

Ukraine is a warning to workers everywhere

Comrade Leonardt, a trade-unionist and socialist in Namibia, asked a few days ago for an explanation for the crisis and war in Ukraine.

He speaks for millions of people all over the world, who have been increasingly horrified by the growing savagery of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. It is right to denounce this appalling brutality on the part of the Russian government and it is right, as many people are now doing, drop their daily routines and make a great effort to support the millions of Ukrainian refugees fleeing their country.

But it is not enough. We have to do our best to understand the driving forces behind this crisis situation, which is a warning to everybody in the world.

The mounting crisis points to a central feature of world politics, economy and diplomacy: the growing rivalry between the established “Western” (or “First World”, to use that repulsive and misleading term) powers and the rising economic, diplomatic and military powers of Russia and China.

Just over a month ago (January 31, 2022) these words were posted on the “LA Progressive” website:

“This moment in history will be remembered for the massive shift in global relations currently underway. On one side stand the forces of peace and multipolarity led by China, Russia and their allies in the Global South. On the other is the forces of empire and conquest spearheaded by the US and its allies. The conflict between these two camps is about much more than competing visions for planetary development. World politics has transitioned from a war between socialism and capitalism to a protracted struggle for the survival of humanity itself”.

(As the US threatens endless war with Russia over Ukraine, confidence in China surges, by Danny Haiphong).

The Russian invasion of independent sovereign Ukraine has literally dropped a bombshell into this type of wishful thinking. Millions of people around the world are deeply shocked and revolted by the cynicism, brutality and lies with which the Russian state has set about destroying an entire people.

Following immediately on the heels of the wordy joint declaration by President Xi (China) and President Putin (Russia) during the 2022 Winter Olympics, the Russian invasion of Ukraine has severely embarrassed the Chinese state. President Xi's government urgently needs to distract world public attention from its own treatment of the Tibetan and Uighur peoples and to paint in the most appealing colours possible its seizure of Hong Kong, its intention to seize Taiwan, and its broader ambitions around the world, including the Belt and Road Initiative ("The New Silk Road") to extend Chinese trading, financial and diplomatic relations around the globe.

Where does Modern Imperialism Come From?

Danny Haiphong and those who think like him understand imperialism simplistically as "the forces of empire and conquest" and specifically identify this solely with "the US and its allies", as if there had never been any other imperialists in modern times. On this point, as on others, Danny Haiphong is putting aside the discoveries of generations of socialist thinkers and activists who have probed beyond the appearance of "empire and conquest" to discern the social and economic driving forces of the phenomenon.

A good starting point is Chapter 31 of volume 1 of Karl Marx's *Capital*, which locates the beginnings of "empire and conquest" in the "genesis of the industrial capitalist" in Europe, specifically in Britain. Moreover, a few pages later in his discussion of what colonialism reveals about the inner workings of capital, Marx explains the direction in which the laws of capitalist society push the whole system. He talks about:

"... the action of the immanent laws of capitalist production itself, by

the centralisation of capital. One capitalist always kills many. Hand in hand with this centralisation, or this expropriation of many capitalists by few, develop, on an ever-extending scale, the co-operative form of the labour-process, the conscious technical development of science, the methodical cultivation of the soil, the transformation of the instruments of labour into instruments of labour only usable in common, the economising of all means of production by their use as the means of production of combined, socialised labour, the entanglement of all people in the net of the world market, and with this, the International character of the capitalist regime". (K.Marx, *Capital* vol 1, London 1974 pp 714-715.)

In the same passage, Marx explicitly talks about the way forward in:

"... the mass of misery, oppression, slavery, degradation, exploitation; but with this too grows the revolt of the working class, a class always increasing in numbers, and disciplined, united, organised by the mechanism of the process of capitalist production itself" until "the knell of capitalist private property sounds, the expropriators are expropriated".

It was upon these conceptions that Lenin based his analysis of capitalism in its imperialist phase during World War I. His quite short and readable book, *Imperialism: the Highest Stage of Capitalism*, is essential reading for anyone who really wants to understand what is going on.

Imperialism is not the result of "bad" or "evil" people (although it certainly spawns monsters), but of the social relations of capitalism. By reproducing these contradictory relations on a world scale, imperialism ushers in not only constant rivalry and war, invasions and annexations, between imperialist powers and also against their victims, but also the epoch of world revolution of the working class to achieve socialism.

What is the "Global South"?

The "Global south" is a confusing euphemism for the huge territories exploited and oppressed in various ways by imperialism over many centuries and still today. The first point to make about these territories is that they have become part of "the entanglement of all

people in the net of the world market" and "the international character of the world market", albeit under very different conditions from those in the imperialist nations.

