

Letters from our readers

3 August 2010

On "The Afghanistan documents and the struggle against war"

Dear Bill Van Auken,

Thank you for your perspective on these documents, their reception in the media, and their impact on political processes in the United States.

Reading the *New York Times* alone, one would have little idea as to the content of what are being called the "War Blogs." The 92,000 documents include records of targeted and also indiscriminate killings of civilians on a wide scale in Afghanistan, and reveal a war far more savage than seen through most media coverage. The *Times* however has openly consulted the US government, asking permission both how to proceed and what to think. The result is an effort to bolster the war using the very documents that condemn it. Today, the paper has suggested that Assange should be prosecuted according to the Espionage Act of 1917, which was employed against socialists and other figures on the left. It is illegal to uncover war crimes, but not to commit them.

The reaction among students has been mixed, with some condemning the war, and others the leak itself. What is lacking by all is a historical perspective explaining the origin of the war, of American militarism in Central Asia, and its relationship to social inequality in the United States. Outside of this perspective, most discussion becomes embroiled in debate over one or another form of "humanitarian" warfare, "support for the lesser evil" or "responsible nation-building." Anti-communism, religion, the promotion of the free market and lastly the growth of social inequality have taken their toll on the American intelligentsia.

Thank you for writing what nobody else can or will.

Daniel
29 July 2010

"The fight against war is a revolutionary question" indeed. You will assuredly be proven right, as a very small group of revolutionaries in exile, underground or in jail had been when, neglected and scorned, they held steadfastly to Marxist principles and practices at the start of the First World War to find themselves at the head of the insurgent masses only a few years later.

Your wonderful web site read events accurately and applied scientific Marxist principles correctly when, uniquely on the left, you rejected from the first the excuses for the barbaric dismemberment of Yugoslavia, Iraq, Afghanistan and now Somalia. Just as Leon Trotsky pointed out in 1915, the ruling class could not rely exclusively on organizations like the Tea Party or the Black Hundreds in Russia, "the most benighted and corrupt dregs of the working class". Rather, Trotsky (and your web site) explains, it was the work of the so-called leftists who threw their weight behind the war, calmed the masses and propped up the government, claiming self-defense or a mission of spreading a higher culture and democracy as an

excuse.

My hero, Rosa Luxemburg, writing from jail as Junius called attention as you had to what is just below the surface, that is, that beneath their apparent tranquility and disorientation, the masses were (are) seething and learning. War is a grim teacher. It's Kandahar next, or perhaps Iran or China. "Cities are turned into rubble, villages into cemeteries, whole countries into desert, entire nations into beggars..."

And suddenly becoming visible "Shamed, dishonored, wading in blood and dripping in filth—this is capitalist society. Not preened and proper, feigning culture, philosophy, and ethics.. a roaring beast... a pestilential breath, devastating culture and humanity—so it appears in all its hideous nakedness."

I can't remember a time in over 40 years of reading with pleasure and attention Rosa Luxemburg, Lenin and Trotsky when their writings of 1915-16 seemed so contemporary. Your article caused me to re-read them in a collection of documents I would strongly recommend: "Lenin's Struggle for a Revolutionary International: Documents 1907-1916".

AL
Toronto, Canada
29 July 2010
On "800,000 gallons of oil spilled into Michigan river"

There should be pressure sensors and flow meters throughout such a pipeline. Their control system which monitors these sensors must have alerted the operators of the location. Waiting twelve hours indicates extreme carelessness.

John S
29 July 2010

I googled for the Lakehead pipeline system, hoping to find a map of the pipeline. None turned up, only some vague verbal descriptions of the route. But I found an interesting article, "Web of oil and gas pipelines crosses county" in the Port Huron *Times Herald* (<http://www.thetimesherald.com/article/20100729/NEWS01/7290304/Web-of-oil-and-gas-pipelines-crosses-county>).

In this article, the question of the whereabouts of pipelines is addressed:

"Lori Eschenburg, a geographic information systems specialist with St. Clair County's Metropolitan Planning Commission, said the county has an abundance of underground pipelines because of its proximity to Canada.

"But where they all are is unknown. Eschenburg said information about the lines' locations is not readily available.

"In 2009, she made a map using right-of-ways [sic] in the county. While

she can follow a long line of right-of-ways, she said, it is difficult to tell how many pipelines might be within it.

“The reason it’s not readily available and hard to get is because pipeline [sic] and utilities don’t want to advertise where their underground facilities are, because of danger or terrorism....They don’t want you to know where their weak link is,” she said.”

When I worked in the pipeline industry (from 1976 until 1985, working for several different companies), concerns about “terrorism” did not seem to have developed very much. In fact, I was asked around 1979 or 1980 to write a white paper summarizing known hazards to pipelines for one of my employer’s big Saudi clients.

