

# 1917

"To face reality squarely; not to seek the line of least resistance; to call things by their right names; to speak the truth to the masses, no matter how bitter it may be; not to fear obstacles; to be true in little things as in big ones; to base one's program on the logic of the class struggle; to be bold when the hour of action arrives—these are the rules of the Fourth International."

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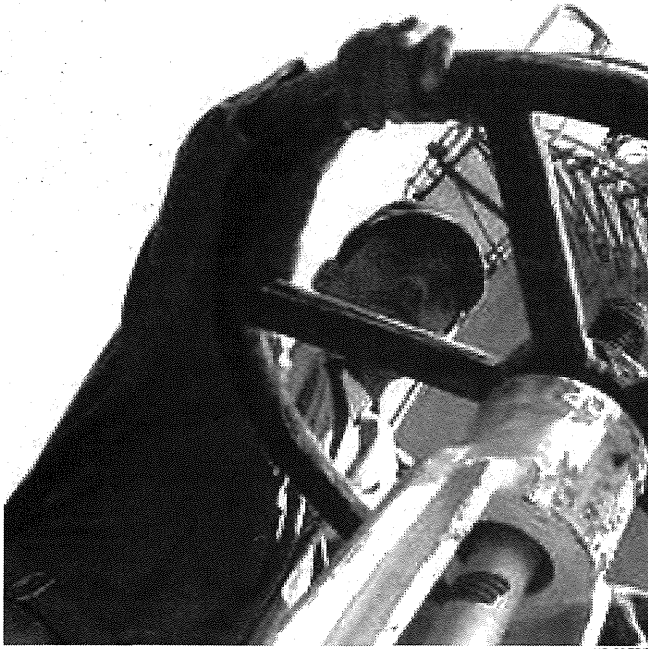


## *For a Socialist Federation of Latin America!* **Venezuela: State & Revolution**

Latin America has the world's widest income gap, with well over a hundred million people forced to eke out an existence on less than two dollars a day, according to the World Bank's 2005 "World Development Indicators." IMF-dictated austerity and privatization programs have ravaged the region for decades. "No other developing region [has] moved faster to sell off state companies," wrote *Newsweek* (5 July 2005), noting that: "By the end of the 1990s, Latin America accounted for fully 55 percent of total

privatization revenues across the developing world...."

The imperialist financiers' campaign to shrink the "state sector" and privatize water, electricity and gas utilities is rationalized with cynical claims that the region's desperate poverty requires increased foreign capital penetration. In fact, the IMF's austerity prescriptions, designed to create lucrative investment opportunities for imperialist corporations, have driven down living standards wherever they have been imposed.



NO CREDIT

### Venezuelan oil worker

"Neo-liberalism" has sparked massive popular resistance throughout South America. In June 2005, Bolivia teetered on the brink of civil war as mass protests demanded the reversal of the 1996 privatization of the country's oil and gas deposits. But the highest-profile opponent of the "Washington Consensus" is Venezuela's charismatic president, Hugo Chávez, whose administration has sought to mobilize millions of workers and poor peasants under the banner of a "Bolivarian Revolution." The Bolivarians, named after Simón Bolívar, the leader of the 19th century revolt against Spanish colonialism, are the target of a sustained, but thus far spectacularly unsuccessful, campaign of intimidation and subversion by the Venezuelan ruling class in collaboration with the various agencies of its American overlord.

Many leftists are excited by the Venezuelan leader's talk of "transcending capitalism" and building the "socialism of the 21<sup>st</sup> century." They fervently hope that Chávez will be able to use his position at the pinnacle of the Venezuelan state to deal a crushing blow to the forces of reaction, and propel Venezuela in a new, revolutionary direction. But this is a dangerous illusion, for, as Karl Marx observed after the defeat of the Paris Commune in 1871, "the working class cannot simply lay hold of the ready-made [capitalist] state machinery, and wield it for its own purposes."

Some "Marxists" active in the Venezuelan workers' movement have abandoned this fundamental axiom. Followers of Ted Grant and Alan Woods in the Committee for a Marxist International (CMI, a.k.a. the International Marxist Tendency) have denounced "sectarians" and "formalists" who "constantly refer to definitions and ready-made quotations from the Marxist classics ('we must smash the old state' etc.), which in their hands become transformed from scientific statements into empty clichés or religious incantations" (Marxist.com, 4 May 2004). The CMI certainly cannot be accused of adhering—religiously or otherwise—to the fundamental principles of Marxism. But this does not change the fact that socialist revolution

in Venezuela, as everywhere else, requires smashing the bourgeois state and replacing it with institutions committed to defending workers' power.

### Class & State in Venezuela

Venezuelan society has been decisively shaped by its relationship with the imperialist colossus to the north. The discovery of huge oil reserves during the First World War, at the dawn of the automobile age, vastly increased Venezuela's strategic importance, and today it is the world's fifth-largest oil exporter. Petroleum accounts for approximately one third of the country's gross domestic product (GDP) and more than 80 percent of its total export earnings. As a result of the oil boom of the 1970s, Venezuela today is a highly urbanized society, with 87 percent of its population living in towns and cities. Half the workforce is employed in the "unofficial" economy concentrated in the sprawling slums, while agriculture contributes a mere six percent of GDP. Two-thirds of the country's food has to be imported.

On 1 January 1976, the government of Carlos Andrés Pérez nationalized Venezuela's oil industry and created the state-owned *Petróleos de Venezuela Sociedad Anónima* (PDVSA). This increased the government's share of oil revenues, but the management of these newly nationalized oil installations did not change, and, as a result, the international oil majors continued to obtain Venezuelan crude at a substantial discount. In the 1980s, PDVSA began to acquire overseas refining, distribution and marketing assets, including the Citgo gas station chain in the U.S. In the 1990s, Venezuela's oil industry was reopened to outside investors. Today, roughly a quarter of production is controlled by foreign firms.

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## 1917

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## Predators & Prey

# Imperialist Expansionism & the EU



MELANIE FREY—WPN—AGENCY FOCUS

**French demonstration against projected European Union Constitutional Treaty**

*This statement was published prior to the May 2005 French referendum that rejected the EU constitutional treaty.*

In October 2004, representatives of the European Union's (EU) 25 member states celebrating the signing of a Constitutional Treaty at a posh reception in Rome's Palazzo dei Conservatori were told by incoming European Commission President José Manuel Barroso that the agreement would usher in a "more democratic union" (BBC News, 29 October 2004). Outside, 7,000 cops were deployed to ensure that their celebration of democracy was not disturbed by the hoi polloi.

To take effect, the treaty must be endorsed by all member states. Ten countries (France, Spain, Britain, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Ireland, Luxembourg, Poland, Portugal and the Netherlands) are holding popular referendums. In 15 states (Austria, Belgium, Cyprus, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Slovakia, Slovenia and Sweden) the government considered it too risky to submit the new "constitution" to a popular vote, and opted instead for a simple parliamentary ratification. While this is certainly a violation of democratic principle, for Marxists democracy is not the main issue here.

The essential question is whether or not to endorse the consolidation of the grip of the powerful West European imperialist bourgeoisies over the neo-colonial countries of the east, which is what the treaty is designed to facilitate. The pending referendums provide class-conscious workers with an opportunity to express their opposition to the entire imperialist project with a resounding "No!"

If any country fails to ratify the agreement, it will

inevitably be repackaged and resubmitted in one form or another—but this would represent a setback for the imperialists' plans. Philip Gordon, of the Brookings Institution in the U.S., observed that a single failure:

"would seriously undermine prospects for EU enlargement to include key American friends such as Turkey and Ukraine. It could lead to divisive, unworkable proposals for an EU 'core group' that would exclude US allies in Britain and Eastern Europe."

—*Financial Times* (London), 17 May [2005]

Given the compromises and trade-offs required to get agreement on the existing draft, amending it or redrafting it seems likely to be both costly and time-consuming.

### 'Old Europe' vs. United States

The EU originated in the aftermath of Hitler's failed attempt at "European integration" under the swastika as a U.S.-sponsored attempt to develop closer economic and political ties between the major West European powers. Washington's overtly counterrevolutionary strategic objective was to strengthen West European capitalism against both the Soviet Union and indigenous pro-socialist elements of the workers' movement. The first step was the creation of the European Coal and Steel Community in 1951 when France, West Germany, Italy, Belgium, Luxembourg and the Netherlands signed the Treaty of Paris. European "integration" took a further step in the 1957 Treaties of Rome, which created both the European Economic Community and the European Atomic Energy Community. In 1986, the Single European Act extended the scope of European poli-

cymaking and sought to rationalize decision-making. The "European Union" born of the 1992 Maastricht Treaty represented a significant deepening of the project through the Economic and Monetary Union and agreement on launching the Euro as a single currency.

The 1989-91 triumph of counterrevolution over the bureaucratized workers' states of the Soviet bloc opened up vast spheres for capitalist exploitation, while also sharpening antagonisms among the major imperialists. The French and German bourgeoisies in particular openly aspire to establish a European counterweight to the declining American colossus. A key element in this project involves tightening integration of the former "Communist" hinterland of Eastern Europe in order to gradually undercut U.S. economic and military influence in the region. Yet, as the recent campaign against Iraq has illustrated, there are important contradictions among the EU's major players (Germany and France openly opposed the U.S. adventure while Britain, Spain, Italy and the Netherlands signed on). These differences, which U.S. policymakers naturally seek to manipulate, are, at bottom, an expression of the aspiration of each European imperialist bourgeoisie for its own "sphere of influence" at the expense of its competitors.

In March 2003, a week and a half after the U.S.-led assault on Iraq commenced, the influential German magazine *Der Spiegel* reported that a "new German foreign and security policy" was being formulated with the aim of establishing Germany "as an actor on the global political stage." In May 2003, German defense minister Peter Struck released a set of "defense policy guidelines" proclaiming his government's willingness to deploy the *Bundeswehr* (German army) "anywhere in the world and at short notice and...across the entire mission spectrum down to high-intensity operations" (cited in "Mugged by Reality? German Defence In Light of the 2003 Policy Guidelines," Bastian Giegerich).

This represents a clear rejection of European military subordination to the U.S.-dominated North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). In September 2003 the German, French and British governments jointly signed a document proposing that, "the EU must be able to plan and conduct operations without the backing of Nato assets and Nato capability" (cited in the *Daily Telegraph* [London], 22 September 2003). A recent CIA report predicted that:

"[the] EU, rather than Nato, will increasingly become the primary institution for Europe, and the role Europeans shape for themselves on the world stage is most likely to be projected through it," the report adds. "Whether the EU will develop an army is an open question."

—*Scotland on Sunday*, 16 January [2005]

The possibility of a wholesale integration of European militaries into some sort of "EU army" is excluded by the fact that, in the final analysis, the European bourgeoisies are rivals, not partners. This does not rule out the formation of smaller integrated military units, but even the European Rapid Reaction Force, a supposedly transnational military formation directed by Brussels, is composed of units from the national armies of EU member states, each of which ultimately gets to decide whether or not to participate in any particular operation.

In February 2003 when the so-called "Vilnius 10" group of countries (including various East European EU candi-

dates) pledged their support to U.S. aggression against Iraq, French President Jacques Chirac commented that they "had done their best to reduce their chances of entering Europe." While this proved an idle threat, it reflected the considerable irritation felt in Paris and Berlin at American influence over the former Soviet bloc states. The most important U.S. ally in the EU is Britain, which signed on as a junior partner in Washington's plans to occupy Iraq and establish its direct military control in the Middle East. But things have not gone well for the U.S./UK occupation: most of America's East European vassals have pulled out, the pro-war Spanish government was defeated and Tony Blair's Labour government has suffered a precipitous decline in public support. Washington's influence in Europe is currently at its lowest point since the end of World War II.

In November 2004 José Zapatero, Spain's new Socialist prime minister, declared that the EU should "have faith in the prospect of becoming the most important global power in 20 years" (*Time Europe*, 22 November 2004). The successful launch of the Airbus A380 as a rival to the U.S. Boeing Corporation in the field of commercial passenger airplanes demonstrates the capacity of the European bourgeoisies to cooperate in becoming competitive in at least some strategic sectors. In October 2004, when Washington hauled the EU before the World Trade Organization on charges that it had unfairly subsidized Airbus, the Europeans countered by pointing to the U.S. subsidies for Boeing. According to the *New York Times*, at the January unveiling of the A380 German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder "urged the European Commission to negotiate aggressively with the United States":

"There is the tradition of good old Europe that has made this possible," Mr. Schröder said, alluding to Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld's quip about 'old Europe' before the Iraq war."

—*New York Times*, 19 January [2005]

## Divisions within the 'Union'

The "European constitution" is not really a constitution at all, but then the EU is not a state—not even a federated one. Despite achieving a significant degree of economic and political integration, the European Union remains in essence a long-term strategic alliance between competing national bourgeoisies, each of which retains the capacity to pursue its own interests when necessary at the expense of its partners. While the EU has proved more durable and comprehensive than any previous inter-imperialist alliance, its essential character was anticipated by Vladimir Lenin some 90 years ago:

"Of course, *temporary* agreements are possible between capitalists and between states. In this sense a United States of Europe is possible as an agreement between the *European* capitalists...but to what end? Only for the purpose of jointly suppressing socialism in Europe, of jointly protecting colonial booty *against* Japan and America.... On the present economic basis, i.e., under capitalism, a United States of Europe would signify an organisation of reaction to retard America's more rapid development."

—"On the Slogan for a United States of Europe,"  
23 August 1915

The EU's new "constitution" represents little more than a codification of the agreements of 1957, 1986 and 1992 in a single document. It creates the post of a foreign affairs minister but stipulates that he/she may only act when all member countries are in agreement. The same principle governs EU "defense policy":

"The common security and defence policy shall include the progressive framing of a common Union defence policy. This will lead to a common defence, when the European Council, acting unanimously, so decides."

—Article I-41, Paragraph 2

Instead of a mandate for a European military, there is vague talk of "structural cooperation" between individual member states in the area of "mutual defence."

## West European Imperialists Move East

The division over the Maastricht Treaty in the early 1990s was essentially a dispute over the relative advantages of "free trade" versus protectionism, as we observed at the time:

"The controversy over Maastricht is exclusively a dispute over how European capitalism should be organized. The duty of Marxist revolutionaries is to represent the long-term, historic interests of the working class, which has no stake in either model of capitalism."

—"European Disunity," 1917 No. 13, 1994

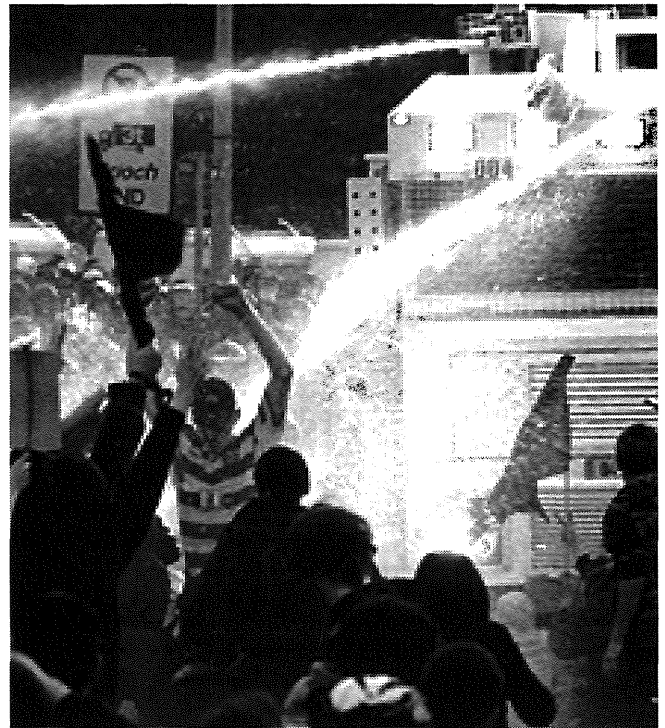
While still members of Arthur Scargill's Socialist Labour Party in 1997 our British co-thinkers wrote:

"We reject the Maastricht plan for a European imperialist super-state as well as the Eurosceptics' alternative, which points to an autarkic, protectionist Britain. We must prepare for aggressive resistance to all capitalist attacks on wages, living standards and social services, whether these are advanced on the grounds of promoting European integration, safeguarding British sovereignty or simply making British industry 'competitive'. Workers' struggle across national lines—not nationalist poison—must be our reply to capitalist attacks."

—"A Marxist Programme for the Socialist Labour Party," *Marxist Bulletin* No. 1, April 1997

Revolutionaries oppose privatization, cuts to social programs and all other attacks on workers and the oppressed, while at the same time refusing to promote the reformist illusion that capitalism can be rejigged to solve the fundamental problems faced by the vast mass of humanity. Reformists, by contrast, constantly push the illusion that there is an essential difference between humane, "social," national capitalism and heartless, "neo-liberal," globalizing capitalism. In 1988, at the height of a major public controversy over the Canada-U.S. Free Trade Agreement (FTA), our Canadian comrades argued that working people have no side in disputes between the protectionist and free-trade wings of the ruling class:

"Whether 'free trade' or Canadian protectionism triumphs, the capitalists will attempt to ensure that the workers pay the price of intensified international competition. If [Prime Minister Brian] Mulroney's deal falls through, and the Canadian capitalists end up 'independent' of all the major international trading blocs, the first thing they will do is try to further slash labor costs (i.e., working-class standards of living) on



Riot police in Dublin hose protesters in front of EU leaders' gathering marking bloc's expansion

the grounds that they are locked into a small domestic market. Alternatively, if free trade goes through, it becomes an excuse to cut living standards and social services in order to stay competitive with the U.S."

—"The Free Trade Election—No Choice for Workers!" November 1988

When the FTA was expanded to include neo-colonial Mexico in the early 1990s our attitude changed:

"The union bureaucrats depict NAFTA (the North American Free Trade Agreement) as a mechanism for Mexican workers to steal the jobs of U.S. workers instead of what it really is—an attempt by the U.S. capitalists (and their Canadian junior partners) to take control of Mexico's economy while simultaneously increasing the exploitation of workers throughout North America."

—"Labor Must Defend Immigrants!" December 1993

The EU's expansion into Eastern Europe represents a transformation qualitatively similar to the shift from the FTA to NAFTA in North America. That is why we now call for voting "no" in the referendum on the so-called European constitution. "No" to the economic annexation of the neo-colonial east by the rapacious imperialist powers of Western Europe as well as to the inevitable attempts to ratchet down wages and living standards in the name of becoming more "competitive."

## European Unity & the Left

The Constitutional Treaty is an attempt to "substantially improve the Union's effectiveness" by incorporating the agreements governing its operation into a single text and introducing "qualified majority voting" as the guiding principle in place of unanimity. But working people have no interest in rendering this imperialist alliance

"more effective." The central project of the capitalist governments of Western Europe is to address declining profits by increasing the rate of exploitation—lengthening the workweek and reducing labor costs while boosting military budgets in preparation for future conflicts over markets and raw materials.

Many of the supposed socialists in the "no" camp put forward the notion that the austerity drives and anti-working class attacks undertaken by each national bourgeoisie originate in directives from Brussels, rather than from their own aggressive pursuit of profits. The British Socialist Workers Party (SWP) warns:

"[T]he EU constitution is an attempt to set in stone a capitalist vision of the world with penalties for those who defy it. It will erode democracy and make officials even less accountable."

—*Socialist Worker*, 26 June 2004

The SWP's adaptation to illusions in the "accountability" of capitalist functionaries was displayed during the run-up to the imperialist assault on Iraq when it joined a variety of other pseudo-Marxist groups in signing an appeal pleading with Europe's rulers to try to persuade the U.S. to call off its plans to attack Iraq:

"Those who show solidarity with the people of Iraq have no hearing in the White House. But we do have the chance to influence European governments—many of whom have opposed the war. We call on all the European heads of state to publicly stand against this war, whether it has UN backing or not, and to demand that George Bush abandon his war plans."

—reprinted in *Weekly Worker*, 12 September 2002

One of the motions adopted by the October 2004 conference of Respect, the SWP's current electoral vehicle, included the following:

"The effect of market forces on our welfare state has been catastrophic and it is time to reverse this and return it to the people, who provide the taxes for these services, to rebuild our welfare state for the benefit of those using the services and for the staff who provide the services."

Not only do these reformists refer to the British bourgeoisie's organ of repression as "our" welfare state, but, in the same resolution, they describe the relentless attacks on social services as something "achieved by the UK Government signing up to the Maastricht Treaty and the World Free Trade Organisation..."

The SWP's social-democratic concerns about the dangers of EU neo-liberalism are shared by the French Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire (LCR—the leading section of the moribund United Secretariat of the Fourth International) which paints rosy pictures of the possibilities of life under capitalism free of the Brussels bureaucrats and their constitution:

"Our opposition to the European Constitution is one of social mobilization, of internationalist solidarity of workers and peoples. The direction of our No is a real alternative to [neo]liberalism: the right to a job and the banning of lay-offs, in particular in companies making a profit; stopping privatizations and re-launching public services; increasing salaries; social minimums and a new division of wealth."

—"Le Non peut et doit gagner!" 4 April [2005]

Peter Taaffe's Socialist Party (leading section of the

Committee for a Workers' International—CWI) correctly criticizes its larger reformist opponents for being so anxious to tail the anti-globalization milieu that they omit all references to socialism from their propaganda:

"Those in the ESF [European Social Forum] who merely stress opposition to neo-liberalism, as if it is somehow distinct from capitalism, create the impression that a nicer, capitalist world is possible. This idea is reinforced by the failure of groups like the SWP, LCR and PRC [the Italian Partito Rifondazione Comunista] to spell out a socialist alternative or even emphasise the need for working-class action to counter the bosses' offensive."

—*The Socialist*, 23 October 2004

The CWI strikes a more leftist pose by observing that:

"The alternative to the neo-liberalism of the Lisbon Agenda is not the same policies, only slower. The EU of the capitalists must be abolished and replaced with a socialist Europe."

—CWI website, 7 April [2005]

But while remembering to mention its socialist maximum program, the CWI is just as concerned as the SWP and LCR that the proposed constitution is likely to result in the loss of national sovereignty of the various bourgeois states to the "unaccountable" Brussels bureaucracy:

"The European constitution lays down a framework for a common foreign policy and sets in stone the utter submission of its economic policies to neo-liberalism. Once this European constitution comes into effect it will be 'illegal' for member states to pursue economic policies that protect public services, nationalise industries or subsidise prices. If the social democratic policies which led to the creation of the welfare state in the aftermath of the Second World War in Europe were brought in after the approval of the constitution, they would be illegal and open to penalties from the EU and its member states. The EU constitution will be used as a weapon against any future radical governments in Europe who would try, even remain[ing] within the framework of capitalism, to introduce radical policies."

—CWI website, 1 March [2005]

What is "legal" and "illegal" in the interactions of Europe's imperialist pirates in the future will be determined entirely by the relation of forces between them, just as it has been in the past.

After initially hesitating, the French organization Lutte Ouvrière (LO) also decided to vote "no." While denouncing the "domination of the great powers of Western Europe and their trusts over the poor part of Europe," LO has observed that "Europe" is not the cause of the French government's anti-working class policies:

"It's certainly not the European Constitution—which has not yet been decided—which is responsible for attacks against wage earners, against retirees, against hours of work. These attacks are the work of the bosses and the governments that apply the policy they demand."

—*Lutte Ouvrière*, 8 April [2005]

LO tends to put a positive spin on capitalist attempts at European unification:

"...the European Union represents progress in a certain number of domains. The end of economic barriers and customs alone (along with the free circulation of people in part of the continent) represents an appreciable

advantage in relation to controls and barbed-wire fences, even though this freedom is not fully recognized for immigrants who live and work in the Union.”

—*Lutte de Classe*, February [2005]

LO welcomes the inclusion of Turkey (and presumably other semi-colonial countries) into the imperialist-dominated European alliance:

“[W]orkers have nothing at all to worry about from Turkey’s eventual entry into the Union. Granted, if the European bourgeoisies are working hard to suppress the borders that break up this old world, it’s in their interest, because they need a market on the scale of the United States. But all the same, the disappearance of borders, the single currency, the possibility of men to circulate freely, constitute progress.”

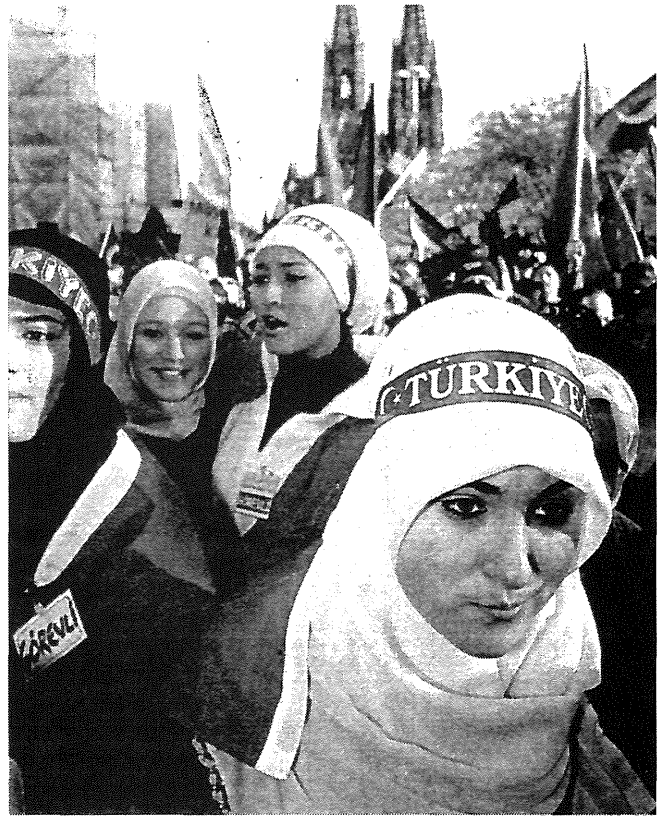
—*Lutte Ouvrière*, 24 December 2004

For LO, the essentially predatory relationship between imperialist powers like France, Germany and Britain on the one hand and semi-colonial countries like Turkey or Romania on the other is transcended by the innately progressive character of the EU. While distinct from the nationalist/utopian tilt of the LCR, SWP and CWI, LO’s complacent reformist conviction that the incorporation of neo-colonial countries into the EU represents “progress” is hardly less dangerous.

