The crisis of revolutionary leadership in 2011

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The first three months of 2011 have witnessed a series of extraordinary events: revolutionary upheavals in the Middle East and North Africa that have toppled two entrenched dictatorships and staggered several others; mass protests in Wisconsin that herald the resurgence of long-suppressed working class struggle in the United States; and the waging of a new imperialist war. In addition, a nuclear crisis in Japan, triggered by a tsunami, confronts the entire world with an ecological disaster—arising from the reckless profit-motivated use of nuclear power plants—with as yet unknown economic and social consequences.

The pace with which events follow each other is characteristic of a revolutionary period. On a global scale, there is an increasing polarization of society along class lines. Two and a half years after the financial crisis that erupted in the fall of 2008, the corporations and banks are escalating their war on the working class. At the same time, the first few months of the year have already produced a significant growth of popular resistance.

The initial struggles of the working class have made it clear that it faces immense and complex political challenges in every country, all of which are centered on the problem of revolutionary leadership.

In the Middle East and North Africa, the heroic battles of workers and youth have so far been unable to achieve any significant degree of democratization, let alone carry through a redistribution of wealth and restructuring of the national economies in the interests of the masses of the people. In Tunisia and Egypt, mass demonstrations and strikes brought down two US-backed dictators, but they have left in place the regimes that formed the backbone of their power.

In Egypt, the military government, hailed by the Obama administration as the guarantor of democracy, is attempting to ban strikes and demonstrations. It is responding no less brutally than its predecessor to the economic and political demands of the Egyptian masses. The absence of revolutionary political leadership in the working class has enabled, at least for the time being, the Egyptian bourgeoisie to regroup. The ruling class has been assisted by the official opposition organizations, which reject the fight for workers' power and socialism, and have worked to subordinate the working class to the existing capitalist state.

The struggles of workers in the United States, inspired in part by Egypt, confront the same problem of leadership in a different form. Hundreds of thousands came out in Wisconsin to oppose Governor Scott Walker's push to eliminate the collective bargaining rights of workers and attack public workers and social programs. The effort to resist this attack was crippled by the right-wing trade unions, which opposed the demands for a general strike to force Walker's resignation.

The official unions worked systematically to subordinate opposition to the Democratic Party, which in states throughout the country, and at the federal level, is implementing cuts and austerity measures no less brutal than those demanded by Walker.

In Europe, workers face a new wave of austerity demands even more extreme than those implemented last year, with signs that spring will bring with it a resumption of the European debt crisis. As in the United States, governments have expended fortunes to bail out the banks and are now demanding that the working class pay. The one-day general strikes organized by the trade unions last year did little more than let off steam, giving the ruling class time to plan another offensive.

The war in Libya has exposed the consequences of the crisis of leadership. Popular opposition to the regime of Gaddafi, lacking an independent revolutionary democratic and anti-capitalist program,

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has been hijacked by imperialism to serve its own ends.

Moreover, the support for the dirty colonial war being waged by the United States and its European allies has laid bare the unbridgeable social and political chasm that separates the interests of the working class, on an international scale, from the liberal and “left” representatives of the bourgeoisie. In the name of “human rights”—a slogan selectively employed to justify neo-colonial wars—the old “left” protest movements and parties, representing the interests and views of the most affluent sections of the upper middle class, have aligned themselves with imperialism. Moreover, while endorsing “human rights” imperialism, these parties and organizations do everything in their power to block the development of working class struggles against the austerity policies of the ruling class in their own countries. In the United States, this takes the form of supporting the administration of Barack Obama, even as he continues and expands upon the reactionary policies, at home and abroad, of his hated predecessor.

Writing in the midst of another revolutionary epoch, Trotsky explained in 1938 that "the world political situation as a whole is chiefly characterized by a historical crisis of the leadership of the proletariat." Conditions have changed, but the basic political task remains. To lead the struggles of the working class against the capitalist system, the critical task is the building of a new socialist leadership in every country.

It is under these conditions that the Socialist Equality Party in the United States is holding a series of conferences next month on The Fight for Socialism Today. The first of these conferences will be held on April 9-10 in Ann Arbor, Michigan, followed by conferences in Los Angeles on April 16 and New York on April 30. Since these conferences were called in January, the events of the year have demonstrated their historical significance as a critical stage in the building of a socialist leadership in the United States.

The WSWS urges all its readers in the US to register and make plans to attend one of these conferences today. If you cannot attend, or live outside the US, contact the SEP and its youth organization, the International Students for Social Equality, and make the decision to join today. As the world enters a new era of revolutionary struggle, now is the time to take up the fight for socialism.

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To register for the conference, click here.

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