



world revolution

Middle East: capitalism is a growing threat to humanity



A few months ago, the world seemed to be taking a step towards a nuclear confrontation over North Korea, with Trump's threats of "fire and fury" and North Korea's Great Leader boasting of its capacity for massive retaliation. Today the North and South Korean leaders are holding hands in public and promising us real steps towards peace; Trump will hold his face-to-face meeting with Kim Jong-un on 12 June in Singapore.

Only weeks ago, there was talk of World War Three breaking out over the war in Syria, this time with Trump warning Russia that his smart missiles were on their way in response to the chemical weapons attack in Douma. The missiles were launched, no Russian military units were hit, and it looked like we were back to the "normal", everyday forms of slaughter in Syria.

Then Trump stirred the pot again, announcing that the US would be pulling out of the "Bad Deal" Obama made with Iran over its nuclear weapons programme. This immediately created divisions between the US and other western powers who consider that the agreement with Iran was working, and who now face the threat of US sanctions if they continue to trade or cooperate with Iran. And in the Middle East itself, the impact was no less immediate: for the first time a salvo of missiles was launched against Israel by Iranian forces

in Syria, not merely their local proxy Hezbollah. Israel – whose Prime Minister Netanyahu had not long before performed a song and dance about Iranian violations of the nuclear treaty – reacted with its habitual speed and ruthlessness, hitting a number of Iranian bases in southern Syria.

Meanwhile Trump's recent declaration of support for Jerusalem as the capital of Israel has inflamed the atmosphere on the occupied West Bank, particularly in Gaza, where Hamas has encouraged "martyrdom" protests and in one bloody day alone, Israel obliged by massacring more than 60 demonstrators (eight of them aged under 16) and wounding over 2,500 more who suffered injuries from live sniper and automatic fire, shrapnel from unknown sources and the inhalation of tear gas for the 'crime' of approaching border fences and, in some cases, of possession of rocks, slingshots and bottles of petrol attached to kites.

It's easy to succumb to panic in a world that looks increasingly out of control – and then to slip into complacency when our immediate fears are not realized or the killing fields slip down the news agendas. But in order to understand the real dangers posed by the present system and its wars, it's necessary to step back, to consider where we are in the unfolding of events on a historical and world-wide scale.

In the *Junius Pamphlet*, written from prison in 1915, Rosa Luxemburg wrote that the world war signified that capitalist society was already sinking into barbarism. "*The triumph of imperialism leads to the destruction of culture, sporadically during a modern war, and forever, if the period of world wars that has just begun is allowed to take its damnable course to the last ultimate consequence*".

Luxemburg's historical prediction was taken up by the Communist International formed in 1919: if the working class did not overthrow a capitalist system which had now entered its epoch of decay, the "Great War" would be followed by even greater, i.e. more destructive and barbaric wars, endangering the very survival of civilisation. And indeed this proved to be true: the defeat of the world revolutionary wave which broke out in reaction to the First World War opened the door to a second and even more nightmarish conflict. And at the end of six years of butchery, in which civilian populations were the first target, the unleashing of the atomic bomb by the USA against Japan gave material form to the danger that future wars

would lead to the extermination of humanity.

For the next four decades, we lived under the menacing shadow of a third world war between the nuclear-armed blocs that dominated the planet. But although this threat came close to being carried out – as over the Cuba crisis in 1962 for example – the very existence of the US and Russian blocs imposed a kind of discipline over the natural tendency of capitalism to operate as a war of each against all. This was one element that prevented local conflicts – which were usually proxy battles between the blocs – from spiralling out of control. Another element was the fact that, following the world-wide revival of class struggle after 1968, the bourgeoisie did not have the working class in its pocket and was not sure of being able to march it off to war.

In 1989-91, the Russian bloc collapsed faced with growing encirclement by the USA and inability of the model of state capitalism prevailing in the Russian bloc to adapt to the demands of the world economic crisis. The statesmen of the victorious US camp crowed that, with the "Soviet" enemy out of the way, we would enter a new era of prosperity and peace. For ourselves, as revolutionaries, we insisted that capitalism would remain no less imperialist, no less militarist, but that the drive to war inscribed in the system would simply take a more chaotic and unpredictable form¹. And this too proved to be correct. And it is important to understand that this process, this plunge into military chaos, has worsened over the past three decades.

The rise of new challengers

In the first years of this new phase, the remaining superpower, aware that the demise of its Russian enemy would bring centrifugal tendencies in its own bloc, was still able to exert a certain discipline over its former allies. In the first Gulf War, for example, not only did its former subordinates (Britain, Germany, France, Japan, etc) join or support the US-led coalition against Saddam, it even had the backing of Gorbachev's USSR and the regime in Syria. Very soon however, the cracks started to show: the war in ex-Yugoslavia saw Britain, Germany and France taking up positions that often directly opposed the interests of the US, and a decade later, France, Germany and Russia

openly opposed the US invasion of Iraq.

The "independence" of the USA's former western allies never reached the stage of constituting a new imperialist bloc in opposition to Washington. But over the last 20 or 30 years, we have seen the rise of a new power which poses a more direct challenge to the US: China, whose startling economic growth has been accompanied by a widening imperialist influence, not only in the Far East but across the Asian landmass towards the Middle East and into Africa. But China has shown the capacity to play the long game in pursuit of its imperialist ambitions – as shown in the patient construction of its "New Silk Road" to the west and its gradual build up of military bases in the South China Sea.

Even though at the moment the North-South Korean diplomatic initiatives and the announced US-North-Korean summit may leave the impression that "peace" and "disarmament" can be brokered, and that the threat of nuclear destruction can be

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1. See in particular our orientation text 'Militarism and decomposition' in *International Review* 64, 1991, <http://en.internationalism.org/node/3336>

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thwarted by the “leaders coming to reason”, the imperialist tensions between the US and China will continue to dominate the rivalries in the region, and any future moves around Korea will be overshadowed by their antagonism.

Thus, the Chinese bourgeoisie has been engaged in a long-term and world-wide offensive, undermining not only the positions of the US but also of Russia and others in Central Asia and in the Far East; but at the same time, Russian interventions in Eastern Europe and in the Middle East have confronted the US with the dilemma of having to face up to two rivals on different levels and in different regions. Tensions between Russia and a number of western countries, above all the US and Britain, have increased in a very visible manner recently. Thus alongside the already unfolding rivalry between the US and its most serious global challenger China, the Russian counter-offensive has become an additional direct challenge to the authority of the US.

It is important to understand that Russia is indeed engaging in a *counter*-offensive, a response to the threat of strangulation by the US and its allies. The Putin regime, with its reliance on nationalist rhetoric and the military strength inherited from the “Soviet” era, was the product of a reaction not only against the asset-stripping economic policies of the west in the early years of the Russian Federation, but even more importantly against the continuation and even intensification of the encirclement of Russia begun during the Cold War. Russia was deprived of its former protective barrier to the west by the expansion of the EU and of NATO to the majority of eastern European states. In the 90s, with its brutal scorched-earth policy in Chechnya, it showed how it would react to any hint of independence inside the Federation itself. Since then it has extended this policy to Georgia (2008) and Ukraine (2014 onwards) – states that were not part of the Federation but which risked becoming foci of western influence on its southern borders. In both cases, Moscow has used local separatist forces, as well as its own thinly-disguised military forces, to counter pro-western regimes.

These actions already sharpened tensions between Russia and the US, which responded by imposing economic sanctions on Russia, more or less supported by other western states despite their differences with the USA over Russian policy, generally based on their particular economic interests (this was especially true of Germany). But Russia’s subsequent intervention in Syria took these conflicts onto a new level.

The Middle East maelstrom

In fact, Russia has always backed the Assad regime in Syria with arms and advisers. Syria has long been its last outpost in the Middle East following the decline of the USSR’s influence in Libya, Egypt and elsewhere. The Syrian port of Tartus is absolutely vital to its strategic interests: it is its main outlet to the Mediterranean, and Russian imperialism has always insisted on maintaining its fleet there. But faced with the threat of the defeat of the Assad regime by rebel forces, and by the advance of ISIS forces towards Tartus, Russia took the major step of openly committing troops and warplanes in the service of the Assad regime, showing no hesitation in taking part in the daily devastation of rebel-held cities and neighbourhoods, which has added significantly to the civilian death toll.

But America also has its forces in Syria, ostensibly in response to the rise of ISIS. And the US has made no secret of backing the anti-Assad rebels – including the jihadist wing which served the expansion of ISIS. Thus the potential for a direct confrontation between Russian and US forces has been there for some time. The two US military responses to the regime’s probably use of chemical weapons have a more or less symbolic character, not least because the use of “conventional” weapons by the regime has killed far more civilians than the use of chlorine or other agents. There is strong evidence that the US military reined in Trump and made sure that great care would be taken to hit only regime facilities and not Russian troops².

2. “US defence secretary James Mattis managed to restrain the president over the extent of airstrikes on

But this doesn’t mean that either the US or Russian governments can avoid more direct clashes between the two powers in the future – the forces working in favour of destabilisation and disorder are simply too deeply rooted, and they are revealing themselves with increasing virulence.

