Ukraine, Russia: Against imperialism: the internationalism of the working class

When Russian troops seized key build- ings in the Crimea, John Kerry, the US Secretary of State, pronounced these words: ‘You just don’t do in the 21st century what in 19th century fashion by invading another country on completely trumped up pretext.’

But, meanwhile, taking out a loan from the Tony Blair word-bank, insists that the semi-invas- sion of Ukraine is a “humanitarian intervention”, and in any case, the forces who took over the Crimean parliament were just local “self-defence units” who bought their Russian uniforms in a second-hand store.

It is not hard to see the emptiness and hypocrisy of these mouthpieces of capital. Kerry’s statement was met with an on-line storm from the left, pointing out that trumping up pretexts and invading other countries has been the exact behaviour of the USA for the last two decades and more, with the 2003 invasion of Iraq with the excuse of looking for weapons of mass destruction as the high point of America’s “19th century” behaviour. As for Putin’s appeal to humanitarian motives, this is a further case of hollow laughter around the world, not least in Grozny which was reduced to rubble in the 90s when the Russian military ruthlessly suppressed Chechenian moves to break away from the Russian Federation.

19th century behaviour is a code for imperialism. In that period of capitalism’s history, the developed powers built up enormous empires by invading whole swathes of the surrounding pre-capitalist world in pursuit of markets, raw materi- als and cheap labour power. Most of these areas were ruled as colonies by the conquering powers, and the desperate push to grab, hold onto or divide up the last of these regions was a major factor in the First World War.

Rosa Luxemburg, who of all Marxists, in our view, had the clearest view of the origins and na- ture of imperialism, drew out the significance of this transition from “19th century imperialism” to the imperialism of the 20th century:

“With the high development of the capitalist countries and their increasingly severe competi- tion in acquiring non-capitalist areas, imperial- ism grows in lawlessness and violence, both in ag- gression against the non-capitalist world and in ever more serious conflicts among the competing capitalist countries. But the more violently, ruth- lessly and thoroughly imperialism brings about the decline of non-capitalist civilisations, the more rapidly it cuts the very ground from under the feet of capitalist accumulation. Though imperialism is the historical method for prolonging the career of capitalism, it is also a sure means of bringing it to a swift conclusion. This is not to say that capi- talist development must be actually driven to this: the more tendency towards imperialism of itself takes forms which make the final phase of capitalism a period of catastrophe.”

These words were written a year or two before the outbreak of the First World War. And we are still living in that “period of catastrophe”, marked by global economic crises, two world wars, mur- derous proxy wars (often fought in the name of decolonisation) during the Cold War period, the chaotic conflicts that have swept the globe since the collapse of the old bloc system.

In these conflicts, imperialism may have changed its form – holding onto colonies, as in the case of Britain and France for example, became a sign of imperial decline rather than strength, and the most powerful capitalist nation, the USA, supplanted the old empires using its immense economic re- sources to assert its domination of large areas of the planet. But even the US has been obliged again and again to back up its economic influence with military action up to and including the inva- sion of other countries from Korea to Grenada and from Vietnam to Iraq. As for its main rival during the Cold War, the USSR, which was far weaker economically, brutal military control was the only way of holding its bloc together, as we saw with the invasions of Hungary and Czechoslovakia. And although the USSR is no more, Putin’s Rus- sia relies no less on the military option to defend its national interests.

In short: imperialism, far from being a 19th cen- tury phenomenon, still rules the world. And as Luxemburg wrote from the prison which was her punishment for opposing the bloodbath of 1914, “Imperialism is not the creation of any one or any group of states. It is the product of a particu- lar stage of ripeness in the world development of capital, an innately international condition, an indivisible whole, that is recognisable only in all its relations, and from which no nation can hold aloft at will.” (The Junius Pamphlet)

In other words: all nations are imperialist today, from the biggest to the smallest, all are pushed by the constricted conditions of capitalist accumula- tion to expand at the expense of their rivals, to use war, massacre and terrorism to defend their own economic and diplomatic interests. As for patrio- tism and nationalism it is nothing “but a cloak that covers imperialistic desires, a battle cry for im- perialistic rivalries, the last ideological measure with which the masses can be persuaded to play the role of cannon fodder in imperialistic war.” (Junius Pamphlet)

Luxemburg, like Lenin, Trotsky, Pannekoek, Rosmer and others was an internationalist. She didn’t look at society from the standpoint of “my country”, but of “my class”, the working class, which is the only truly international class because it is exploited and attacked by capitalism in all countries. She knew that nationalism had always been a way of hiding the fundamental reality that capitalist society is divided into classes – one which owns the national economy and controls the nation state, and the other which owns nothing but its capacity to work. In the past, when capitalism was a step forward from the old feudal society, the ideal of national liberation could serve the needs of a progressive bourgeoisie revolution, but in the period of capitalism’s decline, nothing positive re- mains of nationalism except to drag the exploited off to war in the service of its exploiters.

