

Imperial Wars, Imperialism and the Losers

A Critique of Certain 'Labour Aristocracy' Theories

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As the 100th anniversary of the outbreak in August 1914 of World War One fades, let us remember that imperialism harms all working class people – including those in imperialist and Western countries, and the white working class.

It is often said that Western workers benefit from imperialism, or imperialist profits, or that welfare in the West is funded by imperialism – but all of these claims fall in the face of realities like World War One (1914–1918). This war – between Germany and Britain and their respective allies – was, at least in part, fought for a re-division of the European-ruled colonies.

Not Their Causes

The fighting, of course, was largely done by the working class – against the working class. Those who insist that Western workers benefit from imperialism should remember the 37 million who died: the 10 million-plus soldiers, 7 million civilians, and 23 million wounded were heavily drawn from the Western working class; the others were drafted in from colonies like Senegal, South Africa and India. This followed a string of wars, including in Southern Africa, from the late 1800s, like the Anglo-Zulu War of 1879, and the Anglo-Boer War (or South African War) of 1899–1902.

It was ordinary people who formed the armies and the victims in all these conflicts; they fought in wars they did not create, driven by mighty empires that ruling classes controlled. The conquered peoples, like the Zulu and Afrikaners, fought for national independence and lost. Their ruling elites, however, made peace with the empires: the Zulu monarchy becoming part of the colonial apartheid system, the Afrikaner generals becoming local allies of British imperialism. The elites that controlled the early African National Congress (ANC) in South Africa were Empire loyalists, too, routinely supporting Britain's wars.

This is not to say such elites were mere collaborators or 'compradors': they acted in such ways in pursuit of their own class interests and agendas, changing allegiances as situations changed.

Wars and Western Labour

No one would deny that imperialism harms ordinary people in the colonial and postcolonial world. But what of the ordinary people in the imperialist countries of the West? They never ruled, nor controlled, those countries. At the time of the three wars listed above, they did not even have universal voting rights, and were still battling for basic union rights.

'Labour Aristocracy' Myths

Did they, and do they still, benefit from the imperial wars or imperialist economic activities, like Structural Adjustment or unfair terms of trade? No. The notion that Western workers benefit from imperialism – a version of 'labour aristocracy' and 'privilege' theories – remains a widespread myth. If the mass deaths in these wars – borne largely by the working class and poor – are not enough evidence, consider also the crippling injuries that hundreds of thousands faced, or the future they looked forward to after military demobilization – of low-wage jobs and unemployment.

Beyond the TV Screen

The image we see today on TV and in films of life in the West is a myth. Whereas on TV, even fast food workers and sex workers live in large flats, drive their own latest-model cars, and sit down to giant screen TVs, the reality is different. In Britain at the start of the 1980s – that is, before the neo-liberal offensive really got started – 10% of the population owned 80% of personal wealth, while the bottom 80% owned only 10%; 32% lived in poverty, even using the dubious measures of the time¹.

It was from these masses that the cannon fodder of the war was and are recruited; so appalling were their living conditions that the state found that hundreds of thousands fell below the required health standards for recruitment as soldiers in 1899 and 1914.

Historical Correlation

Of course, some sectors of the Western working class live relatively well, but there is no clear evidence that this is due to some sort of a transfer of wealth from the non-Western world, to Western workers by imperialism. Before the neo-liberal period starting in the 1970s, the best living conditions were in the Nordic countries, none of which had much in the way of any imperial history. Living conditions in Western countries improved dramatically from the 1940s – after the ruin of World War Two – which coincided precisely the period in which empires that had lasted centuries collapsed.

By contrast, the points of greatest direct Western imperial rule – like the ‘Victorian’ period of the late 19th and early 20th centuries – remain notorious as periods of massive repression and poverty in the West. The modern Keynesian welfare state (KWS) in the West, the basis of welfare, arose precisely when the European empires fell. Similarly, as imperialist wars increased from the late 1980s, working class conditions deteriorated severely, in large part due to neo-liberalism; again, the soldiers of the USA and other major powers were primarily recruited from workers looking for jobs.

Wages and Capital Structure

Unequal wages exist within and between countries, including between and within those with a colonial history, but this reflects a range of factors. Western countries have more industrialised economies: by current figures, the GDP of Germany alone is almost twice that of the entire region of sub-Saharan Africa, South Africa included.² Such economies, which have moved decisively to the production of relative surplus value, involve much higher productivity per worker – this, in turn, allow much higher wages, as well as higher (!) rates of exploitation, inasmuch as the gap between output and income is proportionately worse.

