

The return of the “white man’s civilising mission”

Imperialism is not just another buzz word...

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WHAT USED TO be called the white man's civilising mission has returned with a vengeance. Suddenly white Europeans and Americans once more have to bring peace and harmony to the rest of the world by stamping on dictators, stopping the Islamic bomb and introducing economic stability. If all this wasn't tough enough the Japanese are cheating with unfair trade practices and unusual work practices.

This has been the message of European and U.S. politicians and media for the last two years or so. Since the end of the cold war and the collapse of the Russian empire a new struggle is taking place. Initially there was lots of talk of the peace dividend, that huge re-allocation of resources that would occur as military production was switched to a more humane usage.

Instead what we are seeing is the re-division of the world. The cold war has ended the same way as the 1st and 2nd World Wars, with a furious scramble by the victors for the prizes. Within a decade it is likely that Japan will be threatening world peace, or at least that is what we will be told. In fact what is happening is that driving force of twentieth century history, old-fashioned imperialism.

When George Bush talked during the gulf war of a new world order, policed by the United States it was not just Iraq he had in his sights. The U.S. is a declining economic power but is still by far the world's most powerful military power. The U.S. wants to be in a position to police any country which steps out of line with its economic interests.

This in the short term means all those brutally underdeveloped countries of Africa, Asia and Central America. In the long term it means Japan. In recent years the American regime has demonstrated the role of this policeman in Panama, Grenada, Nicaragua and El Salvador among other countries. Like all policemen this one will not be influenced by concepts of democracy or justice but rather will serve wealth and U.S. interests alone.

It is this ability of countries like the former Soviet Union, the U.S., Britain and others to dominate not just their immediate neighbours but countries on the other side of the globe that marks them out as something special. Many other countries would like to share this ability but despite investing huge percentages of their Gross National Products in the military are unable to do so.

GULF WAR

The Gulf War demonstrates what is likely to happen when one of these regional powers steps out of line with the imperialists interests. The Iraqi military machine on paper looked a formidable opposition, in practise it was incapable of fighting a real imperialist power. Calling countries like these imperialist is about as useful as referring to Fianna Fáil or the Tories in Britain as 'fascist'.

The ability of countries to dominate large areas of the globe is seen most obviously by their military strength. Military strength is however just a reflection on the real driving force of imperialism, economic power. The demands of the large economies for markets, raw materials and products makes imperialism an inescapable part of capitalism.

Those who own and control the large 'multi-nationals' also control the actions of the governments of the imperialist countries. The use of military might by the imperialist countries flows from the bosses' demands that their companies should control the markets and raw materials of other countries. The interests of United Fruit for instance has been behind many of the U.S. interventions in Central America.

WORLD WAR III

The U.S. control of Central America has meant the exclusion from these markets of Japanese goods. As well as supplying cheap labour to the U.S. bosses the Central American countries rely on the U.S. for almost all of their exports and imports. In the U.S. itself the Japanese are allowed access to no more than 33% of the car market.

A consensus has been created throughout U.S. society which identifies the Japanese as the cause behind the U.S. recession. This has included some of America's unions and liberal Democrats like Jessie Jackson. One consequence has been a rising number of physical attacks on Asians in general.

The economic war between the U.S. and Japan has already warmed up. For American bosses it means bigger profits as they convince American workers that it is the Japanese rather than capitalism that are responsible for unemployment. Alliances between bosses and workers against another country mean little or no effective class struggle at home. This in turn means low wage rises and crap working conditions. The U.S. is one of the few countries where workers saw a real reduction in wages in the 1980's.

It is this sort of prejudice that European bosses hope to build on through the E.C. Most European countries have already seen it on a national level. In Ireland a milder version is currently being pushed through the "Buy Irish" ad's. Our interests as workers lie with the workers of other countries, not our gombeen green bosses.

The effects of imperialism on different countries varies, for many of the underdeveloped countries it means that their exports are permanently underpriced and their imports overpriced as they have no control over access to international markets. It means an enormous burden of debt to the imperialist countries in return for outdated or inappropriate technology and military equipment.

It means a government whose sole role is to ensure the country stays profitable for the imperialists with low wages, tame or non-existent unions and few safety laws. It commonly means famine and death as proxy wars are fought between imperialist powers there.

IMPERIALISM KILLS

Imperialism's casualties in the last decade have included 100,000 Iraqi's, more as a show of force than anything else, 3 million Ethiopians in a country which exported food throughout the famine, 50,000 Nicaraguans in an effort to topple a government less disposed to American interests. Were it not for the death and destruction it would be funny that the West poses as part of the solution. The imperialist powers are not part of the solution, they are the problem.

The sheer level of destruction guarantees some resistance to imperialism wherever it is found. Commonly this takes place through the mechanism of National Liberation Movements like the Provos or Sandanistas. Such movements attempt to unite sections of the bosses with the workers in order to throw out imperialism and restructure the economy. This is in the interests of the native ruling class rather than of the imperialist ruling class.

Sometimes such movements take up socialist sounding ideas in order to gain support from the workers. Sometimes as in Cuba or Vietnam this occurred because they allied themselves with a different imperialist power (U.S.S.R) against the imperialist power that they were fighting (U.S.).

The interests of the workers are not central to such movements, whether or not the workers gain is incidental. In practise gains are commonly made by workers in terms of education and health care as the new system attempts to build and maintain an industrial base. This also helps to create loyalty to the new regime.