This is why internationalists, in 1914, stood for the continuation and deepening of the class struggle against their own ruling class; for solidarity with workers in other countries fighting their own rulers; for the eventual unification of the world workers in a revolution against capitalist rule ev- erywhere. This is why they took up the same posi- tion in relation to the Second World War, the proxy wars between the USA and USSR, and this is why we take up the same position against all of today’s wars. We don’t side with ‘lesser evils’ against ‘enemy number one’, we don’t support ‘small na- tions’ against more powerful ones. Neither do we argue that there is a ‘nationalism of the oppressed’ which is morally superior to the “nationalism of the oppressor”. All forms of nationalism today are equally reactionary and equally murderous.

In today’s conflict in the Ukraine, we don’t sup- port the ‘sovereignty’ of Ukraine, backed up by the imperialism of the US, nor do we support Rus- sian militarism which is pitted against US or Euro- pean influence on their southern flank. We are not ‘neutral’ or pacifists either. We are partisans of the class struggle in all countries, even when, as in Ukraine and Russia today, the class struggle is being drowned in the battle between competing factions of the ruling class. Against the barricades of national flags dividing the workers of Ukraine and Russia, against the threat that patriotic intoxication will drag them towards a terrible slaughter, internationalists have no reason to deviate from the old watchwords of the workers’ movement: the working class has no fatherland! Workers of the world, unite!
The Scottish referendum campaign: another vicious aspect of the Spending Review

T he month Vince Cable and the government have magnanimously announced an increase in the minimum wage by 3%, increasing it by 90p an hour more, bringing the minimum hourly rate to 6.30p an hour. What generates! ‘The working poor’ can do a lot with that, but that’s what you say. It is as above inflation increase! And it’s only fair that our poorer citizens are better treated in a generally down market. We shall all rest in our beds easier with that knowledge and our 90p an hour tacked safely into our pockets, a real victory. The government has extended to the NHS, awarding nurses a generous 1% in line with inflation, well it’s only right and fair, as our masters repeat ad infinitum.

Yet the deadly dance goes on. The Spending Review, now in the second year of its implementation, is bringing a new level of human degradation, not like a pole-axe. The capitalists know that it is only by attacking our wages and cutting our benefits that they can maintain their control over the national state. The danger in the national state is the most important question facing the working class.

This is not an underestimating the destruc- tive impact of this nationalist campaign against the working class at this time. The referendum is on a bluff and its outcome depends on the attacks on living and working conditions imposed by the economic crisis, the working class has found it extremely difficult to resist the onslaught. In a situation marked by low levels of struggles, by an open attack on the working class’s sense of class identity and of its self-confidence, the nationalist campaign around independence can only add to the destruction. An inherent in Scotland being able to offer the prospect of less attacks than under the “government in Whitehall” can have a major impact. Meanwhile the UK idea of the break-up of the country increases fears of even worse attacks on workers. The desire to defend our class security by lining up behind this or that status quo is very powerful.

This is being manipulated very cleverly by the ruling class. The Scottish National Party portrays itself as the alternative, it has played a large role in the history of the working class. The massive in- dustral concentration along the Clyde in the 19th and 20th century saw the rise of a powerful battalion of the class, the famous Red Clydeside, while the huge concentration of mines in South Wales meant that the miners there were at the forefront of the most important struggles of the class. In the miners’ strike in the 80s in South Wales and Wales played an important role. The ruling class thus has every interest in crushing this memory and replacing it with nationalism. Hence nationalism has been a pre-emptive strike against the development of proletarian solidarity.

The referendum is aimed at driving home this nationalism onslaught against the potential future struggles of the proletariat. However with the deepening of the economic crisis the fraction of the ruling class around the SNP have started to believe that independency may be the best means for them to exploit the working class and build their own imperialist state. This desire is shared by important factions of other regional/na- tional bourgeoisies, for example among the Cata- ban: The rupture between in Spain or the Flemish bourgeoisies.

However, there are also important factions of the “Scottish” ruling class that do not want inde- pendence, and internationally there is a real fear amongst the ruling classes in Europe that Scot- ish independence would encourage secessionist movements against their national states. Hence the great reluctance of the EU to say that an inde- pendent Scotland would automatically be able to join.

