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On the World Trade Center Attack

Chris Hobson

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I took advantage of a day off—and the occasion of Yom Kippur seemed right—to go to the World Trade Center site. With a friend I approached southward along Church Street and then west to the Hudson River. From these vantage points one is half a mile away and sees the site only through gaps in the buildings; so we circled around and approached on the east side, along Broadway, where one can walk within a few blocks of the ruins. The scene is very grim. The crowds are kept some blocks away from the actual destruction, and one does not see anything not already seen more clearly in photographs, but it is entirely different to be there. The sense of reality is heightened by the still-acrid air that makes eyes sting and phlegm buildup. Only at the real site, not in photos, can one realize physically that right there, in those several acres of rubble in some places four to five stories high, were the two huge and several smaller towers and thousands of people who are now simply ash.

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It's difficult to imagine these thousands—I mean this literally, it is hard to hold in mind a conception of their presence and now their absence. But there amid the New Yorkers and tourists straining for a look or photo—one well-dressed elderly man posed for a snapshot against the backdrop of collapsed buildings—one can begin to imagine what those not immediately killed experienced; one can hear their echoes, like the email message printed in the New York Times (Sept. 12) from someone in the buildings to a recipient at the New School University, "I don't think I'm going to get out. You've been a really good friend." One's heart goes out too to the soldiers, some still adolescents, who are now on duty at the site and will be sent—they or their brothers, sisters, lovers and friends—to bomb and/or advance on land against their brothers and sisters, military and civilian, in Afghanistan and perhaps other countries.

Virtually unanimously, anarchists, anti-imperialists, and decent people in general have condemned the attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon. It would be superfluous to add my own view. Nonetheless there are some points worth making or underlining. First, the attack was wrong not because it was an attack on the United States but because it was an attack mainly on uninvolved civilians, most of them working and oppressed people. (Even in the Pentagon, which of course is a military command center, most of the victims were low-level clerical and service workers.) This is what makes terrorism so stupid, as well as morally wrong: ordinary people, who should be and in many cases are opponents of U.S. power, can imagine their spouses or brothers dying in such an attack—or their spouses/brothers did die—and wish, not unreasonably, to kill those responsible. But—for us it goes without saying—we should oppose the U.S. retaliation that is plainly ahead. Whatever its specific targets, the U.S. campaign will not be aimed just at punishment but at removing political opponents and reasserting U.S. world power, objectives every opponent of oppression should resist. My impression—perhaps biased because I am in New York with its multicultural population—is that many people are on a

confirmed what I wrote then: the attack is the spear-head of an offensive aimed at enforcing U.S. supremacy throughout the Middle East, cementing new imperialist alliances, and isolating—if possible destroying—anti-U.S. governments. The Taliban regime's apparent collapse has handed the U.S. at least a momentary victory and lots of propaganda pictures of grateful Afghans. But it will only embolden Bush to extend his ambitions—and his attacks on civil rights at home. Already Bush and his advisers are talking about an attack on Iraq; and Attorney General Ashcroft is overseeing the biggest extension of government repressive power since the 1950s, reminding us that intolerance of dissent, not tolerance, is the historic U.S. norm.

To state what should be obvious but has been obscured by the mass media's collusion: the U.S. is not waging a campaign against terrorism but for international domination. The ray of hope is that uneasiness about the war, awareness of U.S. imperialism's role, and outright opposition are all greater than the media admit—I hear this in the sub-way and on the corner—and greater than at a comparable period in the Vietnam war. We can only try to build this sentiment into a powerful movement to make the imperialist bullies feel their shame.

what the United States and its allies have inflicted on countless others.

Many decent people, non-militarists who are appalled by the terrorist action, are now asking: What should the United States do in response to the attack? In my view the answer is very simple, although also “utopian.” The United States should recognize the independence of Palestine. Beyond that, the U.S. should stop bombing Iraq, recognize the Taliban government in Afghanistan—it is a brutal dictatorship but it is the government of the country—stop sending billions in military equipment to pro-U.S. dictatorships in Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and elsewhere, and conduct all its relations in the Middle East (and elsewhere) on a basis of equality. Then we could see how much support for terrorism remains. The U.S. however will not do any of this; not just because Bush prefers a war policy but because the whole economic-military system we live in is moving toward an attempt to build up, not scale back, U.S. domination of the Middle East.

This systemic grasping of an imperialist system for greater, more universal power already existed before September 11. The ordinary citizens and workers in the World Trade Center, not to mention air travelers and firefighters—and even cops, who are oppressors on a daily basis but were not acting as such at the World Trade Center in the chaos following the explosions—were in part its victims, victims not just of the vicious and antidemocratic policy of the immediate attackers but of U.S. imperialism’s standing aim of dominating the world. Those U.S. soldiers and the soldiers and civilians of other countries who will inevitably lose their lives in the coming weeks are victims of this same power, which we must oppose as well as we can.