## No to the Constitutional Treaty! Forward to the Socialist United States of Europe!

The proposed Constitutional Treaty’s embrace of “the principle of an open market economy with free competition” is a declaration of intent to roll back the concessions won by workers’ struggles in the past. Yet all sections of the European bourgeoisie, including those that oppose the EU and advocate a more nationalist, protectionist policy, have the same intentions. The attacks of the bosses can only be successfully beaten back if the workers’ movement understands that there is no “progressive” wing of the bourgeoisie with which to ally, because the dispute over participation in the EU is basically an intra-bourgeois quarrel over how best to organize their system of exploitation and wage slavery.

Working people have the social power to successfully resist the ravages of capitalism, which grinds them down and humiliates them on a daily basis, but to wield this power they must embrace an internationalist class-struggle program. This begins with the recognition that all workers across Europe (and beyond) have common interests and common enemies. The trade-union bureaucrats in the imperialist heartlands, who function as little more than an agency of the capitalists within the workers’ movement, accept the bosses’ insistence that their enterprises must become more “competitive” by lowering wages, giving up benefits, lengthening the workday and introducing more “flexible” working conditions. The capitalists threaten that if their demands for concessions are not met they will move their operations to where wages are lower—to Eastern Europe or Asia. This plays into the attempts by nationalists and the far right to foment anti-immigrant xenophobia and racist attacks on foreign workers. The only way to combat this chauvinist poison is for the organized workers’ movement to champion the demand for full citizenship rights for everyone, regardless



HENNING KAISER—DDP

### Demonstrators in Germany support Turkey’s entry into EU

of their immigration status, and to actively participate in fighting every manifestation of racism and national chauvinism at home and abroad.

The record of cooperation between dockworkers in various EU countries provides a model for workers in other sectors. On 17 January 2003 when dockers in Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Spain, Cyprus and the Netherlands carried out a one-day strike to protest attempts by shipping companies to use non-union labor to load and unload cargo, they demonstrated, on a limited scale, the powerful potential of international working-class solidarity.

Every struggle to protect the gains won in the past is important. Yet the nature of capitalist competition requires constant, endless attacks on the lives and livelihoods of working people. This is why workers’ interests can only be permanently secured through expropriating the exploiters and creating an egalitarian, socialist economic system. Successfully challenging capitalist state power requires the construction of a revolutionary, internationalist combat party, rooted in the mass organizations of the proletariat, which is able to unite workers across national lines. Leon Trotsky, Lenin’s partner in the October Revolution of 1917, suggested that revolutionary workers pose the issue of European unity to their rulers in the following terms:

“In order to unify Europe it is first of all necessary to wrest power out of your hands. We will do it. We will unite Europe. We will unite it against the hostile capitalist world. We will turn it into a mighty drillground of militant socialism. We will make it the cornerstone of the world socialist federation.”

—“Disarmament and the United States of Europe,”

4 October 1929

# U.S. Imperialism in Decline

## New Orleans: Racism & Capitalist Irrationality



IRWIN THOMPSON—THE DALLAS MORNING NEWS

### Desperate families flee rising water

*The following is a slightly edited version of a talk given by Jason Wright in Toronto on 30 September 2005.*

On 29 August 2005, New Orleans, the cradle of jazz, famous for riverboat casinos, Mardi Gras excesses, Cajun cuisine and easy living, sank like a 21st century Atlantis. One of the few cities in the U.S. where bars can legally serve alcohol round the clock, the Big Easy was closed down by a toxic cocktail of flood water, sewage, industrial waste and gasoline.

Like Amsterdam and Venice, New Orleans symbolized the determination and resourcefulness, bordering on hubris, with which human beings have carved out centers of civilization in the most inhospitable places. Its destruction demonstrates the irrationality of the capitalist social system.

As the flood waters rose, coffins interned in the 1800s floated free of their mausoleums to mingle with the corpses of victims who lacked the resources and connections to flee Hurricane Katrina. In a city where 84 percent of those

who live below the poverty line are black, it is hardly surprising that most of the victims were African-American. As one journalist, Greg Palast, observed:

*"There is no such thing as a 'natural' disaster. Hurricanes happen, but death comes from official neglect, from tax cuts for the rich that cut the heart out of public protection. The corpses in the street are victims of a class war in which only one side has a general."*

Not much of a general, but one who personifies the willful ignorance, arrogance and stupidity of a ruling class that, while still the most powerful in the world, is unable to reverse, or even acknowledge the symptoms of its own decline. George W. Bush, the "What Me Worry?" president, belatedly responded to this immense human tragedy by shrugging and moronically observing: "I don't think anybody anticipated the breach of the levees."

In fact the calamity was widely anticipated in both scientific and popular literature. The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) had predicted a hurricane



flooding New Orleans as one of the three most likely major disasters faced by the U.S. (along with a California earthquake and a major terrorist attack on New York). The October 2004 *National Geographic* described a hypothetical scenario in which a hurricane produced a storm surge in Lake Pontchartrain that:

“raced through the bars and strip joints on Bourbon Street like the pale rider of the Apocalypse. As it reached 25 feet (eight meters) over parts of the city, people climbed onto roofs to escape it:

“Thousands drowned in the murky brew that was soon contaminated by sewage and industrial waste. Thousands more who survived the flood later perished from dehydration and disease as they waited to be rescued.”

That is pretty much exactly what happened.

New Orleans sits in a bowl, surrounded by water on three sides and protected by an extensive network of levees that the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers began to construct in 1879 to shield the towns and industries along the Mississippi from its periodic floods.

But routine spring flooding, carrying millions of tons of sediment, was integral to the formation of the channel islands and the periodic renewal of the bayous. As flood prevention reduced the capacity of the ecosystem to regenerate, the cypress swamps hung with Spanish moss began to gradually recede. The elimination of flooding lowered the water table, which increased the rate at which the land subsided, thereby accelerating New Orleans' drop below sea level.

Since the 1950s, more than 8,000 miles (13,000 kilometers) of canals have been laid through the delta, mostly to facilitate oil exploration and improve shipping lanes. “Development” has reduced the wetlands of the Mississippi Delta, which buffer New Orleans from the Gulf, at the rate of an acre (4,000 square meters) every 25 minutes. Since the 1930s, it is estimated that 1,900 square miles of coastal wetlands have disappeared, thereby clearing a path for hurricane storm surges.

Bob Morton of the U.S. Geological Survey noted a correspondence between increased oil and gas production in the delta in the late 1970s and early 80s and the accelerated loss of wetlands. Joe Suhayda, a retired coastal engineer from Louisiana State University, put it like this:

“When you look at the broadest perspective, short-term advantages can be gained by exploiting the environment. But in the long term you're going to pay for it. Just like you can spend three days drinking in New Orleans and it'll be fun. But sooner or later you're going to pay.”

—*Ibid.*

President Bush embraces superstitious notions about “intelligent design” and “creation science” but is quite skeptical about global warming. There is a broad consensus among scientists who have studied the question that, as an unintended by-product of fossil fuel consumption, humanity is nearing, if we have not already passed, a critical “tipping point” in climate change. In the British *Independent* last week (23 September 2005) Sir John Lawton, chairman of Britain's Royal Commission on Environmental Pollution, was reported to have observed that over the past few decades: “Hurricanes were getting more intense, just as computer models predicted they would, because of the rising temperature of the sea.” Between the 1970s and 1990s, the average temperature of surface sea water

has increased by nearly a full degree Fahrenheit (0.5 Centigrade) while the number of Category 4 and 5 hurricanes has almost doubled.

### ‘Lethal Ineptitude’

As has been widely reported, the Bush administration's response to the growing severity of hurricanes has been to slash funding for flood control. A 16 February 2004 article in *New Orleans City Business* reported that the federal government was spending only 20 percent of what the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers considered necessary to maintain the levees on Lake Pontchartrain.

It seems that the money was needed for other things. The occupation of Iraq is going very badly—instead of being an enormous new source of wealth for the oil monopolies and providing new leverage for U.S. imperialism over its rivals, it has dramatically weakened America's position diplomatically, militarily and financially. At the same time, the expansion of the domestic bureaucratic apparatus of police repression under the banner of “Homeland Security” has also been expensive. And while vastly increasing the federal budget, the administration also pushed through a program of tax cuts for the corporations and the ultra-rich that slashed government income. The result is a soaring federal budget deficit and less room for the ruling class to maneuver in.

The attempt to square this circle by cutting “flab” like levee maintenance on the Mississippi reflects the ideological priorities of the American bourgeoisie, as liberal economist Paul Krugman recently pointed out:

“the federal government's lethal ineptitude...was a consequence of ideological hostility to the very idea of using government to serve the public good. For 25 years the right has been denigrating the public sector, telling us that government is always the problem, not the solution. Why should we be surprised that when we needed a government solution, it wasn't forthcoming?”

—*New York Times*, 5 September 2005

The port of New Orleans did not spring up by accident—it handles more goods than any other in the U.S. More than 50 million tons are shipped out of New Orleans each year, including most of America's agricultural exports. It also handles the bulk of imports, particularly oil and coal. The decision to cut funding for the levees therefore was not only a devastating blow to hundreds of thousands of ordinary working people, but also to the entire capitalist class.

Ports cannot function without workers, and port workers require others to provide housing, schools, grocery stores, utilities, transit and every other necessity. This is why Bush felt he had to promise to rebuild New Orleans—without of course increasing taxes or the government's budget. Of course the imperialists often make grand promises to do this or that and then renege, as the victims of last year's tsunami and the peoples of the former Soviet bloc, Iraq and Afghanistan well know. But the U.S. bourgeoisie cannot simply leave New Orleans to its fate.

New Orleans has never been particularly popular with right-wingers in America, but Dick Cheney, Karl Rove & Co. are smart enough to recognize that its destruction is a disaster for the capitalist class as a whole. The malign neglect of the past several decades, as the market worked



### Prisoners being evacuated from New Orleans

its "magic" along the Gulf Coast, now has to be paid for. And the bill will be steep.

Of course some of the president's "born again" base doesn't think rebuilding New Orleans is such a good idea. They are generally more inclined to view the destruction of this city as evidence of divine retribution rather than capitalist stupidity. The anti-abortion bigots of "Columbia Christians for Life" think Katrina was aimed at New Orleans' ten abortion clinics, but "Repent America" sees a broader focus: "this act of God destroyed a wicked city. From 'Girls Gone Wild' to 'Southern Decadence,' [the city's annual gay pride event] New Orleans was a city that had its doors wide open to the public celebration of sin."

### Racism & Cop Mentality

In America the question of race always simmers just below the surface, but it burst into the open in the wake of Katrina. Before the Civil War, when cotton was king and the Gulf Coast was lined with the plantations of the slavocracy, New Orleans was a center of the slave trade. Yet it was also unique among Southern cities during the time of slavery because of the opportunities it offered free blacks. This originated in the willingness of the French and Spanish colonialists, who feared American expansionism, to welcome runaway slaves in their territories. The late Herbert Aptheker, leading historian of the American Communist Party, wrote that in the 1790s the impact of the French revolution and the resulting slave revolt in Haiti were felt throughout the region:

"In Spanish Louisiana the turmoil was great, and 'the fever of the French Revolution stirred up sedition among

the numerous French creoles...and insubordination among the slaves.' When, in 1793, Spain declared war upon France, only severe measures of repression directed against both the white and the Negro population prevented revolution."

—*American Negro Slave Revolts*, 1943

The U.S. purchased Louisiana from France in 1803, after Napoleon finally abandoned plans to revive a French colonial empire in North America when it became clear that after a decade of unsuccessful attempts the French Army was unable to stamp out the Haitian rebellion. New Orleans' large, bi-racial Creole population, which already numbered in the tens of thousands, made the city a cultural mecca for American blacks. Many of the *gens d' couleur* were literate, skilled artisans who tended to look to London and Paris, rather than New York and Washington, for inspiration. Their very existence refuted the racist ideology of the defenders of the slave system.

During the Civil War, the Confederacy had to enforce strict martial law to retain control of New Orleans. After the city fell to the Union in April 1862, thousands of runaway slaves found refuge there. The First Louisiana Native Guards, raised in New Orleans, was the first black regiment to be officially incorporated into the Union army.

When Katrina struck, New Orleans was a city where two thirds of the population were black and poverty rates were triple the national average. In 1850 only 20 percent of free blacks living in New Orleans were illiterate—by 2005, 40 percent of the city's population could not read or write. The U.S. ruling class has for generations maintained blacks as a pool of cheap labor, forcibly segregated

at the bottom of society and traditionally stuck with the dirtiest and most dangerous jobs. But racism is not only about economic super-exploitation, it also functions as a means of social control by providing the ruling class with a ready-made scapegoat in periods of social crisis. The use of the "race card" to deflect criticism of the handling of Hurricane Katrina demonstrated this.

To counter television images of the plight of desperate, overwhelmingly black, crowds of people trapped without food, water or medical care, the political spinmeisters fixated on "looting" and incessantly repeated that "law and order" had to be the first priority. An influential German weekly reported:

"three pictures of apparent 'looters' featured on Yahoo news. Two men are pictured wading through flood waters with bags of groceries and beer in their arms. They are described as 'looters.' And, coincidentally they are African-American.

"Next comes a picture of a white couple carrying food supplies through the flood waters. According to AFP/Getty Images, these fine young people are on their way home after 'finding bread and soda from a local grocery store.' So the white people don't 'loot,' they 'find'. A curious insight into prevalent racism in the US media; just as one man's 'terrorist' is another man's 'freedom fighter,' it seems one man's 'looter,' is another man's 'finder'."

—*Der Spiegel* Online, 31 August 2005

The situation was presented to enthralled American television viewers as a sort of bizarre dystopia, with scenes of chaos straight from "Waterworld," "Mad Max" and "Escape From New York." On 2 September 2005, Reuters reported claims by a woman that gangs of (black) men were roaming through New Orleans' convention center raping and murdering children:

"She said she found a dead 14-year old girl at 5 a.m. on Friday morning, four hours after the young girl went missing from her parents inside the convention center. "She was raped for four hours until she was dead,' Joseph [the woman] said through tears. 'Another child, a seven-year old boy was found raped and murdered in the kitchen freezer last night.'"

The dispatch included the unusual disclaimer that these sensational allegations, which were immediately picked up by the rest of the media, "could not be independently verified." Other stories of snipers firing on rescue helicopters circulated widely. The constant repetition of such tales without any attempt to verify them served to divert attention from the stupidity and ineptitude of the political authorities, and provided the media with the opportunity to praise the cops and National Guard units sent to enforce martial law.

It was left to the European media to investigate the horror stories—and not surprisingly most turned out to be inventions. New Orleans police superintendent Eddie Compass confessed: "We don't have any substantiated rapes," but promised to investigate if any victims or their families came forward. The London *Guardian* (6 September 2005) reported that: "while many claim they happened, no witnesses, survivors or survivors' relatives have come forward. Nor has the source for the story of the murdered babies, or indeed their bodies, been found."



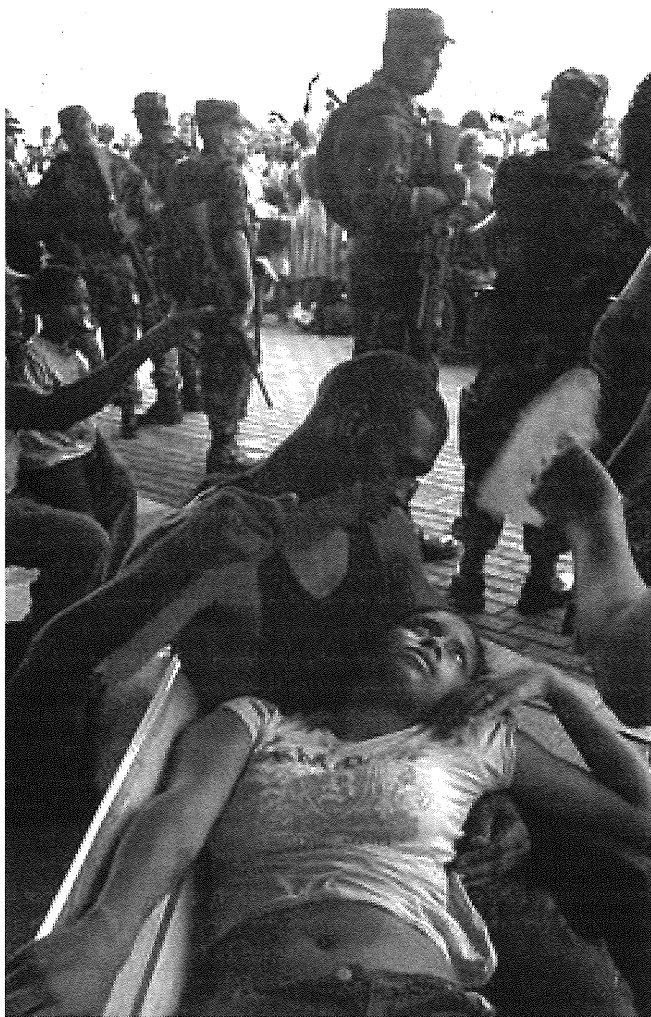
18 September 2005, Algiers residents furious at FEMA

When some in the U.S. media finally sought to verify the reports of attacks on rescue helicopters, they also turned out to be false. Laura Brown of the Federal Aviation Administration told ABC News, "We're controlling every single aircraft in that airspace and none of them reported being fired on," and Department of Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff admitted: "I haven't actually received a confirmed report of someone firing on a helicopter." Unlike the original lurid fantasies which were prominently featured and widely disseminated, the truth was confined to the small print and back pages.

There were undoubtedly plenty of instances of lumpen criminality, but the chief problem in New Orleans was not "crime" or "looting," but rather the gross incompetence of the federal and state authorities whose actions put tens of thousands of desperate people in a near hopeless situation with no resources. The *Guardian* commented: "America is the richest and most powerful country on earth, but its citizens, begging for food, water and help, are suffering agonies more familiar from Sudan and Niger. The worst of the third world has come to the Big Easy." Malik Rahim, a former Black Panther and long-time activist who is now with the Green Party, observed bitterly:

"We have Amtrak here that could have carried everybody out of town. There were enough school buses that could have evacuated 20,000 people easily, but they just let them be flooded. My son watched 40 buses go underwater—they just wouldn't move them, afraid they'd be stolen."

The capitalists and their media hacks avoided any dis-



RICHARD ALLAN HANNON—AP

### Victim of Katrina in the Superdome

discussion of the root of the problem—a social system organized to serve the interests of a few at the expense of the many—even when the issue was one of maintaining the essentials of life, which in New Orleans includes the levee system. The lesson drawn by capitalist ideologues is that everyone has to accept personal responsibility for their own individual situation. Rick Santorum (the right-wing Republican senator from Pennsylvania whose name has become synonymous with a particular frothy mixture) advocated a crackdown on the victims:

"I mean, you have people who don't heed those warnings and then put people at risk as a result of not heeding those warnings. There may be a need to look at tougher penalties on those who decide to ride it out and understand that there are consequences to not leaving."

But it was not just the Republicans—their "progressive" Democratic twins also prioritized martial law over rescue efforts. In welcoming the Arkansas National Guard in New Orleans, Louisiana's Democratic Governor Kathleen Blanco praised them as troops who "know how to shoot and kill and I expect they will."

Baton Rouge's David Duke, one of America's most notorious fascists, wrote an article entitled "New Orleans descends into Africa-like Savagery," a theme picked up by Brigadier General Gary Jones, commander of the Louisiana National Guard's Joint Task Force who told the *Army*

*Times*: "This place is going to look like Little Somalia.... We're going to go out and take this city back. This will be a combat operation to get this city under control."

### An Empire in Decline

True to form, various Bush cronies have seized upon the disaster as an opportunity for personal enrichment. FEMA's website sought to channel donations through Operation Blessing, a dubious "charity" run by Pat Robertson on the basis that "charity begins at home." During the Rwandan genocide, Operation Blessing planes were busy delivering equipment for an African diamond mining operation owned by Robertson. Presumably he has found similar opportunities this time.

Vice President Dick Cheney's buddies at Kellogg, Brown & Root Services Inc., a Halliburton subsidiary famous for getting no-bid contracts for restoring Iraqi oil production, have already tapped a \$500 million Navy contract for repairing Gulf Coast facilities. (Cheney was, of course, the former CEO of Halliburton.)

So far the "reconstruction" of New Orleans promises to be as good an example of capitalist irrationality as its destruction. Bush's assurances that everything can be fixed without straining the federal budget by setting up a few tax-exempt "free enterprise zones" and paying workers less than the minimum wage can only be taken seriously by imbeciles. Free enterprise is the *problem*, not the solution.

This is demonstrated by comparing the handling of Katrina with the response of the Cuban deformed workers' state a year ago to Hurricane Ivan, a Category 5 storm that destroyed 20,000 homes. The Cubans managed to successfully evacuate a million and a half people with no loss of life. The United Nations International Secretariat for Disaster Reduction declared: "The Cuban way could easily be applied to other countries with similar economic conditions and even in countries with greater resources that do not manage to protect their population as well as Cuba does."

The contrast is rooted in the difference between a social system based on private property and untrammelled competition on the one hand, and a collectivized economy, albeit a bureaucratically deformed one, on the other. In New Orleans many diabetics, AIDS sufferers and other people with particular requirements were stranded without help or medication. Those unable to fend for themselves were simply left to die. In Cuba, everyone had a pre-assigned shelter, with the necessary medical personnel, patient records and medicine.

The U.S. today is an empire in decline—a fact made rather evident by the quality of its leadership. The peculiar indifference displayed by the Bush gang to the enormity of this tragedy, their initial focus on dismissing it with an upbeat public-relations spin before getting back to holidaying, shoe shopping and business as usual, was typical of an administration that has made obliviousness to reality, particularly to unpleasant facts, its calling card. From the manifest stupidity of denying "global warming," to the notion that the ballooning federal deficit can be best addressed by destroying the social security program that most of the population depends on for retirement, the Bush White House has given perfect expression to the fundamentally irrational character of the global social order

over which it presides.

The diversion of funds from Medicare, food stamps, libraries, parks, pensions, schools, childcare, environmental protection and practically every other form of socially useful spending, in order to fund military aggression and further enrich a tiny minority of parasites has only accelerated the decline of U.S. imperialism. In 2004, the usually staid London *Financial Times* bluntly characterized the Bush government's economic policy as "lunacy." The same could be said of the notion that American economic supremacy can be preserved through a military doctrine of "preemptive strikes" against "rogues" and potential rivals—a policy that, at bottom, is an expression of the deterioration of America's position in the global world order.

The deepening difficulties besetting the U.S. crusaders in Iraq is compounded by the domestic catastrophe in the Big Easy. This has created, at least in the short term, a genuine political crisis for the American ruling class that seems likely to accelerate the erosion of domestic popular support for seizing control of the oil fields of the Persian Gulf by establishing a massive, permanent American military presence there.

The gradually worsening situation in Iraq, compounded by an inability to really get New Orleans back on its feet, seems likely to undercut the popular legitimacy of many of the traditional mechanisms of capitalist rule. The U.S. economy, kept afloat by an enormous expansion of debt, is in a position that is simply unsustainable. A major economic dislocation could result in significant social turmoil.

## From the Horse's Mouth

*The following remarks by the late, unlamented, Lee Atwater, the Karl Rove of the 1980s, explains the evolution of the use of racism in American politics. Atwater was the architect of the infamous "Willie Horton" ad that helped George H. W. Bush brand Democratic candidate Michael Dukakis as soft on (black) crime during the 1988 U.S. presidential election:*

**"You start out in 1954 by saying 'Nigger, nigger, nigger.' By 1968 you can't say 'nigger'—that hurts you. Backfires. So you say stuff like forced bussing, states' rights, and all that stuff. You're getting so abstract now [that] you're talking about cutting taxes, and all these things you're talking about are totally economic things and a by-product of them is [that] blacks get hurt worse than whites. And subconsciously maybe that is part of it. I'm not saying that. But I'm saying that if it is getting that abstract, and that coded, that we are doing away with the racial problem one way or the other. You follow me—because obviously sitting around saying, 'we want to cut this,' is much more abstract than even the bussing thing and a hell of a lot more abstract than 'Nigger, nigger.'"**

—cited in *Southern Politics in the 1990s*,  
Alexander P. Lamis



ROBYN BECK—AFP

### Ninth Ward resident surveys damage

There is of course no guarantee that any upheavals will necessarily have a leftist character—Pat Buchanan, David Duke and the rest of America's far-right can certainly be counted on to seek to channel them in a racist-reactionary direction.

But the disaster in New Orleans cannot help but suggest to people of reasonable intelligence that the existing social order is not only manifestly irrational and profoundly unjust, but also that it is neither necessary, nor inevitable. The venal, pro-imperialist bureaucracy that has strangled the American trade unions and run them into the ground can provide no leadership for people who are looking for a way out of the capitalist morass of poverty, oppression and endless war.