These contradictory dynamics are also seen in the SNP’s gyrations over its plans for an inde- pendent Scotland. A few years ago it was the idea of Scotland as one of the Celtic Tigers, but the Ti- gers ended up looking distinctly moth eaten; then it was to be Scotland as part of the Euro but then there was the Euro crisis; now the idea is Scot- land as a new Norway and its huge sovereign in- vestment fund, but unfortunately oil revenues are falling. Every time the SNP puts forwards a plan for a shining future its goes up in smoke. These contradictions are also expressed by the somewhat bizarre idea of an independent Scotland keeping the monarchy and the Pound, and having a mone- tary union with what is left of the Union. In short: independence, but with the enemy ruling class providing the financial backing! The instability of the prospects offered for justifying independence demonstrates how irrational the idea is in capital- ist terms.

The sheer irrationality of the idea that there re- ally could be an independent Scotland has already stop this being a difficulty for the ruling class. The growing demands for independence in Catalonia, the Flemish in Belgium, the North of Italy and so on are taking on a dynamic of their own and obliging the national bourgeoisies to devote energy to dealing with these centri- ugal forces. Until now the British bourgeoisie has managed to keep such tendencies in tight control; the outcome of the referendum has looked like a foregone conclusion with a large majority against independence. Nevertheless the centrifugal ten- dencies will not go away because a fraction of the bourgeoisie in Scotland will see its future pros- ects as being fulfilled by independence; and if the proletariat is unable to develop its own strugg- les such nationalist illusions will gain weight ground within its ranks.

The proletariat is faced with incredibly difficult conditions for developing its struggles and its con- sciousness, but one thing is certain: submitting to the nationalist lies of Scottish independence or def- ence of the state is the only way to lose one’s strength and the national bourgeoisie in these difficulties. The rejection of all nationalism is fundamental to the proletariat’s ability to im- pose its own offensive of a united and free humanity.

Phil, 18.3.14

Continued on page 3
Floods in UK, a foretaste of capitalism’s future

The floods which hit Britain this winter, especi-
ally in the south of the country, have brought evidence that the impact of climate change is already being felt, and not only in the most vulnerable countries like Bangladesh and the Maldives, but in the “rich world” too: most recently, in last summer’s devastating floods in the Balkans and parts of
Europe, and the droughts and unusual storm activ-
ity in the USA. Now even “tory heartlands” like
Surrey and Somerset are being bitten by weather
conditions that seem more and more unpredict-
able. The Daily Telegraph – not a paper that nor-
mally-shouts loudest about the ecological crisis –
got the message of a local flooding group to a
flooded area: “Disastrous flooding
ruined
damaged
El
field
miles


British Medical Journal
15.3.14
1. http://www.telegraph.co.uk/earth/
earthnews/8328705/Floods-caused-by-climate-change.
jan/13/floods-public-spending-britain-europe-polices-
homes
fev/17/farmers-ok-flood-maize-soil-protection
fev/20/climate-change-deniers-markets-xl
feb/09/global-water-shortages-threaten-terror-war
6. A slightly different version of this collection can be
found here: http://72.52.202.16/–fenders/Murder.html
jan/13/floods-public-spending-britain-europe-polices-
homes
left-right-right-wing-philosophy
10. From The Communist Manifesto, 1848.
We are publishing a statement produced by the KRAS, an internationalist anarchist group in Russia, and signed by various other groups and individuals. We think that it responds to the elementary duty of internationalists to oppose imperialist policy in Ukraine. The result of the Crimean referendum is very keen to protect Russian investment in the City and keep its concern over Ukraine at a rhetorical level.

It is not possible to be definitive about the build-up of tanks, troops and military vehicles on Russia’s borders with the Ukraine. It’s not clear how far Russia will go. This is not because of the personality of Putin, or the bellicose Russian personality. It’s because war and the threats of war can’t be neatly analysed into particular causes and probable outcomes. What we do know is that in the phase of capitalist decomposition, the tensions and antagonisms between capital states increasingly take on irrational and unpredictable forms. In practice, whatever the initial motivations, all these energies became channelled into zones of contact and confrontation.

The working class

In the protests in Ukraine that led to Yanukovych’s flight to Russia there were many elements. Some had illusions in the potential of deals with the EU, some were just anti-Russian, a rather large number were indeed very close to traditional fascism; at the same time many were on the streets because of a discontent with their worsening material conditions. In practice, whatever the initial motivations, all these energies became channelled behind the nationalism of the bourgeoisie.

