UN “poverty summit” exposes failure of world capitalism

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The “poverty summit” that concluded at the United Nations Wednesday served to expose capitalism’s responsibility for the poverty and hunger confronting billions of people across the planet. Despite vows by the UN and the major powers over the past decade to ameliorate these conditions, the desperation and misery of the world’s most oppressed layers have only deepened as a result of imperialist predations and the shocks arising from the global financial crisis.

The meeting saw numerous heads of state parade before the UN General Assembly in New York City to platonically proclaim their commitment to the so-called Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) that were adopted by a similar summit exactly ten years ago.

In the more frank statements, there were admissions that ten years into the supposed pursuit of these goals, the achievement of proposed benchmarks in relation to extreme poverty, hunger, child and maternal health and other areas by the 2015 deadline is already out of the question.

The goals represented a commitment to eradicate what amounted to the worst symptoms of the poverty and oppression to which the profit system has relegated much of the world’s population. Even if they had been achieved, billions of people would still be left in hunger and misery.

In adopting the MDGs, the UN approved a “Millennium Declaration” which proclaimed that “the central challenge we face today is to ensure that globalization becomes a positive force for all the world’s people.”

The intervening decade has made a mockery of this statement, which from the start was aimed at providing window-dressing for world finance capital’s exploitation of the most oppressed countries.

Global economic integration, while making possible an immense growth in technology, production and communications, has been totally subordinated to the profits of the banks and corporations and the accumulation of obscene amounts of wealth by a tiny financial aristocracy.

For the masses of the world’s poor, capitalist globalization has meant a series of catastrophes and ever-growing social inequality. The globalization of capitalist agriculture, bound up with wholesale privatizations and global commodity speculation, produced a food crisis in 2007-2008 that plunged hundreds of millions more people into a state of chronic hunger.

Thus, the balance sheet on the first Millennium goal, “eradicate extreme poverty and hunger,” is a dramatic worsening of conditions. While 830 million people lived on the brink of starvation when the goals were adopted a decade ago, this number soared to over 1 billion during the food crisis and remains at 915 million.

According to the World Bank, 980 million people today are forced to live on less than a dollar a day, only slightly lower than the 1.25 billion figure recorded in 1990.

The Millennium goal had been to cut this number in half by 2015. But the crisis that began on Wall Street in 2008 has spread around the world, swelling the ranks of those living in absolute poverty. According to the World Bank, 50 million more people were plunged into these conditions in 2009, and another 64 million are expected to share the same fate in 2010.

There has been shamefully little progress in relation to other stated goals. One was to slash infant mortality by two-thirds by 2015. But after a full decade, 9.2 million children still do not live past their fifth birthday, largely because of malnutrition and preventable disease.

Similarly, a pledge to cut maternal mortality by three-quarters has been shattered by the reality of half a million women dying every year from complications in pregnancy and childbirth.

The UN vowed to halt the spread of AIDS, but after a decade, only one third of the 33.2 million people infected with the virus are able to get treatment. Moreover, funding for anti-AIDS

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efforts is being slashed, threatening what gains have been made. European nations, for example, are giving $623 million less to HIV/AIDS programs this year than last.

None of the advanced capitalist countries is meeting minimal pledges to provide aid to the most impoverished regions of the world. While in 2005 they had committed themselves to allocating a miserly 0.7 percent of their gross national income to international assistance, the average figure for the Group of 7 countries stands at only 0.22 percent and, for the United States, it amounts to just 0.17 percent.

Despite having reneged on their promises, the leaders of the major capitalist countries delivered speeches dripping with imperialist arrogance towards the world's oppressed.

On Tuesday, German Chancellor Angela Merkel dismissed the commitments made in 2000. "The international community gave itself real goals 10 years ago," she said. "Unfortunately, today we have to recognize that we are probably not able to reach these objectives."

She blamed the poorest countries for the failure to achieve these targets, warning them that "development aid cannot continue indefinitely."

US President Barack Obama sounded similar themes on Wednesday, while admitting to the General Assembly that US aid efforts were subordinate to Washington's "national security strategy."

Obama proclaimed that his administration is "changing the way we do business" in relation to international aid. "For too long we've measured our efforts by the amount of money we've spent," he said. Such assistance, he stressed, bred "dependence," insisting that this was "a cycle we need to break."

Speaking as the leader of a country that is providing less than a quarter of the foreign aid that it pledged, Obama cynically urged the UN delegates to "move beyond the old narrow debate about how much money we're spending."

The purportedly new approach proclaimed by the US president consists in directing aid to impoverished countries that submit unreservedly to the dominance of American finance capital. He stressed that such nations would have to "create business environments that are attractive to investment" and "encourage entrepreneurs" in order to "unleash transformational change."

In other words, Obama's prescription for global poverty is more of the same toxin that caused it in the first place: unfettered capitalist exploitation.

Such policies are hardly surprising. Obama, Merkel and leaders of other major capitalist countries are imposing brutal austerity measures against working people at home. The logical extension of these policies towards the most oppressed countries of the planet is the acceptance of mass starvation as an unavoidable cost of doing business.

Behind their arrogant demands that the impoverished countries "take responsibility" for their own fate and fight "corruption," the major capitalist powers continue to loot the historically oppressed regions of the globe.

Sub-Saharan Africa, for example, receives some $10 billion dollars in aid per year, while paying more than $14 billion in debt payments to the banks on Wall Street and the City of London. As for corruption, the entire planet is suffering the consequences of the criminal actions of Wall Street's financial speculators, aided, abetted and bailed out to the tune of over $12 trillion by the Bush and Obama administrations.

The UN's Millennium Development Goals Conference has only underscored that the answer of the major capitalist powers to the worst economic crisis since the 1930s is to redouble their attacks on the jobs, living standards and social conditions of working people, including the most impoverished and oppressed on the planet, while turning increasingly toward militarism and war.

Against this wave of social reaction, the working class must counter pose its own independent and revolutionary perspective of international socialism. The eradication of poverty is impossible within the framework of the profit system.

The historic task posed in every country is the struggle to put an end to the capitalist system and reorganize the global economy in the interests of the working class and the oppressed by freeing production from its subordination to profit and dedicating it to meeting the needs of all the world's people.

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