I set about to research all sorts of natural and man-made hazards that could cause damage to both onshore and offshore pipelines, and began to write about them in a generic, nontechnical way. I figured that, if a major Saudi client was truly concerned to catalog all hazards, they would want the simple truth: onshore pipelines lie just a few feet below the ground and can run for tens, hundreds, or in the case of the Lakehead pipeline system, thousands of miles, traversing roads, rivers, cities, towns, villages, and remote countryside in highly visible and well-marked rights of way. It is obvious to any casual observer that blowing up a pipeline is a simple matter.

Given the always-incendiary political situation in the Middle East, it seemed clear to me that, as hazards went, this would be one of the biggies. Boy, was I wrong! I was called in by my boss. He was visibly annoyed with me, and said something like, “The Saudis would be insulted by this. Take it out.” I was incensed, but also puzzled about why the Saudis (and for that matter, my boss) would be so sensitive to my mentioning such an obvious thing.

I must emphasize that I never found out if the Saudis even saw my paper—I was much too low in the hierarchy ever to be allowed to speak to some Saudi prince. After the exchange with my boss, I never received any sort of feedback about it.

All of this is by way of trying to connect the issues of where pipelines are, who owns them, and who will suffer when one blows up or develops a leak, to the question of private ownership of the means of production. The pipelines, the products they carry, and the land they traverse are all the private property of one or another corporation, sometimes several.

It is not that the exact, precise routes of pipelines are “unknown.” Every pipeline, and every piece of attached equipment, is planned down to the centimeter. Pipeline maps are marvels of engineering precision, as are the lines themselves. But they are private property. And the pipeline companies know they are whistling past the graveyard when they put a big cross-country line in the ground. Best all the documentation be kept private. In a private-property world, this is pretty easy. And in a world of competing corporations and nation-states, probably necessary. This is utterly consistent with my faux pas regarding that Saudi pipeline. Little did I know at the time that it is simply not polite to mention, like one’s mad Aunt Sally living with twenty cats on the third floor.

If you find it remarkable, as I do, that St. Clair County’s Metropolitan Planning Commission officials have no idea where the lines are that run through their county, this just underscores who works for whom. This, in microcosm and onshore, is the same situation we find on a much larger scale offshore, as BP continues keeping a lid on the Macondo disaster, and the US government is impotent before BP’s sacred “property rights.”

Leon Trotsky, in his Transitional Program of 1938, wrote:

“The accounts kept between the individual capitalist and society remain the secret of the capitalist: they are not the concern of society. The motivation offered for the principle of business ‘secrets’ is ostensibly, as in the epoch of liberal capitalism, that of ‘free competition.’ In reality, the trusts keep no secrets from one another. The business secrets of the present epoch are part of a persistent plot of monopoly capitalism against the interests of society. Projects for limiting the autocracy of ‘economic royalists’ will continue to be pathetic farces as long as private owners of the social means of production can hide from producers and consumers the machinations of exploitation, robbery and fraud. The abolition of ‘business secrets’ is the first step toward actual control of industry.

“Workers no less than capitalists have the right to know the ‘secrets’ of the factory, of the trust, of the whole branch of industry, of the national economy as a whole. First and foremost, banks, heavy industry and centralized transport should be placed under an observation glass.”

We shall bear in mind that pipelines are a central part of the transportation system, and they too will be put under the observation glass. This will certainly include those precious maps, so that everyone who needs to can find where they are and what’s in them. And anyone who lives or works near a pipeline needs to know.

As for “terrorism”, since most claimed instances of terrorism are manufactured by competing nation-states in order to create pretexts for military action, these will disappear. As for actual acts of vandalism, most are carried out by adventurist groups seeking to foment some sort of mass action. These will also disappear once the pipeline companies and their capital equipment are converted into public utilities under the ownership and democratic control of the workers themselves.

Charles H
Texas, USA
29 July 2010

On “The ‘new normal’: More than one in five Americans at risk of destitution”

If you read the history of the Weimar Republic you’ll see that, like their leaders, our president is being harassed by the right and the left and that if the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq do not turn out well the blame will be heaped upon the anti-war crowd and anyone petitioning for peace and rationality. The way the economy is going I am very curious to see what sort of sociopath the people of the United States turn to once the country’s riches have been looted. Having learned from history I anticipate it will be someone with a deep-seeded misunderstanding of economics, an undying loyalty to Wall Street and the Pentagon, and an irrational hatred of immigrants, unions, workers, social equality, and government. The list of possible choices, coincidentally, is huge and available for all to see on numerous cable stations.

PK
29 July 2010

On “A somber look back: Mad Men, Season 4”

Dear WSWS & James Brookfield,

Thank you for this brilliant review, so ably and lucidly connecting the TV series’ interpersonal content and public reception, on the one hand, with the early 1960s macro economic and political context, on the other.

Richard M
California, USA
29 July 2010



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