November 30: The remarks above were written before the U.S. attack on Afghanistan began October 8. Events have only

kind of knife-edge, with aggressive responses balanced by awareness that the U.S. has a lot to answer for. Bush and his advisors want to keep this equivocal sentiment from growing. It is vital that they not succeed and that people be encouraged to voice their own doubts about the U.S. response in whatever terms they find meaningful. Now more than ever anarchists and other radicals should not talk as if we have all the answers, but we should hold to an unshakeable opposition to the U.S. war.

Second, anarchists must be clear about our position on terrorism. In the past some anarchists have been sympathetic to revolutionary groups that waged terror attacks against civilians. I think this position has always been wrong. There are two classical arguments against revolutionary terrorism, both valid. First, terror operations—necessarily secret and waged by small bands—do not encourage oppressed people to take action themselves for their liberation. On the contrary, they reduce them to passive spectators and increase their dependence on and support for the government, since they can see that they themselves may become victims. Further, working and oppressed people are our class brothers and sisters, even if they may be divided from us by adherence to the oppressor’s ideology. We do not attack them, or we do so to the smallest extent possible (for example, it is legitimate to attack an occupying army).

Additionally, the organizing of terror attacks reflects the terrorists’ own antidemocratic politics, their view of ordinary people as expendable pawns and themselves as a future ruling power. It shouldn’t take much imagination to realize that people who are willing to blow up uninvolved civilians either to strike fear into the enemy side or to impose discipline on “their own” population are not going to set up participatory democratic societies if and when they gain power.

What is crucial, in my view, is that supporting a political goal is not the same as supporting any particular group that happens to be fighting for it, or their strategy or tactics. For instance, one can and

should be for Palestinian independence without endorsing any of the Palestinian political groups, and while condemning Palestinian attacks on uninvolved Israeli civilians. By the same token, no false comparison between the number of Palestinian attacks on Israeli citizens and the number (larger or smaller) of Israeli attacks on Palestinian civilians should make us forget the basic difference that Israel is denying Palestinian independence, while Palestinians are fighting for independence. Nevertheless, in my opinion, we must be clear that not just the World Trade Center bombing but every kind of revolutionary terror against civilians is both counterproductive and morally wrong.

A final point is that the U.S. and Israeli governments share responsibility for the World Trade Center and Pentagon attack. They are responsible in a general sense—the attack, no matter how wicked, is partly a response to the Israeli government’s occupation of Palestine, its refusal to grant independence to the half of Palestine still populated by Palestinians, its daily discrimination and violence against Palestinian civilians, and its assassinations of Palestinian leaders—for example Mustafa al-Zibri, leader of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, who was killed by two missiles fired through his office windows by Israeli forces on August 27. All these actions were supported or only weakly criticized by the United States. In addition, the U.S. and Israeli governments are responsible in a very specific way. Israeli prime minister Sharon, then in opposition, set out deliberately to wreck the faltering peace negotiations in September 2000, with his police-backed assertion of Israeli power over the Al Aqsa mosque area in Jerusalem, a holy site for Muslims that Israeli forces had generally stayed outside of. Sharon’s act was designed to depth-charge the peace talks and set Israel and Palestine on a war footing, and it succeeded in doing so. The U.S. neither broke with Sharon nor opposed these tactics in any effective way. The attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon are the long-term result of Sharon’s and the U.S. government’s own policies.

Further, the U.S. government in an overall sense is a terrorist power—not just imperialist, though it is that, but terrorist, in that it claims the right to use force against a wide range of political opponents. Besides the anti-personnel attacks in Israel just mentioned, the U.S. government continues to bomb Iraq between once and twice every week, in a policy begun under the first Bush and continued (even intensified) through the Clinton administrations until now. A long list of similar actions could be added.

Given this history it’s not surprising that some Palestinians initially cheered the attack. A widely-circulated email claims that CNN footage of these celebrations was fabricated, but this seems not to be true and in any case it misses the point—it is entirely understandable that such reactions would occur. Reportedly, some crowds in Chile also celebrated, with comments like, “Now they know what we went through”—referring to the U.S. support for the 1973–1990 Pinochet military dictatorship, which rounded up thousands of opponents in a soccer stadium, tortured and killed them there, and pushed leftist youths out of helicopters to their deaths. (Such reactions to the World Trade Center conflagration, however, died down as the horror of the deaths of innocent people and rescue workers sank in.)

This home truth isn’t very fashionable now in the U.S. Learned commentators tell us that Osama bin Laden hates all Western civilization, not just Israel or U.S. support for Israel. True enough, but what about the cheering crowds the same commentators are quick to denounce? The U.S. should take a long look in the mirror; when it does it will realize the same point W. H. Auden stated in his poem on the beginning of World War II, printed elsewhere in this issue: “Out of the mirror they stare, / Imperialism’s face / And the international wrong.”

These points in no way lessen the criminality of the World Trade Center bombing, the horror experienced by its victims, the suffering of those affected by it. They only indicate the criminality of