During both world wars, the Middle East was an important but still secondary theatre of conflict; its strategic importance has grown with the development of its immense oil reserves in the period after World War II. Between 1948 and 1973, the main arena for military confrontation was the succession of wars between Israel and the surrounding Arab states, but these wars tended to be short-lived and their outcomes largely benefited the US bloc. This was one expression of the “discipline” imposed on second and third rate powers by the bloc system. But even during this period there were signs of a more centrifugal tendency – most notably the long “civil war” in the Lebanon and the “Islamic revolution” which undermined the USA’s domination of Iran, precipitating the Iran-Iraq war (where the west mainly backed Saddam as a counter-weight to Iran).

The definitive end of the bloc system has profoundly accelerated these centrifugal forces, and the Syrian war has brought them to a head. Thus within or around Syria we can see a number of contradictory battles taking place:

- Between Iran and Saudi Arabia: often cloaked under the ideology of the Shia-Sunni split, Iranian backed Hezbollah militias from Lebanon have played a key role in shoring up the Assad regime, notably against jihadi militias supported by Saudi and Qatar (who have their own separate conflict). Iran has been the main beneficiary of the US invasion of Iraq, which has led to the virtual disintegration of the country and the imposition of a pro-Iranian government in Baghdad. Its imperialist ambitions have further been playing out in the war in Yemen, scene of a brutal proxy war between Iran and Saudi (the latter helped no end by British arms)³;
- Between Israel and Iran. The recent Israeli air strikes against Iranian targets in Syria are in direct continuity with a series of raids aimed at degrading the forces of Hezbollah in that country. It seems that Israel continues to inform Russia in advance about these raids, and generally the latter turns a blind eye to them, although the Putin regime has now begun to criticise them more openly. But there is no guarantee that the conflict between Israel and Iran will not go beyond these controlled responses. Trump’s “diplomatic vandalism”⁴ with regard to the Iranian nuclear deal is fuelling both the Netanyahu government’s aggressively anti-Iran posture and Iran’s hostility to the “Zionist regime”, which, it should not be forgotten, has long maintained its own nuclear weapons in defiance of international agreements.

Syria. (...)It was Jim Mattis who saved the day. The US defence secretary, Pentagon chief and retired Marine general has a reputation for toughness. His former nickname was ‘Mad Dog’. When push came to shove over Syria last week, it was Mattis – not the state department or Congress – who stood up to a Donald Trump baying for blood. Mattis told Trump, in effect, that the third world war was not going to start on his watch. Speaking as the airstrikes got under way early on Saturday, Mattis sounded more presidential than the president. The Assad regime, he said, had ‘again defied the norms of civilised people ... by using chemical weapons to murder women, children and other innocents. We and our allies find these atrocities inexcusable.’ Unlike Trump, who used a televised address to castigate Russia and its president, Vladimir Putin, in highly personal and emotive terms, Mattis kept his eye on the ball. The US was attacking Syria’s chemical weapons capabilities, he said that this, nothing more or less, was what the air strikes were about. Mattis also had a more reassuring message for Moscow. ‘I want to emphasise that these strikes are directed at the Syrian regime ... We have gone to great lengths to avoid civilian and foreign casualties’ In other words, Russian troops and assets on the ground were not a target. Plus the strikes were a “one-off”, he added. No more would follow”. (Simon Tisdall, *The Guardian* 15 Apr 2018)

3. <http://en.internationalism.org/icconline/201712/14640/yemen-pivotal-war-fight-influence-middle-east>

4. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/may/09/europe-trump-wreck-iran-nuclear-deal-cancel-visit-sanctions>

- Between Turkey and the Kurds who have set up enclaves in northern Syria. Turkey covertly supported ISIS in the fight for Rojava, but has intervened directly against the Afrin enclave. The Kurdish forces, however, as the most reliable barrier to the spread of ISIS, have up to now been backed by the US, even if the latter might hesitate to use them to directly counter the military advances made Turkish imperialism. In addition Turkish ambitions to once again play a leading role in the region and beyond have not only driven it into conflict with NATO and EU countries, but have reinforced Russian efforts to drive a wedge between NATO and Turkey, and to pull Turkey closer to Russia, despite Turkey’s own long-standing rivalry with the Assad regime.

- This tableau of chaos is further enriched by the rise of numerous armed gangs which may form alliances with particular states but which are not necessarily subordinate to them. ISIS is the most obvious expression of this new tendency towards brigandage and warlordism, but by no means the only one.

The impact of political instability

We have seen how Trump’s impetuous declarations have added to the general unpredictability of the situation in the Middle East. They are symptomatic of deep divisions within the American bourgeoisie. The president is currently being investigated by the security apparatus for evidence of Russian involvement (via its well-developed cyber war techniques, financial irregularities, blackmail etc) in the Trump election campaign; and up till recently Trump made little secret of his admiration for Putin, possibly reflecting an option for allying with Russia as a counter-weight to the rise of China. But the antipathy towards Russia within the American bourgeoisie goes very deep and, whatever his personal motives (such as revenge or the desire to prove that he is no Russian stooge), Trump has also been obliged to talk tough and then walk the talk against the Russians. This instability at the very heart of the world’s leading power is not a simple product of the unstable individual Trump; rather, Trump’s accession to power is evidence of the rise of populism and the growing loss of control by the bourgeoisie over its own political apparatus - the directly political expressions of social decomposition. And such tendencies in the political machinery can only increase the development of instability on the imperialist level, where it is most dangerous.

In such a volatile context, it is impossible to rule out the danger of sudden acts of irrationality and self-destruction. The tendency towards a kind of suicidal insanity, which is certainly real, has not yet fully seized hold of the leading factions of the ruling class, who still understand that the unleashing of their nuclear arsenals runs the risk of destroying the capitalist system itself. And yet it would be foolish to rely on the good sense of the imperialist gangs that currently rule the planet – even now they are researching into ways in which nuclear weapons could be used to win a war.

As Luxemburg insisted in 1915, the only alternative to the destruction of culture by imperialism is “*the victory of socialism, that is, the conscious struggle of the international proletariat against imperialism. Against its methods, against war. That is the dilemma of world history, its inevitable choice, whose scales are trembling in the balance awaiting the decision of the proletariat*”.

The present phase of capitalist decomposition, of spiralling imperialist chaos, is the price paid by humanity for the inability of the working class to realise the promise of 1968 and the ensuing wave of international class struggle: a conscious struggle for the socialist transformation of the world. Today the working class finds itself faced with the onward march of barbarism, taking the form of a multitude of imperialist conflicts, of social disintegration, and ecological devastation; and - in contrast to 1917-18, when the workers’ revolt put an end to the war – these forms of barbarism are much harder to oppose. They are certainly at their strongest in areas where the working class has little social weight – Syria being the most obvious example; but even in countries like Turkey, where the question of war faces a working class with a

long tradition of struggle, there are few signs of direct resistance to the war effort. As for the working class in the central countries of capital, its struggles against what is now a more or less permanent economic crisis are currently at a very low ebb, and have no direct impact on the wars that, although geographically peripheral to Europe, are having a growing - and mainly negative – impact on social life, through the rise of terrorism and the cynical manipulation of the refugee question⁵.

But the class war is far from over. Here and there it shows signs of life: in the demonstrations and strikes in Iran, which showed a definite reaction against the state’s militarist adventures; in the struggles in the education sector in the UK and the USA; in the growing discontent with government’s austerity measures in France and Spain. This remains well below the level needed to respond to the decomposition of an entire social order, but the defensive struggle of the working class against the effects of the economic crisis remains the indispensable basis for a deeper questioning of the capitalist system. **Amos, 16.5.18**

5. For an assessment of the general state of the class struggle, see ‘22nd ICC Congress, resolution on the international class struggle’, in *IR* 159, <http://en.internationalism.org/international-review/201711/14435/22nd-icc-congress-resolution-international-class-struggle>

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Readers can register for our online forum at en.internationalism.org, where they can discuss the contents of our press with other readers, sympathisers, and members of the ICC.

Currently, for example, our article on the death of Stephen Hawking (Death of Stephen Hawking, a scientific mind in the service of humanity) has provoked a good deal of disagreement and debate. It has also given rise to a second thread aimed at discussing the more general question of ideological influences in science.

Antisemitism in the Labour Party

Difficulties in the bourgeoisie’s political apparatus

The British Labour Party harbours antisemites, leading to what the Chakrabarti Report in June 2016 called an “*occasionally toxic atmosphere*”. Furthermore this is a longstanding and somewhat intractable feature of the party, continuing despite the recommendations of the report 2 years ago, despite Corbyn meeting with the Jewish Leadership Council and Board of Deputies in April, which they described as a missed opportunity, and despite the fact that it has caused problems in recent local elections in areas with a large Jewish population. On the day of the royal wedding, the Labour Party chose as one of its three new peers Martha Osamor, who had signed a letter two years ago defending those accused of anti-Semitism.

