

Libya: “the jewel in the crown”

Bill Van Auken
30 September 2011

In a recent teleconference with US businessmen, Washington’s ambassador to Libya let slip a telling phrase while referring to the North African nation’s oil reserves.

Ambassador Gene Cretz, who recently ran the stars and stripes up the flagpole at the previously abandoned US embassy in Tripoli recounted to reporters the contents of the briefing he delivered to representatives of some 150 American businessmen. Joining him in the presentation was Assistant Secretary for Economic, Energy and Business Affairs Jose Fernandez, the State Department’s point-man on pursuing US corporate—and particularly oil—interests abroad. The agency has also played a leading role in seeking US investments in Iraq.

“We know that oil is the jewel in the crown of Libyan natural resources, but even in Gaddafi’s time they were starting from A to Z in terms of building infrastructure and other things,” said Cretz.

The US ambassador continued: “If we can get American companies here on a fairly big scale, which we will try to do everything we can to do that, then this will redound to improve the situation in the United States with respect to our own jobs.”

The “jewel in the crown” is a phrase that is drenched in the history and ideology of imperialism. First employed in the 19th century by the British Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli, it referred to India and its position as the most lucrative source of profits extracted by British imperialism from its worldwide colonial possessions.

That such language creeps into the official briefings of the chief US representative in Tripoli is hardly accidental. It expresses the rapacious aims pursued by American imperialism and its NATO allies, particularly Britain and France, since the outset of a war waged on the phony pretense of “human rights” and protecting civilians.

Now, with NATO warplanes and heavily armed “rebels” continuing a brutal siege of the coastal city of Sirte, where bombs, shells and lack of food and water has already killed hundreds if not thousands of civilians, capitalist interests from all the major powers are engaged in an unseemly stampede to exploit the wealth created by Libya’s oil reserves, the largest on the African continent.

Similar meetings of hundreds of businessmen have been convened in London—addressed by the envoy of the Benghazi-based National Transitional Council on Tuesday—and in Paris, as the governments who sent warplanes and special forces operatives to wreck the country are now mobilizing a new invasion of capital to extract profits from it.

On Thursday, Senators John McCain of Arizona and Lindsey Graham of South Carolina and two other Republican members of the US Senate visited Libya, the highest level US delegation to arrive in the country since the beginning of the NATO war last March.

The purpose of the visit was clear: profits. As the Associated Press reported, “The senators said American companies are hoping to tap into the wealth of oil and natural resources in Libya, which under Gaddafi long faced sanctions that prohibited much business.”

“There is a desire here by the Libyan people to make sure that those who helped get paid back,” Graham told reporters in Tripoli. McCain added, “I think American investors are more than eager to come invest here in Libya and we hope and believe that they will be given an opportunity to do so.”

In the past, the Libyan oil industry has been dominated by European conglomerates, but US corporations such as Conoco, Marathon, Hess and Occidental have been involved in a number of projects in the country and are anxious to increase their grip over Libya’s resources.

McCain and Graham are no strangers to Tripoli. In August 2009 they were the guests of Col. Muammar Gaddafi and his son and national security adviser Muatassim. A US embassy cable released by WikiLeaks described the meeting as “positive, highlighting the progress that has been made in the bilateral relationship” and quoted McCain as assuring the Gaddafis that he would work in Congress to expedite US arms sales to the regime.

These contemptible US politicians, who now bray about Gaddafi the “bloodthirsty dictator,” are no more concerned now than they were then about the lives of Libyan working people, thousands of whom have been killed in the war they promoted.

Having previously curried favor with Gaddafi to promote the interests of Big Oil and Wall Street, Washington and its European allies saw the mass upheavals in Tunisia and Egypt together with the beginning of anti-Gaddafi protests in Libya as an opportunity to initiate a predatory war aimed at securing semi-colonial control over the oil-rich country.

An indispensable role was played in preparing this criminal venture by a whole layer of middle class ex-lefts and liberal academics who provided a chorus that echoed and embellished upon the cynical claims of the US, French and British governments that their only interest in intervening in Libya was to halt a supposedly imminent massacre and to defend “human rights”.

From the New Anti-Capitalist Party in France, to the *Nation* magazine and the Pabloite *International Viewpoint*, the glaring contradiction that the same US government that took the lives of approximately one million Iraqis and continues to slaughter civilians in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Yemen and elsewhere was suddenly seized with concern about the fate of civilians in Libya gave them no pause.

A leading voice in this camp was that of University of Michigan professor of Middle Eastern history Juan Cole, who used his reputation as a critic of the Bush administration’s war policy in Iraq the better to sell the war on Libya. At the beginning of the war, Cole issued “An Open Letter to the Left,” warning that foreign intervention should not be turned into a “taboo” and “anti-imperialism” should not be allowed to “trump all other values”.

In this statement, he described the argument that the US and the other imperialist powers were waging the

war not to protect the Libyan people, but “to open the way for US, British and French dominance of Libya” as “bizarre”.

The ongoing scramble for Libya has put paid to these pathetic apologies for colonial-style conquest. The war itself has served to expose the movement of a whole socio-political layer of ex-lefts and liberals into the camp of imperialism, which they seek to serve by providing a “left” cover for aggression.

The movement of this layer is itself an expression of the deep-going social and class polarization that characterizes US society and, indeed, the entire capitalist world. Like the turn by the major powers to wars of imperialist conquest, it is driven by the historic crisis of the capitalist system and is a harbinger of coming revolutionary struggles of the working class.

Bill Van Auken



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:
wsws.org/contact