In parts of Eastern Ukraine, in the steel and mining areas, as well as a strong pro-Russian sentiment, there is also a discernable anger about the “oligarchs”, the ultra-rich bourgeoisie that has accumulated great wealth with the downfall of the Stalinist state. There have been demonstrations in Donetsk directed against the pro-Russian authorities. There might be the g tossed with protest about the social situation, even though, at this stage it is likely that any such movement could easily be diverted into nationalist dead-ends. The working class in Ukraine and Russia faces a very difficult and dangerous situation and it is not likely that it will be able to break out of the nationalistic trap on its own – which only emphasizes the crucial role of the international class struggle in opposing the austerity of the bourgeoisie and its flight into irrationality and war.

We will not succumb to nationalist intoxication. To bell with their state and “nations”, their flags and nationalities is not our war, and we should not go on it, paying with our blood their palaces, bank accounts and the pleasure to sit in soft chairs of authorities. And if the bosses in Moscow, Kiev, Lviv, Kharkiv, Donetsk and Simferopol start this war, our duty is to resist it by all available means! No war between “nations” – no peace between classes!

KRAS, Russian section of the International Workers Association

Internationalists of Ukraine, Russia, Moldova, Israel, Lithuania

Archipelago Federation of Moldova

Fraction of the Revolutionary Socialists (Ukraine)

Declaration was supported by:

Workers Solidarity Alliance (North America)

An Internationalist from USA

Anarchist-Syndicalist Initiative of Romania

Libertarian Federation of Barcelona

Left Communists and Internationalists from Ecuador, Peru, Dominican Republic, Mexico, Uruguay and Venezuela

Workers-Communist Initiative (France)

Leicester group of Anarchist Federation (Britain)

An Internationalist from Ireland

French-speaking Anarchist Federation (FAF)

International of Anarchist Federations (IFA)

Union workers and precarious of Clermont-Ferrand

CNT-AIT (France)

“World Revolution” (Croatia)

A Libertarian Socialists (Egypt)

libcom.org group

World in Common network

The statement is open for signature

From http://www.anina.info/node/3609 Individuals or organisations wanting to co-sign the statement should send their name/organisation name to KRAS by e-mail at comanar30@gmail.com

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**International declaration on Russia – Ukraine conflict**

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**Ukraine battlefield for capitalist powers**

The power struggle between oligarchic clans in Ukraine threatens to escalate into an international conflict. Russian capitalism intends to use the redistribution of Ukrainian state power in order to implement their long-standing imperial and expansionist aspirations in the Crimea and eastern Ukraine where its economic, strategic and political interests. On the background of the next round of the impending economic crisis in Russia, the regime is trying to stoke Russian nationalism to divert attention from the growing workers’ socio-economic problems: poverty wages and pensions, dismantling of available health care, education and other social services. In the thunder of the nationalist military rhetoric it is easy to construct a corporatist, authoritarian state based on reactionary conservative values and repressive policies.

In Ukraine, the acute economic and political crisis has led to increased confrontation between “old” and “new” oligarchic clans, and the first used including ultra-rightist and ultra-nationalist formations for making a state coup in Kiev. The political elite of Crimea and eastern Ukraine does not intend to share their power and property with the next in turn Kiev rulers and trying to rely on help from the Russian government. Both sides rejected the rampant nationalist hysteria: respectively, Ukrainian and Russian. There are armed clashes, bloodshed. The Western powers have their own interests and aspirations, and their intervention in the conflict could lead to World War III.

Warring clashes of bosses force, as usual, force to fight for their interests us, ordinary people: wage workers, unemployed, students, pensioners... Making us drunkards of nationalist drug, they set us against each other, causing us forget about our real needs and interests: we don’t and can’t care about their “nations” we are now concerned more vital and pressing problems – how to make ends meet in the system which they found to enslave and oppress us.

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**Strategic importance of Ukraine**

Obama and Kerry have warned of the dangers of a Russian advance in the area and insisted that the consequences of a ‘back-door annexation’ of Crimea will be very serious. The EU is prepared to impose sanctions on Russia and its allies in Ukraine. This is not a re-run of the tensions of the Cold War, although it is clear that Russia cannot be excluded. This is not because of any wealth of resources in Ukraine.The importance of Ukraine for Russian capitalism is essentially strategic. The importance of Russia for Ukraine is limited, although, for example, in 2010, it was able to get a discount on Russian gas imports in exchange for extending Russia’s naval base in Crimea. Since the time of Peter the Great, Russia’s rulers have striven for ports that can function throughout the year. You need look no further than Russia to see major ports like St Petersburg on the Baltic sea, and Vladivostok in the far East (ice-locked for four months a year) to appreciate the importance of Russia to access of the Black Sea. The Russian Black Sea Fleet is based in Sevastopol in Crimea; indeed Russia has had a base here since 1783. Any influence that Russia might have in the Eastern Mediterranean, Balkans and Middle East is backed up by the Black Sea Fleet. Although it’s the smallest Russian fleet, in comparison to the Northern fleet based in Murmansk, the Baltic Fleet based in Kaliningrad and the Vladivostok, it is an essential part of Russian capitalism’s interest in key areas of conflict. “For Russia, the fleet in Sevastopol is more than an asset of its southern borders and a platform for projecting power into the Black Sea and from there into the Mediterranean. Its base is also a docking point for Russian oil tankers bound for the Bosphorus and the fleet will be tasked with protecting Russia’s South Stream gas pipeline once it is finished... Russia’s only overseas military base, is buffeted by winds, is sometimes forced to shut because of bad weather; and would need billions of dollars of investment to house the Black Sea Fleet.” (Reuters 7/3/14)