This aspect of the LP should not surprise us. It is a party belonging to the capitalist class, and antisemitism is deeply embedded in capitalism (see <http://en.internationalism.org/iconline/201605/13931/labour-left-and-jewish-problem>). And, as we showed two years ago, “*It is well known that Corbyn has developed links with Hamas and Hizbollah, and his allies in the Trotskyist movement, after years of supporting Arafat or other factions of the PLO, have raised slogans like ‘we are all Hizbollah’ at demonstrations against Israeli incursions into Lebanon. It is here that anti-Zionism indeed becomes indistinguishable from antisemitism. ... Hamas has referred to the Protocols in its programme to prove that there is a world Zionist conspiracy. Hezbollah’s leaders have talked of ‘throwing the Jews into the sea’. Corbyn and the Trotskyists may disapprove of these excesses, but the essence of national liberation ideology is that you make a common front with the enemies of your enemy. In this way, the left becomes a vehicle not only of a more shamefaced antisemitism, but of its most open manifestations.*”

The existence of antisemitism is, however, not sufficient to account for the campaign about it. Whether the media make a scandal of something, or whether it is hushed up, often depends on the divisions in the ruling class and the need to put pressure on a politician or a government. So while Kennedy’s affairs were always hushed up, Clinton’s with Monica Lewinsky was publicised and led to impeachment proceedings which we analysed at the time as due to divisions over imperialist policy in the Far East, and whether to play the China or the Japan card. As leader of the opposition Corbyn has faced fairly sustained pres-

sure, including campaigns about the antisemitism in the party two years ago and again today, a vote of no confidence by the Parliamentary Labour Party and a new leadership election after the referendum. To understand why all this is happening, we need to see what role the Labour Party plays for British capital.

What does the Labour Party do for capitalism?

Often called a ‘broad church’, the Labour Party has different wings that play a greater or lesser part in the various functions it fulfils for the state. Often they loathe each other, but somehow the Labour Party is hanging together much better than the Socialist Parties in France or Spain that have lost much of their influence to the more left wing France Insoumise and Podemos. Ever since the Party and the trade unions were definitively integrated into the state during World War One, Labour’s first responsibility has been to provide a safe means for the working class to express discontent within capitalism, and to monitor that discontent through the unions. This is its unique task, and it is carried out at all times, not just during periods of heightened class struggle as in the period between 1968 and 1989, but also in periods with low levels of class struggle as today, and even in periods in which the class has been defeated as in the 1930s and 1940s. Jeremy Corbyn is clearly on this wing of the Party, a politician who has often been seen on picket lines and demonstrations, and like others on the left of the party has often expressed views that are not wanted in government. For instance his views on unilateral nuclear disarmament, which he has conveniently dropped following a vote by the Party.

The other main role played by the Labour Party from the first half of the 20th century is as a credible party of government, either to ensure the main parties alternate in government to give credence to democracy, or in exceptional circumstances in coalition, as in World War Two. When the ruling class is in control of its political apparatus this works very well for it. In the 1980s the UK, like much of western Europe with the notable exception of France, put the right wing parties in power to impose austerity and privatisation, and the left in opposition to control the wave of class struggle going on at the time. The left wing Michael Foot became leader of the Labour Party and however unpopular Margaret Thatcher’s government be-

came, she kept winning elections. When the Labour Party was no longer needed in opposition a different sort of leader, Tony Blair, was elected.

Brexit, populism and the bourgeoisie’s political difficulties

Two surprises have resulted in Corbyn finding himself as Labour leader and prime minister-in-waiting, both of which highlight the bourgeoisie’s political difficulties. First, and most disastrously for British capital, the Tory Party felt the need to offer a referendum on EU membership in its manifesto for the 2015 election, both because of the divisions on this issue within the party and because of pressure from UKIP. The narrow vote in favour of Brexit was unexpected, and has thrown the bourgeoisie (Tories and Labour) into confusion because of the deep divisions on the issue and the fact that there was no agreed policy on what Brexit would mean.

While the UK bourgeoisie has always had Eurosceptics in both major parties, it has been able to cope with this difference until faced with the current wave of populism. This development of populism, the anti-elitist anger that has led to the election of Trump in the USA and the growth of the Front National in France, expresses the decomposition of capitalism and not any struggle against it. It is therefore a hindrance for the development of working class struggle as well as causing problems for the ruling class.

Similarly, the LP had its leadership election after its defeat in 2015. Corbyn was not expected to win, but was put on the ballot paper so that left wing views would also be represented in the campaign. However, he proved attractive to many Labour Party members and many new members who joined in order to vote for him, swelling the ranks of the party. Nevertheless, he was considered unelectable and it was expected that if he lasted until the next election, Labour would lose disastrously and he would be gone. However, he was a good lightning rod for discontent and anger, particularly among the young, and the Labour Party did much better in the 2017 election than expected. The result was that the PLP, which had only recently voted no confidence in him, was partially reconciled to put up with his leadership for the time being. The new media campaign on antisemitism shows this is no longer the case.

On the one hand, as the *Economist*, 19.5.18, put it, “*the prospect of a far-left government led by Mr*

Corbyn and Mr McDonnell is not the joke it might have seemed 18 months ago. Labour deprived the Conservatives of their majority in a general election last year. Polls now have the opposition snapping at the heels of the flailing Tories, who are hopelessly bogged down in Brexit negotiations.”

On the other hand, Corbyn has been expressing views that are generally acceptable only in a back bench, not a leader of the opposition, let alone a prime minister-in-waiting. First of all his expression of doubts about Russia’s responsibility for the poisoning of former spy Sergei Skripal and his daughter Yulia, and secondly his lack of support for the missile attack on Syria following a gas attack on civilians. This has reminded the main factions of the ruling class just why they do not trust him as a potential PM: “*he has voted against every military action proposed by the UK government during his 35 years in Parliament. He is also firmly opposed to air strikes in Syria in response to chemical attacks, arguing that it will escalate tensions...*” (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-43737547>).

It is precisely this issue that makes the campaign about antisemitism perfect as a means to pressurise Corbyn. It hits him on his links with Hamas and Hizbollah, and with his Trotskyist supporters, and is intended to weaken this wing of the Labour Party and to induce the leader to distance himself from it. It is also something that a party that claims to oppose all forms of racism cannot openly tolerate.

The Labour Party is from top to bottom and from left to right a party of capitalism. It is always ready to take the reins of government, impose austerity and pursue Britain’s imperialist policy. There is nothing to be gained from supporting one wing against the other. **Alex, 19.5.18**

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Sinking into the economic crisis

capital). In this way, the weight of private funds became more important than public funds in the financing of debt (public and private).

This does not mean that there was a lessening of the weight of the state (as the ‘liberals’ proclaim), but rather there was a reply to the increasing needs of financing (and particularly immediate liquidity) which meant a massive mobilisation of all the available disposable capital”.

The credit crunch of 2007 is perhaps the clearest demonstration that the most ubiquitous cure adopted by the capitalist system in the last few decades - the resort to debt – has also poisoned the patient, postponing the immediate impact of the crisis only to raise future convulsions to an even higher level. But it also shows that, in the final analysis, this cure has been the systematic policy of the capitalist state. The credit bonanza which fuelled the housing boom prior to 2007, so often blamed on the greedy bankers, was in reality a policy decided and supported at the highest echelons of government, just as it was government which had to step in to shore up the banks and the whole tottering financial edifice in the wake of the crash. The fact that they have done this by getting even further into debt, and even by unashamedly printing money (“quantitative easing”) is further evidence that capitalism can only react to its contradictions by making them worse.

It is one thing to show that we were right to predict the reappearance of the open economic crisis in 1969, and to offer a framework to explain why this crisis would be long drawn out affair. It is a more difficult task to show that our prediction of a resurgence of the international class struggle has also been vindicated. We will therefore devote a second part of this article to this problem, while a third part will look at what has become of the new revolutionary movement which was born out of the events of May-June 1968. **Amos, March 2018**

50 years ago, May 1968

To mark the 50th anniversary of the struggles of 68, the ICC is holding a public meeting to discuss the meaning of these events.

**Saturday 9th June,
11am-6pm**

**The Lucas Arms
254A Grays Inn Road,
London WC1X 8QY**

Morning Session: The events of May 68, their context and significance

Fifty years is as far away from today as the Russian revolution was to the events of 68. That’s why it will be necessary to recall the broad outlines of what actually happened in May-June, from the agitation in the universities to the ten-million strong strike wave. At the same time, we will try to place these events in their broader international, and above all historical, context: before 68, the international scale of a new generation’s questioning of a society which breeds racism and war, together with growing signs of working class discontent faced with the beginnings of a new

economic crisis. In the wake of May 68: an international upsurge of workers’ struggles which signalled the end of a long period of defeat and counter-revolution, and the emergence of a new milieu of revolutionary political organisations.

Reading material

‘May 68 and the revolutionary perspective’, in International Reviews 133 and 134; see the online dossier ‘Fifty years ago, May 68’, <http://en.internationalism.org/international-review/201804/15127/fifty-years-ago-may-68>

Afternoon session: The evolution of the class struggle since 1968

Just as the five decades prior to May 68 were marked by definite periods in the balance of class forces – a period of open revolutionary struggles followed by a period of deep counter-revolution – so the period opened up by 68 also needs to be analysed in its overall characteristics and not simply as a series of particular struggles. Broadly speaking, we can say that the period 1968-89 was marked by waves of class struggle which contained a potential for massive and even decisive class confrontations; but also that the failure of these movements to develop an explicitly revolutionary perspective, coupled with the bourgeoisie’s own inability to enlist the proletariat for

What the British media don't tell us

The two articles we are publishing in this issue of *World Revolution* are part of a broader project aimed at re-examining the authentic legacy of the events of May-June 1968 in France. The article ‘Sinking into the economic crisis’ takes us back to a document written by the newly-formed group *Révolution Internationale* in 1969, a polemic against the Situationist thesis that the events were a response to a capitalist system that was “working well”. RI’s article insisted that the struggles of 68 were in fact the first reaction of the working class to the resurfacing of the world economic crisis – and our more recent article concludes that this argument has been amply confirmed over the past fifty years. This will be followed by further articles assessing the predictions we have made about the evolution of the class struggle since 1968, and looking at the development of the revolutionary movement over this period.