The fundamental problems faced by working people in every capitalist country cannot be solved by tinkering with a system created by, and for, the exploiters of labor. The only way forward is through creating independent working-class parties committed to struggle to expropriate the bosses, rather than begging for crumbs.

The first step in creating such a party in the U.S. is to cohere a nucleus of an authentically revolutionary, class-struggle leadership within the mass organizations of the working class. Only through the revolutionary overturn of the entire system of capitalist competition, and the creation of a social system based on the collective ownership of the economic levers of society, will it be possible to set economic and social priorities on the basis of human need, rather than private profit.

At this point this is still a distant prospect—yet it is quite simply the only way out. And we of the International Bolshevik Tendency are committed not only to analyzing the contradictions and irrationalities of capitalism, but to building an organization capable of intervening to change history. For, as Karl Marx observed in his famous "Theses on Feuerbach" 160 years ago, "The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways, the point, however, is to change it." ■

# Venezuela...

*continued from page 2*

Another lever of imperialist control is the country's external debt, which, according to the World Bank's 2005 "World Development Report," was over \$32.5 billion in 2002 (roughly a third of gross national income). Much of this was accumulated in the 1970s:

"The foreign debt grew from \$1.2 billion in 1973 to \$11 billion in 1978. Astronomical sums were gobbled up by Pharaonic projects. Multimillion dollar deals were made in violation of the law and the constitution. A lot of money was used to fuel networks of clientalism and essentially benefited financial capital, eminent representatives of which occupied important positions within the state apparatus."

—Réseau d'information et de solidarité avec l'Amérique latine (RISAL), 17 May 2004

Venezuela's "oligarchs," whose social and political power is rooted in their ownership of industry, transportation, banking and the media, are linked by a thousand threads to the centers of imperial finance capital. Their rural cousins, the big landowners, dominate the countryside. Seth DeLong, a Senior Research Fellow at the Washington-based Council on Hemispheric Affairs, estimates that, despite a 1960 land reform, today "roughly 75 to 80% of the country's private land is owned by 5% of all landowners" (Venezuelanalysis.com, 25 February 2005). The parasitism of Venezuela's tiny light-skinned ruling class has traditionally been rationalized by racism—the supposed superiority of "Europeans" over the black, Indian and *mestizo* masses—and sanctified by the obscurantist reactionaries of the Catholic Church.

## From 'Caracazo' to 'Bolivarian Revolution'

A combination of falling oil prices and soaring debt produced a serious fiscal crisis in the 1980s, prompting the government of Carlos Andrés Pérez to respond with IMF-dictated austerity and "structural adjustments." The first step was to deregulate fuel prices. On the morning of 27 February 1989, when people on their way to work discovered that bus fares had doubled over night, they exploded in anger:

"Buses were overturned and burnt, but this was just the initial stage of the revolt. Within hours the rebellion had become more generalized, with widespread looting and the destruction of shops and supermarkets. Gangs of young people from the suburbs, both poor and angry, invaded the commercial centre of Caracas and moved on to the privileged residential areas of the wealthy under the slopes of Mount Avila, close to the heart of the city. Rioting and looting continued unchecked throughout the night and the following day. It developed into a prolonged and mighty rebellion—the *Caracazo* as it was called—but it was soon to be followed by days of brutal military repression."

—*In the Shadow of the Liberator*, Richard Gott, 2000

The army gunned down as many as 3,000 people, but was unable to quell the unrest. From that moment the traditional mechanisms of social control began to break down. Suddenly left-nationalist formations, like the Movimiento

al Socialismo (MAS) and La Causa Radical (both offshoots of the Venezuelan Communist Party) began to grow rapidly. Popular dissidence even found expression in Venezuela's officer corps when, in February 1992, a group of officers around Colonel Hugo Rafael Chávez Frias made an unsuccessful bid to overthrow Pérez and overturn his "neo-liberal" agenda. Nine months later they tried, and failed, again. Chávez went to prison promising his supporters that their project was on hold only "for the moment."

In 1994, when Rafael Caldera Rodríguez, who had earlier held power from 1969 to 1974, was reelected president, he immediately reversed some of Pérez's less popular measures, nationalized a few insolvent banks and pardoned Chávez. Caldera's populist credentials were further enhanced when a representative of the MAS was given a cabinet post. Yet the new government was unable to turn the economy around, and in April 1996, Caldera agreed to yet another IMF structural adjustment program. Between 1993 and 1999 real wages plummeted, the rate of unionization fell by half (to just 13.5 percent), unemployment doubled (from 6.3 to 14.9 percent) and the "informal" economy expanded. According to the World Bank:

"[T]he percentage of Venezuelans living in poverty (household income of less than \$2 a day) has increased from 32.2 percent in 1991 to 48.5 percent in 2000. Likewise, the proportion of those living in extreme poverty—below \$1 a day—rose from 11.8 percent to 23.5 percent."

—"Venezuela Country Brief," August 2004

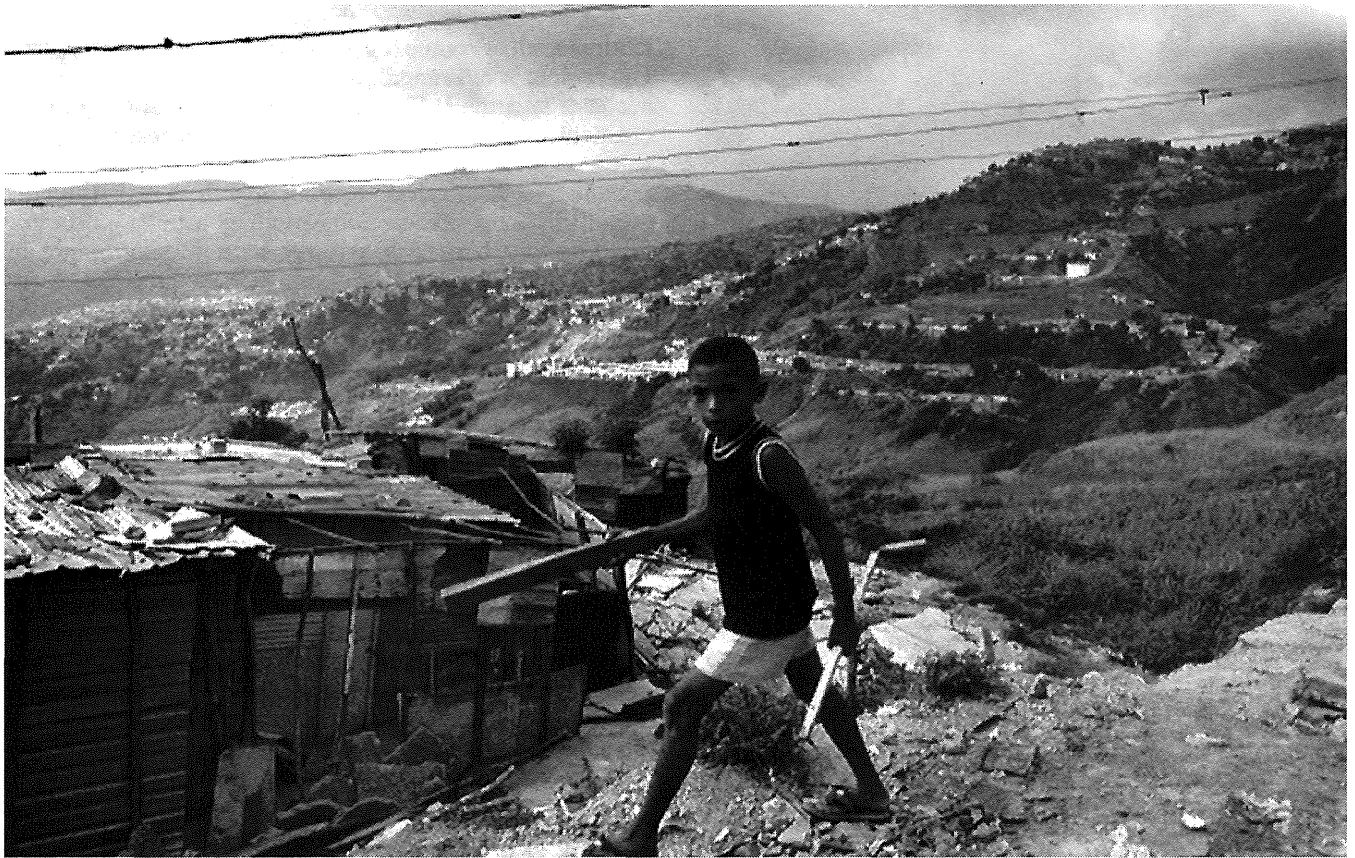
As the poor were growing poorer, the rich grew steadily richer. "The income share of the poorest 40 percent of the population fell from 19.1 percent in 1981 to 14.7 percent in 1997, while that of the wealthiest decile increased from 21.8 to 32.8 percent" (*Venezuelan Politics in the Chávez Era*, Steve Ellner and Daniel Hellinger, eds.).

In March 1994, as soon as he got out of prison, Chávez began organizing a "military-civilian" alliance, the Movimiento Quinta República (MVR) which participated in the "Polo Patriótica," a bloc of parties pledged to liberate Venezuela from corruption and neo-colonial servitude. As the Polo Patriótica presidential candidate in the December 1998 elections, Chávez received 56 percent of the vote:

"Chavez got elected in late 1998 on three basic promises: first, to break Venezuela's old political system, known as 'puntofijismo,' named after the location, Punto Fijo, at which Christian Democrats (Copei) and Social Democrats (Acción Democrática) signed an accord to limit Venezuela's political system to a competition between these two parties. Second, Chavez promised to end corruption. And third, Chavez promised to alleviate poverty in Venezuela."

—G. Wilpert, Venezuelanalysis.com, 11 November 2003

A few months after being elected, Chávez's proposal to convoke a constituent assembly won an overwhelming mandate. His supporters swept the July 1999 elections to the assembly, where they proceeded to draft a new constitution declaring Venezuela to be a "democratic and social state of law and justice." When this document was ratified by 70 percent of voters in a December 1999 referendum, the new "Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela" was born. Seven months later, in July 2000, Chávez was elected its first president.



NOAH FRIEDSKY

**"Nuevo Tacagua," Caracas' hillside barrio—tin and cardboard shacks are frequently destroyed by mudslides**

Relations were tense between *puntofijists* and Bolivarians within the state apparatus. Those who had served the old regime did not trust Chávez, who seemed largely uninterested in using his position for personal advantage (a characteristic that many in his circle do not share). Many old-timers worried that Bolivarian denunciations of poverty and "globalization" might stir up the impoverished masses. They were alarmed when Chávez assigned loyal military cadres to monitor the civil service:

"The military are everywhere,' one senior economic adviser explained to me. 'It sometimes seems as though there is a secret project that you don't quite know about. There really is a military party. In some of the ministries, it's a case of dual power.'"

—Gott, *op. cit.*

Washington was equally suspicious of Bolivarian intentions. To reassure the imperialists, the government pledged not to touch any foreign investments, although, according to Gott, Chávez sought to avoid personal responsibility for this measure by arranging to be out of the country when it was announced.

Despite vehement denunciations of "neo-liberalism," the Bolivarian government proposed to privatize state-owned electrical and aluminum companies, while retaining control of PDVSA. In his inaugural address, Chávez spelled out his government's economic plan:

"Our project is neither statist nor neo-liberal; we are exploring the middle ground, where the invisible hand of the market joins up with the visible hand of the state: as much state as necessary, and as much market as possible."

—*Ibid.*

While proclaiming its commitment to social justice, the Venezuelan government continued to make scheduled payments on its foreign debt and, in an obvious bid to reassure the reactionaries, Chávez reappointed Maritza Izaguirre as finance minister—notwithstanding the fact that, under the Caldera administration, she had introduced many of the unpopular measures denounced by the Bolivarians.

But despite the government's conservative economic policies, its popular base was emboldened by the belief that the president was on their side. In November 2001, tension between the Bolivarians and the *puntofijists* came to a head when Chávez, in an attempt to shore up his slipping popularity, pushed through 49 decrees fulfilling some of his earlier promises. One of these limited foreign control of the oil industry and doubled the royalties due to the government. The right-wing opposition responded by accelerating its plans to overturn the regime.

While a few Venezuelan capitalists sought to reach a *modus vivendi* with Chávez, most of the bourgeoisie, and much of the petty bourgeoisie, were virulently hostile. The venal trade-union bureaucracy of the Confederación de Trabajadores de Venezuela (CTV), demagogically exploiting some legitimate grievances of their base, sided with the bosses against Chávez. A few of the more corrupt and cynical elements of the left, notably the degenerate Stalinists of the formerly pro-Albanian Bandera Roja (Red Flag) group, also threw their support to the "democratic" pro-imperialist opposition. On 10 December 2001, the CTV, supported by Fedecámaras (the employers' association) and PDVSA management, carried out a one-day



GLOBE AND MAIL

### Pedro Carmona: leader of U.S.-backed 2002 coup

strike to protest the decrees issued by Chávez the month before. Chávez responded in February 2002 by sacking the top PDVSA managers, an act that triggered a U.S.-backed coup two months later.

The U.S. National Endowment for Democracy (NED), which channeled CIA funds to the Nicaraguan contras in the 1980s, had long been funding the CTV bureaucracy via the AFL-CIO's perversely titled "American Center for International Labor Solidarity" (ACILS, a.k.a. "Solidarity Center") the contemporary embodiment of the infamous American Institute for Free Labor Development. Between 1997 and 2002, the NED officially provided ACILS with \$700,000 for subversion in Venezuela (*Monthly Review*, May 2005). It was no coincidence that NED's budget in Venezuela quadrupled in the period immediately before the April 2002 coup. Among other things, it sponsored a March 2002 conference of CTV bureaucrats, Fedecámaras officials and members of the Catholic hierarchy to discuss perspectives and priorities for the country's future.

### April 2002 Coup: Made in U.S.A.

On 11 April 2002, elements of the Venezuelan military arrested Chávez, and Fedecámaras chief Pedro Carmona proclaimed himself head of state. Carmona immediately rescinded the constitution, dissolved the legislature, suspended the Supreme Court, revoked all of Chávez's decrees and began rounding up leading Bolivarians. With consummate cynicism he announced: "Everyone will feel that there exists plenty of freedom, pluralism and respect for the state of law" (Associated Press, 12 April 2002). Carmona was supported by the corporate media, much

of the intelligentsia and the officer corps, the Catholic Church and, of course, the big capitalists and landowners. His regime was immediately recognized by Washington, Madrid, and the IMF, although no Latin American government was eager to endorse the U.S.-orchestrated overthrow of an elected government in the region. There was never any serious question about American involvement:

"[V]isits by Venezuelans plotting a coup, including Carmona himself, began, say sources, 'several months ago', and continued until weeks before the putsch last weekend. The visitors were received at the White House by the man President George Bush tasked to be his key policy-maker for Latin America, Otto Reich.

"Reich is a right-wing Cuban-American who, under Reagan, ran the Office for Public Diplomacy. It reported in theory to the State Department, but Reich was shown by congressional investigations to report directly to Reagan's National Security Aide, Colonel Oliver North, in the White House."

—*Observer* (London), 21 April 2002

Former U.S. navy intelligence officer Wayne Madsen reported:

"I first heard of Lieutenant Colonel James Rogers (the assistant military attaché now based at the US embassy in Caracas) going down there last June to set the ground,' Mr Madsen, an intelligence analyst, said yesterday. 'Some of our counter-narcotics agents were also involved.'

"He said that the navy was in the area for operations unconnected to the coup, but that he understood they had assisted with signals intelligence as the coup was played out.

"Mr Madsen also said that the navy helped with communications jamming support to the Venezuelan military, focusing on communications to and from the diplomatic missions in Caracas belonging to Cuba, Libya, Iran and Iraq—the four countries which had expressed support for Mr Chavez."

—*Guardian* (London), 29 April 2002

Although Carmona held power for less than 48 hours, he found time to meet both the Spanish and U.S. ambassadors. The coup collapsed when hundreds of thousands of Chávez's plebeian supporters massed outside the Miraflores presidential palace to demand his restoration, while several hundred loyal soldiers, who had hidden in the basement after being tipped off about the coup, emerged to arrest Carmona.

Some senior officers who had initially gone along with the coup were reportedly so appalled by the Fedecámaras chief's dictatorial actions during his first day in office that they withdrew their support. This may explain why, as soon as he returned, Chávez immediately sought to open a "dialogue" with his rightist enemies, backtracked on some proposed reforms and announced that PDVSA management would remain in place. Instead of being mollified, the rightists saw these overtures as a sign of weakness and launched a national strike/lockout to bring down the Chávez government in December 2002. The lockout was supported by all the big capitalists and a minority of workers. It inflicted serious economic damage, but collapsed after a couple of months. This time Chávez was less conciliatory, and promptly fired 18,000 of the participants (including the PDVSA bosses).



The majority of the working class and several important unions had actively opposed the bosses' lockout:

"...in the process of recovering PDVSA, there were many experiments in workers' control, notably in the El Ilenadero de Yagüa, Puerto La Cruz and El Palito refineries. In the latter, dozens of workers worked day and night to counter the economic sabotage. And it was also pressure from the workers that forced [...] Ferrari to open and distribute gasoline.

"Similar experiments took place in other branches of industry. In the middle of the lockout, workers seized companies demanding their reopening and direct workers' control over production. This was the case with Texdala, a textile factory in Maracay, and with Central Carora, a sugar factory in the state of Lara."

—Frédéric Lévêque, RISAL, 5 June 2003

After the failure of the lockout, the rightist opposition, which according to the *National Catholic Reporter* (2 April 2004) was receiving a million dollars a year from the U.S. to fight Chávez, began to gather signatures for a presidential recall referendum. The vote, eventually held on 15 August 2004, delivered a devastating blow to the opposition. One prominent imperialist hireling, Maria Corina Machado (leader of Súmate, the group that spearheaded the recall campaign) now faces criminal charges for illegally using foreign funds to attempt to influence the outcome. In a signal to Caracas, Machado was invited to the White House in May 2005 by George W. Bush.

Chávez's decisive victory in the referendum dramatically weakened the opposition. The subsequent victory of pro-Chávez candidates in the 2004 regional elections led to the appointment of a *chavista* majority in the Supreme Court. With the right in retreat, Chávez swung left, at least rhetorically, and in January 2005 at the World Social Forum in Porto Alegre declared that henceforth his government would be pursuing a "socialist" agenda.

Many leftists backed Chávez in the recall referendum on the grounds that his opponents were reactionary. But voting "no" to new presidential elections amounted to giving political support to the existing bourgeois government, something Marxists can never do. Under these circumstances, with no way to express a clear, proletarian alternative, the best that class-conscious Venezuelan workers could do was spoil their ballots, while making clear their readiness to defend Chávez, arms in hand, against any extra-legal attacks by the right or their imperialist godfathers.

## Social Reform & 'The Movement'

The Chávez government has initiated a series of significant new social programs (known as "missions") that are providing important assistance to millions of Venezuela's poor. Mission Mercal established a chain of supermarkets to sell goods at subsidized prices. Mission Robinson, a mass literacy program, has already taught more than a million poor people to read and write. Mission Ribas helps those who never graduated from high school to resume their studies, while Mission Sucre provides scholarships for impoverished students to attend college. Mission Vuelvan Caras is a training program through which Mission Ribas graduates and others can learn the skills necessary for decent, productive jobs.



ERIC DRAPER

### Súmate head Machado and Bush in Oval Office, May 2005

The goal of Mission Barrio Adentro is to create a free and universal health care system. Already 20,000 Cuban medical professionals have set up clinics to provide free health and dental care for the urban and rural poor. In exchange, Venezuela is selling oil to Cuba at prices well below those of the international market. Mission Barrio Adentro II, launched in June 2005, is constructing hospitals, as well as diagnostic and rehabilitation facilities. Chávez has announced plans for Mission Barrio Adentro III, to organize the acquisition of modern medical equipment. Under Mission Miracle, Venezuela is sending thousands of patients to Cuba to receive surgery they otherwise could not afford.

The Bolivarian missions, which are hugely popular, have helped draw millions of poor Venezuelans into political activity through their emphasis on "grassroots" participation. Much of this has taken place through the "Bolivarian Circles"—local groupings of between seven and ten individuals who help enroll people in the "missions" and then support them and monitor their progress. The Bolivarian Circles, which have a quasi-independent relationship with the state and at their height claimed an active membership of two million, are waning and being replaced by other organizational networks.

In February 2002 the government announced that it would issue titles for land in shantytowns to inhabitants organized into land committees of between 100 and 200 families. These urban land committees have since become a central pillar of the "Bolivarian Revolution":

"The urban land reform is functioning as a catalyst for the mobilization of Venezuela's barrios, following the fizzling out of the Bolivarian Circles....It has led to the mobilization of over 5,000 land committees, representing a total population of more than 5 million Venezuelans, or 20% of the population. This makes the urban land committees Venezuela's largest organized social movement.

—Venezuelanalysis.com, 12 September 2005

The government has also created small-scale financial institutions (e.g., the Women's Bank and People's Bank) to provide cheap credit for small businesses and cooperatives. The National Housewives' Union, launched in 2003, is another key participant in the plans for "endogenous development":

"We also have people who teach the women how to develop cooperatives in small businesses and community work,' [Lizarde Prada, a leader of the Housewives' Union] explained. 'For example, if you live in a certain neighborhood and you have the raw materials, such as bananas, use it for a sweets shop and use local transportation for your business. All of this will generate more local work.' There are different cooperatives affiliated with the Housewives' Union, some involve cooking and food distribution, others have to do with textiles and sewing."

—Benjamin Dangl, ZNet, 27 April 2005

While improving life for many of the most impoverished, these sorts of initiatives do not begin to address the roots of social inequality in the imperialist world order. Chávez has recently begun to talk about "21<sup>st</sup> century socialism," but the measures proposed so far do not seem to go much beyond the 1999-2000 "Transitional Economic Program," which projected the development of "a humanistic, self-managed and competitive economy" for which:

"The backdrop is the social organization of production in which the market, as a fundamental mechanism for assigning resources and factors, incorporates complementary organizational forms of private property which, like cooperatives and strategic consumer and producer associations, foster a dynamic diversification of production and add value."

There is a profound and fundamental contradiction between the interests of those who own and control the essential economic levers—the Venezuelan bourgeoisie and their imperialist patrons—and the mass of the population. In some circumstances the capitalists can be compelled to make concessions, but, so long as the bourgeois state remains intact, gains for working people can easily be reversed when the relation of forces changes.

### Limits of Bolivarian Agrarian Policy

The supposed "war against the latifundia" illustrates the limits of the Bolivarian experiment. Among the 49 decrees Chávez promulgated in November 2001, one that particularly enraged the oligarchs was the creation of the Instituto Nacional de Tierras (National Lands Institute—INTI) which was charged with implementing a modest land reform. The law imposed a supplementary tax on landholdings where more than 80 percent is unworked, and allowed for the expropriation—with full compensation—of "high-quality idle land of over 100 hectares or lower quality land of over 5,000 hectares" (*New Left Review*, May-June 2003). Expropriated land was supposed to be turned over to farmers' cooperatives. The reform was intended to address the land hunger of poor peasants, modernize the countryside and boost agricultural production, thus enhancing Venezuela's "food sovereignty." Ricarte Leonete, the head of INTI, pointed out that this was not an anti-capitalist measure: "Our terratenientes [landlords] aren't even capitalists. Capitalists make use

of their land.... In Europe capitalism got rid of this kind of parasitic behaviour a long time ago" (cited in *Le Monde Diplomatique*, October 2003).

Yet, despite occasional rhetorical attacks on landed parasites, the regime did not touch any private holdings for over three years. Meanwhile, more than 100 peasant leaders have been killed by armed gangs working on behalf of the big landowners. In some cases, the local Bolivarian authorities sided with the rural elites:

"It's one thing when the enemy is an opposition governor—as in the states of Yaracuy, Apure and Carabobo—or a politician from the ancien régime. But in January 2002, in El Robal (Cojedes State), it was Jhonny Yanez Rangel who let the dogs out. He had been elected as a member of the Movement for the Fifth Republic (MVR, the president's party). He kicked out the campesinos and destroyed their ranchos and their equipment. Everything was lost,' says Vásquez [a landless peasant], still enraged at what happened. How could a revolutionary governor act against the revolution?"

—*Le Monde Diplomatique*, October 2003

In January 2005, with the government less anxious to conciliate the reactionaries, Rangel dispatched 200 National Guard soldiers to the 32,000 acre *El Charcote* estate (owned by British multimillionaire Lord Vestey) where several hundred landless peasants had been squatting for years. The *Washington Post* (14 January 2005) immediately seized on this as an "assault on private property" that proved Chávez "is undermining the foundations of democracy and free enterprise." The European media treated it less hysterically. The BBC described Chávez's announcement that land reform was to be accelerated as "more modest than many expected," and Radio Netherlands noted:

"Although President Hugo Chavez once spoke of a 'war against the landed estates,' the government now carefully avoids using the word 'confiscation.' It is simply 'retaking' land which, while it has always been 'public property,' was dubiously 'occupied' by private landowners and businesses."

—Radio Netherlands, 15 March 2005

The discrepancy between the tough talk of "war on the latifundia" and the timid measures actually undertaken is highlighted by the regime's recent attempts at "coordination" with landowners to reach negotiated agreements and by its continuing reluctance to support peasant occupations. For all the radical rhetoric, Chávez is well aware that a true agrarian revolution that uprooted the big estate owners would inevitably threaten capitalist property in the cities as well. In the past few years, in order to placate the rural poor without offending the rich landowners, the regime has been parceling out state-owned land, turning over more than two million hectares to 130,000 families and farming cooperatives. In doing so, the government acted to expand the influence of the capitalist market and maintain the influence of the big landholders.