The response to the Russian military build up has varied between different powers. The US and France have been able to make generous denunciations because they don’t have particular interests in the area that might be put at risk. German capitalism is in a different position because it has closer links with Russia on a number of levels and is therefore more cautious about applying (rather than just calling) for sanctions. It wants to avoid fascism in the Crimea and keep its concern over Ukraine at a rhetorical level.

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**Social movements in Turkey and Brazil: Indignation on the crest of the proletarian dynamic**

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**20th congress of the ICC**

- Balance sheet of the congress

- Report on imperialist tensions

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**Russian and Ukrainian troops confront each other**

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**War or war? Not a single drop of blood for the “nation”**

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**Imperialist conflict**

The outising of Ukrainian President Yanukovych to Russia was greeted by some as an expression of another ‘Ukrainian Revolutoion’. From the point of view of the Russian state it was denounced as a coup” by “fascists” in Kiev. In reality, however, it is a zone of combat between major capitalist powers.

What’s been happening is no more a revolution than the Orange Revolution of 2004-5 in Ukraine which led to the installation of Yanukovych’s predecessor Viktor Yukhych as “President” of an “electoral coup”, such language is the common currency of any regime when describing political arrangements that it doesn’t approve of.

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**Bilan**, the Dutch left, and the transition to communism (II)

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**Report on the international situation**

We don’t think, as the statement implies, that the conflict between Russia and Ukraine could spark off a third world war. The conditions for such a conflict are absent in the present period: the constitution of stable imperialist blocs and a defeated working class in the major capitalist countries. Nevertheless, the conflict does express a grave deepening of world-wide imperialist tensions and a further descent of capitalism into chaos and militarism. And yet — in apparent contradiction with the idea that this conflict could be the precursor of a worldwide confrontation — the statement also gives the impression that a central motivation for Russia’s actions is to divert or forestall a proletarian response to the crisis. Nationalism is indeed used in this manner during any war situation, but it is not the danger of class struggle which pushes the bourgeoisie towards war: rather the opposite is the case. Despite these criticisms, we want to affirm our solidarity with the comrades of KRAS and those in Ukraine who have signed this statement, since they are facing a particularly difficult situation: an atmosphere of rampant nationalism, ubiquitous state repression against dissenters, and the unequivocal violation of the “new rights”, which is just a reheated version of the old fascism.

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**Discussion with the ICC and others through our online discussion forum**

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**en.internationalism.org**
For a century now, humanity has stood at a crossroads. In the 19th century the working class starkly outlined this historical watershed in the expression: “social change is the central issue of our time.” For the first time, the analytical and methodological depth – and defend against all comers, including the world revolution will have this impact. The growth of barbarism, today the growth in the depth and comprehensiveness of the productive forces, and the division of labour that vanish with the advent of the productive forces, then society flourishes, not just on the material but also on the moral and cultural levels. But when the relations of production become a barrier to the continued development of the productive forces, then society undergoes repeated and unmistakable crises. It is threatened with a return to barbarism. To take just one historical example: one of the pillars of the Roman Empire was the exploitation of slave labour, especially in agriculture. The application of new farming techniques which could not be put into practice because of the productive power appears as the product of capital – rather than of human labour. Capitalism set its face against all the progress of the world, but the world is round. A world market has been created (on the ruins of alternative forms of production, like the textiles of China, India, or the Ottoman Empire for example). The success of the capitalist mode of production is a progressive step in human industrialisation. The industrial population at the heart of capitalism the industrial revolution meant the destruction of previous ways of life and forcible execution, which made up the rest of the world it meant famine, epidemics and slavery. Capitalism is undoubtedly the most modern form of exploitation, but in the end it is every bit as parasitic as its predecessors. To keep the machine of accumulation going, capitalist socialisation demands ever more raw material and markets, and men and women constantly dispose of a reserve of human beings forced to sell their labour power to survive. This is why its victory over previous systems was measured in terms of the destruction of the others.