The second article in this issue, ‘Against the lies about May 68’, also written by our comrades in France, takes up some of the principal distortions and outright lies being spread about the meaning of May 68: that it was something specifically French, that it was essentially a student rebellion, that its main legacy is in contemporary identity politics, or that it was just something that happened a long time ago with no relevance for today.

A brief consideration of some recent attempts to deal with May 68 in the British media confirms that these are indeed the main mystifications about May 68. We are not talking about the lamentations of the right who bewail the permissive spirit of the 60s for destroying traditional values, or of liberals like Polly Toynbee who moaned that “*out of all*

*this revolution against ‘the system’ came a ‘me’ individualism that grew into neo-liberalism”*¹. We are talking about articles and a TV programme that proclaim a certain sympathy with the mood of revolt that swept through France in 1968, display a level of sophistication in their knowledge of what happened and who was involved, but that, in the end, remain firmly inside the standpoint of bourgeois politics and sociology.

For example: both the BBC TV programme ‘Vive la Révolution’, presented by Joan Bakewell², and the *Guardian* article by John Harris, ‘May 1968: the revolution retains its magnetic allure’³ do not simply repeat the banal idea that May 68 was a student revolt and little more. Both point out that it was the massive involvement of the working class which provoked a situation of national crisis. It’s true that Bakewell’s programme reinforces the idea of something specifically French because, while it deals with student and civil rights protests in other countries at the time, it says nothing at all about the powerful *international* wave of working class struggles which followed on from the movement in France. By contrast, the article by John Harris, which focuses more on cultural and historical works dealing with May 68 in retrospect, talks about the Italian workers’ struggles of 1969, the so-called ‘Hot Autumn’, which is the subject of a novel by Nanni Balestrini, *We want everything*.

1. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/sep/08/revolution-victoria-albert-museum-sixties-us-her-neoliberalism>
2. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b0b2lz6r>
3. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/may/11/may-1968-the-revolution-retains-its-magnetic-allure>

written in 1971 but only published in English in 2014. As the title suggests, and as Harris notes, the novel shows that the Italian Hot Autumn echoed the profound desire for social transformation that was such an important component of the French events. Also noteworthy is that both Bakewell and Harris deal with the Situationists, who, whatever their faults, did give voice to the renewed revolutionary hopes of that era. Harris in particular is of the view that the Situationist concept of the Spectacle – and the related slogan, “*Are you consumers or participants*” – retain their vitality in today’s world of obsessive consumerism, Facebook and fake news.

And yet we are also informed by Harris that the true heirs of the Situationists and other radicals can be found in the Momentum movement inside Corbyn’s Labour Party – an example of something the Situationists understood rather well: recuperation, the channelling of radicalism and revolt into the existing institutions of bourgeois society, just as the movement in 68 was derailed onto the trap of democratic elections, and so many of its most dynamic elements were sucked up into the political groups of capitalism’s extreme left.

It is also striking that Bakewell, Harris and also David Edgar in ‘The radical legacy of 1968 is under attack. We must defend it’⁴ agree that the feminist movement – and identity-based politics in general – are a palpable, enduring legacy of the revolt of May 68. And of course, there is a grain of truth in this: as the article ‘Against the lies about May 68’ points out, every serious proletarian

4. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/may/10/radical-legacy-1968-neoliberalism-progressive>

movement has indeed posed the question of the oppression of women and the necessity to overcome it through the unification of the class and the future unification of humanity. The same goes for all other forms of oppression - sexual, racial, national...and all these oppressions were indeed called into question in the animated debates that sprang up everywhere during the wave of working class struggles of the late 60s and early 70s. But the idea of a specific “women’s movement” independent of class is something different, since it acts not for the unification of the proletariat but for its internal fragmentation and its dissolution into cross-class alliances. In today’s period where the working class is experiencing profound difficulties in forging a sense of itself as a class, the growth of identity politics threatens to further exacerbate this tendency towards fragmentation and dissolution.

In this sense, the true legacy of 1968 is indeed less obvious and less spectacular: it can be found in the small milieu of authentically revolutionary, communist organisations, in various forums of discussion about the class struggle and the problem of revolution, but also, now and again, in much more massive movements which give rise to the same kind of searching, reflection and discussion that we saw in the occupied faculties and factories of May-June 68: movements like the 2006 students struggle in France, or the Indignados movement in Spain in 2011, which are not mere pale echoes of May 68, but which point the way to the revolution of the future. **Amos 19/5/18**

Against the lies about May 68!

From Emmanuel Macron to Daniel Cohn-Bendit, from *Figaro* to *Marianne*, from *BFM TV* to *Radio France*, the extreme-right to the extreme-left, whether criticising or celebrating it, all in their own way commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of May 68 by covering it with a shed-load of lies.

No, May 68 is not a “specificité française”!

No-one can deny that May 68 took place within a dynamic that was international. But in focusing on the night of March 22 at Nanterre, on the “electrifying” eloquence of Cohn-Bendit, the smothering paternalism of De Gaulle, the impact between “the new and old France”... this international dimension is deliberately pushed into the background in order to finally make May 68 a “specificité française”. In reality, the wave of student unrest started in 1964, at Berkeley University in California with demands for the right to speak, the end of racial segregation and an end to the war in Vietnam. This wave spread to Japan in 1965, Britain at the end of 1967, Italy, Spain, Germany, Brazil, Turkey and to Mexico at the beginning of 1968. But above all, **May 68 was part of an international workers’ movement**. The wave of strikes which began in France in 1967, reaching its heights in 1968, reverberated throughout the world up to 1974: the famous *Cordobazo* in Argentina, the “Hot Autumn” of Italy in 1969, Spain and Poland in 1971, ranging through Belgium and Britain in 1972, Scandinavia, Germany...

Nor is May 68 a “student revolt”!

The proletarian character of May 68 is often masked by the emphasis put on the student movement. The most sophisticated and devious version of this mystification clearly comes from the leftists and the unions: “*The strength of May 68 is the convergence of the students and the workers!*” Lies! If May 68 dynamised the struggle throughout the world, it’s precisely because **the working class wasn’t dumbly following the movement but, on the contrary, it was its motor force**.

The student movement of the 1960’s was of a **petty-bourgeois** nature, one of its clearest aspects



being its desire for “*immediate change*”. At the time, there was no major threat of not being able to find a reasonable job at the end of your studies. The student movement which began in 1964 developed in a period of prosperity. But, from 1967, the economic situation seriously deteriorated, pushing the proletariat into struggle. From the beginning of 1967 important confrontations occurred: at Bordeaux (*Dassault* aviation factory), at Besançon and in the region of Lyon (strike and occupation at Rhodia, strike at Berliet), the mines of Lorraine, the naval dockyards at Saint Nazaire, Caen... These strikes prefigured what was going to happen from the middle of May 1968 across the country. You couldn’t say that this storm broke out of a clear, blue sky. Between March 22 and May 13 1968, the ferocious repression of the students increasingly mobilised a working class carried along by its instinctive feelings of solidarity. May 14, at Nantes, young workers launched a strike. The next day the movement won over the *Renault* factory at Cléon in Normandy as well as two other factories in the region. On May 16, other *Renault* factories joined the movement and red flags flew over Flins, Sandouville and le Mans. The entry of *Renault-Billancourt* into the struggle was then a beacon: it was the biggest factory in France (35,000 workers) and the saying went “When Renault sneezes, France catches a cold”. On May 17,

the strike wave hit the whole of France. It was a totally spontaneous movement and all over France it was the young workers who were at the forefront. There weren’t any precise demands: this was the expression of a general discontent. On May 18, there were a million workers on strike; on May 22, eight million. **This was therefore the biggest strike in the history of the international workers’ movement**. All sectors were involved: industry, transport, energy, post and communications, teaching, administrations, media, research laboratories, etc. During this period, occupied faculties, some public buildings like the Theatre de Odeon in Paris, the streets, places of work, became spaces of permanent political discussion. “We talk and we listen” became a slogan.

Neither was May 68 a “lifestyle revolution”!

Fraudulently reduced to its “student” dimension, May 68 is presented as the symbol of sexual and women’s liberation.

The great movements of proletarian struggle have always put forward the “woman question”. At the time of the Paris Commune in 1871, in the mass strike of 1905 and the 1917 Russian revolution, women workers played an inestimable role. But what the student petty-bourgeoisie of 1968 extolled is something else altogether: it’s libera-

tion “right here and now” within capitalism, it’s the liberation of humanity **through** sexual liberation and not as a product of a long struggle against the system of capitalist exploitation. In short, it’s the forsaking of all forms of reflection which aim to really call into question the roots of the established order; it’s the negation of the whole process of strikes, self-organisation and discussion within the working class in France during those weeks in May. The importance to the world bourgeoisie of reducing May 68 to burning bras is thus evident.