### Chávez & Organized Labor

Chávez's government has raised the minimum wage several times—including a 26 percent hike in May 2005 (roughly equal to the annual rate of inflation) while also making it more difficult for employers to lay off workers. These measures, which only apply to the half of the work-



NO CREDIT

### Metering Loop at PDVSA's Lake Maracaibo facility

force employed in the "formal" economy, have made it easier for workers to unionize.

When Chávez came to power, the main trade-union federation was the highly bureaucratized CTV, which was traditionally closely integrated with *Acción Democrática*, self-described "social democrats" who propped up the *puntofijista* regime. In March 2000, Chávez declared a strike of PDVSA workers for better wages and working conditions to be illegal, and demanded that a new union leadership be elected before negotiations could continue. Rather than comply, the union tops promptly called off the action. But seven months later, in October, 30,000 oil workers struck again, and after four days wrested a 60 percent pay hike from the PDVSA management. This time the government did not seek to intervene, as unions representing over a million public-sector employees declared their intent to strike in solidarity (BBC News Online, 15 October 2000).

In 2001, in an attempt to break the grip of the CTV bureaucracy, the government decreed that all unions had to immediately hold elections. Although Chávez's intervention in the trade-union movement was popular with many workers frustrated by the CTV misleaders, Marxists, as a matter of principle, oppose any meddling by the capitalist government in the unions. Those who rely on the bourgeois state to fight union corruption only weaken the workers' movement. When the CTV bureaucrats managed to win the vote, Chávez supporters split away and founded the *Unión Nacional de Trabajadores* (UNT) in April 2003. Since then, the UNT has grown rapidly, and now represents the vast majority of public-sector workers and half of those in the private sector.

Those leftists who want to see Chávez as a revolutionary socialist have been encouraged by the recent nationalization of several companies. Alan Woods, a leader of the

Committee for a Marxist International, declared:

"The fact that President Chavez has come down publicly in favour of socialism is a further clear indication as to where the Bolivarian Revolution is moving. The nationalization of Venepal, and now also of CNV, confirms this direction. Those people who criticized us for pointing out that the Bolivarian Revolution would have to take the socialist road or fail, have been shown to be completely wrong."

—Marxist.com, 10 June 2005

The January 2005 nationalization of the Venepal paper mill (which had been bankrupted as a result of its owner's participation in the 2002-2003 bosses' "general strike") only occurred after several hundred workers, responding to its September 2004 closure, occupied the mill and resumed production. Chávez did not pretend that this represented a step toward socialism: "The expropriation of Venepal is an exception, not a political measure, nor a government one. We won't take the land, if it's yours it's yours. But the company that is closed and abandoned, we'll go for them. For all of them" (Venezuelanalysis.com, 20 January 2005). Only in December 2004, after the company had officially declared bankruptcy, did the government nationalize it—and then only after paying the owners its full market value. In April 2005 the government also took over the *Constructora Nacional de Válvulas* (CNV), which had also been shut down by its owner (former PDVSA president Andrés Sosa Pietri). In this case as well, the Bolivarian authorities acted only after some 60 former CNV employees occupied the factory.

The government has announced plans for converting other bankrupt enterprises, as well as some privately-owned companies "co-managed" by employees, into

*Empresas de Producción Social* (EPSs, Social Production Enterprises):

"Examples of enterprises that should be turned into EPS are Cadafe (the electrical company), Hidroven (the water company), the Metro, Conviasa (the state airline). The state-owned oil company PDVSA is an enterprise that has already undergone the transition from capitalist enterprise to social production enterprise, said Chavez....

"Expropriations to advance this program would, however, be only a last resort. Agreements with current owners would first be attempted, so that the enterprises might reopen as social production enterprises with government support. Agreements could be reached, 'always when the owners are willing to improve the enterprise, to promote worker participation, and to involve them in the distribution of the products, as well as to make them participants in the benefits [of the enterprise],' said Chavez."

—Venezuelanalysis.com, 18 July 2005

Despite the wishful thinking of some leftists, the reality of workers "co-managing" with employers has nothing to do with socialism:

"Workers at Cadafe, the state electric company that provides 60 percent of the electricity in Venezuela, began a push for co-management soon after Chávez was elected in 1998. In 2002, shortly after the April coup, Cadafe officially began the transition to co-management. But three years later, workers' role in the decision-making process is still limited to two positions on a five-member coordinating committee—a group that can make recommendations to the president of the company, but he has no obligation to heed. After giving the state management a chance to implement real co-management, Cadafe workers, led by the union federation Fetraelec, have staged a series of protests articulating their impatience. It's a tricky strategy, because the majority of these workers are staunch supporters of President Chávez, but their protests are necessarily directed against the Ministry of Energy—the state entity in charge of Cadafe."

—*Monthly Review*, June 2005

The biggest co-management "success" story is Alcasa, a state-owned aluminum concern located in the industrial city of Puerto Ordaz, where departmental works councils are allowed to discuss the company's "participatory budget." In April 2005, the plant's 2,700 employees got to elect two of the firm's five corporate directors. The president of Alcasa, Carlos Lanz, a former guerrilla leader, suggested: "This is about workers controlling the factory and that is why it is a step towards socialism of the twenty-first century" (BBC News Online, 17 August 2005). In reality, this is simply a way to increase productivity through speed-up, something that managers always favor:

"'The managers and the workers are running this business together,' [Alcasa worker Pedro] Gomez said above the din of rumbling forklifts and humming industrial fans, sweat dripping down his face from the heat of the casting house. 'It gives us new motivation to work hard.'"

—*New York Times*, 3 August 2005

The Bolivarian union leadership is happy to redefine "socialism" to correspond to the regime's co-management policy. The UNT's two main slogans for May Day 2005

were: "Co-management is revolution" and "Venezuelan workers are building Bolivarian socialism" (*Green Left Weekly*, 11 May 2005). A vision of "socialism" as a decentralized market economy in which workers get to consult with management on decisions and in which the state provides extensive social programs may be inspiring for many Venezuelans, but the whole idea of creating socially-conscious, humane, worker-run capitalism is an unrealizable, petty-bourgeois fantasy.

The road to Bolivarian pseudo-socialism begins with a publicly funded bail-out for capitalists who have run their companies into the ground, and proceeds, if all goes well, to convert the employees into petty owner-operators:

"Alexis Ornevo, former member of the executive of Venepal's now defunct union and current member of the directorate of Invepal [the new name for the nationalized Venepal], noted that since they no longer had any bosses, they no longer needed a union, as workers were now grouped into a cooperative (Covimpa) to run the company. And as a cooperative, Ornevo was quick to point out, they got several benefits including constitutional relief from paying taxes. Also, thanks to the 1999 Bolivarian Constitution, Covimpa—which now owns a 49 percent share in Invepal—is legally entitled to increase that share up to 95 percent."

—*Monthly Review*, June 2005

Cooperatives that survive and flourish will eventually gain enough market share to push their competitors out of business. At that point, they will want the chance to expand their operations by absorbing and reorganizing the less profitable co-ops, and will doubtless expect to receive a share of any future earnings as a reward for their expertise. Members of the more successful cooperatives might well find that managing their various businesses leaves little time for work. As time goes on, a larger and larger share of their income is likely to derive from dividends (profit shares). This is not socialism, of course, but capitalism, even if disguised for a time by the illusion that it is a uniquely Venezuelan harmonious and compassionate sort of capitalism. Genuine socialism begins with the *expropriation* of the capitalist class as a whole, the destruction of its repressive state apparatus and the creation of new economic institutions based on the principle of planning and cooperation, not profit-driven competition.

## Bolivarian Bonaparte

While Chávez has decisively defeated the opposition in every political confrontation to date (and currently enjoys support from a clear majority of the population), the capitalists retain possession of the major means of production, communication and transportation; their state apparatus remains essentially intact, and they are well aware that in any major confrontation they can count on the support of other bourgeois regimes in the region backed by the imperialist superpower to the north. The ambivalence displayed by the Venezuelan military to date is at least partially attributable to the fact that much of the officer corps is recruited from more plebeian social layers than in most of the rest of Latin America.

Even Chávez's supporters are skeptical about his muddled, left-nationalist talk of "less capitalism and more socialism" (ZNet, 10 April 2005) as though they were two



Bolívar, Chávez and Jesus

points on a continuum, determined by the percentage of the economy that is publicly owned. In reality they are two mutually antagonistic social orders separated by a revolution or counterrevolution, i.e., civil war. In a 2005 opinion poll conducted by a firm not considered sympathetic to Chávez, more than 70 percent of Venezuelans expressed broad approval of the president and 35 percent said that they wanted the government to establish socialism, while another ten percent were undecided. Yet fewer than 20 percent of Chávez supporters believed that he will be able to build a socialist society (Venezuelanalysis.com, 3 May 2005).

Chávez has gone out of his way to praise "Jesus Christ, one of the greatest revolutionaries...the true Christ, the Redeemer of the Poor" (ZNet, 10 April 2005). In July 2005, the Bolivarian leader asserted: "In the history of Venezuela there has never been a government that has been closer to the principles of Christianity than this one" (Vheadline.com, 14 July 2005). In fact the main "principle" of Chávez's rule is *bonapartism*—a term denoting a "strong" government that appears to float above the conflicts of competing social classes, but in fact balances precariously between them.

In order to maintain his room for maneuver, Chávez has, on occasion, found it expedient to dispense with the "participatory democracy" that is supposed to characterize the Bolivarian revolution:

"In response to increasing mobilization demanding primaries for regional candidates [within the *chavista*

coalition], Chávez' position has been a surprise to many. Last month, he declared 'We have already announced the candidates, and these are the candidates. Those who don't want unity can join the *escualidos* (opposition).' Yet since these candidates were all appointed by a national committee dominated by the governing party, the 5th Republic Movement (MVR), the result has been fierce opposition in many communities who are demanding that the government act in accordance with its participatory rhetoric."

—Venezuelanalysis.com, 17 October 2004

Candidates of the pro-Chávez "Group for Change" coalition for the December 2005 National Assembly elections were also chosen by the "National Tactical Commando" rather than the grassroots.

Chávez's bonapartist behavior seems to derive from a desire to better the conditions of the poor and downtrodden without infringing on capitalist property. Yet the fundamental interests of the proletariat and the bourgeoisie are irreconcilably counterposed, and for all his socialist rhetoric, Chávez is well aware that his power comes from his position as the head of the capitalist state. He may wish that he did not have to behave so autocratically, but he cannot trust the Bolivarian rank and file to make significant decisions because they are likely to upset the delicate balancing act he is attempting to pull off.

The European imperialists, who tend to be more sophisticated about things like the "Bolivarian Revolution" than the "born agains" in and around the White House, are not particularly alarmed by developments in Caracas. During a visit to Europe in October 2005, Chávez met with Italy's right-wing prime minister Silvio Berlusconi, who later told the Italian paper *La Repubblica* that the Bolivarian leader is a "pragmatic guy" with whom it is possible to do business. "It is true that there are ideological distances [with the U.S.], but in the end, commercial relations are good. I know [Chávez] for a while now. I also have good relations with him," remarked Berlusconi (Venezuelanalysis.com, 18 October 2005). The current Fedecámaras chief, José Luis Betancourt, has also opted for turning the other cheek, at least in public, declaring: "joint public and private investment is the only way to develop this country in a harmonious manner" (Venezuelanalysis.com, 26 October 2005). The bosses' representative apparently "responded well to Chávez's statement that property rights would be respected during the development of Venezuela" (*Ibid.*).

The overwhelming majority of the Venezuelan ruling class still hates Chávez with a passion. They are accustomed to enjoying close personal and financial ties with the country's political rulers, and are uncomfortable with having a left-talking bonapartist in charge of their state. Yet Chávez's relative independence from the bourgeoisie enables him to better serve the interests of Venezuelan capital, a paradox he explained to a "Macro Business Round Table" in Caracas last July that brought government officials together with Venezuelan and American businesspeople:

"Venezuela, and I said this before becoming president of Venezuela, is a kind of—we would say in '95, '97—Venezuela is a kind of a bomb (tick tock! tick tock!). We are going to begin to deactivate the mechanism of that bomb. And today, it's not that it is totally deactivated,

but I am sure that it is much less likely that this bomb explode today than it was in the face of what we had since 1985, 88, 89—then it already exploded. The 90's until '98, poverty, inequality."

—"President Chavez's Speech to Venezuelan and U.S. Business Representatives," 6 July 2005

While contrasting sharply with the socialist rhetoric about capitalism as "savagery," Chávez's talk about "deactivating" social contradictions lies at the core of the entire Bolivarian project. With his unrealizable promises of simultaneously advancing the interests of the poor and the imperialist financial piranhas via a more inclusive and socially responsible form of "endogenous" capitalist development, Chávez, no doubt unwittingly, is helping lay the groundwork for the forces of a resurgent right to exact a bloody revenge in the future.

### Bolivarian 'Anti-Imperialism'

Washington's implacable hostility to the Bolivarian government is a living refutation of the Bush administration's claims to champion "democracy" and "freedom" for the benighted peoples of the earth. While grudgingly describing the *chavistas'* repeated electoral triumphs as "technically legal," U.S. officials warn that Chávez represents "a new breed of authoritarianism" and complain that he does not govern "democratically," i.e., refuses to take orders from Washington.

Chávez has condemned the U.S. invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq; lambasted the IMF and the Free Trade Area of the Americas and befriended Fidel Castro. The Venezuelan Central Bank has recently begun to convert most of its foreign currency reserves from dollars into Euros (Venezuelanalysis.com, 5 October), and Chávez has hinted that he may one day decide to start pricing oil exports in Euros as well. All of this has made him the current *bête noire* of the American imperialist propaganda machine, and thus the natural recipient of an assassination fatwa from theocratic bigot and hard-core Bush backer Pat Robertson. When mass protests in Bolivia reached pre-revolutionary dimensions in June 2005, the U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for Western Hemisphere Affairs, Roger Noriega, knew who to blame: "Chávez's profile in Bolivia has been very apparent from the beginning" (*Miami Herald*, 8 June 2005). Fidel Castro, the traditional Latin American bogeyman for delusional anti-communist fanatics, jokingly complained to Chávez: "I'm realizing that your friendship is hurting my image" (Reuters, 30 April 2005).

The ill-fated American adventure in Iraq has made an immediate military assault on Venezuela less likely, but planning is certainly underway. Massive U.S. aid has tripled the size of Colombia's armed forces in the past several years, thus providing Washington with a reliable proxy in the region. When Chávez announced plans to modestly expand the popular militias, purchase 100,000 AK-47 rifles and 40 helicopters from Russia, the Bush administration squawked that he was threatening the peace of the region. U.S. Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld cynically inquired: "What in the world [is the threat] that Venezuela sees that makes them want to have all those weapons?" (BBC News Online, 1 July 2005).

Despite attempts to diversify its markets, Venezuela remains dependent on sales to the U.S. for roughly two-

thirds of its oil export earnings which, as the Bolivarians have suggested, is reason enough to reach an accommodation with the U.S. In the aftermath of the April 2002 coup, an exasperated Chávez reportedly declared: "With me in power the oil supply to the U.S. is assured. If you support efforts to push me out of power there will be a civil war and oil will be interrupted" (ZNet, 10 September 2002). At the July 2005 Round Table, Chávez spoke of having "friends in both parties" of the American ruling class. The anti-imperialist tub-thumping that had so excited his leftist admirers in Porto Alegre was set aside in favor of a pitch to his "dear North American business friends" for "peace," "understanding," "transparency" and "true integration." Far from calling for "transcending capitalism" via Bolivarian socialism, the Venezuelan *lider maximo* spun fantasies of the peaceful self-reform of imperialism through a sort of Tobin tax that could "create a fund that would allow governments and society to forge an historic alliance for the survival of the human species" (Venezuelanalysis.com, 6 July 2005).

The expansion of social programs under the "Bolivarian Revolution" has been paid for by the astronomical rise of international oil prices. When Chávez took office in 1998, oil was selling for roughly \$12 a barrel—in 2005 it was going for \$60. Under Chávez, royalties paid by foreign oil companies have increased from a token 1 percent to 16.6 percent (*New York Times*, 5 July 2005). Yet while government revenues have soared, Venezuela's public debt has also increased, largely as a result of a deliberate policy of lavishly subsidizing Venezuela's banks:

"But what makes this really crazy," says [Banco Venezolano de Crédito's president, Oscar] García [Mendoza], 'is that the government is depositing all its oil revenue in the same banks at about 5 percent, then borrowing it back at 14 percent. It's a very easy way for bankers to make money. That's why I say this is a government for the rich.'"

—*The Nation*, 11 April 2005

The *chavistas* apparently imagine that Latin American subordination to the U.S. will be reduced if regional trade and economic cooperation is expanded. To date, Cuba is the only country to have shown any enthusiasm for Chávez's proposed "Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas" to compete with the U.S.-dominated Free Trade Area of the Americas. But the logic of attempting to enlist other capitalist regimes in a Bolivarian solidarity project was clearly displayed in August 2005, when Chávez offered to support Ecuador's government against workers who, demanding increased investment and more jobs, brought that country's petroleum exports to a halt. Undercutting the leverage of the workers, the Chávez government announced: "Venezuela will cover the [oil export] commitments that the Ecuadorean [sic] government has not been able to fulfill these days. They will not have to pay a cent" (Reuters, 21 August 2005).

### Marxism & the State in Venezuela

This shameful strikebreaking was passed over without comment by many of Chávez's international admirers, including those in the Committee for a Marxist International, who on paper champion the political independence of the working class from the bourgeoisie and,

at least in theory, advocate the creation of a Leninist vanguard party to carry out Trotsky's program of permanent revolution. But, for the CMI, none of this seems to apply in Venezuela.

Marxists do not disparage those measures implemented by the Chávez government that improve the lives of the poor and dispossessed—but neither do we conclude that the fundamental principles of socialism no longer apply. Capitalists and workers have counterposed material interests in Venezuela, just as they do everywhere else. No Bolivarian alchemy can transform an instrument constructed to defend and promote capitalist exploitation—the bourgeois state—into an agency of social liberation.

The CMI claims that Chávez has “carried out a partial purge of the state” (Marxist.com, 20 May 2004). Alan Woods has even asserted that Chávez's bonapartist attempts to mediate between workers and bosses means that “*the state in Venezuela is no longer controlled by the bourgeoisie*” (Marxist.com, 4 May 2004). While allowing that Chávez heads a bourgeois one, and even warning that the state represents a threat to the as yet unconsolidated “revolution,” Woods' solution is to propose that it is “necessary to remove all the conservatives” still hiding in the apparatus (Marxist.com, 20 May 2004). In an “Eyewitness report from the heart of the revolution,” a CMI supporter breathlessly described the titanic revolutionary struggle supposedly underway within Venezuela's capitalist state machine:

“Although the structures of the Venezuelan state remain capitalist, this does not mean that within it there is not a ferocious struggle taking place between revolutionaries and sectors that think that the revolution has gone too far. There is a huge division between the reformists and revolutionaries within the Miraflores palace, the ministries and all kinds of public offices. In some ministries, the left is strong like for instance in the Ministry of Labour. Cristina Iglesias is actually working shoulder to shoulder with the UNT in order to tackle the anti-worker practices of the bosses, trying to boost the participation of workers in trade unions and trying to take further the co-management measures.”

—Marxist.com, 7 September 2005

Here in all its nakedness, is Eduard Bernstein's debilitating reformist prescription that working people can peacefully take over the capitalist state and gradually transform it from an apparatus of oppression into a tool of liberation.

According to the CMI, “Chavez in general has made a shift to the left, one that revolutionary Marxists must support and push forward” (Marxist.com, 19 May 2004). Those who criticize Chávez, or his touts in the CMI, are dismissed as “sectarians” who fail to grasp “the dialectical relation between Chavez and the masses”:

“Our attitude to Chavez has all along been one of *critical support*. That is to say, we will support Chavez to the degree that he strikes blows against imperialism and the oligarchy, but we will criticise him when he vacillates or makes concessions to imperialism and the oligarchy.”

—Alan Woods, Marxist.com, 23 July 2004

This is precisely the formula employed by Stalin, Kamenev and the rest of the right-wing Bolsheviks toward Russia's bourgeois Provisional Government after the over-



MARXIST.COM

**Bolivarian publicist Alan Woods with Chávez**

throw of the Tsar in February 1917. In his historic “April Theses,” Lenin emphatically rejected this approach and insisted on a policy of hard opposition to *any* capitalist government, however “progressive.” This position, which was the political basis for the victorious workers' revolution in October 1917, was regarded as sectarian lunacy by representatives of every shade of opportunism within the Russian socialist movement, all of whom had a strategy, like that of the CMI today, that amounted to pressuring the “left” capitalist government and waiting for the “revolutionary dynamic” to unfold.

The CMI views Chávez as an initiator of revolutionary change whose bold actions have thrown the working class into motion. According to Woods, as soon as “the working class enters the arena of struggle, it acquires a dynamic and a movement of its own” (Marxist.com, 21 January 2005). In pinning their hopes on Chávez as the embodiment of an inevitable historical process, the CMI renounces any responsibility for combating the petty-bourgeois illusions spread by the *chavistas* within the working class:

“Chavez and his supporters are leaning on the support of the masses to strike blows against the oligarchy and imperialism. They did not originally have a socialist perspective, but only the notion of clearing out corruption and modernising Venezuela. They wanted a fairer, more just and equal society, but imagined that this was possible without breaking the bounds of capitalism. But this immediately brought them into conflict with the bourgeoisie and imperialism. The masses took to the streets and imparted an entirely different dynamic to the process. The mass movement has provided a stimulus to



**Two amigos: Castro & Chávez**

Chavez and in turn he has encouraged the movement in a revolutionary direction."

—Alan Woods, Marxist.com, 20 May 2004

The Venezuelan president has taken note of his CMI courtiers, and even invited a couple of them to appear on "Aló Presidente," his weekly television program. The CMI proudly reported that Woods and another CMI comrade "were placed in the front row, in a prominent position immediately opposite the President" and that "In the course of the programme, Hugo Chavez mentioned Alan at least three times" (Marxist.com, 19 April 2004).

Of course it is nice to get airtime, but V.I. Lenin took a dim view of the pseudo-sophisticates in the Second International who spent their time hobnobbing with cabinet ministers and other bourgeois notables while teaching the workers to patiently wait for the inexorable workings of a quasi-automatic historical process to deliver socialism. Woods' assurances to his followers that, "sooner or later the masses will become conscious of the real meaning of their actions" (Marxist.com, 21 January 2005) are not worth a great deal. What purpose does a socialist organization serve if not to make the masses politically conscious? The job of revolutionaries is to assist the workers to understand social reality and to act in their own interests—as a "class for itself"—rather than remain a "class in itself" befuddled by bourgeois ideology.

### **Revolution or Counterrevolution?**

The poor and working people of Venezuela have repeatedly demonstrated their willingness to do whatever is necessary to lift themselves out of the poverty and desperation to which capitalism has consigned them. The task of Marxists is to win the more politically advanced elements to understand the necessity of expropriating the capitalists as a class and beginning the reconstruction of society on a socialist basis. A necessary first step on this road is the repudiation of any notion of reconciliation or strategic compromise with the exploiters.

Things are not going to stand still in Venezuela. There will be no slow and steady drift to socialism. The imperialist colossus has burned its fingers badly in Iraq and is

loathe to undertake any new large-scale military adventures in Latin America. Its Colombian proxies seem, for the moment, to have their hands full. And the Venezuelan right wing, having lost three consecutive rounds to the Bolivarians, are regrouping and licking their wounds. But the bourgeoisie retains control of all the essential levers of the economy, as well as the media, and it is only a matter of time before it once again goes on the offensive.

To counter the threat of a Pinochet- or Franco-style rightist coup, Venezuelan workers need to organize themselves through a network of elected representatives from every factory, refinery, mine and other workplace. A nationally coordinated system of workers' councils would provide a mechanism for exerting control over the production and distribution of the necessities of life, for mobilizing the most oppressed layers of society, and for effectively countering any attempts by the capitalists and their thugs to reassert their prerogatives through brutal repression.

What is necessary in Venezuela today is a political leadership within the workers' movement that is committed to the struggle for power—a Leninist vanguard party rooted in the proletariat, capable of polarizing the Bolivarian movement into its class components and thus preparing the working class for the inevitable showdown with the bourgeoisie. Some leftists hope that the Chávez government will follow the path of Fidel Castro's July 26<sup>th</sup> Movement, which began as a radical liberal formation but, after leading a struggle which smashed the existing capitalist state, ended up expropriating the bourgeoisie and creating a centralized command economy. The creation of a deformed workers' state 90 miles off the coast of Florida, was a product of the unrelenting and inflexible hostility of both the Cuban capitalists and their imperial patron, but it was only possible because of the existence of the degenerated Soviet workers' state as a global counterweight to imperialism.