Imperialist nations (like the USA, UK, EU, Japan, Russia and China) certainly have "allies" in these parts, but these are either "compradors" (businesspeople who facilitate the exploitation of their compatriots by the imperialists) or outright corrupt puppets. There is no "third road" forward in these countries. Not one of them is going to find a peaceful way forward through a peaceful capitalist development. The end of imperialist exploitation can only come when masses of people join the "revolt of the working class" and fight to end the capitalist system. The very few polities that will be able to become imperialist powers themselves (as, for example, Germany and Japan did in the late 19th century, and Russia and China are doing now) will only be able to do so through brutal dictatorship and the ruthless exploitation of their own people and the oppression of other peoples. The rulers of Myanmar present a good example of a bourgeoisie with that type of ambition.

What is Russia? What is China?

What can Russia and China now bring to the "global south"? These regimes (the Peoples Republic of China and until 1992 the Union of Socialist Soviet Republics) were the products of mass revolutions whose original inspiration was the insights of Marx and Lenin. But for decades their leaders have followed a "capitalist road". The Chinese government maintains in words an appearance of socialism, and the country is still ruled by the Chinese Communist Party, which maintains a continuing but distant relationship with the actual ideas of Karl Marx. But 30 years ago, the Russian state, the USSR, simply collapsed.

The last "Communist" leaders, Gorbachev and Yeltsin, threw themselves upon the mercy of the "Western" imperialists. The USSR fell apart. Many national minorities had suffered grievously under Stalinist rule. This was particularly true of the peoples of the Baltic states (Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia) and of Ukraine, who demanded autonomy. (It should be remembered that there were also significant number of Russians living in these areas). The huge state-controlled industry and economy of the USSR

was “privatised” under conditions which resembled piracy. Gorbachev and others promised Russian workers that they could join in a “common European home” and enjoy “western” standards of pay and conditions, but the reality was very different. Bandit Russian entrepreneurs fought like jackals with rapacious foreign “investors” over the corpse of the workers’ state. Living-standards plummeted as jobs disappeared and welfare and health services suffered. Life expectancy actually fell in the former USSR.

The “Pacific Rim” financial and monetary crisis of the late 1990s was a body-blow to the fledgling Russian stock market and banking system. The new Russian (bandit) capitalist class lacked the depth of experience and culture of rule of its foreign counterparts and was not able to deal with this situation. With the working class in disarray and leaderless, the only force which could restore a certain amount of order was the old security authorities of the former Soviet Union, and accordingly the kind of electoral dictatorship which we see today was established around the person of what is increasingly looking like President-for-life Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin.

Putin’s state echoes the brutal barbarity of the Tsarist Empire. The President enjoys wide and unchallengeable powers. The electoral campaigns of opposition politicians encounter novel and inventive obstacles. Serious opponents are shot, poisoned and imprisoned. Personal freedom is curtailed by officially-imposed standards of conformity. Even slightly outrageous behaviour in public is viciously suppressed. The Russian Orthodox Church with all its taboos and prescriptions is the mentor of people’s private lives as well as a source of nationalist fervour. Those like the “Pussy Riot” protestors who took pot-shots at both the patriarchal stupidity of the church and the stifling conformism of the government suffered appalling reprisals. Now, with the invasion of the Ukraine underway, thousands of anti-war demonstrators are brutally arrested and worse, and all independent media outlets are suppressed.

While retaining Communist Party rule, considerable state industries and above all state control of the country’s main banking institutions, the People’s Republic of China some fifty years ago chose a “capitalist road”. US and other Western politicians were at bay against on the one

hand a growing independence movement in their (official or unofficial) colonial dependencies and on the other a working class at home determined to preserve the gains it had made in the class struggle and press ahead to make more gains. This struggle of the working-class bit deeply into company profits, while body-bags coming back from Vietnam fuelled a national resistance to imperialist war. Henry Kissinger and President Richard Nixon looked around for allies – and found them in the Chinese Communist leadership.

The alliance with the Chinese and Russian leaders enabled the USA to broker “independence” deals in the colonies and semi-colonies which left the basic imperialist economic structures in place under new but pliant “liberation” leaders. It enabled the US, British and European capitalist classes to close down industry after industry at “home” and simply pull the rug out from under their “own” working classes, and it meant that the same capitalists could get their products made by Chinese labour in Chinese factories and mines at a fraction of the cost of production “at home”.

By doing this, the leaders of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) have, over the last forty years, called into being two significant and numerous classes. The first is the now massive Chinese working class, by far the biggest contingent in the world proletariat. The second is the new Chinese entrepreneurial class, the bourgeoisie. For the moment, the CCP has been able to keep the lid on the class struggle between these two classes because for China the economic story of those forty years has been one of almost continuous and massive growth. However, that growth has now stalled. Meanwhile, Chinese businesses have become major players in technical advances and on stock markets around the world. On the other hand, China is now well on the way to projecting her economic power around the world.

No wonder President Xi has taken very public steps to punish high-level corruption, rein in the most powerful business leaders and reassure workers that the next ten years will see improvements in their living standards. “Communist” China has to face the implications of a domestic class struggle just like any nation with a largely capitalist economy dependent on world trade.

