

An exchange on globalisation

24 November 2000

Dear WSWs Editorial Board:

The subject of this letter is globalisation. I agree totally with the way that WSWs analyses it, in the articles by Nick Beams and in the article on the protests against the WEF summit in Melbourne. It is historically progressive to free the productive forces from the restrictions that are associated with the nation-state.

My questions are on what level can one struggle against the impoverishment and polarisation the globalisation has produced and continues to generate. The task, as you pose it, is to unite the workers of all countries on the basis of a socialist program; to reorganise the economy so that it can serve the needs of human beings, not to benefit capitalism. You reject simplistic slogans and militant campaigns. You also criticise opposition to “fair trade” and “free trade.”

This is what I think about that:

* In the WSWs perspective there is a gap between the actual conditions and the final goal of uniting the world's workers.

* Between the final goal and the actual conditions there must exist a path, that, in addition to introducing theoretical clarity, out of necessity passes through militant campaigns. The latter must occur on the basis of correct partial goals, not on simplistic slogans.

* Globalization is conducted by global big business and in the pursuit of its own profit. What should we do until the world's working class takes control of globalization?

* It is the case that globalization is pushing down living standards of workers across the world, by moving production to low-wage countries. Already, work from low-wage countries is being moved to lower-wage countries. In those nations, workers lack the most basic of rights, like health, education, housing and job security. Under those conditions, what can workers do that struggled to achieve gains that are now being taken away? It seems to me that it is not wrong to counterpose “fair trade” to “free trade,” by fighting against the importation of products from countries in which workers are not being granted a minimum of rights, for instance. An example is what happened in the US against the makers of sports shoes. (Reebok and Nike, I believe.) As a result of the pressure from consumers they had to agree not to use subcontractors that engage in the super-exploitation of workers. A political strategy based on that idea would not only put a brake to the reduction of living standards of all workers to a very low levels, it would also be a mechanism through which the workers of advanced countries (or of less backward ones, like Argentina) would defend the rights of super-exploited workers in those countries that are chosen by big capital to lower production costs.

Sincerely,

HL

Buenos Aires, Argentina

Dear HL,

Thank you for your letter on globalisation, which raises a number of important questions. I apologise for the delay in getting back to you.

You begin by expressing your agreement with the analysis made by the WSWs on globalisation and that “it is historically progressive to free the productive forces from the restrictions that are associated with the nation-state.” Having taking this stand, I think it is necessary to think it through to the end.

The reason I say this is because there has been a long experience with many tendencies which have proclaimed their adherence to internationalism, only to abandon this perspective in practice as they formulate various demands and programs which rest upon the nation-state on the grounds that this is the only “realistic” foundation for waging a political struggle.

In the perspectives resolution of the International Committee published in 1988 we emphasised that it had “long been an elementary proposition of Marxism that the class struggle is national only as to form, but that it is, in essence, an international struggle. However, given the new features of capitalist development, even the *form* of the class struggle must assume an international character. Even the most elementary struggles of the working class pose the necessity of coordinating its actions on the international scale.” All the developments in the global capitalist economy have underscored the correctness of this basic approach.

You correctly raise the necessity to find a path to connect the struggles confronting workers arising from the globalisation of production which is utilised by the capitalist class to attack the social position of the working class and the goal of uniting the working class internationally. But such a path or program cannot advance the interests of the working class unless it is based on an international strategy aimed at the overthrow of the nation-state system and the reorganisation of the global economy to meet human need, not profit. In developing such a program it is necessary above all to oppose the type of opportunist argument which, while claiming verbal adherence to internationalism, nevertheless claims that in the interests of “realism” or immediate effects it is necessary to base a struggle on the national state.

As you are probably aware, the Fourth International has always been concerned with developing a program to guide the working class from its immediate struggles to the perspective of socialism. In the founding document of our movement, Trotsky wrote: “It is necessary to help the masses in the process of the daily struggle to find the bridge between present demands and the socialist program of the revolution. This bridge should include a system of *transitional demands*, stemming from today's conditions and from today's consciousness of wide layers of the working class and unalterably leading to one final conclusion: the conquest of power by the proletariat.”

