

Workers' Liberty

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Responses to globalisation: class struggle or Yankophobia?

In many ways capital has been global since the 16th century. There is a lot of exaggeration and hype in the talk about globalisation today. But there are four developments which are relatively new in the last 10 years or so.

The first is that we have a world made up almost entirely of capitalist states integrated into the world market. In the whole of the previous history of capitalism there have been many countries which have been dominated by pre-capitalist ruling classes and pre-capitalist modes of production, and tied into the capitalist world market in very limited and specialised ways. And, of course, for much of the 20th century there was the Stalinist bloc. But now, in almost all countries, there are true-blue capitalist states well integrated into the world market.

Secondly, almost all countries are integrated into the world market in complex ways. They include substantial sectors integrated into complex production networks stretching over several countries.

Thirdly, there has been an enormous cheapening and speeding-up of transport and communications.

Fourthly, the wage-working class, defined as those who sell their labour-power to capital and are exploited by capital, together with the children and retired people of that class, is probably the majority of the world's population for the first time ever. Indonesia, which is one of the less capitalistically-developed countries in the world, a country where many people live not far from malnutrition and starvation, has probably a higher proportion of wage-labour than Germany did in 1918, when the Bolsheviks would cite it as the epitome of a highly-developed capitalist country.

Response to crises

All the developments listed are culminations of tendencies which go back a very long time. But in the 1990s the four developments reached a sort of 'critical mass'. That hap-

pened mainly through two processes.

Firstly, the economic crises of the 1970s and '80s. The period from the Second World War to the early 1970s was one of the gradual knitting-together of world trade, the gradual development of autonomous capitalist centres in many of the ex-colonial countries, and the gradual rise of transnational corporations. From the early 1970s there opened up an era in which the relations of capitalist states to the world market became a cause of tremendous economic crises for them. The ruling classes were faced with options. They chose the option of reorganising their affairs to attune them better to the gradually-more-powerful world market, instead of the one of raising economic barriers and erecting siege economies on the model followed by capitalist states in the 1930s.

The interests within the ruling classes who looked towards the world market turned out to have hegemony, and to be prepared to pay a high price, not only in working-class suffering but also in the ruination of large sections of capital.

Alongside the response to economic crises of governments in West and South, the other essential process was the collapse of the Stalinist bloc and of the Stalinist model for industrial development. That in turn was very much tied up with the involvement of the East European states, in particular, in the world market from the 1970s onwards.

Capitalist revenge

All this happened in a period when the ruling classes had regained the initiative after the big working-class struggles of the late 1960s and the early 1970s. In some countries there were big set-piece defeats for the working class — in Britain, the miners' strike of 1984-5 — and, in other countries, simply a petering-out of the struggles of the 1970s in disarray and disillusionment. The capitalist classes were eager and able to take their revenge. And that has shaped the detail of

how 'globalisation' has proceeded in the 1980s and 1990s. A push towards inequality, destruction of social provision, ecological damage and mass pauperisation is endemic to capital, but the working-class setbacks allowed the capitalist classes to add extra bite and sharpness.

Capitalist globalisation is capital writ large. It is not a number of other things which it is said to be. It is not capitalism turned financial. The financial markets have expanded enormously, but all the essential developments were well in train before that expansion of the financial markets. They have proceeded in the last 20 years in close intertwining with the expansion of financial markets, but that is not to say that finance was the essential driving force.

It is not capitalism turned stateless. It is not a capitalism where the nation-state is withering away and markets, or transnational corporations, decide everything. Although it is a capitalism much more attuned to the world market, that attuning is carried out by the nation states. Capitalist globalisation is a process largely carried out by capitalist states. A precondition for its development is the emergence in less capitalistically-developed countries of capitalist states of a weight that they did not have previously, which have the power and confidence to carry through the policies of globalisation.

It is not capitalism turned American. It is not a world where instead of the old European empires we have semi-colonial rule by the United States. The USA is the biggest capitalist power. But the long-term trend, operating since 1945, for the USA's relative dominance to decline, has not been reversed fundamentally. The USA does not have the same position in today's world order as Britain had in the British Empire.

Capital writ large

Capitalist globalisation is capital writ large, capital raging across the world. The challenge

for us, in response, is to rewrite working-class struggle on an equally large scale — to rewrite it on a scale which matches the new outreach of capitalism.