Nor was May 68 a union general strike!

Today, with the rail workers’ strike in France, the unions and leftist organisations are pretending that another general strike is possible. As in May 68, the unions are about to organise the “convergence of struggles” faced with the policies of Macron¹. Lies! In May 1968 the workers took up their struggle **spontaneously**, without union slogans or union orders. The latter in fact ran after the movement in order to sabotage it all the better. The contemporary cartoon by Sine at the head of this article is very explicit about the resentment of the working class towards the dirty work of the unions.

The Grenelle Accords that the left and the unions celebrated as **THE** great victory of 68 were the outcome of the government and unions working hand-in-hand to stop the movement and defeat it. These accords brought in a rise in purchasing power much less than those gained in the preceding years. A fact that’s hidden today is that the workers immediately felt these accords as an insult. Coming to Renault Billancourt on the morning of May 27, Seguy, Secretary General of CGT, faced plenty of booing and whistling and many union cards were torn up. On May 30, De Gaulle announced the dissolution of the National Assem-

1. For an analysis of the present movement, which is a trap laid for the proletariat, we refer our readers to the article on this site: <http://en.internationalism.org/icconline/201804/15124/france-rail-rolling-strikes-and-go-slows-union-manoeuvres-are-aimed-dividing>

Sinking into the economic crisis

In issue number two of *Révolution Internationale*, published in 1969, there is an article called ‘Understanding May’ written by Marc Chirik, who had returned from over a decade of exile in Venezuela to take an active part in the ‘Events’ of May 68 in France¹.

This article was a polemical response to the pamphlet ‘*Enragés and Situationists in the Occupation Movement*’ published by the Situationist International². While recognising that the SI had indeed played an active part in the movement of May-June, it punctured their almost unlimited pretentiousness and self-regard, which led them to the frankly substitutionist conclusion that “*the agitation unleashed in January 1968 by the four or five revolutionaries who were to constitute the enrages group was to lead, in five months, to the virtual liquidation of the state*”. And that “*never has an agitation undertaken by so small a number led in so short a time to such consequences*”

But the principal focus *RI*’s polemic was the underlying conceptions which provided the soil for this exaltation of ‘exemplary’ minorities – their rejection of the material bases of the proletariat

1. <http://en.internationalism.org/node/3417>. See also our short biography of Marc to get a better idea of one aspect of this “active participation” in the movement. “*He had the opportunity on this occasion to show one of the traits of his character, which had nothing to do with those of an armchair theoretician. Present wherever the movement was going on, in the discussions but also in the demonstrations, he spent a whole night behind a barricade with a group of young elements, having decided to hold out until morning against the police...*” <http://en.internationalism.org/ir/066/marc-02>
2. <https://libcom.org/library/enrag%C3%A9s-situationists-occupations-movement>

Continued from page 4

bly, elections at the end of June, and the opening of branch by branch negotiations. The unions took this opportunity to send back to work the sectors (such as EDF-GDF) where the bosses went beyond the Grenelle Accords. They strengthened this pressure in favour of a return to work through all sorts of manoeuvres, such as the falsification of votes, lies about who had or hadn’t gone back to work, and intimidation in the name of the struggle against “leftist provocateurs”. One of their biggest arguments was that the workers had to go back to work so that the elections, which were supposed to “seal the workers’ victory”, could take place normally.

And May 68 is not “a thing of the past”

May 68 is presented as a movement of the period of prosperity. In other words it belongs to the past, another time. Once again, nothing is more false! From 1967, the world economic situation began to deteriorate, opening the period of the permanent crisis that we’ve known since and confirming that capitalism is a decadent system that it’s necessary to overthrow. May 68 confirmed that the proletariat was the revolutionary class; that it had the strength to organise itself and develop its consciousness through debate in autonomous general assemblies; that it could stand up against the established order and shake it to its roots. Above all, May 68 marked the end of 40 years of Stalinist counter-revolution! The importance of this event shouldn’t be underestimated. May 68, and the wave of struggles which then swept through various countries, signified that the working class was not ready to accept all the sacrifices demanded in the interests of Capital, and still less to sacrifice its life. It is this, and nothing else, which prevented the confrontation between the Eastern and Western blocs from degenerating into a Third World War! Since then, the development of the proletarian movement has met many difficulties. The idea that “*revolution is possible but not really necessary*” has given way to “*revolution is absolutely necessary but has become impossible*”. The proletariat has lost confidence in itself. But the reality of proletarian strength in May 68 must be a source of inspiration for the future. The bourgeoisie knows it and that’s why it covers it with so many lies!

Bmc, April 28, 2018

revolution. Indeed, Marc’s article concludes that the voluntarism and substitutionism of the SI was a logical consequence of repudiating the marxist method which holds that massive and spontaneous actions by the working class are intimately connected to the objective situation of the capitalist economy.

Thus, against the SI’s notion that the “revolutionary events” of May-June had broken out against a capitalism that was “functioning well”, and that there had been “no tendency towards economic crisis” in the period leading up to the explosion, Marc demonstrated that the movement had been preceded by a growing threat of unemployment and by falling wages – signs that the “glorious” prosperity of the post-war period was coming to an end. And these signs were not limited to France but expressed themselves in various forms across the ‘developed’ world, notably in the devaluation of the pound sterling and the dollar crisis in the USA. He stressed that these were indeed only signs and symptoms, that “*this is not yet an open economic crisis, first because we are only at the beginning, and second because in today’s capitalism the state possesses a whole arsenal of means to slow down, and temporarily to attenuate the crisis’ most striking expressions*”.

At the same time, while repudiating the anarchist (and Situationist) idea that revolution is possible at any time, the article also affirms that the economic crisis is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for the revolution, that profound changes in the subjective consciousness of the masses are not automatically produced by the decline of the economy, contrary to the affirmation of the Stalinists in 1929, who declared the opening of a “Third Period” of imminent revolution in the wake of the 1929 crash, when in reality the working class was experiencing the most profound defeat in its history (of which Stalinism was, of course, both a product and active factor).

May 68 was thus not yet the revolution, but it did signify that the counter-revolutionary period that followed the defeat of the first world wide revolutionary wave had come to an end. “*The full significance of May 68 is that it was one of the most important reactions by the mass of workers to a deteriorating world economic situation*”. The article does not go any further in examining the actual events of 68; that is not its purpose. But it does give some indications about the consequences of the end of the counter-revolution (a period which Marc had lived through from beginning to end) for the future unfolding of the class struggle. It meant that the new generation of the working class was freeing itself from many of the mystifications which had imprisoned it during the previous period, above all Stalinism and anti-fascism; and although the re-emerging crisis would push capitalism towards another world war, today, unlike in the 1930s, “*Capitalism disposes of fewer and fewer themes of mystification capable of mobilizing the masses and sending them to the slaughter. The Russian myth is collapsing; the false choice between bourgeois democracy and totalitarianism is wearing very thin. In these conditions, the crisis can be seen immediately for what it is. Its first symptoms will provoke increasingly violent reactions from the masses in every country*”.

Furthermore, as a series of articles written in 2008, ‘May 68 and the revolutionary perspective’³, insisted, May 68 was more than a purely defensive reaction to a deteriorating economic situation. It also gave rise to an intense political ferment, to innumerable debates about the possibility of a new society, to serious attempts by young politicised elements - workers as well as students - to discover the revolutionary traditions of the past. This dimension of the movement was above all what the revived the perspective of revolution, not as an immediate or short-term possibility, but as the historic product of a whole period of resurgent class struggle. The more immediate fruit of this new-found interest in revolutionary politics was the constitution of a new proletarian political milieu, including the groups that would form the ICC in the mid-70s.

The question we want to raise here, however, is whether, fifty years later, the predictions con-

3. *World Revolution* 313-316

tained in Marc’s article have been proved correct or found wanting.

At the level of the economic crisis

The majority of marxist currents in the first decades of the 20th century considered that the First World War marked the definitive shift from the era in which capitalist relations of production had been “forms of development” for the productive forces to becoming fetters on their further development. This was concretised, at the economic level, by the transformation of the cyclical crises of over-production which had marked the 19th century to a chronic state of economic crisis accompanied by a permanent militarisation of the economy and a spiral of barbaric wars. This did not mean, as some of the marxists in the revolutionary period that followed the 1914-18 war thought, that capitalism had entered into a “death crisis” from which any kind of recovery would be impossible. Within an overall epoch of decline, there would still be recoveries, expansion into new zones previously outside the capitalist system, and real advances in the sophistication of the productive forces. But the underlying tendency would be one in which economic crisis was no longer a passing storm, but a permanent, chronic illness, which would at certain moments enter into an acute phase. This was already becoming clear with the crisis of the 30s: the idea that ‘leaving well alone’, relying on the hidden hand of the market, would naturally allow the economy to recover - the initial response of the more traditional bourgeois sectors - had to give way to a more openly interventionist policy by the state- typified by the New Deal in the US, and the Nazi war economy in Germany. And it was above all the latter which revealed, in a period of defeat for the working class, the real secret of the mechanisms which served to alleviate the acute crisis of the 1930s: preparation for a second imperialist war.