It is probably true to say that no part of the theoretical and political legacy of Leon Trotsky has come under greater attack from opportunist tendencies than the question of transitional demands. The aim of such demands must be to overcome the gap between the maturity of the objective situation—the historic necessity for socialism arising from the globalisation of capitalist production itself—and the confusion and immaturity of the consciousness of the working class masses.

“For this very reason,” as we explained in our 1988 perspectives resolution, “the raising of transitional demands must never be counterposed to or isolated from the revolutionary socialist perspective upon which they are based. Not least among the betrayals of the Pabloites has been their persistent effort to transform *The Transitional Program* into a recipe book for opportunist adaptation and centrist evasion; that is, by tearing isolated demands out of their genuine revolutionary context and suggesting that they be presented to the working class as a substitute for a

genuinely revolutionary program. According to the proponents of this revisionist method, transitional demands are a means of adapting to, rather than combating, the backward consciousness of the masses. In essence, the proponents of this position deny the necessity of any open struggle for socialist consciousness in the working class. It is not necessary, they claim, to patiently nourish the workers movement with the rich fruit of Marxist culture. Rather, it is enough to dish out a few simple demands which will supposedly entice the masses and lead them to socialist revolution without even being conscious of their ultimate destination.”

On the basis of these considerations let me turn to the specific points you raise. You ask: “What should we do until the world's working class takes control of globalisation?” In the first place it has to be understood that whether the working class is able to take control of globalisation and the productive forces is dependent upon what we do to develop a socialist culture and outlook within the international workers movement.

The inability of the working class at present to advance a perspective to defend even its most basic conditions is bound up with the fact that the socialist culture and outlook upon which the workers movement was ultimately based in the past has been destroyed.

The central task therefore—and this the perspective on which the WSWS is grounded—is the restoration of socialist consciousness in the working class. This means above all else developing an understanding and assessment of the twentieth century and the political tendencies which have dominated the workers movement over its duration.

It means developing an understanding in the working class, first among the more advanced sections and through them more broadly, of why it was that Stalinism and the various Communist Parties did not represent socialism but its very antithesis, that nationalist movements such as Castroism, Maoism and various forms of guerrillaism did not represent the interests of the working class, but rather sections of the bourgeoisie, and that the various opportunist tendencies, of which Morenoism in Argentina were one, which emerged within the Fourth International played a key role in ensuring the maintenance of bourgeois rule in the post-war era.

Above all, it is necessary to imbue in the consciousness of the working class the understanding that the degeneration of its leaderships—from the development of opportunism within German social democracy, the growth of Stalinism and its theory of socialism in one country and national roads to socialism, to the emergence of the various Pabloite tendencies within the Fourth International—have been inseparably bound up with the substitution of an internationalist outlook and perspective with a nationalist agenda, most often with the argument that it is the “only realistic” approach. The fruits of this “realism” are now seen in the ideological and political crisis which confronts the working class internationally.

The central task therefore is the restoration of a socialist outlook in the working class, which involves nothing less than a concrete historical assessment of the experiences of the twentieth century. Without such an assessment, the working class is really like someone who has a memory disorder: it has no sense of where it has come from nor an understanding of where it must go.

Let me emphasise this point: there can be no talk of the working class taking control of globalisation, that is, conquering political power, without the renewal of a socialist perspective and indeed no serious struggle by the working class to defend even the most minimal of its past gains.

The various struggles of the working class will raise all sorts of partial demands. But each of these demands, and the tactics employed to fight for them, must be assessed from the following standpoint: do they assist in or hinder the development of a socialist and internationalist outlook in the working class?

It is from this standpoint that we must assess the so-called “fair trade” campaign. In this regard you write: “It seems to me that it is not wrong to counterpose ‘fair trade’ to ‘free trade’ by fighting against the importation

of products from countries in which workers are not being granted a minimum of rights, for instance.” In support of that argument you maintain that pressure in the US along these lines has led to improvements in conditions of Nike workers and you call for the extension of this into a “political strategy”.

