Answers to a radical numbskull: once more on the gulf between Marxism and protest politics

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On March 7, reader ML sent a letter, under the heading “Making the World Safe for Globalization,” which criticized the series of articles by Nick Beams of the WSWS Editorial Board contrasting the Marxist analysis of globalization to the attitude of middle class radicals. This letter denied that globalization represents anything new, or has any progressive aspect, contending it is merely a newfangled label for imperialism and that nothing more is required intellectually than to restate Lenin's analysis of world capitalism made some 85 years ago. Beams replied to this letter with a lengthy and carefully reasoned explanation, published March 15.

ML reacted by firing off a series of email messages denouncing various aspects of the politics of the WSWS. On March 16, in response to the article, “A New Round of Shootings in the US,” he accused the WSWS of supporting the Clinton administration's position on gun control. On March 20, he criticized an article on the case of Cynthia Stewart, an Ohio woman prosecuted for taking nude photographs of her own child, suggesting that the WSWS was guilty of “wishy-washy reformism” because we denounced the charges as bogus. Finally, on March 22, ML wrote attacking an article on the Taiwan election, entitling his one-paragraph epistle, “WSWS Abstains on the Question of Defense of China Against Imperialism.”

ML does not make a systematic or coherent critique of the political standpoint of the *World Socialist Web Site*, confining his missives to brief denunciations. But there is a definite political standpoint expressed in these criticisms, which is worth examining in some detail. ML's outlook is typical of those who are hostile to the injustices and inequalities of the profit system, but who confine their opposition to radical-sounding, pseudo-Marxist phrases, not rooted in a scientific analysis of the essential, underlying contradictions of capitalism.

It is significant that despite his posture of ultra-Marxist orthodoxy, ML has not responded to the Marxist analysis of globalization made by Nick Beams. Rather than discuss this issue—central to the development of a socialist political perspective in the twenty-first century—our critic has sought to change the subject by unleashing an increasingly wild barrage of attacks. This only demonstrates that in his method of argumentation, as in his overall approach to political issues, ML proceeds in an unprincipled, eclectic fashion, typical of the middle-class dilettante, not the revolutionary Marxist.

Fetishism of the gun

In his March 16 letter, ML writes: “Genuine communists, as opposed to reformists, stand opposed to gun control principally because they don't wish for the working class to be disarmed, while those who have not the slightest intention of ever leading a socialist revolution see no problem with the bourgeoisie disarming the working class. Beneath your obligatory rhetoric it is perfectly obvious that you are not advocates of socialist revolution, and so I would hope that you would at least stand aside rather than sabotage the struggle for socialism with your pseudo-leftist posturing.”

The WSWS article which he was attacking took note of a series of violent incidents in America, nearly a dozen over a two-week period, and sought to explain these events as the product and manifestation of mounting social tensions, and of a decaying bourgeois culture which glorifies violence and brutality. Then came the paragraphs which so offended ML:

“The ready availability of weapons in the US is undoubtedly a contributing factor. According to the Department of Justice and the National Rifle Association, it is estimated that between 65 million Americans own between 200 million and 225 million firearms, close to one weapon for every man, woman and child.

“However, the calls of President Bill Clinton and others for stricter gun controls ring increasingly hollow with each tragic incident. The Democrats have seized on the slogan of gun control in order, as one party insider put it, to ‘make crime a Democratic issue'—i.e., to gain short-term electoral advantage and distract public attention from an examination of the social roots of the increasing number of tragic and violent outbursts.”

It is obvious that these paragraphs address, not the issue of gun control in general, but the cynicism with which the Democrats and Clinton have embraced this slogan. As for the reference to the prevalence of weapons, can any serious observer of American society deny that the ready availability of guns, including semiautomatic and automatic weapons, is “a contributing factor” in the wave of workplace, school yard and other mass shooting incidents?

The availability of guns is not the root cause of this violence. We oppose those, like Clinton, who advocate gun control as a diversion from addressing the underlying social causes. But it is nonetheless a fact that the same social tensions exist, to one or another degree, in other industrialized capitalist countries, such as Britain, France, Germany, Japan, etc., without taking this particular form of bloody mayhem. Even Canada, the country whose social structure and history are most closely linked to the United States, has a considerably lower rate of such killings, in part because of restrictions on gun ownership, and particularly on the possession of automatic and semiautomatic weapons.

ML's claim that gun control is a conspiracy to disarm the working class is so much radical posturing. As we have pointed out in the past, the obstacle to socialist revolution in the United States is not the lack of arms, but the lack of political consciousness. Russian workers did not possess a

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great stock of armaments when they made the greatest revolution in history in October 1917. They obtained what weapons they needed through a political struggle among the soldiers in the Russian army, led by the Bolshevik Party. By contrast, the American working class is the most heavily armed in the world. Yet nowhere has the workers movement proved more impotent, in terms of defending jobs, living standards and basic democratic rights against attacks by the employers and the government, than in the United States. And nowhere have social tensions produced so many outbreaks of seemingly random and individual violence, directed generally against other workers, or at immediate supervisors, foremen, personnel managers, etc., which leave the system as a whole intact.