The return of the open crisis which our article proclaimed in 1969 was confirmed within the next few years, with the shock of the so-called ‘oil crisis’ of 1973-4 and the growing difficulties of the post-war Keynesian consensus, which expressed itself in mounting inflation and attacks on workers’ living standards, particular the wage levels which had risen steadily during the period of post-war prosperity. But, as we showed in our article ‘30 years of the open economic crisis’ written in 1999⁴, the tendency towards the open crisis becoming a permanent feature of decadent capitalism has become more evident in the entire period since 1968: today we are due an article on ‘50 years of the open economic crisis’. Our 1999 article traces course of the crisis through the explosion of unemployment which followed the application of ‘Thatcherism’ and ‘Reaganomics in the early 80s; the financial crash of 1987; the recession of the early 90s; the convulsions in the Far Eastern ‘Dragons and Tigers’, Russia and Brazil in 1997-8. An updated version would include further recession at the turn of millennium and of course the so-called financial crash or credit crunch of 2007. The 1999 article underlines the principal features of the crisis-ridden economy in these decades: the untrammelled growth of speculation, as investment in productive activities become increasingly unprofitable; the de-industrialisation of whole areas of the old capitalist centres as capital was drawn to the sources of cheaper labour power in the ‘developing’ countries; and, underlying a large part both of the growth and the financial shocks of this whole period, capital’s incurable addiction to debt. And it shows that the crisis of capitalism is not only measured in unemployment figures or rates of growth, but in its social, political and military ramifications. Thus it was the world economic crisis of capitalism which was a decisive factor in the collapse of the eastern bloc in 1989-91, in the sharpening of imperialist tensions and the exacerbation of war and chaos, above all in the weakest zones of the global system. In our putative update we would also seek to show the link between the increased competition demanded by the crisis and the accelerating plunder of the natural environment, the consequences of which (pollution, cli-

4. *International Review* 96 and 97

mate change etc) are already having a direct impact on human populations throughout the world. In brief: the prolonged character of capitalism’s open crisis in the last five decades, with the two major classes caught in a social stalemate, neither able to their respective solutions to the crisis – world war or world revolution – underlies the emergence of a new and terminal phase in the decadence of capitalism, the phase of generalised decomposition.

Of course, the trajectory of this period has not shown one long decline or even a permanent state of stagnation, and the ruling class has always made maximum propaganda use out of the various recoveries and mini-booms that have taken place in the advanced countries in the 80s, 90s and 2000s, while for many of its mouthpieces the impressive rise of the Chinese economy in particular is proof positive that capitalism is far from being a senile system. But the fragile, limited and temporary bases of these recoveries in the established centres of the system was cast under a very bright light by the enormous financial crash of 2007, which exposed the degree to which capitalist growth was founded on the shifting sands of unlimited debt. This phenomenon is also an element in the rise of China, even if the latter’s growth has a more substantial basis than the ‘vampire recoveries’, the ‘recoveries without jobs’ and the ‘recoveries without wage rises’ which we have seen in the western economies. But in the final analysis China cannot escape the contradictions of the global system and indeed the dizzying scale of its expansion has the potential to make future world crises of overproduction even more destructive. Looking back over the past five decades, it becomes evident that we are not talking about a cycle of boom and bust as in the 19th century, when capitalism really was a system in its prime, but a single, protracted, world-wide economic crisis, itself the expression of an underlying obsolescence of the mode of production. The 1969 article, armed with this understanding of the *historic* nature of the capitalist crisis, was thus able to diagnose the real significance of the small signs of economic ill-health that were so easily dismissed by the Situationist doctors.

The development of state capitalism

Looking back in this way we can also appreciate the correctness of the article’s assertion that “*today’s capitalism the state possesses a whole arsenal of means to slow down, and temporarily to attenuate the crisis’ most striking expressions*”.

The main reason why this crisis has dragged on for so long, and has so often been so difficult to perceive, is precisely the capacity of the ruling class to use the state to hold off and postpone the effects of the system’s contradictions. The ruling class from the 60s onwards did not make the same mistake as in the apologists for ‘laissez-faire’ in the 1930s. Instead, an older and wider bourgeoisie maintained and strengthened the state capitalist interference in the economy which had enabled it to respond to the crisis in the 30s and which helped to sustain the post-war boom. This was evident with the first Keynesian responses to the reawakened crisis, which often took the form of nationalisations and direct financial manipulations by the state, but, ideological fog notwithstanding, it has continued, albeit in an altered form, throughout the epoch of ‘Reaganomics’ and ‘neo-liberalism’, in which the state has tended to delegate many of its functions to private sectors with the aim of increasing productivity and the competitive edge.

The 1999 article explains how this revised relationship between state and economy operated:

“*The mechanism of ‘financial engineering’ was as follows. On the one hand, the state issued bonds and securities in order to finance its enormous and ever-growing deficits which were subscribed to by the financial markets (banks, business and individuals). On the other hand, it pushed the banks to search for loans in the financial markets, and at the same time to issue bonds and securities and to carry out successive expansions of capital (issuing of shares). It was a question of a highly speculative mechanism which tried to exploit the development of a growing mass of fictitious capital (idle surplus value incapable of being invested in new*

Illusions in the trade unions hold back the workers’ struggle

This article was written by a comrade of the ICC who works at a UK university and took part in the recent UCU strikes. Although not in the UCU or even eligible to join the pension scheme at the centre of the dispute, the comrade joined the strike in solidarity.

In February 2018, the University and College Union (UCU) launched industrial action across the university sector in the UK. The strike was called over attempts by Universities UK (UUK)¹ to reduce the benefits members of the University Superannuation Scheme (USS), the pension scheme for academics and professional staff in the Higher Education section. The employers have claimed that this reduction in benefits was necessary to tackle the large deficit that the scheme is accruing.

The cuts are significant, with the headline figure suggesting an ‘average’ academic would lose £10,000 annually from their pension.

This is especially the case in my institution² where militancy is weak. Staff are divided into three unions:

- UNISON covers lower graded administration and manual workers (porters, cleaners, etc.). This would be my natural home, were I unionised.
- Unite covers technical staff.
- UCU covers academic and ‘professionally’ graded administration staff.

Only a minority of staff are unionised and those outside are generally apathetic. Unison is chronically weak, having been on strike only once in all the time I’ve been there. Unite seems a bit more militant but, again, I’ve only ever known them to go on strike once.

UCU has a far more militant rhetoric (albeit only by comparison) and has its main support in the academic community.

A new militancy

In general, HE strikes are small and demoralising affairs, token efforts involving one or two-day actions. Any more is practically a revolution in comparison. Turnout at pickets is limited – many workers cross the picket line or stay at home, cut off from one another.

In contrast, this action was announced for 14 days over 4 weeks. This essentially meant giving up three weeks’ pay over one, possibly two, pay packets – a considerable loss for even the better off workers, but an eye-watering sum for the growing layer of low-paid, casualised staff in both administrative and academic functions³.

In previous strikes, the local branches have had to scrape together picket rotas in order to maintain a minimal presence. This time, the first days of action on 22nd and 23rd February produced pickets of around 150 at the main entrance. Other entrances had smaller – between 10 and 20 – but still lively gatherings.

Originally, the union had planned a picket on only the first day or so. The branch leaders were visibly astonished by the turn-out and quickly moved to organise further pickets for the rest of the week. Every strike day saw a picket and although numbers fluctuated, the main entrance always managed to attract a minimum of around 50 picketers, even during the arctic winds of the “Beast from the East”⁴.

The picketers were mainly drawn from the academic staff, with support functions a clear minority. There were also notable differences in turnout

between disciplines, with arts, humanities and social sciences far more strongly represented than technical subjects.

Numbers were augmented by a significant number of students that joined the picket, rejecting calls from the administration to go to their lectures as normal. The student composition largely followed that of the picketers, being weighted towards non-technical disciplines. The local “Socialist Students” society joined the line, setting up pop-up food tables.

Further evidence of how the local branch had completely underestimated the support for the action was evident at the post-picket rally on 22nd Feb. They had booked a small room at the local community centre. This filled up almost immediately, resulting in another, more spontaneous, rally taking place outside, essentially creating two meetings.

Motivating factors

Everyone I spoke to was surprised at the turnout. Many people had never been on strike before or had experienced only small actions supported by a hard-core. In the early days, there was a real sense of euphoria as hundreds of people gathered in common purpose, made new friends both personal and professional and aired common grievances.

There was a real sense of anger and betrayal over the pensions issue. Over the years, staff have accepted a series of cuts to the pension scheme, often following demoralising small-scale industrial actions. Having already accepted significant cuts, the employers are back for more. But, more important, there was a general sense that the attack on pensions is only the latest in a series of continual attacks on academic freedom, low-pay, casualisation, ever more regimented working environment, increasing dictatorial control from the centre, impossible workloads⁵, etc. It cannot be denied that some of this can be explained as the revolt of a layer of workers that has previously enjoyed an almost petit-bourgeois level of autonomy in their working lives, resisting increasing proletarianisation.