The situation in Caracas in 2006 is entirely different than that in Havana in 1960—the Soviet Union no longer exists, and the Venezuelan state remains intact. Chávez has purged some elements that are particularly hostile to his regime, but he has not, and will not, touch the essential core of the bourgeois state. The "Bolivarian" experiment can only be a temporary interlude. There are but two roads in Venezuela today—either the working class will go forward to expropriate the bourgeoisie (thus liquidating it as a class) or the capitalists will crush the proletariat. There is no middle option, no "third way." There will be no relief from the pain and suffering of the masses of Latin America so long as the means of production remain in the hands of a tiny minority, as Leon Trotsky, the great Russian revolutionary, observed more than 70 years ago:

"South and Central America will be able to tear themselves out of backwardness and enslavement only by uniting all their states into one powerful federation. But it is not the belated South American bourgeoisie, a thoroughly venal agency of foreign imperialism, who will be called upon to solve this task, but the young South American proletariat, the chosen leader of the oppressed masses. The slogan in the struggle against violence and intrigues of world imperialism and against the bloody work of native comprador cliques is therefore: the *Soviet United States of South and Central America.*"

—"War and the Fourth International," June 1934



# On the 2004 Venezuelan Referendum

## Principles & Tactics

*The following is an edited version of a document adopted at the Fourth International Conference of the IBT.*

Given a choice, Marxists would generally vote "yes" to removing a bourgeois government. But in the case of Venezuela today, the role of U.S. imperialism somewhat complicates the equation. There have been analogous situations in the past, when revolutionaries have not been eager to see similar attempts succeed, notably the Nazi-initiated "Red Referendum" against the Social Democratic government of Prussia, which was defeated when the combined efforts of the Stalinists and Nazis failed to obtain the support of the majority of the electorate. In his 25 August 1931 article on the Red Referendum, Trotsky commented:

"We have not the slightest ground for supporting Braun's government, for taking even a shadow of responsibility for it before the masses, or even for weakening by one iota our political struggle against the government of Bruening and its Prussian agency. But we have still less ground for helping the fascists to replace the government of Bruening-Braun.

"To come out into the streets with the slogan 'Down with the Bruening-Braun government' at a time when, according to the relationship of forces, it can only be replaced by a government of Hitler-Hugenberg, is the sheerest adventurism. The same slogan, however, assumes an altogether different meaning if it becomes an introduction to the direct struggle of the proletariat itself for power."

We would never vote confidence in a bourgeois government, but in some situations the best course is not to participate in an attempt to bring one down, and the 2004 referendum in Venezuela is just such a case.

Marxists absolutely reject the reformist logic of supporting "lesser evil" bourgeois politicians on the grounds that their opponents are even worse. In the second round of the 2002 French presidential election, when the choice was between Chirac, a right-wing bourgeois, and Le Pen, a fascist, we condemned the Pabloites and other supposed revolutionaries who voted "against Le Pen," i.e., for Chirac, while claiming that by doing so they were defending bourgeois democracy against fascism.

The 2004 recall campaign in Venezuela is certainly an example of "democratic," low-intensity imperialist meddling in neo-colonies. Though the Venezuelan referendum was not directly organized by the U.S., the imperialists certainly supported those behind it. Some leftists argue that it was necessary to vote against removing Chávez because of the reactionary character of his opponents. But a "no" vote on the question of holding a new presidential election amounts to support for the existing bourgeois government.

There is no question that a victory by the right could have set the stage for "legalizing" wholesale attacks on working people. The defeat of the "yes" campaign led to splits and recriminations among the domestic reactionaries and their imperial sponsors. It also undoubtedly ener-

gized Chávez's plebeian base, much like electoral victories of popular fronts have in the past (e.g., France 1936, Chile 1971). Workers who confidently expect "their" government to defend their interests will initially tend to be hostile to those who make leftist criticisms. But over time, as the reality becomes clear, these attitudes can change.

Ideally, there would have been a way to vote against the imperialist-backed right wingers without politically supporting Chávez, but the format of the referendum made this impossible, just as it was impossible to simply vote "against" Le Pen in the second round of the 2002 French election. The Venezuelan referendum was not an extra-legal assault by the right, but rather a parliamentary maneuver sanctioned by the "Bolivarian" constitution. This makes it rather different than the coups that deposed Chile's Allende in 1973 or Haiti's Aristide in 2004. Chávez accepted the challenge because he estimated, correctly, that he had enough popular support to win.

Venezuela today is a sharply polarized society in which armed conflict is a real possibility. While we give no support to Chávez's muddled left-bonapartist/reformist program, we would certainly bloc with him militarily against any coup attempts, just as the Bolsheviks did with Kerensky's Provisional Government in 1917.

A parallel can be drawn between the Venezuelan referendum and the elections organized in Nicaragua by the Sandinistas under pressure from imperialism. In that case we did not vote for the Sandanista National Liberation Front (FSLN), even though we had earlier supported it militarily against the contras and their bourgeois backers. We took the same attitude in South Africa and El Salvador when the African National Congress (ANC) and Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN) made the transition from resistance fighters to nationalist/leftist popular-front electoralists.

Clearly Chávez's supporters, unlike most of the opposition, are people we would like to win over. Those who have put their faith in Chávez would certainly look askance at any group refusing to participate in the "no" campaign, but they would also expect all genuine anti-imperialists to vote for the Bolivarian slate in an election. Leftists who voted "no" to allowing Chávez's opponents the chance to shorten his term, and then refused to vote "yes" to allowing him to complete it, would tie themselves in knots trying to explain such a contradictory position.

In approaching the referendum, Venezuelan Trotskyists would begin with the perspective of helping the working class assert its own independent political interests. Their propaganda would stress the fact that the stranglehold of U.S. imperialism and its Latin American bourgeois vassals can only be broken by the wholesale expropriation of domestic and foreign capital. Like Egypt's Nasser, Chile's Allende and other purveyors of radical-egalitarian "third way" fantasies, Chávez is opposed to such a course. While stressing their willingness to militarily defend his government against attacks by reactionaries, Venezuelan

Bolshevik-Leninists would try to win the more leftist elements among the *chavistas* to the understanding that the enemies of the oppressed can only be decisively defeated by replacing the existing state with organs of workers' rule.

In the case of extra-legal attempts by reactionaries to seize power (e.g., Kornilov in 1917, Franco in 1936 or the 2002 coup against Chávez), Marxists militarily defend the "legal" bourgeois government. But this is a very different situation than when rightists use constitutional, parliamentary channels—in such cases, electoral "blocs" amount to political support.

Something was posed in the Venezuelan referendum that was a lot more significant than a routine bourgeois election, and everyone knew it. If a similar plebiscite were to take place in Brazil, where the bourgeoisie has felt no need to resort to a coup to secure its control, the imperialist big brothers would not likely take any particular interest. They are happy enough with Lula. For the Venezuelan opposition, this parliamentary maneuver was a matter of tactical expediency, as they had already tried and failed to achieve their goals through a coup and a paralyzing national lockout.

A revolutionary organization with a following large enough to have been a real factor in the outcome could have responded to increased rightist activity with a cam-

paigned for the creation of "committees of action" along the lines of those proposed by Trotsky after the victory of the popular front in France in 1936. Revolutionaries would warn that, as the examples of Guatemala in 1954 and Chile in 1973 demonstrate, workers' cannot protect themselves through the ballot box. Proletarian defense guards are the only effective means to deal with the threat of violent rightist thugs, and their creation also raises the self-confidence and fighting spirit of the working class.

As Marxists, we recognize that extra-parliamentary actors sometimes assume parliamentary guises. In some situations, a constitutionally proper procedure can provide a cover for a profoundly anti-democratic development, e.g., Hitler's ascension to the German chancellorship in 1933. But in such circumstances, almost by definition, there is no viable electoral response. While we would never vote for a Christian Democrat or Gaullist to keep a Nazi out of office, we would certainly favour vigorous mass action to negate a fascist electoral victory. We do not want Le Pen as president of France, but we are not prepared to vote for Chirac—not only out of principle, but also because we recognize that if society is that close to a National Front takeover, the idea of electoral resistance can only be a debilitating illusion. In such situations, or in the case of another attempted rightist coup in Venezuela, the urgent duty of revolutionaries is to mobilize the working class for battle. ■

## For the Separation of Religion & State! Socialists & Sharia Courts

In September 2005, the Liberal government of Ontario, Canada's most populous province, ended months of speculation by announcing that it would not extend the 1991 Arbitration Act (which gave Christian and Jewish clerics the right to make legally-binding rulings on civil disputes normally handled in family court) to include Islamic tribunals. Instead, the government decided to end *all* religious arbitration. The Liberals' move came after public pressure was generated by a campaign that was spearheaded by supporters of the Worker-communist Party of Iran and heavily supported by bourgeois feminists and various other secular organizations.

While most of the left welcomed the decision as a reaffirmation of the democratic principle of the separation of religion and state, the International Socialists (IS—an affiliate of Britain's Socialist Workers Party) opposed it, presumably to ingratiate themselves with Canada's oppressed Muslim minority. In the months that followed, the IS held several public meetings on the topic in Toronto, where they proudly reported having sold their paper in front of a local mosque. IS coverage of the issue has pointed to the supposedly progressive elements of *sharia* (Islamic) law:

"All religions are contradictory. Why aren't the opponents of the use of the arbitration act highlighting those aspects of Islamic law which say it is the man's

responsibility to share in the cleaning and cooking, that gives women, along with men, the right to divorce, that mandates child-support from the estranged husband?"

—*Socialist Worker* (Canada), 8 October 2005

IS members have had difficulty explaining why socialists should favor the integration of clerical and state authority. When pressed, they claim that opposing religious courts can foster Islamophobia:

"In France, the government banned Muslim girls from attending school if they wore the hijab, and widespread support for this law is similar to what we now see over Sharia. Abstract calls for secularism mask the undertones of racism and sexism that see Islam as uniquely reactionary, or Muslim women as uniquely passive victims in need of imposed liberation."

—*Socialist Worker*, 8 June 2005

Marxists oppose the headscarf ban as a racist attack on the religious freedom of a persecuted minority (see "No to the Hijab Ban!", 1917 No. 27). But investing clerics with the authority of the state is not a matter of freedom of conscience—it is an assault on one of the key gains of bourgeois democracy. Those who are unable (or unwilling) to make this elementary distinction have no right to claim to be any sort of socialist.

# SWP's Respect Gambit

## Cliffites, Clerics & Class Collaboration

In October 2003, a middle-of-the-road social democrat, George Galloway, was kicked out of the Labour Party for his forthright opposition to Tony Blair's participation in the criminal invasion and occupation of Iraq. A year and a half later, in the May 2005 British general election, Galloway had his revenge when he defeated Oona King, a prominent Blairite, in the traditionally Labour Bethnal Green and Bow constituency. Fresh from this triumph, Galloway made another splash a few weeks later when he easily bested a gaggle of Republican bullies in a U.S. Senate hearing where he was defending himself against charges of profiteering from Iraqi oil dealings.

Galloway won his seat as the candidate of "Respect," a lash-up between Britain's largest ostensibly Marxist organization, the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) and important elements of Britain's Muslim minority, supported to some degree by most of the "far left." While Respect candidates polled well in several other constituencies in London and Birmingham with large Muslim minorities, the coalition (and by default its animators in the SWP) is little more than a vehicle for Galloway's political views and relentless self-promotion.

Respect was designed from the outset as a cross-class political formation, something the British comrades of the IBT noted in a January 2004 statement entitled "RESPECT-able Reformism and Cross-class 'Unity'." Aside from Galloway's surprise win, Respect remains on the margins of mainstream British politics. Yet the prospect of trading its overtly socialist identification for future electoral success is exerting a significant, and malign, influence on the SWP—and through it, much of Britain's ostensibly revolutionary left.

### Respect's Election Campaign

Respect's manifesto for the 2005 general election contained a list of standard left-Labourite proposals for the reform of British capitalism. Notably absent however was any mention of a woman's right to free abortion on demand. This omission presumably stems from George Galloway and the Muslim Association of Britain's flat opposition to abortion, and from the SWP's anxiety not to offend its bloc partners. Unlike the SWP, Galloway has made no attempt to duck the issue, and, a few weeks before the election, he made his position clear:

"I'm strongly against abortion. I believe life begins at conception, and therefore unborn babies have rights. I think abortion is immoral. You can't be pro-choice? 'Who is choosing for the child?'"

"...I can't accept that, because I believe in God. I have to believe that the collection of cells has a soul."

—*Independent on Sunday*, 5 April 2004

Similarly, while Respect's manifesto champions the rights of asylum seekers, it fails to categorically oppose



REUTERS

Galloway at multi-faith prayer vigil

Britain's racist immigration controls. Galloway has argued: "we should publish an economic-social-demographic plan for population growth based on a points system and our own needs." He reassured voters that among his Respect supporters, "no-one serious is advocating the scrapping of immigration controls" (*Morning Star*, 12 February 2005).

In the June 2005 issue of the SWP's *Socialist Review*, the editor, Lindsay German, contrasted Respect's electoral success to that of its leftist competitors:

"The left vote outside Respect was almost universally small, showing a lack of engagement with the movement which characterises some of the old left. Even long established groups like the Socialist Party failed to benefit from the anti-war mood, and the results for the Scottish Socialist Party were poor for a party with six MSPs and with a much longer history than Respect."

German offered the following explanation for Respect's results:

"Respect scored the successes where it did because it was able to tap into a new thirst for politics and a new commitment to work together from groups who had not done so previously. During the election campaign in Newham we saw the beginning of a new politics which holds out exciting challenges for the left if only we can generalise it. Respect was able to group together many activists and supporters from across the board. Our candidate Abdul Khaliq Mian who stood in East Ham was from the Muslim Alliance, which organised among

the Muslim community and was very important in helping to deliver this vote."

Respect candidates certainly ranged "across the board." Abdul Khaliq Mian, one of four candidates highlighted on the front of Respect's election manifesto, acts as a spokesperson for the £300 million London Markaz super-Mosque project. While undoubtedly helping to deliver the Muslim vote, Mian rejected the suggestion that Respect was any sort of radical leftist formation:

"I don't think of it as a radical party'... 'We're a democratic party, so we attract all kinds of people from any party.'"

—Red Pepper, April 2005

This is more or less how George Galloway envisioned it a few months prior to Respect's official launch:

"The first level requires steps towards a mass unifying movement of grassroots radicals to hobble the State, bring it under popular control and complete an unfinished radical democratic revolution. This level will unite Muslims, Christians and Jews, socialists, liberal and conservatives, men, women and the disadvantaged of all types in one movement of democratic liberation."

—quoted on *Aljazeera* website, 30 October 2003

Respect's Founding Declaration put it like this:

"But the yearning for a political alternative is even wider than the anti-war movement. Pensioners, students, trade unionists, Muslims and other faith groups, socialists, ethnic minorities and many others have been deeply disappointed by the authoritarian social policies and profit-centred, neo-liberal economic strategy of the government.

"There is a crisis of representation, a democratic deficit, at the heart of politics in Britain. We aim to offer a solution to this crisis."

Respect is quite explicitly a cross-class alliance of all those who want to redress the "democratic deficit" in the bourgeois parliamentary system.

There is nothing particularly new about supposed socialists proposing to tie the workers and oppressed to the "progressive" or "democratic" section of the capitalists. In the 1930s, the Communist International under Stalin adopted just such a strategy under the formula of the "Popular Front." In that case it was argued that, for an indeterminate period of time, it would be necessary for socialists to defend "democracy" from fascism by supporting the "progressive" wing of the exploiters against the ultra-right. At some point in the hazy future, once democracy was secure, it would again be appropriate to pursue the class struggle. But for the interim, class collaboration was on the agenda, according to the theorists of popular frontism.

The concrete implications of the strategy of class collaboration became clear in Spain in 1936, when virtually the entire capitalist class supported a rightist coup against the elected popular-front government. The Stalinist Communist Party, with the reformist Socialists, worked overtime to persuade the workers that any attempt to carry out a socialist revolution would alienate their hypothetical "anti-fascist" bourgeois bloc partners. The result of this treachery was the triumph of reaction and the crushing of the left and workers' movement. Class divisions lie at the core of capitalist society and anyone who is serious about

struggling for a more egalitarian world must begin by recognizing this fundamental fact.

The SWP leadership insists that Respect represents something "new" in politics. In fact Respect is just a new label for a class-collaborationist strategy that is as old as the socialist movement itself. The nature of the whole project was highlighted by Respect's 6 August 2005 comment on the passing of Robin Cook, Blair's former Foreign Secretary, who it hailed as one of the "powerful and principled advocates of peace" who committed "himself to an 'ethical foreign policy'." While it is true that Cook dis-sented, for tactical reasons, on the 2003 U.S.-led crusade against Iraq, he took the lead in British imperialism's participation in the equally criminal assault on Yugoslavia in 1999. Some "ethics"!

## Respect & the British Left

Most of the British left has raised criticisms of one sort or another of the Respect gambit. Peter Taaffe's Socialist Party (leading section of the Committee for a Workers' International) refused to join Respect, choosing instead to run its own candidates. And yet the Socialist Party leaders have no principled differences with the SWP's class-collaborationist project and were clearly impressed by Galloway's electoral victory:

"The Socialist Party welcomes this victory and called for a vote for Respect—a party that stands to the left of the big three—and that demands bringing the privatised utilities back into public ownership, an £8 an hour minimum wage, and the ending of occupation of Iraq.

"However, we would have preferred Respect to have been launched as a more inclusive and democratic party that aimed to build a base amongst all sections of the working class."

—*The Socialist*, 6-11 May 2005

In other words, they are not currently inclined to participate actively in an electoral vehicle controlled by a larger rival, but if Respect becomes popular enough they will swallow their pride and try to find a seat on the bandwagon.

The Communist Party of Great Britain's (CPGB) position on Respect has undergone a limited evolution. Initially pledging that "the CPGB will work to ensure the biggest possible vote for Respect" (*Weekly Worker* [WW] No. 521, 25 March 2004), a year later, with the election campaign underway, this was changed to a call for votes to "working class anti-war candidates" (WW No. 569, 24 March 2005)—by which they meant SWP members or other leftists running on the Respect ticket.

The International Bolshevik Tendency took a very different approach, arguing that revolutionaries can only give electoral support to workers' candidates who run independently of all sections of the capitalist class—not in alliance with its more "progressive" elements. A prerequisite for Marxists when considering critical support to any self-proclaimed socialist candidates would be that they break decisively from Respect's class collaborationism.

The CPGB debated this issue with us in their paper. In the course of the debate, the CPGB took its position to its logical conclusion by asserting that voting for openly bourgeois parties, such as the Liberal Democrats, could sometimes be a valid "tactic" for Marxists. (See our pamphlet

"Marxism vs. Popular Frontism: Why not voting Liberal Democrat is a principle not a tactic," which reprints the relevant documents from both sides.)

Workers Power (leading section of the League for the Fifth International) joined us in opposing votes to Respect on the basis of its cross-class character:

"The problem with Respect is its class character. It is not a working class party, despite the fact that George Galloway was a long-time Labour MP and the organizational core of Respect is the membership of Socialist Workers Party. Its whole political programme and campaign was trimmed to win cross-class support, particularly to build a coalition of working class and petit-bourgeois people primarily within the Muslim community mobilized by the more socially radical mosques and the Muslim Association of Britain (MAB)."

—Workers Power statement 10 May 2005

At bottom, however, Workers Power's position is, like the CPGB's, not based on Leninist principle, but opportunist tactical calculations. Workers Power has long taken the position that they will vote for class-collaborationist formations that are sufficiently popular. This was spelled out in a 1987 letter to us:

"Both Trotsky and Lenin made clear that the sole purpose of revolutionaries calling for a vote for reformists was that if they have the support of the masses then they have to be put to the test of office. This tactic can be applied whether or not the reformist party is in an open (popular front) or concealed (social democratic government) bloc with the bourgeoisie. The decisive criteria is that party's relationship to the masses."

We replied:

"If the reformists break with the popular front, and thereby destroy it as a 'joint party,' then, and *only* then, can revolutionaries consider a tactic of critical support. This is the whole significance of Lenin's insistence

that the Mensheviks and SRs break with the capitalist ministers in Kerensky's Provisional Government in 1917 as a *precondition* for any critical support from the Bolsheviks."

—reprinted in *Trotskyist Bulletin* No. 3, "In Defense of the Trotskyist Program"

While tut-tutting about the SWP's role in setting out to build Respect as a cross-class political bloc, Workers Power eagerly participated in the SWP's "Stop the War Coalition," (StWC) which was organized on the same basis—i.e., as a popular-frontist formation with a program limited to bourgeois pacifism that offered its partners an implicit guarantee that no advocates of class-war politics would be permitted on the platform at StWC events. Workers Power was allowed a seat on the StWC steering committee where it provided a left cover for the SWP's class-collaborationist anti-war project (see "Fifth Wheel Internationalists," 1917 No. 26). Respect is, in essence, an attempt by the SWP to turn the StWC into an electoral combination.

For revisionists like the CPGB and Workers Power, class collaborationism is not a question of quality (i.e., principle) but of quantity (i.e., how popular a given "popular front" actually is). While quite prepared to lecture on the evils of cross-class formations in the abstract, they treat the question of the political independence of the working class as a tactical matter. If enough people are voting for a multi-class bloc, then they will too (while making a few face-saving criticisms).

For Bolsheviks the popular front poses an issue that is fundamental to Marxism—the necessity for working people to organize themselves independently of the bosses. Those leftists who support Respect, however "critically," endorse the principle of cross-class political formations. The task of revolutionaries is to seek to split such lash-ups into their fundamental (i.e., class) components, not to provide a left cover for a policy of subordinating the interests of the exploited to those of their exploiters. ■

## Workers Power's Labourite Reflex

# What's Bred in the Bone

An IBT statement distributed in advance of the 5 May 2005 general election in Britain contained the following polemic:

Workers Power, which had participated in the Socialist Alliance, drew the line at Respect, describing it as a "non-class populist" formation not worth voting for. And, after years of electoral support to Labour, the April 2005 issue of Workers Power finally declared: "No vote for Labour!" "Build a new workers party." They tried to explain this shift as follows:

"In previous elections, we have called on workers and activists to vote for Labour—not because we believed they would implement socialist measures, but to put them to the test of office and, in so doing, break people's illusions in them. They have been tested and, in the eyes of millions, found wanting.

"To repeat such a call, after eight years of hard Labour,

would not facilitate—but present an obstacle to—revolutionary agitation and propaganda for a new workers party."

What Workers Power cannot explain is why this was not true in 2001 after four "years of hard Labour" or, indeed, last year when they were still supporting Labour in the local elections: "Here by actually voting Labour we can keep piling pressure on the Labour Party, keeping them exposed to the scrutiny of office and raising demands on them to act in working class interests by blocking local cuts and privatisation." This appeal appeared in small print in the same edition in which these confusionists were loudly opposing Labour in the simultaneous EU elections: "Let's use the Euro elections to bring down Blair. Don't vote Labour—write Troops Out Of Iraq on your ballot paper" (*Workers Power*, June 2004).

Who knows what might be hidden in the small print of this new position? What is the meaning of the statement "we should support genuine candidates of struggle, who are standing on a ticket of combating Labour's policies and are pledged to continue fighting the next Labour government" (*Workers Power*, April [2005])? Do these unnamed "genuine candidates of struggle" perhaps include the Labour left MPs?

*Workers Power* chose to ignore these uncomfortable questions, and did not respond to a follow-up letter we sent on 12 July 2005:

Dear comrades,

While you correctly called for no vote to the Labour Party in the general election (as we also did), it appears that, as we speculated, the unspecified "genuine candidates of struggle" you offered to support include the tame Labour lefts (see [www.bolshevik.org](http://www.bolshevik.org)).

In the article "Now fight for a new working class party!" (*Workers Power* No. 296 [May 2005]) you observe that: "The Labour Party cannot be captured by the left and transformed into the socialist party for the working class." This seems rather obvious in light of the Labour government's ruthless attacks on workers, immigrants, youth and other oppressed groups. Certainly the ruling class is well pleased with the advancing privatisation of the NHS and schools, the onslaught on pensions, and the plans to eliminate 100,000 public sector jobs.

In refusing electoral support to any candidates on Blair's slate, we called on those who identify with the cause of the exploited and oppressed to break from Labour because, as you noted in *Workers Power* No. 290 [October 2004], "The chances of it becoming even a crude and inadequate vehicle for working class advance are nil." Yet now you are advising the "left" Labour MPs in the LRC [Labour Representation Committee] and the Campaign Group to remain in the party and put on a show of opposing Blair and Brown's neo-liberalism:

"We call on [the Labour left]—and those trade unions still affiliated to the party—to challenge Blair, campaigning for an end to the war, troops out of Iraq now, an end to privatisation and a defence of civil liberties and the rights of refugees. This is what should be discussed at the forthcoming conference called by the Campaign Group of Labour MPs and the Labour Representation Committee on 16 July.

"But rallying the left within the Labour Party is only part of the story. It will be useful if it weakens Blair and breaks the unity of his party around right-wing policies. But it cannot succeed in capturing Labour as a whole."

—*Workers Power* No. 296

Why should the self-professed Marxists of *Workers Power* be promoting the idea that manoeuvres within the Labour Party can somehow advance the interests of the oppressed? The job of revolutionaries is surely to try to use the government's open attacks on working people and its brutal, predatory foreign policy to destroy any remaining illusions in Labourism. To do this it is necessary to expose the role of the Labour "lefts" whose pretence of opposition to the anti-working class initiatives of the leadership have historically served to neutralise any serious political challenge to the stranglehold of social-democratic reformism on the British workers' movement.

In an earlier issue of *Workers Power* you asserted:

"But there is another way forward. The LRC could launch a real fight for radical demands—against privatisations, for the re-nationalisation of the railways, airports etc, for the immediate withdrawal from Iraq, the ending of tuition fees and the restoring of grants—just for starters."

