

Joseph Kishore: May Day and the American working class

Joseph Kishore
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We are publishing here the text of the speech given by Joseph Kishore, national secretary of the Socialist Equality Party (US), to the International Online May Day Rally hosted by the International Committee of the Fourth International and the World Socialist Web Site on Sunday, May 4.

I want to thank everyone who spoke today and all those who have listened in. It is really an extraordinary meeting and an extraordinary response. It is quite heartening to read the comments of those who are participating—over 500 comments so far from countries all over the world.

It is clear that this is something altogether new. It is, in some way, the most decisive refutation of those who proclaim the “end of history,” for today history is being made. The incredible response we have received to this rally is an indication of the hunger amongst workers and young people for a political analysis and an alternative.

In his article “May Day and the International,” Trotsky explained that May 1 was established as a holiday by the Paris International Socialist Congress in 1889. He wrote, “The purpose of designating it thus was, by means of simultaneous demonstrations by workers of all countries on that day, to prepare the ground for drawing them together into a single international proletarian organization of revolutionary action having one world center and one world political orientation.”

How proud Trotsky would have been had he been able to see this rally today. We’ve had participants in over 84 countries. In many areas entire groups of people are gathering to be part of this rally. Today is the product of decades of struggle waged by our international movement, and those who spoke here today have been leaders in this long struggle for international socialism.

In all the speeches that have been delivered today, the question of the role of American imperialism has played a central part. Whether it is in the Eastern Europe, Asia, Australia, Latin America, Africa, the Middle East—the foreign policy of the United States is a significant factor in domestic politics.

For the population of the entire world, the danger of war looms. The American ruling class has played the leading role, along with its partners in Germany, in instigating a right-wing coup in Ukraine, aligning itself with open fascists, and provoking a crisis that could lead to the first conflict between nuclear-armed powers in history. These are dangerous times.

The predominant position of the United States in world affairs has roots in the history of the 20th century. It is an unquestionable historical fact that, without the intervention of American capitalism, the entire historically bankrupt system that produced the First and Second World wars, the barbarism of fascism and the Holocaust, would have been swept away in the wave of revolutionary upheavals that originated in Russia in 1917 and shook the entire world during the first decades of the last century.

It was the United States that emerged as the main and basic counterrevolutionary force, which assumed the role of the “global

policeman,” which sought, as Trotsky had anticipated, to “reorganize the world.” When the Soviet Union fell toward the end of the last century, the ideologists of American capitalism triumphantly proclaimed the “end of history,” the “unipolar moment.” Finally, the American corporate and financial aristocracy could have everything. It *was* everything, or so they thought.

The United States adopted an explicit policy that it would brook no regional competitors. For more than two decades, it has leveraged its unrivaled military machine to wage war in country after country, to overturn or undermine governments as it sees fit. As the courageous actions of whistleblower Edward Snowden have revealed, it has built up a spying apparatus of immense scope, with the aim of sucking up all communications and monitoring the political activities and relations of everyone on the face of the planet.

Any movement that seeks to overturn present social relations must reckon with this power. It is not uncommon for those who oppose capitalism to become overawed by the task that is posed. This betrays, however, a fundamental error. American imperialism may be strong, but the contradictions of world capitalism are stronger—contradictions that, precisely because of its global role, find their most concentrated expression within the United States itself.

The apparent strength of the American ruling class lies on thoroughly rotten foundations. Indeed, American capitalism has been in a state of protracted decline for the past four decades. The United States emerged as the hegemonic world power in the first decades of the 20th century on the basis of its industrial power. The robber barons of old created massive industrial empires through their ruthless exploitation of the working class.

In contrast, at the pinnacle of the United States today lies a financial aristocracy, drunk on wealth amassed through speculation, parasitism and criminality. As its economic hegemony began to decline in the 1960s and 70s, the ruling class in this country responded by tearing up industries, laying waste to entire cities, destroying hundreds of thousands and millions of jobs.

The fate of Detroit, where we speak today, is representative of this historical transformation—a city that once had the highest per capita income in the country, the auto manufacturing capital of the world. Now, it is mired in bankruptcy, headed by a financial dictator, a stooge for the banks, who is destroying everything that remains.

Those who are enamored of the apparent strength of American imperialism ignore its economic decline. They also miss out on what is the greatest revolutionary factor in the world today, the American working class.

The American working class is the sleeping giant of world politics. The financial aristocrats confront no more powerful adversary than the workers of this country. Even the first stirrings of this colossal social force will upset the calculations of all the political puppets of Wall Street who occupy the government buildings in Washington.

Those within the ruling class who are still capable of thinking beyond

today's stock market quotes understand this, and they are afraid. This is the secret to the unrelenting, mind-numbing propaganda of the media, the lies and plumbum pumped out on a daily basis.

It is the secret to the curious contradiction of official political life. On the one hand, it is claimed that socialism has no following in America, that a socialist movement can never gain a foothold in this country. Yet, on the other hand, if one judged the political scene simply on the basis of the unrelenting propaganda, one would assume that the ruling class was directly confronting a mass socialist movement. A specter is indeed haunting the American ruling class—the specter of socialism.