Capitalism presents itself as the aim and apotheosis of human development. If we believe modern ideology, there is nothing beyond capitalism. But this means that capitalist ideology must hide two things: first, that historically capitalism is largely dependent on an environment and relations of production outside itself; second, that capitalist socialisation, like all the social forms that have preceded it, is only a stage in the process of humanity’s coming to consciousness. The driving force of capitalist accumulation constantly creates internal contradictions which erupt in crises. During capitalism’s ascendant phase, these crises were overthrown by the destruction of excess capital and the reorganisation of production. In the 20th century, capitalism’s perverted and reified socialisation the continuous and ever deeper economic crisis, society is in a condition of imposing a decisive response to an irreversible and ever deeper economic crisis, society is more and more rotting where it stands; a growing social decomposition makes it ever more difficult for the working class to achieve a clear awareness of its historical perspective – a historical perspective which a century ago was widely shared in the workers’ ranks.

One hundred years ago, the working class faced a gigantic historic task, and so it still does today. The class of associated labour as such bears in it the whole of human history: it is the central class in the struggle for the abolition of classes, and it must rise up against this barbarism. In the struggle against capitalism’s nihilistic and amoral barbarity, the working class is the incarnation of a humanity become conscious of itself. It is the productive force of the future still in chains. Within it lies the potential for a new leap forward in human culture.

In the struggle against capitalism’s entry into decadence, a whole generation of revolutionaries worldwide stepped forward, to set against capitalism’s perverted and reified socialisation the conscious association of the working class, guided by the beacon of the Communist International. With the Russian revolution, it took in hand the struggle for world revolution. For us today, one hundred years later, this great task of taking up our responsibilities for humanity’s future remains an electrifying prospect. Even in the face of general multilateralism, a moral indignation arises in the heart of the working class, which gives us our bearings today. The working class suffers with the rest of humanity under the burden of decadence. Atonisation and the absence of perspective for the future attack our very identity. In the confrontations to come the working class will show whether it is capable of becoming conscious once again of its historical duty.

In the sweep of history, it is only a short step from moral indignation to the politiciation of an entire generation. A new leap forward in the history of human culture is both possible and vital. This is what living historical experience tells us.

German and British troops fraternise on the eastern front in 1914
The outbreak of the First World War in August 1914 was a decisive moment in history. Not only did it mark the entry of capitalism into its period of decadence but it was also the point at which laissez-faire economics, Marx and Engels' manifesto, were more or less followed and analysed the military rivalry and wars of the ruling class. The First International, the International Workingmen's Association, had been forced underground by the military war. The International was a product of the 19th century, a creation of the Second International, faced with the rising tide of militarism. Marx and Engels understood that these organisations had gone over to the ruling class and its interests. The International included, so played no role in the campaign for World Revolution 236 in July 2000. It was the triumph of militarism, the capitalist strategy of the struggle for the class party in Britain, which we aim to republish online. We are publishing this preserved article here as part of our response to the growing media and political campaign about the 'commemoration' of the First World War.

The weakness of the workers' movement in the face of war

The outbreak of war has always been an important one for the working class, not least because the proletarian has been the victim of violence, and in the olden days has been the victim of a war by the ruling class and over then to the camp of the bourgeoisie. In country after country the social democrats and the 'socialists' were built up with too much struggle and sacrifice of the preceding decades, rallied to the national flag and called on the proletariat to sacrifice itself on the altar of capitalism.

The article that follows was originally published in World Revolution 238 in July 2000. It was the point at which the Social Democratic Federation (SDF) and the trade unions joined the bourgeoisie. How ever, the dynamic had existed before 1914 and in the period leading up to the war both the socialist movement and the radical wing of the working class were led in their opposition to war and to the foreign policy of the government. The 1912 Labour Party conference had denounced the policy of the Government as 'anti-socialist' and 'unwarrantable'. In late August 1914, as the war was reaching its climax, the British section of the International issued a manifesto under the names of Halbye and Glacier denouncing the threat of war and calling for mass demonstrations. These were held on the 1st August in many of the major cities of the country, with resolutions adopted calling on the government to make every effort for peace. This reflected the lack of any objective analysis behind the grand rhetoric. Very rapidly after the declara tion of war the Labour Party and the unions gave it their open support. The class war was put on hold in order to give the imperialist war free rein.