However, the younger academics and students never experienced those halcyon days – their education has been an experience of continued testing, growing financial pressure, and an uncertain job market. Early-career academics now face particularly harsh conditions. The rise of casual working among students has a broader impact. Exposed to the harsh reality of dead-end jobs, they quickly come to see academic success as the only path to escape. The pizza delivery shift serves as a warning of their likely future should they fail their degree, not to mention the emotional weight of debts in the tens of thousands.

Naturally, debt slavery and naked exploitation is the lot of most working-class children who ‘fail’ in the current education system, and we should not forget that working-class students are still ‘privileged’ in comparison to workers of the same age. But, in some ways, the intellectual stimulation of a degree contrasted with the brutal world of work, combined with the ideology of ‘employability’, is even worse as it teases these young adults with the possibility that they might have a better future.

Where once Higher Education was about training the future bourgeoisie, these days it is more about feeding the capitalist machine with high-skilled labour. The most intelligent and ideological tractable are pushed towards a career with the large corporations, the more independent towards the cult of the entrepreneur and the start-up. The rest are destined to become fodder for low or middle ranking administrative functions, call centre work, and the like, and many not even that.

Small wonder that students’ mental health conditions have deteriorated steadily. Declarations of mental health problems among students have increased around 500% in the last decade, while suicide rates have risen by 56%. As poorly resourced support services struggle to cope, students now have a higher risk of suicide than the general population⁶.

Although the issue of pensions was the spark that lit the fire, the underlying nature of the strike was really a revolt against the alienation of the education system, the modern workplace and society itself, a revolt against social decomposition.

The creativity of the struggle

In response to these underlying issues, the strike was accompanied by a series of “teach-outs” that attempted to articulate a need for something different. These ranged from efforts to formulate an alternative foundation for the University system run on democratic lines, to celebrations of strike-poetry by the English department, lectures on the growth of casualisation and much more.

Much of this was, unsurprisingly, dominated by academic and leftist ideology. The ‘enemy’ was repeatedly framed as ‘neo-liberalism’ rather than capitalism, and the emphasis was on trying to find solutions within the capitalist system. Building strong unions, varying forms of Keynesianism, Jeremy Corbyn, etc. were all seen as offering, if nothing else, some sort of relief from being engulfed in the current effluent of society. To a large extent, however, the meetings were dominated by what could best be described as a cry of torment, tempered by rage, as people shared their experiences of life in the capitalist education system.

Nonetheless, the fact that the struggle impelled an effort by students and workers to create a space where issues can be discussed shows the hunger for discussion growing within this sector. In particular, it shows that a new generation of workers, for all its confusions around identity politics, etc. is not simply willing to passively accept the increasingly brutal attacks launched against it⁷.

On a more practical level, there were also attempts to overcome the nature of the strike itself. As mentioned above, the financial penalty for supporting the strike in its entirety was too much for some workers. But, instead of simply crossing the picket line, they decided to strike on random days, reducing the financial penalty but also maintaining disruption by making it impossible for bosses to predict who was going to turn up when.

Academics also began to withdraw external examiner support for institutions that attempted to intimidate strikers; with the result that many institutions abandoned the hard line they had taken and became much more conciliatory towards striking workers. Threats of disciplinary action were replaced with cloying “acknowledging your strong feelings”.

Students also launched occupations at several institutions, waging a highly effective campaign on social media that further helped dissolve the moral authority of the employers. It’s difficult for the powers that be to maintain credibility when students denied access to toilets post pictures of bottles of urine online and female students lament the anatomical difficulties of filling bottles!

The union strikes back

As the strike progressed into March, the employers’ front appeared to be crumbling. One-by-one, University Vice Chancellors began to distance themselves from the UUK and attempted to cast blame on the disproportionate weight of Oxbridge

colleges in UUK voting. Some Vice Chancellors openly supported the strikers, with some even joining picket lines at their own institutions⁸, although this ‘support’ was still accompanied by attempts to intimidate workers behind the scenes by HR departments⁹.

UUK’s point-blank refusal to back down vanished and suddenly the UCU and UUK were negotiating again and a deal was announced. The ‘deal’ offered the retention of some benefits at the cost of a significant increase in contributions, plus a commitment to a revaluation of the fund.

The mood on the picket line was angry. After launching one of the biggest, most high profile strikes in recent history and the biggest ever in the sector, the employers’ front disintegrating, this was the best that the union could get? Adding to the resentment was the fact that the union had circulated the offer without a recommendation, with many feeling completely unequipped to make a decision about a complex financial product most barely understood.

There was a lot of heated, but good-natured discussion on the picket. A minority supported the deal, and there was a lot of conversation about the way the union hierarchy appeared to have betrayed the strikers. There was also discussion as to how decisions were taken in the union, but although there was significant resentment against the leadership, no explicit anti-union critique emerged.

This didn’t stop anger solidifying into a Twitter campaign around the hashtag #nocapitulation. The next day of pickets was massive, even larger than those at the beginning. One-by-one branches around the country announced their rejection of the deal and within 24 hours it was dead in the water.

The strikes continued with, on the one hand a sense of victory in having beaten back the proposal, but also an underlying sense of worry of what would come next.

Victory, stalemate or defeat?

As the strikes ended, new negotiations were announced with the threat of another wave to come in May.

Very quickly, a new proposal was agreed between the UCU and UUK. The main thrust of this new agreement was a suspension of the attack on benefits in order for a new valuation of the pension to take place over the next couple of years, by an expert panel with more involvement from the union.

The proposal was put to ballot with a recommendation to accept, with a majority of 64% voting to accept.

At first glance, this looks like a victory, if only a temporary or partial one. After all, the attack has been pushed back. But there has been no agreement whatsoever to preserve current benefits or prevent a rise in contributions and, indeed, the union explicitly stated that any attempt to get guarantees on this (a “no detriment” agreement) was “unrealistic”. Everything now depends on the assessment that the newly appointed valuation panel makes concerning the health of the pension scheme.

Workers are now faced with the potential of having to go through the same struggle again a year or two down the line. And this time, the employers (or the union) won’t be caught by surprise at the strength of the struggle.

Weaknesses in the struggle and lessons for the next

Despite the high participation represented by both the large pickets and the surge in members of the UCU, the strikers were still in a minority. Most of the support workers went into work, even

1. This body is the employers’ association for the Higher Education sector in the UK.
2. I work in a low-grade administrative function at a Russell Group university.
3. Academic pay used to be better than most other functions but many academics are now on temporary and casual contracts especially at the beginning of their careers. Indeed, the HE sector has been one of the leading industries in terms of casualised labour.
4. Thankfully for the picketers, the big snowfalls of that period did not happen on strike days. For some institutions, including my own, this added to the chaos. Return to work days saw campuses closed due to heavy snowfall, exacerbating the overall disruption. As soon as the snows melted, the strikes resumed. At that point, workers felt even the elements were with them, despite the bitter cold.

The only way for workers to overcome this inherent disadvantage is **to spread the struggle**. Had the struggle brought in other University workers, far more pressure could have been brought to bear on the bosses.

By making workers a partner (through 'their' union) in valuing the fund, the union creates the illusion of some sort of joint interest between workers and the bosses. It also implies that workers should accept these valuations (when competently done, of course) as somehow objective.

The young Karl Marx

5. <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1847/communist-league/1885hist.htm>

10. *Basic Positions of the International Communist*
Current: <https://en.internationalism.org/basic-positions>

Art doesn't have the job of serving a political cause. However, the content and form of a work can send a message. While we applaud Raoul Peck's efforts to exhume Marx from the cemetery of history, the manner in which the film relates certain moments of his life tends to pervert and deform the political lessons that we can draw from them⁶. This is what we want to try to correct with this article. **DI, 28.10.17**

6. All artistic works are influenced, sometimes unconsciously, by the ideas of the ruling class at the time. We see it very clearly at the end of the film where there's an accelerating succession of images which is supposed to offer a vision of the devastation produced by capitalism but in reality seems to make all kinds of amalgams, in particular between Stalinism (Che Guevara, Mao, Mandela...) and marxism. Stalin was the hangerman of the real communists who followed the approach of Marx. This is the odour of a subtlety distilled poison recognised by the French Communist Party (PCF) and that's why this Stalinist party has been to the fore in publicly praising the film.

Emma Goldman and the Russian Revolution: a long overdue response to a revolutionary anarchist

[illegible]

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The young Karl Marx

Raoul Peck’s film, which has recently been released in Britain, provides us with much to think about on the bicentenary of Marx’s birth, and we certainly recommend it to our readers. But as the following article shows, it still needs to be viewed with a critical eye...

This is a film that’s surprising because it seems to rehabilitate the character of Karl Marx. Surprising because in choosing to cover five years which perhaps were the most decisive in Marx’s life - from 1843 to 1848- Raoul Peck aims to break with the caricature of a solitary genius acting outside of the world of the workers. But does he really achieve this? Without doubt the angle from which Raoul Peck deals with the life of Marx corrects somewhat the idea that Marx and Engels were inventors of abstract notions such as “class struggle”, “revolution” or “communism”. The film does show how these two men, who played a key role in the revolutionary movement, were won over to a cause that had been born well before them from the womb of the proletariat of the most industrialised countries of the 19th century. In this we think that the vision of Peck is totally different from the more rabid intellectuals who, not without a great deal of dishonesty, try to demonstrate that the works of Marx carry the germs of the Stalinist tragedy¹. And yet this film doesn’t totally break from the image of the providential hero, which considerably weakens the attempt to show the militant dimension of Marx, his contemporary relevance, as well as the decisive role that the proletariat will have to play in the transformation of society.