—*Workers Power* No. 287, June 2004

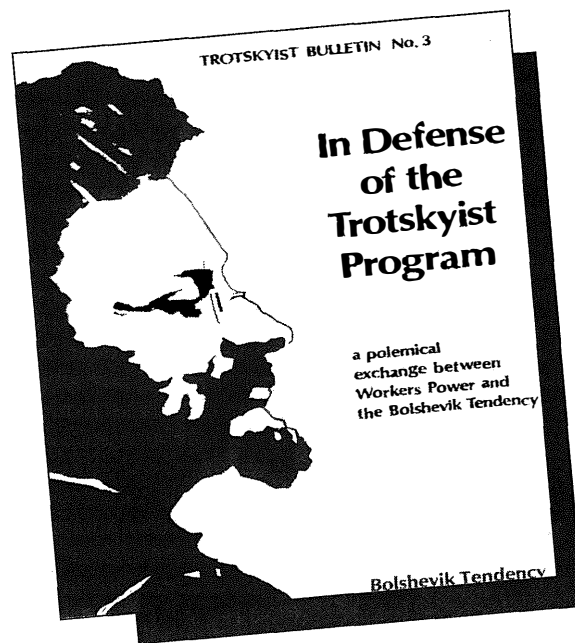
What purpose does it serve to promote the notion that these timid parliamentary cretins can be pushed into carrying out a "real fight" against the capitalists? While you shrink from telling the simple truth about the "lefts" and their role in holding Labour's base together, you are also busy calling on the trade-union bureaucrats, Respect and unspecified "progressive campaigns" to sponsor a conference to discuss preparations for a new workers' party. A left split from Labour would be a potentially very important development, but the creation of a new reformist political party can only lead to another dead end. Revolutionaries do not call on the trade-union misleaders (much less cross-class, popular-frontist formations like Respect) to build a new socialist party. That requires winning the more advanced elements of the workers' movement to understand the necessity for a decisive political break from class-collaborationism and Labourism. As we see it, the job of revolutionaries is to tell the workers the truth and help shatter illusions, not promote them.

Comradely,

David Watts

for the International Bolshevik Tendency

## Polemics with Workers Power



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# IBT's Fourth International Conference

## Swimming Against the Stream

The fourth international conference of the International Bolshevik Tendency (IBT) was held in Western Europe in March 2005. It featured a number of wide-ranging discussions and debates on program, perspectives and organizational priorities, and concluded with the election of a new international leadership. An extensive series of educational sessions on some key historical experiences of the Marxist movement in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century ran concurrently with the conference.

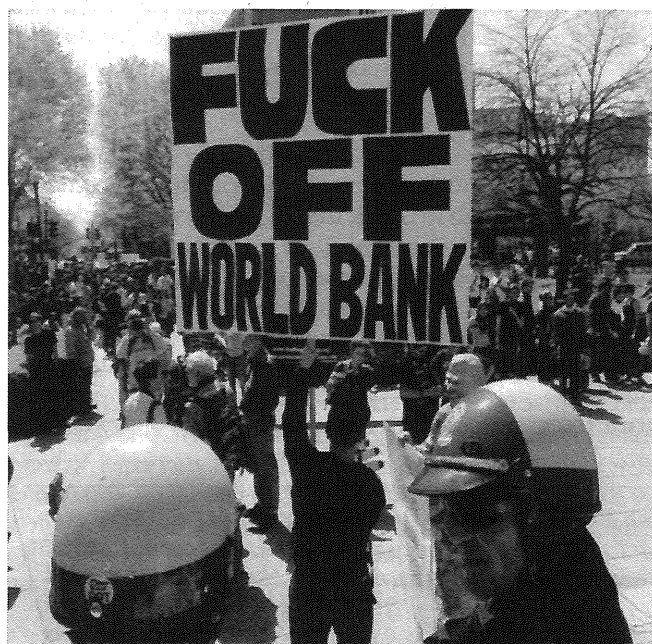
The discussions were framed by a sober recognition of the current problems of the international workers' movement on the one hand, and an appreciation of the enormous potential for massive class struggle on the other. Our failure to make significant breakthroughs in the recent past has not shaken our commitment to maintaining a hard communist organization with an undiluted Trotskyist program. The Tasks and Perspectives document adopted by the conference opened with the following observation:

"At our fourth conference the IBT will remain what we have always been—not merely a splinter, but a splinter of a splinter. We are not appreciably closer to the realization of our objectives than we were at the last conference. Our chief accomplishment during the past few years has been to have maintained the existence of authentic Trotskyism in the world.

"While we are no closer to constituting a stable propaganda group, we have consistently demonstrated the political capacity to correctly assess the fundamental problems confronting the international workers' movement and, given our extremely modest resources, to intervene intelligently in the politics of the international far left. Our status has improved marginally relative to our chief opponents, if only because they have, in various ways, regressed while we have more or less managed to stand fast."

The document noted that the current period has been shaped by the 1989-91 counterrevolutions in the former Soviet bloc—"defeats for the proletariat perhaps more significant than the fall of the Paris Commune 120 years earlier." There has been a catastrophic fall in living standards in the former workers' states while in the "developed" countries (where we are still primarily located), the level of class struggle has declined, trade unions have shrunk, and there has been a general shift to the right across the political spectrum—from mainstream bourgeois parties to the social democracy (including the remnants of Stalinism) and the "far left."

The conference document noted that, among many young people in the imperialist countries, there is a "widespread and growing popular perception that capitalism is a manifestly irrational, profoundly unjust and perhaps unsustainable social system." At the same time, there is little evidence of serious attempts to organize and act on this sentiment. Rebellious youth we encounter today are far more likely to subscribe to some inchoate mix of anar-



PAUL J. RICHARDS—AFP

### Anarcho-liberals protest World Bank

chist, reformist and liberal ideology than to the nominally socialist worldview that was typical a generation ago. In the U.S., the unprecedented outpouring of opposition to the attack on Iraq was absorbed rather easily into the electoral shell game via Howard Dean's faux anti-war candidacy, and then channelled into the Bush/Kerry contest over who could best implement Bush's policies.

### Our 'Trotskyist' Opponents

In this period, recruits to the IBT are likely to remain exceptional individuals who want to understand the fundamental motor forces determining global politics, and who are attracted by our consistently revolutionary program. While many preconditions exist for outbreaks of mass social struggle, the politics of the anti-globalization/anti-war protests remain essentially liberal. Left groups seeking to recruit from this milieu generally adapt to it politically by downplaying their ostensibly socialist ideology. The supposed atheists of the International Socialist Tendency are going further than most with their lowest-common-denominator attempts to ally themselves with mullahs and "faith communities."

The most spectacular rightward devolution among our immediate political opponents has been that of the British Workers Power group. After several decades spent claiming to be the first Trotskyists since Trotsky, these confusionists have now concluded that Karl Kautsky's notion of an all-inclusive "party of the whole class" is superior to the Leninist-Trotskyist concept of a revolutionary vanguard party (see "Fifth Wheel Internationalists," 1917 No. 26).

The Spartacist League/International Communist League

(SL/ICL) remains our most politically significant international opponent, despite its record of erratic programmatic zig-zags, the evident demoralization of its cadre and its unhealthy, introverted existence (see our pamphlet, "Whatever Happened to the Spartacist League?"). While the SL/ICL has of late experienced difficulty recruiting and politically developing new members, its Trotskyist veneer, and the capacity of what remains of its talented but aging cadre to still occasionally produce quality propaganda, allows it to attract some serious young would-be revolutionaries.

For many years the ICL leadership was extraordinarily vituperative toward us, but over the past few years they have attempted to find a programmatic difference which would allow them to attack the IBT from the political high ground of the Leninist-Trotskyist tradition they once represented. The polemical exchanges they have initiated on the national questions in Quebec, Tibet and Kurdistan have, in every case, resulted in political defeat for the ICL. Their attempt to brand us as anti-Kurd chauvinists turned out to be particularly painful. Our simple reminder of their founder/leader's documented record of gross chau-

vinism on this question touched off an internal tsunami in the ICL.

In recent years there has been a noticeable decline in both the political self-confidence of ICLers and the group's programmatic homogeneity. Failing to win the various political fights they picked with us, their members have taken to informally characterizing us as "sterile academics" and "pipe-smoking professors"—allegations similar to those made by the more sophisticated members of the Maoist Progressive Labor Party against the Spartacist League 35 years ago.

The Internationalist Group (IG), whose leadership, like our own, is largely composed of former Spartacists, occupies terrain between ourselves and the ICL on many questions. The IG has correctly criticized some recent ICL deviations, but still defends all the errors that were made prior to 1996 when they were kicked out. Our 2005 Tasks and Perspectives document noted that our most outstanding recent success in opponent work was recruiting the IG's one-man Dutch "group" (see "Dutch 'VVI' Joins IBT: From the IG to Trotskyism," 1917 No. 26). The IG leadership was acutely embarrassed by the exposure of the Potemkin village character of its "League for the Fourth International." The IG's refusal to make any serious attempt to account for its own political origins belies its claim to be building a Trotskyist cadre organization.

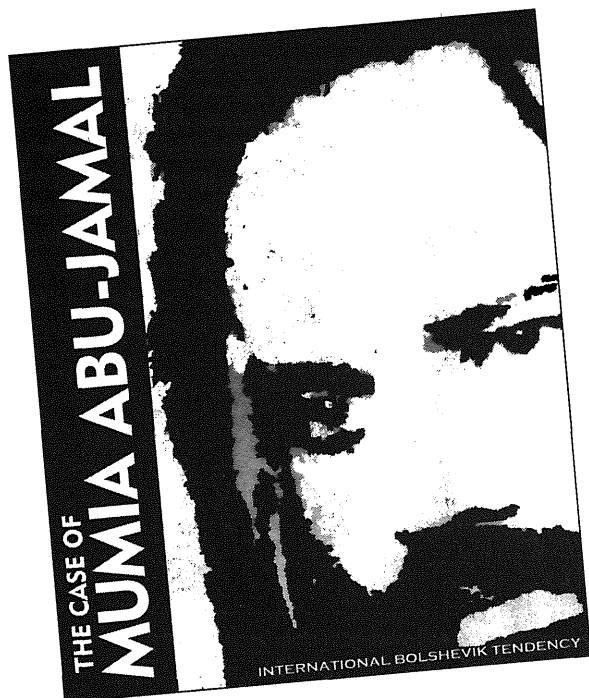
### Setbacks, Activities & Prospects

In reviewing our work since the previous conference, we began with lessons learned from our "fusion" with a group of Ukrainian con artists associated with Peter Taaffe's Committee for a Workers' International (see "CWI Leadership's Role in Ukrainian Fraud: No Innocent Explanation," 1917 No. 26). These skilled impostors fooled us, along with a number of other organizations. When we became aware of the hoax, we played a central role in exposing these petty thieves.

A less public, but more significant, setback was our failure to successfully regroup with a small circle of Argentine comrades who appeared to be rather close to us programmaticaly. This is partly attributable to language difficulties, but a more important factor was a gap in political culture manifested in differences over the tasks and priorities of a micro-propaganda group. In retrospect, we concluded: "Given our capacities and very limited resources there is not obviously a lot more we could have done to advance this collaboration, but it represents a lost opportunity."

The central strategic task of the IBT remains the development of a stable propaganda group capable of acting as a pole of revolutionary regroupment internationally. Much of our work, therefore, involves the production of highly polemical materials. Our activity in defense of Mumia Abu-Jamal has been something of an exception to this. Mumia's defense is an important focus for opposition to the racist death penalty in America and has been taken up by a wide variety of forces internationally. Our participation in the campaign has therefore brought us into contact with a broader political spectrum of groups and individuals and it has provided our comrades with some limited experience in exemplary united-front work. Our most important contribution has been the publication of a pamphlet documenting the history of Mumia's frame-up that has been well received.

***This 90-page pamphlet is the most comprehensive treatment of the evidence and legal/political issues in the case of Mumia Abu-Jamal. It is essential reading for those committed to the fight to free America's best-known political prisoner.***



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The main reporter on the IBT's Tasks and Perspectives document noted that our leadership core has been tested over an extended period of time, and has exhibited both a high degree of programmatic homogeneity and an ability to effectively collaborate. "And for the most part," the conference document noted, "their decisions have been widely approved by the membership of the organization." The passage of time and the aging of our leading cadre will mean that the leadership collective is likely to change considerably over the next period.

## Imperialism—Epoch of War & Revolution

One of the conference's themes was the considerable instability in the international political order today and the rising tide of inter-imperialist tensions, most dramatically the Franco-German opposition to the U.S. invasion of Iraq. At our second international conference in 1998, a few members broke with the IBT, claiming that inter-imperialist rivalries had been decisively subordinated to the "globalization" orchestrated by the World Trade Organization. Concluding that the Leninist-Trotskyist program was no longer applicable, these comrades accepted the bourgeoisie's triumphalist proclamations that many of the fundamental contradictions of imperialism had been resolved by global economic integration.

Our 2005 conference featured considerable discussion of the proposed European Union (EU) "constitution." In intra-bourgeois disputes over questions of the degree of integration between different imperialist economies (for example, the 1992 Maastricht Treaty in Europe), Marxists take a "plague on both your houses" position. In 1988, we supported neither free traders nor protectionists in the wrangle over the Canada-U.S. Free Trade Agreement (FTA). But when the FTA was extended to include Mexico in the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), the character of that trading bloc fundamentally changed from an arrangement between imperialists to an instrument for the imperialist domination of a neo-colony. We therefore changed our position from one of indifference to that of outright opposition. Similarly, when the West European powers sought to incorporate the former deformed workers' states of the Warsaw Pact, we changed our position on EU integration (see "Imperialist Expansionism & the EU" on page 3).

Conference participants also devoted attention to the dangers confronting Cuba, China, Vietnam and North Korea—the remaining deformed workers' states—and the implications of defending them against capitalist restoration. The counterrevolutionary processes underway in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union in the late 1980s and early 1990s contained many important lessons, and our discussion on this experience was enriched by the contributions of comrades who witnessed the destruction of the German Democratic Republic (DDR) and its assimilation by West Germany.

## Swimming Against the Stream

In assessing contemporary political questions, conference participants frequently looked to the experiences of our revolutionary predecessors. Throughout the conference, current problems were assessed in the light of lessons from the revolutionary past. For example, the dis-

ussion of Marxist tactics in the 2004 Venezuelan referendum, when imperialist-backed rightists attempted to recall Hugo Chávez, was illuminated by a comparison with the Bolshevik attitude toward Kerensky's Provisional Government in 1917 (see "On the 2004 Venezuelan Referendum: Principles & Tactics" on page 25).

The educationals held in conjunction with the conference focused on the early history of German communism, from the end of World War I to the abortive "German October" of 1923. "The struggle for Marxism," as one comrade observed, is largely "the struggle against pseudo-Marxism." The German experience demonstrated that it is not enough to recognize and polemicize against revisionism, as did Rosa Luxemburg, the leader of the left wing of the German Social Democratic Party (SPD). It is also necessary to give the political struggle for revolutionary consciousness organizational form, to embody it in a cadre formation that fights to win leadership of the workers' movement on the basis of the program of Marxism. Luxemburg had only begun to undertake this task when she was assassinated by right-wing thugs at the direction of the pro-imperialist traitors leading the SPD. The setbacks in Germany during the extraordinary 1918-23 period negatively confirmed the essential propositions of Leninism—particularly the need for a disciplined, revolutionary vanguard party to lead the working class to victory. The Russian workers triumphed because they had such an organization, while the far more powerful German proletariat was defeated for lack of one.

The political tradition in which we stand—that of Marx, Lenin, Trotsky and the Fourth International—represents an indispensable link between the barbaric present and the socialist future. But it is only possible to make significant progress toward this objective by forging a cadre organization larger than the IBT is today by several orders of magnitude.

The primary responsibility of revolutionaries in a non-revolutionary period is to defend the essential programmatic acquisitions of the past, to speak the truth to the masses, and thus to patiently prepare the groundwork for the successful revolutionary insurrections of the future. Life offers no guarantee of success for Marxist organizations or the individuals who comprise them. But one thing is certain—the working class can never triumph without a leadership that is able to swim against the stream:

"The working class, especially in Europe, is still in retreat, or at best, in a state of hesitation. Defeats are still too fresh, and their number far from exhausted....Such are the conditions in which the Fourth International is developing. Is it any wonder that its growth proceeds more slowly than we should like? Dilettantes, charlatans, or blockheads, incapable of probing into the dialectic of historic ebbs and flows, have more than once brought in their verdict: 'The ideas of the Bolshevik-Leninists may perhaps be correct but they are incapable of building a mass organization.' As if a mass organization can be built under any and all conditions! As if a revolutionary program does not render it obligatory for us to remain in the minority and swim against the stream in an epoch of reaction! The revolutionist who uses his own impatience as a measuring stick for the tempo of an epoch is worthless."

—Leon Trotsky, "A Great Achievement," 30 August 1938

# Defend Civil Liberties in Britain!

## 'The Rules of the Game are Changing...'



**Bombed bus in Tavistock Square**

On the morning of Thursday, 7 July 2005, as Tony Blair and his cronies prepared for their G8 summit in Scotland, 52 innocent civilians were murdered and hundreds others injured in an appalling terrorist attack on London's public transport system. This anti-working class act produced an immediate wave of xenophobic reaction toward Britain's Muslim minority and provided the reactionary Labour government with a cover for the introduction of a new round of police-state measures, all in the name of "security."

The connection between the terrorist attacks in London and British participation in the U.S.-led wars of conquest in Iraq and Afghanistan was immediately obvious to everyone. The Royal Institute of International Affairs commented that "riding pillion" with America into Iraq had "given a boost" to al-Qaeda in "propaganda, recruitment and fundraising." Even a "threat assessment" by the Joint Terrorism Analysis Centre concluded:

"the invasion of Iraq had created 'a motivation and a focus for a range of terrorist-related activity in the UK.' This was based on the pooled findings of the government's own intelligence agencies. They can hardly be damned as apologists for terrorism."

—*Observer* (London), 24 July 2005

But Tony Blair absurdly denies that there is any connection between his government's role in Washington's Middle East crusade and the fact that British cities are now producing "home grown" terrorists who are so incensed at the ravages in Iraq and Afghanistan that they are prepared to launch indiscriminate attacks on civilians in London.

Anger at the pillage of Iraq, and at the devastating effects of the imperialist invasion and occupation, is justified and predictable. But killing ordinary people on their way to work is criminal from the point of view of the working class, because it fails to distinguish between capitalist warmongers and innocent civilians, most of whom opposed the Bush/Blair adventure from the outset.

### New Labour Attacks Civil Liberties

Terrorist attacks tend to boost popular support for imperialist policy abroad and increased repression domestically. Less than a month after the bombings, Blair introduced a 12-point "anti-terror" plan, proudly exclaiming: "Let no one be in any doubt. The rules of the game are changing" (*Guardian* [London], 5 August 2005).

The "Terrorism Bill" tabled by Home Secretary Charles Clarke in October 2005 decreed that anyone who "publishes a statement or causes another to publish a statement" which "he knows or believes" some other person is "likely [to] understand...as a direct or indirect encouragement or other inducement to the commission, preparation or instigation of acts of terrorism" is committing an offense. The bill declares that it is irrelevant "whether any person is in fact encouraged or induced by the statement to commit, prepare or instigate any such act or offence." The "indirect encouragement" of terrorism is defined as any statement that "glorifies the commission or preparation (whether in the past, in the future or generally) of such acts or offences." Anybody convicted of making such remarks can be sent to prison for up to seven years.

Of course, the new law will not be applied to members of the fascist British National Party (BNP), which is organized for the purpose of carrying out racist violence. But it could conceivably be used against anyone making the simple observation that there is a direct connection between Britain's participation in the occupation of Iraq and the London terrorist bombings.

The original proposal to lengthen the period that "terrorist suspects" can be held without being charged to three months was subsequently reduced to 28 days. This still represents a significant attack on the right of *habeas corpus*, the bedrock of all civil liberties. Two Islamist organizations, Hizb-ut-Tahrir and al Muhajiroun, are to be banned, despite the fact that, unlike the BNP, there is no evidence that either has been connected to any violent activity. The Home Office has also announced that anyone with dual British citizenship will be deported if the government claims they have been involved in terrorism (*Times Online*, 12 October 2005). This is clearly aimed at Britain's Muslim minority, as are the Terrorism Bill's provisions granting "new police powers to close mosques and other places of worship being used for terrorist activity" (*Ibid.*).

The terror scare has led to a vast increase in the routine intimidation of immigrants and minorities:

"The use of counter-terrorism stop and search powers has increased sevenfold since the July 7 attacks on Britain, with Asian people bearing the brunt of the increase.... People of Asian appearance were five times more likely to be stopped and searched than white people, according to the latest figures compiled by British Transport police. None of the stops have resulted in a terrorism charge, the force said."

—*Guardian*, 17 August 2005

This is not the first time New Labour has attacked democratic rights. Section 44 of the Terrorism Act 2000 specified that police could "search for articles connected with terrorism but an officer does not need grounds to suspect the person is carrying such an article" (*Ibid.*). In other words, the cops are free to do whatever they want. Of the 732 people arrested under the Terrorism Act 2000 between September 2001 and April 2005, only 121 were ever charged, and a mere 21 were convicted of anything.

In September 2005 82-year old Walter Wolfgang—a Jewish escapee from the Nazis who opposes Blair's predatory war in Iraq—was physically ejected from the annual Labour Party conference for calling out "nonsense" during Jack Straw's speech. When he tried to reenter the meeting he was arrested under the Terrorism Act 2000. George Monbiot observed:

"Had Mr. Wolfgang said 'nonsense' twice during the foreign secretary's speech, the police could have charged him under the Protection from Harassment Act 1997. Harassment, the act says, 'must involve conduct on at least two occasions...conduct includes speech.' Parliament was told that its purpose was to protect women from stalkers, but the first people to be arrested were three peaceful protesters. Since then it has been used by the arms manufacturer EDO to keep demonstrators away from its factory gates, and by Kent police to arrest a woman who sent an executive at a drugs company two polite emails, begging him not to test his products on animals. In 2001 the peace campaigners Lindis Percy and Anni Rainbow were prosecuted for causing 'harassment, alarm or distress' to American servicemen at the Menwith Hill military intelligence base in Yorkshire, by standing at the gate holding the Stars and Stripes and a placard reading 'George W Bush? Oh dear!'. In Hull a protester was arrested under the act for 'staring at a building'."

—*Guardian*, 4 October 2005

The new bill gives the government the right to place both foreign and British nationals under house arrest. A June 2005 report by Alvaro Gil-Robles, the Council of Europe's Commissioner for Human Rights, expressed concern about the rigged judicial hearings which are supposed to review government "control orders":

"The procedures for such hearings foresee the use of secret evidence and closed hearings, to which a special advocate, appointed by the Attorney General to represent the interests of the suspected may have access, but following which he may no longer converse with control order's subject. Neither the suspect, nor his own appointed counsel have access to such *in camera* proceedings or to any secret material used in the course of the hearing. Non-derogating control orders are made for



SCOTT BARBOUR—GETTY IMAGES

### London cop in Muslim neighborhood

a twelve-month period and may be renewed indefinitely for further periods of twelve-months subject to the same conditions each time."

### Murder of Jean Charles de Menezes: State-Sanctioned Terror

The ugly reality of New Labour's "anti-terrorism" campaign was revealed by the execution of Jean Charles de Menezes, a Brazilian electrician, by a police death squad on 22 July 2005 in London's Stockwell tube station. The cops' assertions that he was linked to an Islamic terror cell were soon discredited, as were their claims that he had been wearing an unseasonably bulky jacket (which could have concealed a bomb), and that he had tried to escape when challenged.

After London police chief Ian Blair's clumsy attempt at a cover-up was exposed as a pack of lies, there were many calls for his resignation. But the Home Secretary applauded the police for their performance. London's mayor "Red Ken" Livingstone, who was backed by most of Britain's supposedly Marxist groups in his 2000 election campaign, offered Chief Blair his unconditional support in the wake of de Menezes' murder:

"There are few people I have had to deal with in 30 years in public life I trust as totally as I do him. He not only has my confidence, he is the best news that London policing has got."

Livingstone dismissed the execution with the comment that: "Mistakes like this happen when people are under incredible pressure" (*Evening Standard* [London], 24 August 2005). Under New Labour's "shoot-to-kill" policy, the cops' "belief that the public [are] at risk does not have to be reasonable, as long as it [is] honestly held" (*Guardian*, 25 July 2005).

The government has also been pushing for the introduction of a national ID card with biometric and other personal information. Some 70 offices have already been set up where citizens are supposed to pay £93 (roughly \$165) to purchase a card. Those who fail to register will be subject to a fine of £2,500. The new national database that



Stop the War Coalition demonstration, London 2003

is to be established with all this information will represent a big step down the road to the all-intrusive police state described by George Orwell in 1984.

The government has also tightened regulations on asylum and increased the use of detention camps for asylum seekers. It is mooting a scheme to permit employers of low-skilled migrants to pay only a part of their salary directly to the workers, with the rest being sent to an account that can only be accessed in their home country. Revolutionaries oppose this racist harassment, and call for automatic full citizenship rights for all immigrants, regardless of their official status.

The fascists of the BNP have not missed the opportunity to spread their racist filth and openly incite attacks on Muslims. One of their leaflets had a picture of the number 30 bus blown up in Tavistock Square on 7 July 2005 with the caption "Don't get mad—get even." Immediately after the bombings there was an upsurge of racist attacks on Muslims, with 1,200 incidents officially recorded in the first two weeks. The real figure was no doubt even higher.

### Class Politics & Democratic Rights

The British left condemned the bombings and pointed to the obvious link with the occupation of Iraq. The Socialist Party (SP), which considers the police to be part of the workers' movement (when in fact they are the armed thugs of the bosses) and talks about peacefully transforming Britain from capitalism to socialism via an act of Parliament, responded to the killing of de Menezes with an undated leaflet entitled, "Stop shoot to kill—Justice for Jean Charles de Menezes" that sagely advised: "The police need to be democratically controlled." Unlike the reformists of the SP, Marxists recognize that the police and the rest of the repressive apparatus of the capitalist state cannot be "controlled" by those they are intended to oppress. This is precisely why it is necessary to carry out a socialist revolution—to destroy the capitalists' state apparatus and replace it with institutions that defend the interests of working people.