China's Belt and Road initiative has organised logistical, commercial and political arrangements to facilitate the movement of strategic resources, food and raw materials into China and manufactured goods out of China. Chinese loans are offered to struggling nations in order to provide the infrastructure that will underpin these arrangements. No doubt, given the moral character of many "liberation" governments, much of this "aid" is understood as a contribution to the President's retirement fund, but it is still a debt which will have to be repaid one way or another.

When the Chinese state and businesses approach vulnerable foreign territories, their aim is to penetrate into new markets for their products, win new access to raw materials, or gain a strategic or logistical advantage. Like Portugal, Holland and Britain in previous centuries, China establishes trade routes, bases, harbours and transport links around the world as well as investing in foreign countries and buying political influence.

Whatever "allies" China, and to a lesser extent, Russia, do have in these places are in many cases the corrupt and bankrupt local satraps of imperialism dressed up as "liberation" leaders. And China and Russia have played their part in corrupting them.

Many years ago, Russian politicians cut off military aid to the Cuban soldiers who were beating Apartheid South Africa's forces in Angola. These Soviet politicians stood godfather to the puppet regimes which were established under the African National Congress (ANC) in South Africa and South-West Africa People's Organisation (Swapo) in Namibia at the end of apartheid. Gross forms of discrimination were done away with, while imperialism kept its control of the mineral resources and industry. Poverty, unemployment and oppression is still the lot of the masses there.

After the negotiated withdrawal of the apartheid regime, it was Chinese politicians who persuaded Nelson Mandela to leave the mining industry in South Africa in the hands of capitalist monopolies. They told him that it would be a mistake to take the socialist road. What this meant became evident in 2012 with the massacre of 34 striking miners at the Lonmin owned Marikana platinum mine.

The Chinese government is fostering relationships with some of the most corrupt regimes in Africa, such as Namibia, where the China National Nuclear Corporation (CNNC) in cahoots with the Swapo government has unlawfully sacked the committee members of the Mineworkers' Union of Namibia at the Rössing uranium mine. Trade unions were organised in the mine in the days of apartheid in the face of the most evil forms of oppression and exploitation. Most of the labour force was made up of contract labourers provided and disciplined by tribal leaders. Workers endured appalling living and working conditions, but in the end – and with international working-class support – they achieved recognition for their trade union and much improved wages and conditions.

When CNNC bought the mine from Rio Tinto, promises were made that the union and its local executive would continue to be recognised and that there would be no change in workers' terms and conditions. However, quite soon there were indeed attacks on workers' health provision and other issues and new middle-management were employed recruited from abroad. The company unilaterally imposed changes in workers' terms and conditions of employment against the wishes of the workers and their representatives. The local executive of the Mineworkers' Union of Namibia protested and its officers were unlawfully sacked. They are still in a battle to establish their legal rights to a labour court hearing and to get their jobs back.

The revelations of the "Fishrot" scandal in Namibia heavily implicate Swapo government figures. Foreign interests have bribed ministers and government official to grant fishing quotas above and beyond sustainable levels. The companies which own the fishing fleet have ridden roughshod over crew members' constitutionally-recognised trade union and health and safety rights. These crew-members, who went out on strike and maintained that strike for several years, were let down by a trade union dominated by Swapo politicians. They were denied access to justice by venal lawyers and corrupt judges.

Thanks to an agreement the government of the People's Republic of China reached with western imperialist powers during the 1970s, which developed into China's entry into the world market as a capitalist power herself, the country is now enjoying growing prestige and strength. However, it

will inevitably become more and more deeply involved in rivalry and conflict with the established world power, the USA.

The Russian government's attitude to Ukraine very closely matches the attitude the British ruling class had for many years to Ireland. They thought that Ireland "belonged" to them and that it was part of Great Britain's "sphere of influence". It cost the Irish people a great deal of pain and effort to teach them otherwise.

To return to the *LA Progressive*: It is true that a "massive shift in global relations" is "currently underway". It is true that there is a "protracted struggle for the survival of humanity itself". But the points presented in between are a farrago of confusion and deception.

The "shift in global relations" is the emergence of China and Russia as claimants to the role of global imperialist hegemons, challenging the position that the USA has occupied since the mid-20th century.

To dress this "grab for world power" as inspired by "peace and multipolarity" is an enormous misrepresentation of the real world, a misrepresentation which is elaborated as the paragraph goes on. Danny Haiphong asserts that the conflict between socialism and capitalism is a thing of the past. This is the constant message of all enemies of the working class and the constant refrain of all apologists for capitalism. It is a message which disarms workers at the very point that they face the fight for a future.

For nearly two centuries, the movement of the working class to overcome capitalist social relations, which inherently involve oppression, exploitation, war and conquest, has made advances and it has suffered setbacks. The imperialist epoch concentrates all the tensions and contradictions of these social relations and creates the necessity and at the same time the possibility of a socialist revolution. The environmental damage caused by enslavement to the profit motive also makes this revolution essential if humanity is to have a future at all. The key issue is whether the force of progress, the working class, can develop the kind of leadership which can guide that revolution successfully.

Workers International to rebuild the fourth International will work loyally alongside all workers and groups of workers who set about resolving that crisis of leadership.

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