ML suffers from precisely the illusion, so typical of American culture, that violence *per se* is the solution to social and political problems. In the corporate-controlled mass media, this takes the form of a semi-pornographic fascination with individual violence in the movies and on television, and the open glorification of state violence, whether military action overseas or police action on the streets of American cities. In the mind of the middle-class radical, the same illusion is expressed in the stupid and anti-Marxist dictum of Chairman Mao that “political power grows out of the barrel of the gun.”

In reality, as Engels explained so brilliantly in *Anti-Duhring*, it is economics, and not brute force, which is the basis of the class struggle and political life. With political consciousness, the American working class would be in a powerful position to wage a struggle against the ruling class, a tiny and frightened minority completely isolated from the broad masses. Without political understanding and political struggle workers will be unable to defend their class interests, no matter how many guns they have at their disposal.

Pornography and censorship

Our critic's next email, on the Cynthia Stewart case, can be disposed of more briefly. Stewart is an Ohio bus driver who took thousands of photographs of her growing daughter, including some in which the child was unclothed. When one particular roll of film was taken to the processing center, a technician turned it over to local police, who arrested Stewart and charged her with pornography. The WSWS article denounced the prosecution of Stewart as blatant censorship instigated by ultra-right and Christian fundamentalist elements.

ML denounces the WSWS for pointing out that the charges against Ms. Stewart were bogus and that the pictures were not in any sense obscene. He asks, “And what if the photographs WERE ‘pornographic?' Would you then decline to defend Cynthia Stewart? Your position is liberal at best, and economist at worst. Typical of your wishy-washy reformism.”

This criticism demonstrates that ML has little or no interest in the actual fate of Cynthia Stewart, a working class woman who faced a possible jail term and the lost of custody of her child. Why such a cavalier attitude? Why shouldn't Ms. Stewart have an effective defense against such a vicious and vindictive prosecution?

By implication, ML seems to suggest that the socialist movement should not condemn child pornography, or even advocates such activity as a positive good. It is worth noting that the Spartacist League, an organization whose views ML seems to share on many political issues, has publicly supported a group called the Man-Boy Love Association, which defends child molestation.

This only demonstrates the enormous gulf between the posturing of a radical pseudo-socialist and a movement which is genuinely concerned with the defense of the working class. Child pornography involves the brutal exploitation of underage youth for the sake of profit. Children are, by virtue of their age and lack of experience, incapable of giving a truly informed consent to sexual activity. The socialist movement condemns and opposes child pornography as it does all other abuses perpetrated by the profit system. It is therefore not a matter of indifference to us that Cynthia Stewart is not a child pornographer. She took photographs of her child out of a mother's love and pride, not to make money or satisfy an unhealthy sexual urge.

China and US imperialism

Finally, on March 22, in response to the article, “Taiwan election result produces political volatility at home and abroad,” came a broadside containing only one paragraph: “Brilliant piece! It could have appeared in the *New York Times*, but no, it came from an ostensible (Socialists-HA!) organization that refuses to side with non-imperialist China in the face of possible imperialist military assault. You guys make me want to throw up!”

ML may believe that he is striking sharp blows with his vituperative and semi-literate comments, but he is only demonstrating that his political conceptions have nothing to do with Marxism. His language is deliberately vague: according to him, the WSWS “refuses to side with non-imperialist China.” What, precisely, does this mean? China is not engaged in a war with the United States, nor has the United States threatened to attack China militarily. The issue is that the government in Beijing is threatening the use of military force to seize Taiwan and reunite it with the mainland, and the US government has threatened intervention against such an action.

In the event of a war between the United States, the most powerful imperialist country, and China, the Marxist policy of revolutionary defeatism, elaborated by Lenin and Trotsky, means that socialists working within the United States must oppose their own government and seek to mobilize the working class politically against the war. But it by no means dictates that socialists must support the foreign policy of China or the annexation of Taiwan by the Beijing regime.

The WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party opposed the US war against Iraq in 1990-91 and the bombing of Serbia in 1998. But this principled opposition to imperialism did not imply political backing for Saddam Hussein or Slobodan Milosevic or support for their military actions, such as the Iraqi annexation of Kuwait and the anti-Albanian repression in Kosovo. The same holds true in relation to China and Taiwan.

The socialist position on China and Taiwan starts with making a class assessment of the Chinese state. ML describes the Chinese regime as “non-imperialist,” a formulation which is not only evasive, but completely meaningless from the standpoint of Marxism, which approaches such questions historically.

At the beginning of the twentieth century China was an oppressed country carved up by the imperialist powers into zones of influence and “concessions,” including Taiwan, which was ruled by Japan from 1895 to 1945. The 1949 revolution established the People's Republic, the Stalinist regime under which a series of transformations in property relations took place. Initially private property was guaranteed by the state; later all industry and commerce were nationalized, as well as the land; from 1978 on, private ownership has been gradually restored in all these areas, and the last state-run industries are being prepared for privatization or outright closure. Amid all these shifts, one thing has remained consistent: the working class has been systematically excluded from political power and any manifestation of independent working class action has been ruthlessly suppressed.