The Socialist Workers Party (SWP), which is currently functioning as a sort of fan club for Respect MP George

Galloway, responded in a typically social-democratic manner, posing "peace" as the alternative to "violence" and bleating that: "London is a centre of peace" (*Socialist Worker Online*, 7 July 2005). Viewed from Iraq, London, the site of Blair's government, doubtless appears more like a center of imperialist war.

The left-posturing Workers Power, which has spent the past few years in the SWP's resolutely pacifist Stop the War Coalition (StWC), is mimicking its patron in advancing the notion that the imperialists can be resisted with all-inclusive liberal reformism. Rather than attempting to politically mobilize working-class action against the war, the SWP built the StWC from the beginning as a respectable, middle-class vehicle for letting off steam. In its 8 July 2005 response to the terrorist attack, Workers Power proposed that a social-pacifist, multi-class anti-war movement can defend civil liberties:

"Of course Blair and Bush will seek to use events in London on 7/7 to press on with more draconian attacks on civil rights at home and military brutality and torture abroad. However the huge antiwar demonstrations in 2003 and their partial renewal this year show that they can be fought."

Workers Power, which was given a seat on the StWC steering committee, is well aware that to maintain the bloc with the various eminent persons, Muslim clerics etc. that give the coalition its bourgeois "legitimacy," the SWP leaders will deliberately smother any class-struggle initiative. Yet Workers Power still proposes that the SWP give their "peace movement" a more radical spin:

"Finally, but crucially, we must revive the anti-war movement on a massive scale—and this time with an open willingness to take direct action including strikes—to get Britain out now. Leaving aside the debacle in Iraq itself, the London bombings should be an alarm bell that this remobilisation of the anti-war movement is urgently needed."

—Workers Power, 22 July 2005

The chances of the SWP leadership displaying "an open willingness to take direct action" are roughly equivalent to those of Blair's New Labour revising its imperialist foreign policy. It is empty verbiage designed to cover Workers Power's political responsibility for the thoroughly and unashamedly bourgeois-pacifist StWC.

The fight against colonialist adventures abroad is intimately linked to the defense, and extension, of democratic rights at home. It is necessary to mobilize the British working class to answer the capitalist offensive spearheaded by Tony Blair and his cronies with a class-struggle fight against imperialist war and its derivative assault on immigrants, Muslims and organized labor. The workers' movement has the power to remake society from top to bottom, but to do so it needs a leadership which, instead of seeking to maintain the existing imperialist world order, is committed to overturning it.

A revolutionary leadership for the workers' movement cannot be built by begging, or seeking to pressure, the pro-capitalist parties to act in the interests of the oppressed. It requires a struggle to build a Leninist combat party capable of educating the masses of working people to recognize the futility of all attempts to humanize capitalism and the need to overthrow the entire system of exploitation and wage slavery. ■

# Iraq...

continued from page 48

ist minority openly questioning the wisdom of the war, as well as the Bush gang's ability to prosecute it. Frank Rich, reflecting the bitterness of the liberal bourgeoisie toward the whole venture, commented:

"We have long since lost count of all the historic turning points and fast-evaporating victories hyped by this president. The toppling of Saddam's statue, 'Mission Accomplished,' the transfer of sovereignty and the purple fingers all blur into a hallucinatory loop of delusion."

—*New York Times*, 28 August 2005

While Iraq's new constitution will be no more significant than previous "turning points," the torturous wrangling that produced it illuminated the dimensions of Washington's conundrum. Desperate to stabilize its disintegrating military/political position and bring the Sunni-based insurgency to heel, the U.S. opted to try to make a deal with the reactionary Shiite clerics in the south and Kurdish bourgeois nationalists in the north, whose interests are neither congruent with Washington's, nor with each other's.

## Iraq: Construct of Imperialism

Prior to World War I, the territory today known as Iraq constituted three distinct provinces of Turkey's Ottoman Empire: Mosul, which was mostly Kurdish; Baghdad, which was primarily Sunni Arab; and Basra, which was predominantly Shiite Arab. As the Ottoman Empire declined in the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Britain, France and eventually Germany, began to exert influence within its boundaries. The Arab population of the region was saddled with enormous debts to British and French banks to pay for the construction of the Suez Canal and a network of rail lines to provide European capitalists better access to the resources and markets of the Middle East.

Britain seized Mesopotamia from Turkey during World War I. When British troops entered Baghdad in 1917, their commander assured its residents: "Our armies do not come into your cities and lands as conquerors or enemies, but as liberators" (quoted in *Harper's Magazine*, May 2003). But the British then, like their American counterparts today, were only interested in "liberating" the petroleum resources of the region.

After the war, when imperialist spheres of influence in the Middle East were formalized by the League of Nations (forerunner to the United Nations), France received a "mandate" over Syria, Lebanon and Mosul, while Britain was awarded Palestine and the provinces of Basra and Baghdad. The British subsequently extorted the oil-rich Kurdish province from the French, and proceeded to forcibly amalgamate it and the predominantly Shiite and Sunni Arab provinces into an artificial entity they dubbed "Iraq."

The expectations of the British colonial office that its new Mesopotamian holdings could be controlled by manipulating ethnic/religious tensions among the diverse populations were shattered by the "Great Rebellion" of 1920. One contemporary estimated that there were 160,000 insurgents in the provinces of Baghdad and Basra, and another 480,000 in the Kurdish north. The Arab partici-



LUIJIN—AFP

### Puppet soldier threatens motorist

pants were predominantly Shiite, although a significant number of Sunnis were also involved. Britain's merciless response was captured by Churchill's infamous racist declaration: "I am strongly in favor of using poisoned gas against uncivilized tribes" (quoted in *Banking on Baghdad*, Edwin Black). In addition to mustard gas and aerial bombardments, British ground forces systematically destroyed villages in areas considered sympathetic to the rebels.

After suppressing the uprising, the British sought to create an "Arab government," described by the foreign secretary, Lord Curzon, as an:

"Arab facade ruled and administered under British guidance and controlled by a native Mohammedan and, as far as possible, by an Arab staff.... There should be no actual incorporation of the conquered territory in the dominions of the conqueror, but the absorption may be veiled by such constitutional fictions as a protectorate, a sphere of influence, a buffer state and so on."

—quoted in *Behind the Invasion of Iraq*, Research Unit for Political Economy

A member of the prominent Arab Hashemite family from Mecca (a thousand kilometers from Iraq in what is now Saudi Arabia) was brought to Baghdad and installed as King Faisal I. A cabinet was appointed, a constitution proclaimed and a pseudo-parliament established, although in reality Faisal exercised near-dictatorial powers. The British authorities employed their standard divide-and-rule tactics, supporting the less numerous Sunnis against the majority Shiites and Kurds. To insure against future insubordination by their royal puppet, the colonial authorities insisted that government positions remain the monopoly of a narrow Arab Sunni elite:

"Faysal, conscious of the need to broaden his political base, tried to include Shi'is and Kurds by promoting a number of them (along with the token Jews and Christians). Both the Sunni elite and the British resisted the initiative and made sure that the Shi'is remained woefully under-represented. Sunni dominance was also evident in the provincial governments even in Shi'i dominated areas."

—*A Short History of Iraq*, Thabit Abdullah



ALJ AL-SAADY—AFP

### Shiite protesters in Baghdad

The new "government" granted the British-dominated Turkish Petroleum Company a monopoly over Iraqi oil. When anti-British protests flared up again in the late 1920s, London deftly responded by withdrawing most of its forces, retaining only a few strategic bases, while also signing a "common defense position" with its puppet—in effect a blank check for future British intervention. The ersatz Iraqi monarchy managed to keep a lid on the restive Shiite and Kurdish populations and enforced imperial "order" until its overthrow by a mass popular uprising in 1958 (with the exception of a brief interlude in 1940-41 when a pro-German faction seized power).

### Iraq's 'Democracy'

The American conquest of Iraq in 2003 presented the Pentagon with a situation very similar to that faced by Britain's colonial office after World War I. Washington's plan to secure the oil fields and impose a government of pliable satraps went wrong almost from the beginning. The Bush administration's crude attempts to retroactively change the ostensible purpose of their crusade (which resulted in the "collateral" slaughter of tens of thousands of civilians) from preventing the use of "weapons of mass destruction" to spreading "freedom" and "democracy" fooled few.

While any Iraqis ungrateful enough to resist the occupation were declared to be motivated by an irrational antipathy for "liberty," in fact, democracy, even of the bought-and-paid-for capitalist variety, was never on the agenda. The American war planners, well aware that Iraq is a very unstable political entity, intended from the outset to impose "order" by creating a reliable indigenous leadership willing and able to enforce imperialist edicts. This is why the initial plan for Iraqi elections proposed the creation of a national assembly through regional "caucuses," the composition of which could be easily influenced by the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA).

The plan for caucuses was shelved in early 2004 after hundreds of thousands of supporters of Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, Iraq's most powerful and revered Shiite cleric, held mass protests to demand immediate elections. Washington is anxious to avoid a repetition of the Shiite "Great Rebellion" of 1920, and regards an accommodation with the Shiite leadership as essential.

The January 2005 election posed a problem for the occupation. Fearful that a Sunni boycott would give the Shiite religious parties an overwhelming majority, the U.S. covertly supported candidates running on the ticket of their preferred strongman, Ayad Allawi. According to Seymour Hersh, this involved funding as well as "voter intimidation, ballot stuffing, bribery, and the falsification

of returns" (*New Yorker*, 25 July 2005). The international "observers" who approved the results which, in accordance with the preferences of the U.S. State Department, produced a much smaller majority for the candidates Sistani favored than anticipated, were either stationed across the border in Jordan, or hunkered down in Baghdad's Green Zone. The on-site Iraqi observers who certified that the vote had been free and fair had all been trained by representatives of the twin parties of U.S. imperialism (the National Democratic Institute and its Republican equivalent) or by the CIA-connected National Endowment for Democracy, all of which have considerable experience in helping neo-colonial elections turn out the right way.

The imperialist media trumpeted voter turnout as an endorsement of the American mission, but in fact most Kurdish and Shiite voters participated because their leaders told them that doing so would help end the occupation. As one UN official observed: "The election was not an election but a referendum on ethnic and religious identity. For the Kurds, voting was about self-determination. For the Shiites, voting was about a fatwa issued by Sistani" (*Ibid.*).

The idea that Iraq is on the road to establishing a viable bourgeois democracy is a fantasy chiefly designed to prop up sagging domestic support in the U.S. for the Middle East adventure. An equitable division of wealth and political power between Iraq's different ethnic and religious groupings is simply inconceivable under capitalist rule. In a piece written prior to the January 2005 election, Edward Luttwak of the Center for Strategic and International Studies observed:

"The plain fact is that there are not enough aspiring democrats in Iraq to sustain democratic institutions. The Shiite majority includes cosmopolitan figures, but by far its greater part has expressed in every possible way a strong preference for clerical leadership. The clerics, in turn, reject any elected assembly that would be free to legislate without their supervision—and could thus legalize, for example, the drinking of alcohol or the freedom to change one's religion. The Sunni-Arab minority, for its part, has dominated Iraq from the time it was formed into a state, and its leaders have consistently rejected democracy in principle because they refuse to accept a subordinate status. As for the Kurds, they have administered their separate de facto autonomies with considerable success, but it is significant that they have not even attempted to hold elections for themselves, preferring clan and tribal loyalties to the individualism of representative democracy."

—*Foreign Affairs*, January/February 2005

The Kurds have since conducted elections for three provincial governments, as well as a regional authority, but power remains in the same hands.

Washington is deeply concerned by the centrifugal forces unleashed by the fall of the Baathist regime. Plundering its new oil colony and securing a permanent military beachhead to exert control of the Middle East requires stability. Without a brutally repressive regime at its center, Iraq will inevitably break apart, thereby triggering a series of major regional conflicts:

"A fractured Iraq could dangerously destabilize the broader region. Turkish hostility is guaranteed for any Kurdish statelet, which Ankara worries might set an

attractive example for Turkey's own restive and oppressed Kurdish minority. Iran would find it irresistible to manipulate a semiautonomous Shiite region dominated by Iranian-financed parties and Iranian-armed militias, and spiritually guided by an Iranian-born ayatollah [Sistani].

"If Iraq starts to fragment along these lines, no one should be surprised to see the orphaned Sunni west looking for whatever allies it can find in Baathist Syria, in the Islamist opposition circles of Saudi Arabia and among Jordan's Palestinian majority. The threat of civil war is obvious."

—*New York Times*, 27 August 2005

## Iraq Constitution: Exercise in Delusion

While Kurdish nationalists and most of the Shiite leadership have, for their own reasons, tolerated the occupation, the Sunni Arab elites see no reason to collaborate. After the successful January 2005 Sunni election boycott, the U.S. was anxious to draw some influential Sunni leaders into discussions on a new constitution, in the hope that this might help defuse an insurgency that was growing steadily more dangerous.

Ordinary Iraqis, irrespective of national or religious affiliation, were too involved in the struggle to survive to take much notice of the constitutional wrangling going on in the Green Zone. Hanan Sahib, a Shiite worker, summed up a common view when she asked: "What can I do with a constitution if I have no water, gasoline and electricity?" (*New York Times*, 26 August 2005). At least a third of the workforce is unemployed, electricity and clean water are available only sporadically, and malnutrition has nearly doubled since the imperialist takeover. The "reconstruction" program has ground to a halt—today there is only funding for "security."

The entire constitutional process has been scheduled to produce some "political progress" in time for the November 2006 U.S. congressional mid-term elections. The original 55-member constitutional committee included only two Sunni Arabs, but, at the insistence of the U.S., 15 more were added. After missing three "deadlines," the Shiite and Kurdish delegates announced in August 2005 that the document would have to be finalized without Sunni approval. Under U.S. pressure, two months later, on the eve of a referendum to approve the draft document, a rider was added to permit the forthcoming parliament to propose unspecified alterations to the text. This was sufficient to win the endorsement of the Sunni-based Iraqi Islamic Party, but, as the 13 October 2005 *New York Times* observed:

"Plainly, this isn't textbook democratic procedure. Voters are being asked to approve the constitution—which many have had no chance to read—with the assumption that it may soon be radically rewritten."

While attention focused on the objections of the Sunni Arabs, there are also plenty of differences between the Kurdish and Shiite leaderships. They are prepared to engage in limited collaboration with each other and with occupation authorities against their mutual enemy, the Sunnis, but the alliance is purely one of convenience. On many contentious issues, including the future status of the ethnically-divided northern city of Kirkuk, there is no agreement. Each considers some form of decentral-



SABAH ARAR—AFP

### Sunnis mourn victims of sectarian attack in Baghdad

ized federalism preferable to a unitary state, but where the Shiite elites look forward to finally dominating a unitary Iraq, the Kurdish rulers want the maximum amount of autonomy for their region. The Kurdish leadership has announced that the Iraq Supreme Court cannot overrule legislation passed in their region, and have also announced that units of Iraq's new army will not be permitted in the north without Kurdish permission. Conflict between the Kurds, whose *peshmerga* is the most formidable indigenous military formation in Iraq, and a future Shiite-dominated central government in Baghdad, seems highly likely.

Peter Galbraith, a former U.S. ambassador who participated in the constitutional talks, reported:

"The Kurds saw the constitution largely as a threat to their continued independence, and examined every proposal from that perspective. As the majority faction, the Shiites controlled the drafting of the text—and whether through inexperience or self-serving intentions, they often simply disregarded agreements others thought had been reached. Naturally, this fed Kurdish suspicions. The Sunni Arabs objected to practically everything that was proposed, frustrating the Shiites and Kurds to the point that they stopped negotiating with them. In the end, [Zalmay] Khalilzad [U.S. ambassador to Iraq] had the US embassy prepare drafts, record agreements, and incorporate them into the text."

—*New York Review of Books*, 6 October 2005

It is entirely appropriate that the final text of Iraq's new "constitution," a document initiated by occupation authorities, and guided by them at every step, was finally drafted in the U.S. embassy.

The destruction of Iraq's once-flourishing economy by a decade and a half of unrelenting imperialist attacks and sanctions means that its peoples will remain dependent on oil (which currently provides 90 percent of government revenue) for the foreseeable future. This makes control over territory with known oil deposits, almost all of which are in the Shiite south or the Kurdish north, a question of life or death. The Sunni Arab elites who traditionally accessed Iraq's oil wealth through their control of the central government are well aware that they will be the big losers if Iraq becomes a decentralized, federal state.

Oil also divides the Shiites. The two Shiite Islamist parties which dominate the United Iraqi Alliance favored by Sistani (the Dawa and Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq [SCIRI]) are based in the oil-rich south, and are particularly strong in Basra, where production is centered. Muqtada al-Sadr, the militant Shiite cleric whose Mahdi Army has fought several battles with the occupation forces, has his largest following among the residents of Baghdad's Shiite slums. Sadr's opposition to federalism is couched in theological terms, but it is probably not coincidental that his supporters would suffer if oil revenues were assigned to the provinces under a new federal



arrangement.

In the end, an ambiguous formula was adopted giving the central government control of oil revenues from current production "in cooperation with" the provincial authorities. While supposedly guaranteeing an equitable distribution to all regions, the critical issue of "cooperation" was not defined, nor was there any agreement on revenue from new sources of production.

Under the secular Baathist regime, clerics had no role in the legal system. Women enjoyed more equality under the law than elsewhere in the Arab world, and family disputes were settled by civil law, applicable to all regardless of religious affiliation. In a graphic illustration of imperialism's tendency to ally itself with everything backward and reactionary in the neo-colonial world, the draft constitution declares Islam to be "the official religion of the state" and "a basic source of legislation." Occupation publicists sought to portray this as a partial victory for secularism because Islam was not identified as the *only* "source of legislation," even though any law that "contradicts the fixed rules of Islam" was prohibited, and it was agreed that "a number of judges and experts in Shariah (Islamic Law)" must sit on the highest court (*New York Times*, 15 October 2005). Under the guise of religious freedom, the constitution permits religious law to be used in family and civil disputes.

Ayatollah Ahmad Jannati, leader of Iran's Guardian Council of theocrats, pronounced himself well pleased with the new constitution: "after years of effort and expectations in Iraq, an Islamic state has come to power and the Constitution has been established on the basis of Islamic precepts." As Katha Pollitt put it, in the new "democratic" Iraq:

"women have a lot to look forward to: being married off at the age of 9, being a co-wife, having unequal rights to divorce and child custody, inheriting half as much as their brothers, having their testimony in court counted as half that of men, winning a rape conviction only if the crime was witnessed by four male Muslims, being imprisoned and flogged for premarital sex, being executed for adultery, needing mandatory permission from husband or father to work, study or travel."

—*The Nation*, 19 September 2005

## Cracks in the Citadel

In his 1921 letter to Ritchie, Churchill was distressed by the unexpected overheads of the Mesopotamian venture and the limitations it imposed on the empire's capacity to intervene elsewhere:

"On the one hand it is perfectly clear that we cannot go on spending these enormous sums on Mesopotamia and that the forces that we maintain there must be promptly and drastically reduced. Even the reduced forces which it is hoped will be sufficient after this year are estimated to cost ten or eleven millions. This is far more than we should have any right to spend in such a quarter, more especially when we remember the immense fertility and values of our West African and East African territories and the far better opportunities that they offer for Imperial development than the Middle East."

—quoted in Catherwood, *op. cit.*

Churchill also worried that a precipitous withdrawal



KARIM KADIM—AP

## Influence of clerics growing under U.S./UK occupation

would significantly weaken Britain's international position, concerns that closely parallel those of U.S. strategists today:

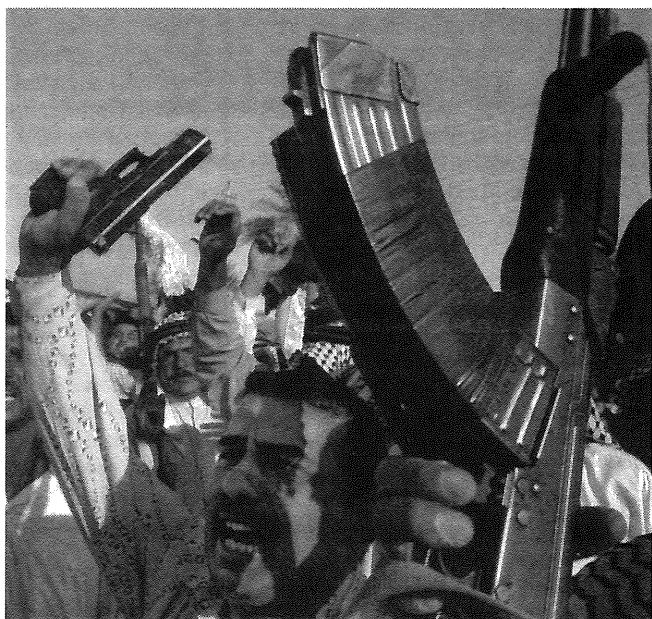
"On the other hand, the disadvantages and even disgrace of such a procedure should not be under-rated. We marched into Mesopotamia during the war and uprooted the Turkish Government which was the only stable form of government in that country at that time. We accepted before all the world a mandate for the country and undertook to introduce much better methods of government in the place of those we had overthrown. If, following upon this, we now ignominiously scuttle for the coast, leaving sheer anarchy behind us and historic cities to be plundered by the wild Bedouin of the desert, an event will have occurred not at all in accordance with what has usually been the reputation of Great Britain."

—*Ibid.*

The British did eventually succeed in extricating most of their troops and creating a viable quisling regime, something that seems beyond the reach of the U.S. at present, for reasons Harvard historian Niall Ferguson recently discussed:

"What has gone wrong? History suggests two answers. The first is that the coalition forces are simply too few to impose order. In 1920, when British forces quelled a major insurgency in Iraq, they numbered around 135,000. Coincidentally, that is very close to the number of American military personnel currently in Iraq. The trouble is that the population of Iraq was just over 3 million in 1920, whereas today it is around 24 million.

"The second problem is qualitative rather than quantitative. The plain fact is that controlling disaffected urban populations is a great deal harder than it was in Kipling's time. In *On the City Walls*, a British Assistant District



WATHIQ KHUZAIE—GETTY IMAGES

### Shiite militiamen

Superintendent of Police—a 'boy of 20' on horseback, armed with a 'long dog-whip' and at the head of 30 constables—succeeds in containing a full-scale Muslim-Hindu riot until 500 regular troops have had time to get to the scene.

"I hesitate to say 'those were the days', but they were certainly the days before rocket-propelled grenades and improvised explosive devices."

—*Sunday Telegraph* (London), 25 September 2005

Of course the military cadres who have trained the young resistance fighters to use their rocket-propelled grenades and other ordinance so skillfully against the occupation forces were the products of the efficient police and military apparatus developed with the active assistance of the U.S. In those days, the Baathists were seen as a bulwark against Iran and before that, left-nationalist and Communist rebels. The other highly competent skilled military component of the resistance—the jihadists—derive from the Islamist *mujahedin* that the CIA trained to fight the Soviets in Afghanistan in the 1980s.

Reflecting on an idea that is becoming increasingly popular in the think tanks, institutes and policy centers that litter Washington, Ferguson asks: "Is it time, then, for the Americans to revive their tried-and-tested policy of proclaiming victory and getting the hell out?"

The media attention showered on Cindy Sheehan, the mother of a U.S. soldier killed in Iraq, during her August 2005 vigil outside Bush's Crawford Texas dude ranch, was a bad omen for the pro-war faction in the U.S. ruling class. On 1 October 2005, a group calling itself "Business Leaders for Sensible Priorities" took out an advertisement in the *New York Times*, complaining:

"Mr. President, we are told you are a 'CEO president.' A good CEO shuts down a disastrous enterprise before it destroys the health of the entire corporation. That is what you must do: Rebuild America. Start bringing the troops home now."

The Iraq invasion was a grand gamble that has gone very wrong. But much has been wagered, and the cost

of retreat is so high that the majority of the ruling class, though pessimistic about victory, still shrinks from openly recognizing defeat. One of the favorite journals of the neo-conservative ideologues, whose glib assurances of an easy triumph helped propel the U.S. into the adventure in the first place, now insists that retreat is not an option:

"America has no choice but to succeed in Iraq. The country's collapse could fuel chaos in the Middle East; a terrorist base there could support new attacks in America, in the region, in Europe and worldwide. The consequences of defeat in Iraq extend beyond this as well. As the only global superpower, the United States can afford to make mistakes—even big ones. But it cannot allow itself to be defeated in a priority-defining project like Iraq. After investing lives and well-being of American soldiers, \$200 billion in taxpayer funds and substantial amounts of international political capital, failure could be very damaging both abroad and at home."

—*The National Interest*, Fall 2005

Yet even the proponents of "staying the course" are distressed by the inability of the American military to bring the situation under control. And the White House views discussion of an exit strategy as tantamount to defeatism. When General George Casey, the commander of U.S. forces in Iraq, suggested that, at some future point, the U.S. might be in a position to make "some fairly substantial [troop] reductions," Bush quickly countered: "Pulling the troops out now would send a terrible signal to the enemy" (*New York Times*, 12 August 2005).

With few signs of progress, and the November 2006 congressional elections looming, many Bush-backers have been turning sour. Republican Senator Chuck Hagel of Nebraska put it bluntly: "Things aren't getting better; they're getting worse. The White House is completely disconnected from reality...It's like they're making it up as they go along. The reality is that we're losing in Iraq" (*U.S. News & World Report*, 27 June 2005). Even North Carolina congressman Walter Jones, who originally proposed that french fries should be renamed "freedom fries" to protest France's refusal to participate in the war, is now calling for setting a timetable for pulling out.

