to kill the works of Marx, who, by a theoretical and historical analysis of capitalism had proved that free competition gives rise to the concentration of production, which in turn ... leads to monopolisation. Today monopoly has become a fact”.

Vijay Prashad treats modern-day financialisation as something essentially different from the “finance capital” that Lenin described.

He argues that whereas Lenin talked about the “export” of capital across borders, such borders are insignificant today as far as finance capital is concerned. They are only “borders” for the workers imprisoned in one country or

another. But while such a distinction is not without its significance, it surely does not indicate a *systemic* change; it is merely an intensification of the contradictions of the imperialist epoch.

A better way to look at it all might be this: Imperialist policy in the last fifty years has successfully played on its ability to divide workers in the advanced metropolitan countries from workers in the rest of the world, which itself is in no small part caused by the leaderships of mass movements dominated by Stalinist and now post-Stalinist politics. Vijay Prashad gives graphic and compelling examples of how this works out, but not of the political developments which allowed it to happen. The results are that classic and significant weapons of the working class in advanced capitalist countries, like trade union militancy and parliamentary political pressure, are held in check by the threat (and the practice) of shifting production to underdeveloped countries. Meanwhile the factory owners in many a “developing” country can (and indeed must) impose savage rates of exploitation on their workers under the threat of “losing the contract” if production costs rise. By the way, the current setup frees the Multi-National Corporation, brand or main contractor from the obligation to fund the investment in production in the “developing” country: the local entrepreneur has to scrape that together somehow, further intensifying the pressure to exploit “their” workers.

These workers’ wages are kept extremely low, even to the extent of compromising the reproduction of the labour force and with devastating cultural and social consequences. The tax bases of governments in underdeveloped countries are also eroded, so these governments have to turn to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) for permission to borrow money, which is only granted on the condition of sustained cuts in living standards and wages. And so, the “Third World Project” is over. Meanwhile attempts to copy what was achieved in Cuba

have resulted in long and debilitating and in the end fruitless guerrilla wars.

Most governments in former colonies have become “compradores” effectively servicing imperialist looting (while lining their own pockets at the same time, and stripping away any real democracy or the rule of law). Vijay Prashad can describe the ability of Multi-National Corporations and financiers to lord it over a global system which seems to offer no limit, but he fails to put his finger on the aspect of this that Lenin identified: These features are the characteristics of constantly intensifying “parasitism and decay”.

“Globalisation” is not a completely new period in the history of capitalism, however essential it is to know at any stage “what is going on” and to take that into account when providing political leadership to workers. The fundamental features of imperialism are continued and intensified and above all unresolved today. The continued existence of capitalism in imperialism and the indeed increasingly absurd forms that takes testify not to the strength and viability of capitalism as a system but to the problems which have arisen in constructing the leadership of the working class.

It is indeed extremely difficult to raise these matters directly in most places. “official science” and “a conspiracy of silence to kill the works of Marx” join with a mood of resignation in many parts of the working class following the ignominious debacle of the Soviet Union and a series of industrial and political struggles frustrated by the “globalising” tactics which the imperialists have adopted.

But the class struggle never stops, never goes away entirely until it is actually resolved. The mass outburst of working-class resistance that led to the Marikana massacre and the subsequent wave of industrial action in South Africa lifted a corner of the blanket of “official science” and “killing the works of Marx”, and that is what made the 2013 Numsa special

Congress decisions and the work to establish the SRWP so important, not just in South Africa but on the international stage.

Workers International greeted these decisions and encouraged their implementation. They open the door to a fuller and franker discussion on the past and the future of the workers' movement than is probably possible anywhere else on the planet at the moment.

These are the matters which deserve to figure most prominently in the political education of SRWP members, when they are preparing themselves to lead the political struggles of the South African working class. SRWP members need to make themselves familiar with all issues around the struggle for working class political power: the fate of the Paris commune, the Russian Revolution, the split with reformist "Marxism" and revisionism, the struggle to build the Communist International, how and in what way the Soviet Union and the world communist movement degenerated.

A cadre of politically-educated South African workers will not only be a powerful force in South Africa, it could also play a significant leading role in building anew the revolutionary proletarian leadership of the world socialist revolution.

Bob Archer

23 May 2020

1. *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism*, Moscow 1968 p.66

2. *Ibid.* p.71

3. *Ibid.* p.118

4. *Ibid.* p.23

5. *Ibid.* p.3

6. *Ibid.* p.111