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The Chinese capitalist class was not destroyed by the 1949 Revolution; instead, it went into exile, removing itself from the mainland to Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore, Indonesia, Thailand and other areas of the Chinese diaspora around the Pacific Rim. Over the past 20 years there has been a vast repatriation of Chinese capital to the mainland, and the emergence of a burgeoning new capitalist class within the People's Republic, comprised of three components: the sons and daughters of the ruling Stalinist bureaucracy; overseas Chinese bringing back their capital with the encouragement of Beijing; and domestic entrepreneurs created by the growth of capitalist relations, especially in the south and the coastal regions.

A Marxist, unlike ML, must take into account this enormous growth of the capitalist class in China in analyzing the new interstate political and strategic relations which are developing in the Far East in the twenty-first century. In the final analysis, the foreign policy of China is an expression of the interests of this dominant social class, mediated through the political infighting among the successors of Mao and Deng Xiaoping, who seek to safeguard their own positions in the state apparatus and, increasingly, at the helm of private industry.

Hence the significance of Beijing's agreement with Britain, faithfully implemented, to maintain Hong Kong's status as a freewheeling capitalist entrepôt after the territory was returned to Chinese sovereignty in 1997. The Chinese state pledged to British imperialism that it would safeguard capitalism in Hong Kong, and it has done so. A similar process has taken place with Portuguese-ruled Macao.

The annexation of Taiwan

Beijing has offered the same “one nation, two systems” deal with Taiwan, although, if truth be told, there are not “two systems” but only one—capitalism—now prevailing on the mainland and the island republic. The annexation of Taiwan to China under the present circumstances would not represent an extension of the 1949 Revolution and would involve no alteration in the property relations or social position of the Taiwan Chinese capitalist class.

For the Taiwanese population, and especially the working class, however, annexation to China would mean new attacks on their democratic rights and a restoration of the police-state rule which prevailed for decades under the Kuomintang and only recently has been relaxed. It is worth noting that Beijing never seriously pressed for annexation of Taiwan during the period of Kuomintang dictatorship. But today, one of the principal concerns of the Chinese Stalinists is that the loosening of political controls in Taiwan has set a bad example and may lead to similar demands on the mainland. Hence the renewed desire to take control of the island and suppress any political unrest among the Taiwanese masses.

Thus, under the present circumstances, a war launched by China to forestall a Taiwanese declaration of independence and re-annex the island to the mainland would not have a progressive character and would not deserve the support of socialists, although ML clearly believes the opposite. Such a war would represent a struggle between rival nationalist cliques, one in Taipei and the other in Beijing, both basing themselves on capitalist market relations.

Nor is it incidental that a Chinese invasion of Taiwan would raise the danger of a far wider conflagration, possibly involving the use of nuclear weapons by China and the United States. Given the entirely corrupt and reactionary character of the Chinese regime, whose policy is based entirely on the defense of capitalist property relations and the power of the ruling CCP bureaucracy, the working class internationally cannot entrust Beijing with the fate of humanity.

The Chinese Stalinist regime has long abandoned even a rhetorical support for the struggle against imperialism. For two decades, beginning with the notorious Mao-Nixon meetings of 1971, Beijing was aligned with US foreign policy during the Cold War struggle against the Soviet Union. Chinese weapons and subsidies went to fascist and anticommunist forces, ranging from Jonas Savimbi in Angola to the Nicaraguan “contras” to the mujahadeen of Afghanistan. China even waged war against Vietnam in 1979 at the instigation of the United States.

In the decade since the end of the Cold War, a new pattern of interstate relations has begun to emerge, one which unthinking critics like ML do not take the trouble to consider. The US-China conflict cannot be seen as a revival of the Cold War, despite the fantasies of a Jesse Helms or ML, among the last few people on the planet who believe Beijing is still somehow associated with communism. Rather, it is the opening up of a new period of strategic conflicts among the major capitalist powers.

Here Lenin's *Imperialism* is indeed relevant, not as a biblical text, but as a historically concrete analysis of the tendencies within global capitalism, tendencies which are once again, after the long interlude of the Cold War, reasserting themselves. The conflicts among the major capitalist powers, over markets, control of raw materials and sources of cheap labor, domination of territory, threaten ultimately the outbreak of a third imperialist world war. Such a military conflict, conducted by powers armed with high-tech and nuclear weapons, would threaten the survival of humanity.

The positions advanced by ML, both in his initial attack on the WSWS analysis of globalization, and in his three latest letters, have in common a formal and ahistorical method which is a caricature of Marxism and a lack of interest in the fundamental problem of the workers movement historically, the problem of leadership and political consciousness. The development of an international socialist movement requires first and foremost the political education of the advanced workers and their assimilation of the long history of the struggle for Marxism against the various forms of pseudo-revolutionary radicalism, exemplified by ML, which combine super-heated rhetoric with the most grotesque forms of opportunism.

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