¹ UK figures: Robert Lekachman and Borin van Loon, (1981), *Capitalism for Beginners*, Pantheon Books, New York, pp. 44- 5, 67, 70; CWF, (1992), *Unfinished Business: The Politics Of Class War*, AK Press / CWF, p. 77. For the USA: M. Lind, cited in “Stringing up the Yuppies”, 24 September 1995, *Sunday Times*, p14; *New York Times*, 25 September 1992.

² Germany: 2014 GDP (current US\$) \$3.853 trillion, population 80.89 million; Sub-Saharan Africa (46 countries): 2014 GDP (current US\$) \$1.712 trillion, population 961.5 million. SOURCE: data.worldbank.org and data.worldbank.org, accessed 15 June 2015.

To illustrate: in South Africa, an autoworker in a big foreign-owned plant, with a permanent and semi-skilled job, is paid far better than a worker on a labour-intensive wine farm. Her or his output is much higher, due to technical conditions. Let us say the output, measured in terms of value added to the commodity, is (to keep it simple) R50,000: then capital can pay a wage of R10, 000 easily, and still pocket R40,000 'surplus' value. Let us say the farmworker adds (again, simplifying) R3,000 value and gets paid R2,000. In this case, the autoworker is actually more exploited than the farmworker, as R40,000 is extracted, as compared to R1,000.

South African Imperialism

This is the general principle allowing sectors of the Western working class to be both better paid than many workers elsewhere, yet at the same time, to be more 'exploited.' It is the same situation that allows South African workers to be paid far higher than workers in neighbouring countries: Regardless of South Africa's semi-industrial character, with its higher productivity and capitalist development, SA workers are not beneficiaries of SA's regional imperialism³ in southern Africa.

There is no real mechanism that supports of the idea that Western or South African workers benefit from 'imperialist' profits or wars: a simple wage disparity (higher relative wages) proves nothing of the sort, since the disparity lies elsewhere. It could, of course, be argued that the higher technological level seen in many Western countries was itself due to imperialism. But, while there is no doubt that major capitalists benefited from systems like the slave trade and colonialism abroad, it was a pre-existing level of advancement that allowed Western domination of such trades and territories in the first place. The cause and effect are getting mixed up.

Power and Class Struggle

The potential for higher wages and more state welfare arising from a more technologically advanced, industrialised, economy is just that: a potential. What matters, above all, is the power and organization of the popular classes. The KWS was, in part, financed by the economic boom of the 'Golden Age' of capitalism from the 1940s-1970s, but would never have happened unless working class movements were able to terrify the upper classes into major reforms.

As World War One showed, it is actually more accurate to say that the interests of working class and poor people in the West are harmed by imperialism. The same military machines that are built for wars abroad, are unleashed at 'home' against unrest – classically, the use of the Army of Africa by General Franco against the Spanish anarchist revolution of 1936–1939. The reactionary ideas and arrogance promoted by ruling classes in their imperial activities confuse and divide people, deflecting their struggles into dead-ends like racism and xenophobia. A simple example is provided by the on-going hatred of black and Asian foreigners in South Africa; the same can be seen across Western Europe.

³ Shawn Hattingh, 2012, "South Africa's role in Africa: An anarchist perspective," South African Labour Bulletin, volume 36, number 2, June/July 2012, pp. 51–53./

The China Syndrome

And we can also see, especially in the period of neo-liberalism, how the historic division of the world between the Great Powers (the big imperialists) and the colonial/ postcolonial world actively harms Western workers. Jobs and industries have been gutted across the West as factories are moved by the giant companies to poorer regions like China, where labour is cheap and unions are banned. Even the worst union represents a bulwark of working class resistance, which is why these repressive states crush unions and run fake 'official' unions.

The very existence of repressive regimes like China is in direct contradiction to the interests of Western workers, as this drive wages, welfare spending, unionization rates and job security through the floor. The syndromes of 'runaway industry' and 'give-back bargaining' which have crippled labour across the West are due to imperialism: workers are forced to accept worse conditions and/or de-unionise and/ or ever-higher productivity standards, under threat their jobs will move to cheap labour sites. In other words, a global market is created, where wages are levelled downwards, as investments threaten to move abroad. Meanwhile, low wage regimes, like that of China, fuel its elites' own wealth and drive for power – including a growing imperialism of their own.

Conclusion

Imperialism, on the grand-scale of the Western powers, or on the scale of rising powers like China or Russia, or even of small regional powers like South Africa, does not benefit the majority of their own people. It also, obviously, does not benefit the interests of the ordinary people subjected to imperialism – although local ruling classes often find ways to accommodate to the system. This means that the struggle against imperialism is not a battle between unified nations or regions, like the 'North' or the 'South', but a fight to be led by the popular classes, worldwide, against ruling elites, worldwide.

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