Ramsay MacDonald, then leader of the Labour Party, after opposing the declaration of war in August 1914, resigned as leader of the party and was replaced by the leader of the party to make way for the openly pro-war Henderson. However, in practice MacDonald, under the pressure of the Labour Party, kept his principles purely by putting them aside for the duration: "...we cannot go back now, nor can we turn to the right or the left. The war is a great struggle and we have got to face it with all the time apportion the praise and the blame, but the young men of the country must, for the moment, bear all. We cannot go back, but we can, and will, in time, under the influence of public opinion, come through this test with a greater national spirit." 

Kier Hardie was more explicit: "A nation at war must be united..." With the 'wars' of the early days of the war to rouse the populace from its slumbers and to underwrite the strength of the ruling class. "The Nation is at the beginning of a crisis which demands thorough and drastic action by the state and the municipalities" (quothed in Harrison, 'The War Emergency Workers National Committee', in Briggs and Saville, Essays in Labour History, p225). An attempt was made to hide this with a modest smeared calling for the 'conscription of riches'. As the war progressed and the state began to organise production and the workforce more effec tively, the WENWC became less significant. In 1915 Henderson joined the coalition government as a Cabinet Minister. When Lloyd George came to power more Labour MPs joined the govern ment, one union leader being made Minister of Labour and another MP Food Controller. Lloyd George was very clear about the importance of the 'Labour Movement' as a whole to the war: "Had Labour been hostile, the war could not have been carried on effectively. Had Labour been lukewarm, victory would have been secured with increased and increasing difficulty" (quoted in Williams, Fifty Years March, p230).

The integration of the unions

The trade unions did not respond immediately at the start of the war. In late August the Parlia mentary Committee of the TUC called for an end to strikes currently underway and for its constitu ent unions to ensure that any subsequent disputes should be settled by agreement. In fact disputes were already sharply declining, from 100 at the start of August to about 20 at the end of the month. On September 2nd the Parliamentary Committee proposed a scheme suggesting the adoption of a resolution welcoming the decision of Labour to support the recruitment campaign. The manifesto also indicated that it was to act as a Charter and that any of its declarations of support for the war showed that these organisations had gone over to the ruling class, the full significance of this can only be understood by tracing subsequent developments that led to their integration into the state. This had been the aim of the most intelligent parts of the bourgeoisie for many years. We have already shown how the leadership of the Liberal Party sought to draw the Labour Party towards the state by agreeing a secret deal to share out some seats (see part 7 in WRF 222). Significant parts of the Fabian Society, in particular Sydney Webb, had worked assiduously towards this aim. The culmi nation of their efforts came after the war with the adoption of a new 'socialist' platform (containing the famous Clause IV) drafted by Webb, and La bour's transformation into the second party after the Tories as large numbers of Liberals changed allegiances.

The integration of the Labour Party into the State

The major role given to the Labour Party was not direct recruitment for the army but the con trol of the workers through trade unions. One of the main vehicles for this in the first years of the war was the War Emergency Workers National Committee (WENWC) which was formed in the first few days of the war (arising in fact from a meeting originally called to organise opposition to the war). It included trade union leaders, members of the Labour Party, the ILP, the BSP and the Fabian. One of its features was that it included both 'super-patriots' like Hyndman and 'opponents' of the war as well as 'patriots' like Webb. This unity was its great strength, but it wasn't a unity that protected the interests of the working class, as it pretended in its public pronouncements, but a unity that pro tected the interests of the ruling class by con tinuing to fight war. It was seen as a unification of trade unionists and government. Its members, was asked by the government to draft the Bill. The Act prohibited strikes and lockouts until 21s days' notice had been given. It also est ablished 'controlled' workplaces, where workers could only leave if granted a certificate allowing them to go.

As the war progressed and opposition and the working class militancy grew, the unions joined in the campaigns promising a bright future. The TUC participated in the work of the Committee on Reconstruction, giving its support to the Whit ley Report which proposed measures to increase state control, such as the establishment of Joint Industrial Councils and the regulation of wages in certain industries.

A victory for the bourgeoisie

1914 marked the point at which the Labour Party and the trade unions joined the bourgeoisie. How ever, the dynamic had existed before 1914 and continued afterwards. The bourgeoisie had long worked to corrupt individual union and Labour leaders but now it was the organisations them selves that they captured. These developments were not the result of the betrayals of the leaders but expressed the conscious transformation of instruments created by the working class into weapons to oppress them. Ultimately, they were a consequence of the change in historic period. The ascendency of the Labour Party after 1918 and its 'conversion' to socialism was a consequence of its change in class character. Similarly, the exten sion of the vote that followed the war was not a step forward for the working class but a reflection of the new reality that bourgeois democracy could no longer be as any use to the working class, and was a great deal of use to the bourgeoisie. Work ing class interests could now only be defended outside of and against both the unions and the Labour Party.

