

Moralizing and opportunism at the rallies on East Timor

A letter from a reader

23 September 1999

Dear *World Socialist Web Site*,

In the last several weeks I have attended several demonstrations concerning the ongoing situation in East Timor. Before going to the first rally, I was hopeful: here, I thought, would be people who were progressive advocates of human rights who also understood the sad realities of capitalist geopolitics. Instead, I was disappointed with most of the protesters and, indeed, became deeply concerned about the overall future of the American left.

What sorts of people attended these rallies? First of all, the group ETAN (East Timorese Action Network) was always well represented; the socioeconomic makeup of this group quickly became apparent to me. ETAN is an organization which apotheosizes the various bourgeois-nationalist misleaders of East Timor, specifically promoting Gusmao, Horta, etc. I had never seen any of their members at protests against the bombing of Yugoslavia or against the imposition and maintenance of sanctions against Iraq, facts which suggested to me that their concern for human rights was something less than universal. Overwhelmingly, the people within the group were young, fashionably dressed individuals whose involvement with politics did not extend past their shouting of simple slogans like "free Xanana now!" In talking with ETAN members individually, I was struck by how unaware these individuals were of the deeper economic forces which underlie US foreign policy; for most of them, the entire issue came down simply to supporting "good" Timorese people in their struggle for national liberation, freedom, etc.

At later protests (nearer to the day of the vote against autonomy) I would tell anyone who would listen about the likelihood of foreign military intervention into East

Timor under the bogus pretext of helping the Timorese masses. Most ETAN members had not heard of these plans for Western military involvement, and they generally remained silent about it; when I told them that the leaders of the CNRT [National Council for Timorese Resistance] were calling for imperialist military intervention, they spoke out, arguing that the leaders of this group really were selfless advocates of the interests of the Timorese people. Getting hoarse, I explained to them ad nauseam how the imperialist powers getting ready to intervene were the same ones who had been deeply complicit in the many tragedies visited upon the Timorese people. Still, they could come up with no response but that "the killing must be stopped!"

Frustrated with this group's overall intransigence in the face of logic and evidence, I decided to speak to another individual at the protest. This guy had been active in opposing the war against Yugoslavia, but just like the group to which he belongs, Workers World, his political ideology can be summed up in one word: opportunism. I explained to him how the leaders of the CNRT saw themselves as the prime beneficiaries from outside military intervention—when the West came in, Gusmao, Horta, Carrascalao, etc., would be installed as local figureheads who would become wealthy through their ties to the Western multinationals looking to gain easy access to the island's natural gas and oil resources. He dissented, arguing that the CNRT was a "genuine national liberation movement." I told him that the KLA (whom he rightly opposes) said the same thing about themselves; to this, he would say "the CNRT is different. The KLA are fascists." Outside of using a lot of imprecise and undefined terms, he was incapable of explaining clearly to me how the CNRT was

qualitatively different from all the bourgeois-nationalist movements who cynically exploit the suffering of their own ethnic group for personal political gain.

Since the ballot and the intensification of the violence, the reactionary and hopeless nature of these two groups has become all the more clear to me. Since the CNRT demands Western military occupation, ETAN's members follow; the same countries which have armed and trained the Indonesian army and militias since 1965 are supposedly the only hope for the terrorized populace of East Timor. As for Workers World, the member that I see around fairly often said a few nights ago that he generally supported the UN operation since the "genuine national liberation movement" of the Timorese people had called for the intervention.

It is quite frustrating to see the left in this condition: on the one hand, opportunist Stalinists, and on the other, moralizing young liberals who have a nonexistent understanding of the real nature of US and Western foreign policy. With a small number of exceptions, the "lefts" at these rallies have decided (yet again, for many of them) that Western imperialism has a positive role to play in the alleviation of suffering in the world. In contrast, the International Committee for the Fourth International is the only group I know that consistently stands for the only real solution to the myriad social horrors created by global corporate capitalism: a multi-ethnic international working class revolution. It is your steadfast defense of genuine Marxist principles that bolsters my revolutionary convictions during tough times; when the rest of the left has, for all intents and purposes, become a cheering section for the imperialists, you take the proper stance in opposing imperialism. For all your good ideological and historical work, I am very grateful.

In Solidarity,
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