Apart from providing markets and sources of cheap raw materials, imperialism has another plus for the bosses. It is used in the imperialist countries to get workers to side with their bosses against the people of other countries. Workers identify with the soldiers of 'their' imperialist armies who share their language and traditions rather than with the workers of the oppressed nation. Anarchists in these countries have to be able to break this cross-class unity in order to challenge the bosses.

NO WAR BUT THE CLASS WAR?

The nature of the national liberation movements has led some anarchists in the past to make the mistake of arguing that such struggles are not relevant. This is commonly based around the slogan "No War but the Class War". During the Gulf War, for instance, British groups like the Class War Federation argued that the outcome of the war was irrelevant and that it was wrong to call for an Iraqi victory as – among other reasons – this meant British soldiers would die.

The logic of seeing the problems in those terms would be to support an imperialist victory once the war was in progress. Those groups who worried about the number of British Squaddies who would die had their wish fulfilled, only a very few were killed. In Iraq this meant enormous casualties due to indiscriminate bombings and the deliberate destruction of basic infrastructure.

The position taken by the rest of the left was at least as absurd. Nearly all the "revolutionary" left called for "Victory to Iraq". In calling for victory to Iraq the implication was that it was an Iraqi victory and not an American defeat which was important. Yet Saddam, even if he had beaten the Americans, would have just as quickly rejoined their camp or that of one of the other imperialist powers. The Iraqi ruling class might have wished for a free hand in the region but their interests clearly lay in stable relations with one or the other imperialist powers.

WHO CAN DEFEAT IMPERIALISM

The only force in the region capable of dealing a lasting blow to imperialism are the workers and peasants who live there. Rather than supporting the Iraqi ruling class (however 'critically') or worrying about British squaddies it was these forces socialists should have supported. The Trotskyist presentation of Saddam as the "objective anti-imperialist" was rubbished by the unfolding of events. The war ended when the Iraqi ruling class and the imperialists both recognised that their common enemy, the working class in Iraq, had moved centre stage.

This happened when uprisings broke out throughout Iraq. Although they had a religious or nationalist base these uprisings saw the formation of workers councils (shoras) in many of the larger cities. Saddam was left his elite divisions and allowed by the U.S to fly helicopters against the uprisings throughout Iraq. The combination of the Iraqi army and the deals stitched up by the nationalist leaders of the uprising meant that the Iraqi ruling class has regained control of the situation. Saddam the "objective anti-imperialist" performed his age old function of guaranteeing stability and oil for the imperialists.

The lessons of the Gulf war can be applied generally. No bosses government whether a dictatorship as in Iraq or the more liberal regime of the Sandanistas can be really described as anti-imperialist. When faced with a choice between the revolutionary anti-imperialism of the workers or compromise with imperialism they will always choose the latter. Workers in those countries have two enemies, their own ruling class and the imperialist powers. Neither of these are potential allies, even in the short term. The role of a revolutionary organisation in those countries is to build towards a situation where the workers and peasants can take control.

The same applies in general to national liberation movements like the ANC or the Provos. The idea that the working class should work for national liberation first and then emerge to assert its own class interests shows no understanding of the nature of such movements. Only an anarchist revolution can hope to end imperialist exploitation of a country.

WHOSE SIDE ARE YOU ON?

Does this mean we say there is no difference between the national liberation movements and the imperialists. It does not. Our problem with such movements is that they offer no solution to the problem of imperialism. It is however imperialism that is the problem. Therefore anarchists have to defend the right of such movements to fight against imperialism, particularly anarchists in the imperialist country itself.

Anarchists in Britain, for example, have to take a clear position on Ireland. The British ruling class in the past has been able to defuse opposition internally by uniting all classes against 'common enemies' in Argentina and Belfast. As long as the British working class supports the British government on Ireland or does not see it as an important issue it will find it more difficult to take up independent working class politics elsewhere. British anarchists must be prepared to defend the Provos against the state by pointing out that they are not the real problem. They must be prepared to call for troops out no matter how difficult this might be. Concretely this means arguing to British workers that it is 'their' state and not the Provos that is the cause of the conflict in Ireland.

In Ireland anarchists have to be not only willing to defend the Provos but capable of putting forward a real solution to the conflict. The Provos today have no solution beyond calls for UN involvement and the demand for talks with the British government. We need to be able to build a movement that in the South is able to undermine the basis of the southern clerical state. In the North we have to be able to unite Protestant and Catholic workers with them in the fight for an all-Ireland workers republic. This will be not only in opposition to British imperialism and its loyalist puppets but also to the green nationalist bosses.

On a wider level we are entering a new period of imperialism. The break up of the cold war world will mean a rush by the victors for new spheres of influence. Ireland is bound to be involved on the fringes of this through the E.C. and the U.N. Both these bodies are dominated by the big imperialist powers.

The U.N. is a talking shop for the ruling class of the world. It gives a veto to the victorious imperialist powers of World War II and so it can only act in their interests. The E.C. is designed to act in the interests of the European bosses. It provides them with a super state through which they hope to compete with the rival imperialists of Japan and the U.S..

We need to expose the real nature of the U.N. and build opposition to any Irish involvement in 'peacekeeping'. Our class is international, our allies are the workers of all countries, our enemy is the "Buy Irish" green bosses.

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