The film correctly emphasises the decisive meeting and the unshakeable collaboration between Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, the rebellious son of an industrialist, who opened Marx’s eyes to the political potential of the working class and to the importance of political economy. However there is a lack of subtlety in the portrayal of this meeting, where the coldness of the formal introductions in Arnold Ruge’s drawing room suddenly gives way to declarations of mutual fascination in a night of drinking and games of chess where

1. Which is the message of the programme *28 minutes* on Arte in an edition on October 1917.

Political positions of the ICC

World Revolution is the section in Britain of the **International Communist Current** which defends the following political positions:

- * Since the first world war, capitalism has been a decadent social system. It has twice plunged humanity into a barbaric cycle of crisis, world war, reconstruction and new crisis. In the 1980s, it entered into the final phase of this decadence, the phase of decomposition. There is only one alternative offered by this irreversible historical decline: socialism or barbarism, world communist revolution or the destruction of humanity.
- * The Paris Commune of 1871 was the first attempt by the proletariat to carry out this revolution, in a period when the conditions for it were not yet ripe. Once these conditions had been provided by the onset of capitalist decadence, the October revolution of 1917 in Russia was the first step towards an authentic world communist revolution in an international revolutionary wave which put an end to the imperialist war and went on for several years after that. The failure of this revolutionary wave, particularly in Germany in 1919-23, condemned the revolution in Russia to isolation and to a rapid degeneration. Stalinism was not the product of the Russian revolution, but its gravedigger.
- * The statified regimes which arose in the USSR, eastern Europe, China, Cuba etc and were called ‘socialist’ or ‘communist’ were just a particularly brutal form of the universal tendency towards state capitalism, itself a major characteristic of the period of decadence.
- * Since the beginning of the 20th century, all wars are imperialist wars, part of the deadly struggle between states large and small to conquer or retain a place in

the two men come to perfect agreement and Marx compliments Engels for having opened his eyes, drunkenly declaiming the celebrated phrase: “*Philosophers have only interpreted the world, the task from now on is to change it*”. Paradoxically, it’s a central scene since it announces the vision of the character that the film will develop: a Marx who is not a philosopher, a historian, or an economist but a militant of the workers’ movement, addressing himself to workers in meetings, polemicising with Proudhon and his petty-bourgeois reformism or with Weitling and his Christian idealism.

What’s more the hardships of the life of a militant are not neglected. If the element of repression is somewhat flippantly depicted when Karl and Friedrich play cat and mouse with the police in the Paris suburbs, the frustrations and traumas of exile, the poverty of daily life, are shown in their cruel reality. These moments show the strengthening links of friendship and love but also those feelings engendered by militant passion. Raoul Peck thus reproduces a whole revolutionary milieu first in Paris and then in Brussels and London. But, despite all this, these scenes offer an excessively personalised image of the debates and the process of clarification within the revolutionary milieu of the time. For example, Raoul Peck seems to attribute to Marx the discredit suffered by Weitling in the League of the Just, whereas the first to call into question the idealist and messianic aims of the latter were Schapper² and a great majority of workers of the German Workers’ Association in London. We know that Marx followed this polemic with a great deal of attention since it revealed a break between a sentimental communism and the scientific communism that he himself advocated. Through the creation of correspondence committees, the London Association got closer to the conceptions of Marx on the direction to give to the movement and consequently distanced itself from the conception of Weitling. Thus the virulent discussion at the Brussels Correspondence Committee of March 30 1846, shown in the film, ended up in a split that was already a long time coming. In fact the director remains a prisoner of the democratic vision of debate and political action because the attention is regularly drawn to the theoretical jousting between leaders and charismatic chiefs, which obscures what was essential: the theoretical effervescence and the complex, collective re-

2. Schapper was the spokesman of the German Workers’ Association of London at the time.



flection which already characterised the workers’ movement at that time.

This confusion increases in the way that the relationship between Marx and the League of the Just is treated. We recognise that Raoul Peck wants to show that Marx and Engels had understood that the salvation of humanity resides in the historic role that the working class has to play. They also understood that it was necessary to rid themselves of all idealism, all ethereal, illusory and utopian speeches on the means to attain a superior stage of human society; that the working class needed a practical theory in order to understand the world which had engendered it, and to understand that its situation was not set in stone but transitory. What the film tries to show, with a certain fidelity it seems to us, is the need for the working class to develop a revolutionary theory and the conviction to act upon it. On the other hand, the way in which the rapprochement between Marx and the League of the Just is shown contains the idea that Marx was ready to engage in intrigues, an ambitious Marx playing on his intellectual stature in order to win the majority of the revolutionary avant-garde to his side. In this version of events, Marx and Engels seem almost to seduce the leaders of the League; they go out of their way to get into contact with them, not hesitating to exaggerate their closeness to Proudhon in order to extend the network of correspondence committees into the east of France. Contrary to the wooliness of the film’s treatment of this event, it was the League, under the aegis of its spokesman Joseph Moll, who invited Marx to join. In their *Karl Marx: Man and Fighter*, Boris Nicolaevskyi and Otto Maenchen-Helfen write: “*he explained in his own name and that of his comrades that they were convinced of the rightness of Marx’s views and agreed that they must shake off the old conspiratorial forms and*

organisation, whether ‘official’ or ‘rank and file’, serve only to discipline the working class and sabotage its struggles.

- * In order to advance its combat, the working class has to unify its struggles, taking charge of their extension and organisation through sovereign general assemblies and committees of delegates elected and revocable at any time by these assemblies.
- * Terrorism is in no way a method of struggle for the working class. The expression of social strata with no historic future and of the decomposition of the petty bourgeoisie, when it’s not the direct expression of the permanent war between capitalist states, terrorism has always been a fertile soil for manipulation by the bourgeoisie. Advocating secret action by small minorities, it is in complete opposition to class violence, which derives from conscious and organised mass action by the proletariat.
- * The working class is the only class which can carry out the communist revolution. Its revolutionary struggle will inevitably lead the working class towards a confrontation with the capitalist state. In order to destroy capitalism, the working class will have to overthrow all existing states and establish the dictatorship of the proletariat on a world scale: the international power of the workers’ councils, regrouping the entire proletariat.
- * The communist transformation of society by the workers’ councils does not mean ‘self-management’ or the nationalisation of the economy. Communism requires the conscious abolition by the working class of capitalist social relations: wage labour, commodity production, national frontiers. It means the creation of a world community in which all activity is oriented towards the full satisfaction of human needs.
- * The revolutionary political organisation constitutes the vanguard of the working class and is an active

traditions. Marx and Engels were to be invited to collaborate in work of reorganisation and theoretical reorientation”³. However Marx hesitated in accepting, still doubting the real will of the League to reorganise itself and get rid of the old conspiratorial and utopian conceptions. But “*Moll stated that it was essential that he and Engels should join the League if it were really to shake off all its arcane shackles, and Marx overcame his doubts and joined the League of the Just in February or March 1847*”⁴.

While it’s true that the weight of personalities was quite strong in the workers’ movement of the 19th century, the film, by isolating the theoretical contribution of Marx and Engels, gives the basic impression that this movement depended entirely on personalities of genius. This is confirmed in the unfolding of the congress of the League of the Just on June 1 1847, which Marx didn’t actually go to - officially for lack of money but really because he wanted to await the decisions of the congress before definitively joining the League. This scene is a caricature because it presents the congress as a fight between personalities where a minority of “elite” militants are supported or contested by applause and cries from the great majority who remain passive. This is a deformed vision of the real proceedings of a congress of a revolutionary organisation.

Despite the harsh nature of their living conditions, the politicised workers attached great importance to learning and to the deepening of political questions, especially through reading pamphlets. Thus the congresses were not some sort of oratory competition where each side had

3. *Karl Marx: Man and Fighter*, Pelican Books, 1976, p 131

4. ibid

Continued on page 7

factor in the generalisation of class consciousness within the proletariat. Its role is neither to ‘organise the working class’ nor to ‘take power’ in its name, but to participate actively in the movement towards the unification of struggles, towards workers taking control of them for themselves, and at the same time to draw out the revolutionary political goals of the proletariat’s combat.

OUR ACTIVITY

Political and theoretical clarification of the goals and methods of the proletarian struggle, of its historic and its immediate conditions.

Organised intervention, united and centralised on an international scale, in order to contribute to the process which leads to the revolutionary action of the proletariat.

The regroupment of revolutionaries with the aim of constituting a real world communist party, which is indispensable to the working class for the overthrow of capitalism and the creation of a communist society.

OUR ORIGINS

The positions and activity of revolutionary organisations are the product of the past experiences of the working class and of the lessons that its political organisations have drawn throughout its history. The ICC thus traces its origins to the successive contributions of the *Communist League* of Marx and Engels (1847-52), the three Internationals (the *International Workingmen’s Association*, 1864-72, the *Socialist International*, 1884-1914, the *Communist International*, 1919-28), the left fractions which detached themselves from the degenerating Third International in the years 1920-30, in particular the *German, Dutch and Italian Lefts*.