Allow me to follow the logic of your argument and see where this strategy would lead. Workers in the United States should campaign against the import of goods from low-wage countries such as Argentina and elsewhere. Argentinian workers should presumably fight against the import of goods from even lower wage countries, such as Sri Lanka or Indonesia, for example. Indonesian and Sri Lankan workers in turn should demand action against the import of goods from Vietnam or from China, etc., etc. And the list of goods coming under such bans and proscriptions should not be confined to shoes and textiles. After all, components of nearly all goods—from Boeing aircraft to steel cars and computers—are produced in low-wage countries where workers are denied to one degree or another basic democratic rights.

The inexorable political logic of the “fair trade” program is to split and divide the working class along national lines. Instead of unifying workers in a common struggle against the transnational global corporations, it seeks to tie them to their own national state. And in doing so it directly aligns them with the most reactionary and right-wing forces.

The experience of the demonstration in Washington against the International Monetary Fund is a case in point. The demonstration was dominated by the nationalist program of the AFL-CIO trade union bureaucracy which has opposed the reduction of tariff barriers on imports of goods from Africa and which opposes the normalisation of trade relations with China. The AFL-CIO leadership has attempted to present its policies as a progressive campaign in defence of labour standards and workers' rights in the so-called Third World. In reality, the union leadership is campaigning on behalf of sections of US industry which feel they cannot compete and promoting the most reactionary political figures such as Patrick Buchanan

Significantly, a representative of the United Students Against Sweatshops spoke at the AFL-CIO's anti-China rally in Washington. As the WSWS noted at the time; “Whether motivated by political opportunism or naivete, these students are aligning themselves with one of the most reactionary forces in American politics.” How is it that a student organisation, professing concern for the super-exploited workers, ends up in the camp of the reactionary trade union bureaucracy and the American fascist Buchanan? Such a development is the outcome of the relentless logic of a political program aimed at so-called “fair trade” import restrictions. And the consequences of such a program will be no less reactionary in whatever part of the world it is advanced.

The basic flaw in your approach to the formulation of partial demands is that you start from the framework of the nation-state. But this form of political organisation is being rendered increasingly anachronistic by a higher social reality—the globalisation of the production process itself.

If one begins by accepting the nation-state as the given reality—and thereby by accepting the division of workers along national lines—then it is literally impossible to achieve the international unification of the working class which the struggle for a socialist perspective demands.

However, the very development of global transnational production points to the way in which such a struggle could be developed. Instead of workers in one country demanding the restriction of imports from another, why should not campaigns be developed by workers employed by the same transnational company, and more broadly, to support the struggles of workers in other branches of the same corporation?

Such struggles will, of course, never be organised through the trade unions which, by virtue of their nationalist program and defence of the profit system in every country, are organically incapable of developing a genuine internationalist program. The task of organising the struggles of

the working class across national boundaries certainly poses new tasks and challenges—some of the answers to which will only be found on the basis of experience. But one thing can be said at the outset: these new tasks can only begin to be addressed through the construction of an international revolutionary leadership which advances a program for the overthrow of the capitalist system of production.

This brings me to the final and perhaps most important point. I think that you tend to view the impact of globalisation too narrowly. Globalisation does not simply mean that transnational companies are able to shift their activities to force down the wages and conditions of the working class. It has a far broader impact. It poses an immense political crisis for the bourgeoisie. The very development of transnational production, the development of a truly global international financial system, which imposes its demands in every country, has undermined the political institutions through the bourgeoisie in both the advanced capitalist countries and the so-called Third World has regulated the class struggle over the past half century.

This has decisive implications for the development of the struggle for socialism. It is wrong and completely one-sided to conceive of the struggle for socialism as arising out the economic demands of the working class, as if the struggle for political power somehow emerges from the struggle for wages, conditions and immediate demands.

History itself reveals that the development of the socialist revolution arises from great *political* developments and crises, in which social discontent over wages, working conditions and democratic rights begin to find expression. The Russian Revolution did not arise out of the wages struggles of the Russian working class, but from the political crisis of the tsarist regime. Likewise the revolutionary situations which developed in Germany in 1919 and 1923 emerged out of a political crisis. The Spanish Civil War arose not from wage and other demands but from the rebellion organised by the armed forces under Franco.