To today's capitalist globalisation there, are fundamentally, two possible working-class lines of response. One is proposed, for example, by Robin Hahnel in his book *Panic Rules* (amidst much clear and valuable critique): "We must act like Lilliputian Luddites first and stop corporate-sponsored globalisation by any means necessary. After corporate hegemony and the present system of global pillage have been defeated, our Lilliputian movement can cease to act like Luddites and begin to build a system of international equitable co-operation from below."

The other is expressed, for example, by Michael Hardt and Toni Negri in their book *Empire* (amidst much obscurity and piffle): "We are by no means opposed to the globalisation of relationships as such... The multitude, in its will to be-against and its desire for liberation, must push through Empire to come out the other side."

Luddites and trust-busters

The first approach misrepresents the Luddites. In actual history, the Luddites of 1811 and after, as E P Thompson records, sought such demands as "a legal minimum wage; the control of the 'sweating' of women and juveniles; arbitration; the engagement by the masters to find work for skilled men made redundant by machinery; the prohibition of shoddy work; the right to open trade-union combination. All these demands looked forwards, as much as backwards". They used machine-breaking as a rational tactic of class war in circumstances where all trade-union action and organisation was illegal. They did not try just to "stop" the Industrial Revolution "by any means necessary".

The first approach would take us close not to the Luddites but to the middle-class "trust-busters" of the early 20th century, or the populists who fought hard and indignantly — and successfully until 1913 — to stop the USA having a central bank. It would submerge independent working-class politics in a combat for smaller and older capitalism against bigger and newer capitalism.

Against the "trust-busters" and the populists, Marxists argued: "It is not use for the proletariat to oppose the policy of advanced capitalism from the era of free trade and of hostility to the state... The proletariat avoids the bourgeois dilemma — protectionism or free trade — with a solution of its own: neither protectionism nor free trade, but socialism, the organisation of production, the conscious control of the economy not by and for the benefit of capitalist magnates but by and for society as a whole". (Hilferding,

Finance Capital)

"Anti-monopoly alliance"?

Instead of bemoaning the "control over social production increasingly [in] the hands of a small number of large capitalist associations", and seeking to go backwards, the working class should fight to go forward, through the new stage, to dispossessing the capitalist oligarchy and replacing it by workers' control.

The idea that today "the multitude, in its desire for liberation, must push through Empire to come out the other side", is the same thought, expressed in a different idiom.

But to orient ourselves here we must reject much ideological debris still littering the left.

From the mid-1930s the Stalinist parties sought alliances with "progressive capitalists". Where should such creatures be found? The Stalinists solved this conundrum by decreeing the most advanced capitalists to be the most reactionary. National, or nationalist, capitalists were progressive against those more oriented to the world market. Small capitalists were progressive as against big. The Communist Parties had the slogan of the "anti-monopoly alliance" in domestic politics, and a similar approach, directed against the USA, Germany, and the emerging European Union, in particular, in international politics.

Revolutionary Marxists of all stripes did, of

course, oppose the "anti-monopoly alliance" and the CPs' flagrant nationalism. Many of the underlying ideas, however, remained uncriticised, to reappear later.

The more advanced, the worse? Then the most advanced capitalism, the USA's, is "the Great Satan". Any social formation counterposed to it, any "anti-imperialism", must be better. Hence support for Islamic fundamentalism, or for Saddam's Ba'athist regional imperialism, or for the Taliban — irrespective of whether there is any real national-liberation issue involved.

The "new anti-capitalist" mobilisations after Seattle set us a question: how to go beyond demonstration after demonstration against one after another symbolic world capitalist organisation — WTO, IMF, World Bank and so on. How do we go beyond the symbols to hit the substance of global capital?

Our problem is to try to recompose an organised movement of global working-class solidarity out of the moods and the one-off actions now emerging across the world. To that we have to rediscover the ideas of internationalism, of consistent democracy, and of the political independence of the working class. And, like every rediscovery of old ideas in a new context, our redevelopment of those principles will in part be a development of new ideas, to match up to the new developments of capital world-wide.

Marxism 2003 • the fringe

Iraq: workers' solidarity or just "anti-imperialism"?

Speakers: Clive Bradley (Workers' Liberty) and Nadia Mahmood (Worker-communist Party of Iraq)

7.30pm Tuesday 8 July, at the Exmouth Arms, Starcross Street, near Euston.