The fear of the ruling elites is not simply paranoia. They sense and understand that the social conditions that exist provide fertile ground for a mass socialist movement. Moreover, they have not forgotten the class battles that plagued this country in the 20th Century. The last three decades actually represent a historic aberration.

It is a fact, unfortunately now little known, that the origins of May Day lie in the great insurrectionary struggles of the American working class. Indeed, today, May 4, 2014, marks the 128th anniversary of the Haymarket massacre, the bloody outcome of three days of working class struggle in the city of Chicago, Illinois, beginning on May 1, and centered around the fight for the eight-hour day.

Several leaders of the protest that culminated in the police rampage on May 4 were arrested and submitted to a drumhead trial. Six months later, four of these leaders were hanged until dead at Cook County Jail. Another of the accused committed suicide before his life could be taken by the state.

In honor of the Haymarket Martyrs, the International Socialist Workers Congress of Paris in 1889 chose May 1 as the day of international working class solidarity. The ever fearful American ruling class, as part of its constant effort to undermine internationalism and class consciousness, responded by making Labor Day a national holiday and placing it nearly as far away from May 1 on the calendar as possible.

The decades that followed these events saw enormous class battles. Here in Detroit, strikes in the auto industry in the 1930s took the form of virtual civil war, raising the question of who would run production—the working class or the capitalists. Out of these struggles, and those that swept the world, workers were able to wrest significant gains—the eight-hour day, the abolition of child labor, higher wages, basic health and pension benefits. The fight for these rights is written in blood.

The Achilles heel of the American working class lay in its failure to build an independent political organization of its own. Many of these early struggles were guided by socialist-minded workers, and the ideological inspiration for the development of an international workers movement was provided by Marxism. The union movement within which they developed, however, was dominated by a pro-capitalist and anti-communist bureaucracy, politically aligned with the Democratic Party.

As American capitalism began its relentless decline, beginning in the 1960s and 1970s, the ruling class went on the offensive. For four decades, it has been engaged in one-sided class warfare. The trade unions, for their part, have turned themselves into labor policemen, the enforcers of management, run by highly paid executives who profit off the exploitation of those they claim to represent.

Everything that the working class won has been taken or is being taken away. Rights that workers had previously thought were secure have been wiped out. Decent pensions and health care benefits are almost entirely a thing of the past as is a secure job. Wages of young auto workers have, in real terms, returned to what they were in the 1920s.

The levels of social inequality that exist in the United States today can be compared only to what existed in the 1920s, prior to the Great Depression. Under Obama, the so-called "candidate of change," the ruling class has orchestrated the greatest transfer of wealth from the poor to the rich in world history. The stock market is soaring, the bank accounts of

the financial traders are swelling. And the working class suffers.

Social inequality is the defining feature of American life. It infects every political institution and is a factor in every action of the state. The country is run by an aristocracy, blind in its greed, shameless in its thievery. The same barbarism practiced abroad is visited on the working class at home, the same ruthlessness, the same contempt for all legality.

We say to our comrades all over the world, always remember: there are two Americas. There is the America of Wall Street, the Pentagon, the CIA, the plutocracy, which lies, threatens and bullies. And there is the America of the working class, the bearer of all that is progressive, the true hope for the future.

Objective conditions are ripe for a social explosion. To borrow the terminology of Wall Street, the American class struggle is massively undersold, and the stability of American capitalism oversold. A radical correction is long overdue.

The question is, what perspective will guide these struggles? Reclaiming the revolutionary socialist traditions associated with this day is the great historic task.

This means, above all, the building of an international movement. There is no solution to the crisis confronting humanity within the borders of any nation-state. There is no nationalist road forward. The social and political nourishment for the working class in any one country must come from the struggles of its brothers and sisters internationally.

This movement must be rooted in the independent mobilization of the working class. It will not be the politics of gender, identity, sexuality or any other brand of middle class politics that will determine the course of history, but the struggle of all workers, united on the basis of our common class interests.

The International Committee of the Fourth International is uniquely poised to lead this struggle. Throughout its history, our movement, the Trotskyist movement, has waged a pitched battle, often under unfavorable conditions, to uphold the genuine traditions and perspective of Marxism, to combat the lies and treachery of the Stalinists, the Social Democrats, the reformists and trade union bureaucrats, the opportunists of every shape and size. What has become of these forces? If they even exist any longer, they are historically bankrupt, spent shells, reactionary pro-capitalist agencies of the ruling class.

It is these great traditions that we bring forward into the struggles of today. A powerful political movement must be constructed, an international movement that has as its aim nothing less than the abolition of the capitalist system and the full political, social and spiritual liberation of mankind.

Those participating in this rally are the kernel of this movement. As was said in the opening report, it is not just a matter of what we say here, but what we do. Let this rally serve notice: The working class is on the march, and international socialism is once again inscribed upon its banner.



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