Today, the globalisation of production has created the conditions where once again great political conflicts, in which broad masses will be directly engaged in struggles over the control of society and the production and distribution of economic wealth, are being placed on the agenda.

Ten years ago, the collapse of the Soviet Union and the Eastern European Stalinist regimes was greeted with triumphal proclamations from the political representatives of the bourgeoisie that these events marked the final victory of capitalism, the death of socialism and even the end of history.

The International Committee of the Fourth International explained that the demise of the Stalinist regimes did not represent the end of socialism—these bureaucratic states were not socialist in the first place—but was rather the initial expression of the impact of the emerging system of globalised production upon the political structures which had formed the basis for bourgeois rule in the post-war era and that these effects would rapidly be manifested elsewhere.

These predictions have been vindicated. The 1997-98 Asian crisis—a crisis not just of Asia but of global capitalism—saw the downfall of the 30-year Suharto regime in Indonesia, the fourth most populous country in the world.

In Europe, globalised production has shattered the old political structures. The parties which once dominated the scene no longer command the support they enjoyed in the past and we find the re-emergence of fascist parties and tendencies.

And now in the United States—so long held up as some kind of political backwater and written off by all manner of radicals (especially in Latin America) as holding out absolutely no prospect of a struggle for socialism—we have a major political crisis over the election, just two years after the first impeachment of a democratically elected president.

Many more political shocks and surprises are in store, especially in a situation where all indications point to a major financial crisis in the US

and the prospect of a recession.

While these are as yet early days, there are some political lessons regarding the development of a mass political movement of the working class which can be drawn.

One of these is that the struggle for democracy is going to play a decisive role in the politicisation of the working class. Look at the situation in the United States. In the past two years we have seen an attempted constitutional coup d'etat, followed by an attempt to steal an election. The old political structures within which the bourgeois has been able to rule in the past are increasingly unable to contain the social tensions which have been generated by the vast changes in the US economy arising from globalisation. Behind the Republican Party stand the most ruthless sections of the bourgeoisie demanding that no impediment be placed in the way of their enrichment. Whatever the immediate outcome of the present crisis, it will become ever more clear to wider sections of the working class that it is completely impossible to defend their democratic rights within the framework of the outworn and flaccid liberalism of the Democratic Party. In other words, the stage has been set for a political radicalisation of the American working class.

These issues have a broader significance. The globalisation of production and the domination of global capital have raised the same issues everywhere. Under the conditions prevailing in the past, where economic processes were subject to a limited degree of national regulation, the ruling classes were able to make certain concessions to the democratic aspirations of the masses. That is no longer the case. Everywhere, through the pressure of international competition, global capital demands that the best conditions be created for the extraction of profit.

In the United States, for example, even the basic demand for a fair count of the presidential election vote raises vast political issues under conditions where virtually all the mouthpieces of the bourgeoisie are demanding that this elementary right be set aside to ensure the installation of Bush.

What these events reveal is that the domination of global capital is becoming increasingly incompatible with even the democratic forms through which the bourgeoisie has ruled in the past. This means that the coming struggles in the US and internationally will reveal ever more sharply that the defence of democracy cannot seriously be undertaken without tackling fundamental economic and social issues; that is, that there cannot be genuine democracy in a society in which wealth and power is increasingly concentrated in the hands of a tiny elite.

As I noted previously, our movement has always insisted on the need to develop a bridge, consisting of a program of transitional demands, stemming from today's conditions and leading on to the conquest of political power by the working class. Past experience and programs provide a guide, but only a guide. A program for the new tasks and challenges which history has placed on the agenda requires above all an all-sided analysis of the developing political and economic situation. The development of such an analysis is at the very heart of the work of the WSW and will provide in the coming period the basis for a whole series of partial and intermediate demands around which the struggles of the international working class will increasingly be organised.

But such a program and series of demands must be grounded on the understanding that the central contradiction of the present epoch is that between the development of world economy and the outmoded nation-state system and all the political structures which rest upon it. This is why we reject all programs, such as the call for "fair trade" and import restrictions, which, whatever the motivations of those who advance them, divide workers along national lines.

Yours sincerely,

Nick Beams

See Also:

Correspondence on Marxist political economy
[WSWS Full Coverage]



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