The outbreak of war did not, nonetheless, mark the death of the working class movement in Brit ain. Revolutionary voices were still raised, both within and without organisations which were part of the Labour Party (it was not possible to join the Labour Party as an individual member at this point) and from those opposed to it. This political strug gle will be examined in the final part of this series. North, July 2000

1914: Labour and the unions mobilise the workers for war

Recruitment of workers to fight in the trenches was a complete betrayal
Tony Benn, Bob Crow
How the heroes of the left are used against the working class

All the obituaries of Tony Benn and Bob Crow have tried to play up their credentials as socialists or, in the case of Bob Crow, with a bent of Lenin in his office, as a communist. The truth lies elsewhere.

Tony Benn is remembered as a courteous, pipe-smoking, middle-class liberal, a great parliamentarian and a rousing orator who would fill any hall for the meetings he held after leaving parliament, as he said, spend more time on politics. He first came to notice for renouncing his hereditary title so that he could pursue a career in the House of Commons. In the 1960s he was in the mainstream of the Labour Party and as a minister in the Wilson and Callaghan governments was an enthusiast for the “white heat of the technological revolution”. In the 1980s he turned to the left and this above all is where his critics want to credit him with socialist policies. He certainly continued to stand for nationalisation when it fell out of favour, but that is not socialism. A business taken over by the state still belongs to the ruling capitalist class and the workers it employs are still exploited. In fact the state itself belongs to the bourgeoisie, and not, as Tony Benn would have us believe, to the ‘people’. Economically he stood for a sort of siege economy with strict import controls – his little England, anti-EU views are close to those of UKIP. He stood for nuclear disarmament, one of the policies that only ever thrives in opposition. However many ministers claim such a position, it has no effect on government policy, as the Labour governments of the 1960s and 1970s demonstr. But it does give the illusion that the state can choose not to be imperialist under the impact of public opinion.

If Benn was a national treasure, as so many of his obituaries have claimed, he couldn’t be a socialist, since socialism (which for us is precisely the same thing when it goes under the less respectable name of international communism) is the sworn enemy of the nation state and of its ‘treasure’ – capital. Tony Benn on the other hand devoted his life to serving the national capitalist state under the false brand of socialism. It is pre-cisely the same thing when it goes under the less respectable name of socialism (which for us is precisely the same thing when it goes under the less respectable name of international communism) is the sworn enemy of the nation state and of its ‘treasure’ – capital. Tony Benn on the other hand devoted his life to serving the national capitalist state under the false brand of socialism. It is precisely the same thing when it goes under the less respectable name of international communism.

Bob Crow, a man who worked on the railways from the age of 16 and lived in a council house despite his £133,000 a year as RMT chief executive, has the reputation of old style radical trade unionism and is credited with the fact that his members have above average pay. He led the union away from the Labour Party in 2004 and the Labour transport secretary, Alastair Darling refused to meet him for 18 months. Aside from that piece of theatre he had the reputation of a very good negotiator with great attention to detail. He described himself as always ready to call a strike, but these were limited token strikes, always secondary to negotiation while enough to keep up his militant reputation. As the Economist states “he did not pick fights he could not win: many of his ‘victories’ were in reality careful compromises” (15-21 March 2014) and despite his reputation he was also “all in favour of co-operating with management” (Bob Crow interview December 2010, http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2010/dec/13/bob-crow-strikes-rmt-union). So was it his militancy that led to rail and tube workers getting above average pay? Here both Crow and the Economist are in agreement that the nature of the industry was key. “Few workers are in the position that RMT members are: becoming a train driver means hurdling remarkable barriers to entry, which helps keep wages high. And transport, unlike car manufacturing or coal mining, cannot be exported overseas” (Economist) and “it’s not the same playing field, I will accept. Working on the railway compared to working in a call centre” (Bob Crow interview December 2010). It is not that workers with a militant union get better pay, but that the bourgeoisie need an apparently militant union leader to keep a militant section of the working class in line.

Like Benn, Bob Crow also comes across as a pleasant and reasonable man in all the obituaries, and like Benn gets fulsome praise from those who opposed him politically. Like Benn, that does not make him a communist or a socialist, nor even a fighter for the interests of the working class. In fact, the ruling class is highly adept at using the personal qualities of this or that figure as a means to maintain the present order: in Benn’s case, the identification of socialism with the capitalist state, and in Crow’s, the illusion that the working class can really defend itself through a more militant form of trade unionism, when in reality the unions everywhere are the capitalist state’s last line of defence. Alex 15.3.14

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* The working class is the only class which can
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