Despite the growing unpopularity of the occupation, congressional Democrats were very slow to advocate a withdrawal because they feared that, in the words of Senator Hillary Clinton: "If we were to artificially set a deadline of some sort, that would be like a green light to the terrorists, and we can't afford to do that" (*The Nation*, 29 August 2005). Even Barbara Lee of the Democrats' "Progressive Caucus," pitched her proposal to prohibit permanent U.S. military installations in Iraq as the best way "to defuse the insurgency and improve the security situation on the ground" (*In These Times*, 29 September 2005).

Various reformist leftists complained that the Democratic Party has been hijacked by right-wingers and opportunists who fear that appearing "soft" on Iraq would hurt their electoral chances. But the real reason the Democrats were so reluctant to call for ending the occupation was because, like their Republican twins, they considered that the U.S. ruling class cannot afford to lose in Iraq.

With Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld speculating that the insurgency may perhaps go on for another dozen

years, the White House has floated the idea of outsourcing the fighting to the new Iraqi army and police force as soon as they are strong enough to stand on their own. This is the same straw Richard Nixon clutched at in Vietnam when the U.S. was finally forced to recognize that a clear-cut military victory was beyond its grasp. "Vietnamization" turned out to be a prelude to the greatest defeat ever suffered by U.S. imperialism, and prospects for "Iraqification" do not seem much better.

The Baghdad puppet government is weak and fractious, but the attempt to create a viable repressive apparatus is little short of disastrous. In October 2005, after two years of "training," General Casey estimated that only one of 115 Iraqi battalions was fully operational. Much of the Iraqi military apparently does not even exist:

"The Iraqi army nominally has 115 battalions, or 80,000 troops. This figure, often cited by those who see the Iraq occupation as a success, corresponds only to the number of troops listed on the military payroll. However, when the Ministry of Defense decided to supervise the payment of salaries, a third of the payroll was returned. (In Iraq's all-cash economy, commanders receive a lump sum for the troops under their command; this acts as an incentive for them to maintain ghost soldiers on the payroll.) One senior official estimated that barely half the nominal army actually exists."

—*New York Review of Books*, 6 October 2005

And then there is the problem of morale. Practically every time the puppet troops have engaged in serious combat with the resistance there have been many desertions. In much of Iraq, ethnic and political militias, including the Kurdish *peshmerga*, Sadr's Mahdi Army and SCIRI's Badr Brigade, exercise control over many official police and army units. In Basra, the police chief was fired for publicly admitting that three quarters of his force were loyal to one Shiite faction or another (*Telegraph* [London], 22 September 2005). Things are so bad that the Pentagon is now hesitant about equipping those Iraqi army units that are ready to deploy:

"Simply put, Iraq remains too fragile for any planner to know what shape the country will be in six months or a year from now—whether it will reach compromises and hold together or slit apart in a civil war.

"And that presents a conundrum for American military planners. With those questions up in the air, they have to fear that any heavy arms distributed now could end up aimed at American forces or feeding a growing civil conflict. And the longer Iraq's army has to wait for sophisticated weapons, the longer American forces are likely to be needed in Iraq as a bulwark against chaos."

—*New York Times*, 28 August 2005

Meanwhile, the resistance, which, unlike the U.S. and its Iraqi hirelings, is nourished by a wellspring of popular support, is becoming increasingly effective. In addition to Baathist cadres and Sunni fundamentalists, it includes many ordinary Iraqis whose homes have been destroyed, whose relatives and friends have been rounded up and sent to be tortured in the imperialists' jails, and whose families and loved ones have been among the "collateral" damage of "coalition" air strikes. According to a report in the *New York Times* (11 November 2005) American intelligence officials estimate that, in addition to foreign jihadists, "ordinary, disenchanting Iraqi Sunnis make up perhaps

70 percent of the insurgency, with supporters of Saddam Hussein's former regime and Shiite groups accounting for the balance."

Millions of Iraqis burn with hatred for the occupation, not out of religious zeal, but as a result of the humiliations, indignities and suffering inflicted upon them. In April 2005, on the second anniversary of the fall of Baghdad, 300,000 Shiites participated in a massive demonstration, chanting "No, no to America! No, no to occupation" (*Los Angeles Times*, 10 April 2005). Similar demonstrations, with tens of thousands of participants, have occurred throughout the Shiite south. Sadr's supporters, the organizers of these demonstrations, also claim to have collected a million signatures on a petition calling for U.S. withdrawal.

A leaked poll by the British Ministry of Defense revealed that 82 percent of Iraqis are "strongly opposed" to the presence of coalition troops, and 45 percent of Iraqis consider that attacks on British and American troops are justified. It also reported that: "71 per cent of people rarely get safe clean water, 47 per cent never have enough electricity, 70 per cent say their sewerage system rarely works and 40 per cent of southern Iraqis are unemployed" (*Sunday Telegraph* [London], 23 October 2005).

At this point Washington seems to have few viable options. Its "coalition of the willing" has largely crumbled away, with British forces, which numbered 45,000 at the outset, dwindling to fewer than 10,000 today. Prime Minister Tony Blair's "stay the course" mantra has seriously weakened him domestically, and behind the scenes London has long been urging Washington to set a timetable for troop withdrawals (*Telegraph*, 20 January 2005).

Without a reliable indigenous army, the Pentagon is forced to use its own forces to battle the resistance. Yet, despite adding 1,000 recruiters and lowering admission standards, the U.S. Army has consistently failed to meet its recruitment goals. Reserve and National Guard units have

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HADI MIZBAN—AP

### Civilians have borne the brunt of U.S. war of choice in Iraq

been used to fill the gap, at times making up 40 percent of U.S. forces in Iraq. This is unsustainable:

"Some retired and active duty senior officers fear that another year of combat duty in urban areas of the Sunni triangle will break the military cohesiveness and morale of the regular Army, reserve and National Guard units being rotated into Iraq on multiple tours. Retired Gen. Barry McCaffrey says the National Guard already is 'in the stage of meltdown and within 24 months will be coming apart.'"

—*New York Post*, 21 August 2005

Something has to give. One option the U.S. high command is considering involves vacating the 100-odd bases they presently occupy and concentrating their forces in four heavily fortified locations where, in the words of a senior U.S. official, they could provide "logistical support and quick reaction capability where necessary to Iraqis" (*Guardian*, 23 May 2005). The obvious problem with this plan is that the U.S. has virtually no "Iraqis" to support.

### Drive Out the Imperialists!

Revolutionaries are not neutral in conflicts between imperialist predators and their victims. As the U.S./UK axis powers prepared to invade, the International Bolshevik Tendency raised the slogan "Defend Iraq Against Imperialist Attack!" While giving no political support to Saddam's blood-drenched Baathist regime, we recognized that the defeat of the imperialist coalition in Iraq would

be a victory for all victims of global capitalism—including the working people and the oppressed in the imperial metropolises.

After a few weeks of resistance, the Iraqi military, including the elite Republican Guard concentrated around Baghdad, simply melted away. This appears, at least in part, to have been the result of a strategic decision by the Baathist leadership, which had threatened to wage a protracted guerrilla war against any occupation. At the time, the Western media scoffed at these declarations and the parades of white-uniformed fedayeen Saddam suicide bombers. An article published just after the fall of Baghdad noted that these elements had proven somewhat more formidable than originally estimated:

"The one surprise in the conflict was Saddam's Fedayeen, Baath Party militiamen who blended in with the population and launched ambushes and sniping attacks on U.S. convoys. While those attacks dominated the news early in the war and gave commanders pause, they proved to be more of a nuisance to the military than a genuine impediment. In military terms, said retired Rear Adm. John Sigler, a former chief planner for the U.S. Central Command, 'Their impact will be a footnote in the history of this war.'"

—*Washington Post*, 10 April 2003

A few days prior to Bush's premature celebration of "Mission Accomplished" aboard the USS Abraham Lincoln on May Day 2003, Defense Secretary Rumsfeld was fielding questions at the U.S. military headquarters in Qatar:

"There were a lot of hand-wringers around, weren't there?" Rumsfeld said when asked by a soldier in the audience whether he had been flooded by apologetic calls from critics.

"You know, during World War II, Winston Churchill was talking about the Battle of Britain and he said, 'Never have so many owed so much to so few,'" Rumsfeld said. "A humorist in Washington...sent me a note paraphrasing that [in which] he said, 'Never have so many been so wrong about so much.'"

—*Washington Post*, 29 April 2003

But what appeared to be an easy victory and a launching pad for further "preemptive" conquests has turned into a quagmire. Today even the most bellicose White House chicken hawks have little appetite for spreading the war to Syria and Iran or attacking the North Korean deformed workers' state.

Marxists support blows struck by the resistance fighters against the imperialist occupiers, their surrogates and hirelings. Those who willingly sign up to enforce imperialist rule in Iraq, even if driven to do so by economic desperation, are legitimate targets. This elementary proposition is apparently rejected by the Third-Camp centrists of the League for the Revolutionary Party (LRP) who declare: "We oppose the targeting of recruits to the Iraqi army, who the great majority of the time have refused to fire on fellow Iraqis when the occupation or the puppet governments have tried to use them against the resistance" (*Proletarian Revolution* No. 75, Fall 2005). The Iraqi army is indeed riddled with agents and sympathizers of the various wings of the insurgency, but it nonetheless remains an agency of the imperialist occupation. Some of its predominantly Shiite and Kurdish units have been successfully deployed in Sunni Arab areas. In the summer 2005 offensive against the Sunni city of Tal Afar, in which thousands of civilians were driven from their homes and hundreds killed, it was the mercenaries in the puppet army who did most of the dirty work.

It seems odd that the LRP, which is generally not overly solicitous of scabs, cops or other agents of their own ruling class, is concerned about the welfare of Iraq's volunteer quislings. We can only interpret this as an expression of guilty liberalism. The overwhelming majority of Iraqi recruits enlist to escape desperate poverty, but this is true of imperialist armies as well, which is why the ranks of the American military are overwhelmingly composed of poor whites, blacks and Hispanics, whose objective interests are diametrically opposed to those of their rulers. But, as we explained to the Spartacist League in 1983 when it called for saving the U.S. Marines in Lebanon, communists have never considered the "economic draft" a reason to give imperialism's trained killers a free pass.

Sectarian attacks upon worshippers in mosques or ordinary people out shopping are another thing entirely. They are not only reprehensible criminal acts, they are also profoundly stupid, as their only effect can be to drive the targeted population into the hands of the imperialists and their puppets.

### Iraq's Working Class Reviving

After 15 years of imperialist sanctions and military terrorism, much of Iraq's industrial capacity has been destroyed, and its working class pauperized. According



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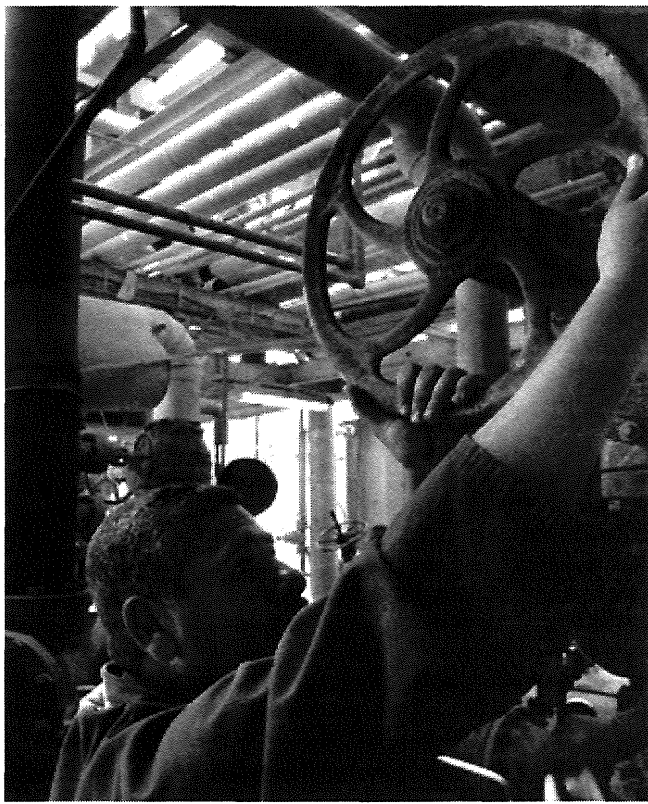
**'Never have so many been so wrong about so much'**

to a 17 March 2005 Associated Press report, the per capita average income is roughly a quarter of what it was 25 years ago. The new pseudo-constitution calls for "encouraging and developing the private sector." Article 110 directs Iraq's federal and provincial governments to develop oil and gas production by "relying on the most modern techniques of market principles and encouraging investment." Article 25 states:

"The state shall guarantee the reforming of the Iraqi economy according to modern economic bases, in a way that ensures complete investment of its resources, diversifying its sources...."

Persistent insurgent attacks upon oil infrastructure and foreign contractors have thus far deterred the oil majors, but the puppet regime has announced plans to open petroleum refining and exporting to private investment (i.e., takeover by imperialist corporations) while retaining control, at least for the time being, of drilling and pumping.

Despite enormous obstacles, the Iraqi working class has shown remarkable resilience. There has been a resurgence of union activity, particularly in the oil sector. The General Union of Oil Employees (GUOE), which claims 23,000 members in the southern oil fields, has militantly resisted privatization attempts. In August 2003, the union successfully shut down all oil exports and forced Halliburton's KBR (Kellogg, Brown & Root) unit to pull out of Basra. Two months later, the threat of strike action was enough to force Paul Bremer, the American proconsul, to cancel plans to cut wages. In July 2005, Basra oil workers staged a 24-hour strike to demand higher wages and land allowances, as well as the removal of Baathist managers and the investment of more oil revenues in the local economy (*Iraq Occupation Focus*, 17 July 2005). One unionist com-



STEVEN SENNE—AP

### Refinery worker in Basra

mented: "We've been like the camel that carries gold, but is given thorns to eat" (*The Progressive*, October 2005).

In August 2005, hospital and medical workers in Kirkuk and the surrounding region struck against Health Ministry pay cuts. The next month textile workers in Baghdad struck to win higher wages. In a blatant attempt to curtail growing labor unrest, the puppet government announced that it was "taking control of all monies belonging to the trade unions to prevent them from dispensing any such monies" (*Occupation Watch*, 25 August 2005). It is perhaps significant that they felt it necessary to resort to such measures despite the fact that Iraq's only legal trade union, the Iraqi Federation of Trade Unions (IFTU), is led by the collaborators of the Iraqi Communist Party (ICP) with the support of Allawi's pro-imperialist Iraq National Accord. (The Stalinist ICP, which has two members in the sham parliament, supported the *sharia* constitution, meekly suggesting that its "civil-democratic elements" could perhaps be strengthened.)

The Worker-communist Party of Iraq (WCPI), which falsely equates the Islamist/Baathist resistance with the U.S/UK axis forces, has at least consistently opposed both the imperialist occupation and its puppets. WCPI cadres have also helped organize significant mobilizations by the Union of Unemployed in Iraq. While the pro-WCPI leadership of the Federation of Worker Councils and Unions in Iraq (FWCIU) is more militant than the openly collaborationist IFTU, they have proposed that: "one way to end the occupation itself would be for the forces of the United Nations to keep the peace" (*Voice of Iraqi Workers*, 5 June 2005).

The UN is not a neutral, classless organization of international do-gooders. The 1991 "Desert Storm" inva-

sion of Iraq, which is estimated to have cost the lives of 100,000 Iraqi civilians, was conducted under the auspices of the UN, as were the subsequent sanctions that killed over a million. The UN Security Council has also voted to approve the current occupation. While it is barely conceivable that the tattered U.S. "coalition" will be replaced by UN gun-toting "peacekeepers," if it were, nothing fundamental would change. Revolutionaries advocate the immediate, unconditional withdrawal of all imperialist forces and their vassals, not a reconfiguration of the occupation under a UN fig leaf.

The working class is the only element in Iraq with both the objective interest and the social power to drive out the occupiers and overturn the oppressive rule of the dictators, sheiks, mullahs and other imperialist allies who have dominated the region for so long. The military defeat of the imperialist predators in Iraq would blunt their appetite for launching similar murderous adventures, at least in the short term. But national and social liberation for the peoples of the Middle East requires the revolutionary intervention of the multi-ethnic working class.

The imperialist occupation has increased the likelihood of a sectarian conflagration, as the leaders of the various ethnic and religious groups maneuver to maximize their share of land, oil and government resources. The leaders of the petty-bourgeois Kurdish parties have subordinated any struggle for national rights to the maintenance of cordial relations with Washington and its puppets. While Kurdish and Shiite bourgeois leaders manipulate the justified grievances of their peoples to advance their own agendas, the Sunni Arab leaders similarly play on the anxieties of their base. Working people will have to face a future of grinding poverty regardless of which faction, or combination of them, ultimately gains ascendancy. They have nothing to gain from the sectarian tit-for-tat killings taking place with increasing frequency.

The only way forward for the working class and dispossessed is through a social revolution that expropriates Iraq's capitalists and landlords, and ignites a wave of revolutionary struggle throughout the region. By constructing a planned, collectivized economy in which production is determined by human need rather than private profit, a workers' state would dramatically improve living standards and thus lay the basis for eliminating sectarian rivalries and national oppression. Within a Socialist Federation of the Middle East, the artificial borders imposed by imperialism could be erased, and the peoples of the region freed to determine their own future while enjoying the benefits of unprecedented economic development.

In reflecting on the disastrous defeat of the 1927 Chinese Revolution, Leon Trotsky observed:

"With regard to countries with a belated bourgeois development, especially the colonial and semi-colonial countries, the theory of the permanent revolution signifies that the complete and genuine solution of their tasks of achieving *democracy and national emancipation* is conceivable only through the dictatorship of the proletariat as the leader of the subjugated nation, above all of its peasant masses."

—*The Permanent Revolution*

A successful proletarian struggle for power requires the leadership of a revolutionary party, rooted in the working class, that is committed to vigorously combating every

form of religious, ethnic, sexual and national oppression, and championing the strict separation of mosque and state. The courageous Iraqi women who have dared to openly oppose *sharia* law and the re-imposition of the veil will undoubtedly provide many of the best cadres for such a party and the most militant fighters for a socialist future.

A revolutionary workers' party would bloc militarily with all those forces resisting the occupation, while actively building independent organs of working-class self-defense. In defending existing housing and food subsidies for workers, and opposing all privatization moves, it would not seek merely to constrain or pressure the occupation authorities and their puppets, but would rather demonstrate to all the oppressed the necessity of supporting a revolutionary, proletarian solution to the intractable problems of life in the prison of imperialism.

The fundamental problem faced by humanity in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is the need to eliminate the entire global system of international capitalism that generates massive poverty, irreversible ecological destruction, racism, sexism, tyranny and war. The history of Iraq has repeatedly demonstrated the inextricable connection between the social and national liberation of the peoples of the Middle East and the struggle for a socialist world. The U.S. today is a superpower in decline, and while its military strength still far surpasses that of its rivals, its impasse in Iraq is accelerating the rate of its descent. Despite their reactionary ideology, the blows struck by the Iraqi resistance fighters against the occupation show downtrodden people around the globe that it is possible to successfully resist.

As the U.S. sinks ever deeper into the Iraqi quagmire, Washington's imperialist rivals are looking for opportunities to improve their position relative to the American leviathan. Some of the most senior figures in the American foreign-policy establishment are profoundly concerned by the destabilizing effects of Bush's reckless doctrine of "pre-emptive" attack. Robert McNamara, the U.S. Secretary of Defense under Lyndon Johnson in the 1960s, and one of the preeminent war criminals of his time, recently expressed concern over current American nuclear doctrine, which he characterizes as "immoral, illegal, militarily unnecessary, and dreadfully dangerous." He pointed out that:

"The United States has never endorsed the policy of 'no first use,' not during my seven years as secretary or since. We have been and remain prepared to initiate the use of nuclear weapons—by the decision of one person, the president—against either a nuclear or nonnuclear enemy whenever we believe it is in our interest to do so."

—*Foreign Policy*, May-June 2005

McNamara also observed that U.S. plans to begin testing a new generation of tactical nuclear weapons:

"says to the nonnuclear weapons nations, 'We, with the strongest conventional military force in the world, require nuclear weapons in perpetuity, but you, facing potentially well-armed opponents, are never to be allowed even one nuclear weapon.'"

The ultimate logic of global capitalist competition is thermonuclear imperialist war. The only thing that can save humanity from this nightmare is a victorious socialist revolution that establishes an internationally-coordinated planned economy which can free the vast productive potential of the industrial technique developed under capitalism from the irrationality of a social system based

on production for profit. A collectivized world economy could completely eradicate hunger and poverty in a matter of only a few years. The alternative to a socialist future is the destruction of human civilization, as the great German revolutionary Rosa Luxemburg observed nearly 90 years ago:

"Socialism has become necessary not merely because the proletariat is no longer willing to live under the conditions imposed by the capitalist class but, rather, because if the proletariat fails to fulfill its class duties, if it fails to realize socialism, we shall crash down together to a common doom."

—"Our Program and the Political Situation," 1918

## *IG & Revolutionary Defeatism* **'A Blank Page'**

The Summer 2005 issue of the *Internationalist*, published by Jan Norden and his comrades in the Internationalist Group (IG—1996 refugees from James Robertson's Spartacist League) contains an article entitled "Drive U.S. Imperialists Out of Iraq!" which lists American interventions in the neo-colonial world after Vietnam:

"Contrary to the right-wing 'stab-in-the-back' myth that the U.S. pulled out of Vietnam because of 'Hanoi Jane' Fonda and hippie peaceniks at home, that war was basically lost on the battlefields of Indochina. The U.S. was driven out, its army was ripped apart by conflicts between officers and soldiers, and its puppet South Vietnamese army collapsed. Even so, the imperialist rulers keep launching new wars: in the 1980s, a proxy war against the Soviets in Afghanistan, the invasion of Grenada, contra war on Nicaragua and the death squad slaughter in El Salvador; in the '90s, the first war on Iraq (Gulf War), the failed Somalia adventure, the first Yugoslav war (Bosnia) and the second Yugoslav war (Kosovo); since 2000, Afghanistan again, and now Iraq again."

Missing from this list is the single biggest military disaster for U.S. imperialism between the defeat in Vietnam and the current debacle in Iraq: the destruction of the American Marine barracks in Beirut by an Islamic Jihad truck-bomb in October 1983. This single, devastating blow forced Ronald Reagan to abandon his attempt to establish a U.S. military toehold in the Middle East. This humiliating setback is very much in the minds of Cheney, Bush and the Pentagon, but, for reasons of personal prestige, the IG leaders omitted it. At the time, Norden was a leading member of the Spartacist League and shares political responsibility for its shameful, social-patriotic call for saving the Marines (see *Trotskyist Bulletin* No. 2, "Marxism vs. Social-Patriotism"). The contrast between the cowardly flinch in 1983 and the IG's forthright revolutionary defeatist position today cannot be rationally explained, so the IG leaders pretend it did not happen—thus producing an example of what Mikhail Gorbachev used to disparage as a "blank page."

# The Empire Strikes Out Iraq Unravels



HADI MIZBAN—AP

**U.S. forces and Iraqi quising police at the site of suicide bomb attack in Baghdad**

“It is my hope, therefore, that by means of an Arab government supported by a moderate military force we may be able to discharge our duties without imposing unjustifiable expense on the British Exchequer. The fact that we shall be calling into being an Arab administration in Bagdad [sic] makes it indispensable that we should treat the Arab question as a whole so far as it concerns British interests. Unless Arabian affairs can be handled as to secure tranquility among the tribes at this critical time, the early withdrawal of large numbers of troops from Mesopotamia, and consequently of the reduction of the expense, may be very greatly hampered.”

—Winston Churchill, 1921 (quoted in *Churchill's Folly*, Christopher Catherwood)

This is how the colonial secretary of the British Empire outlined his policy for the Middle East in a letter to Sir George Ritchie, one of his wealthy constituents. A massive Shiite rebellion a year earlier had shaken colonial authorities who, fearing further upheavals, were anxious to lower the imperial profile in the area. Soon after writing to Ritchie, Churchill chaired the Cairo Conference, where Mesopotamia became “Iraq,” and plans were laid for the creation of an Arab administration.

In 2003, when the leaders of the American empire conquered Mesopotamia, they expected to immediately derive substantial material benefits from the acquisition of

an oil-rich neo-colony in the center of a geopolitically vital region. They intended to rapidly put in place a puppet regime which would enable them to withdraw most U.S. forces, leaving only enough to garrison a few strategically positioned military bases. “Modernization,” i.e., takeover, of Iraq’s oil and other economic assets, could then proceed in a manner maximally beneficial to American corporations. But, like the British colonizers of the 1920s, the new crusaders have been unpleasantly surprised by the intensity of indigenous resistance and dismayed by overheads which are running far in excess of projections.

In removing Saddam Hussein’s Baathist regime, which had long been supported by the U.S. as a reliably anti-communist ally, Washington’s “coalition of the willing” shattered an ethnic and religious jigsaw puzzle that is proving extremely difficult to re-assemble. The powerful American military has not only failed to make headway against a raging insurgency, but has also been unable to secure even the highway connecting their Green Zone redoubt to the Baghdad airport. The Iraq adventure—supposed to “shock and awe” neo-colonies and imperialist competitors alike—has showcased the limitations of the world’s only superpower abroad, while reviving the dreaded “Vietnam syndrome” at home.

The deteriorating military situation is creating deep rifts within the American ruling class, with a growing defeat-

*continued on page 37*