

A crisis of global dimensions

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In a Perspective column published at the beginning of 2015, the *World Socialist Web Site* commented on the frequency of crises convulsing the global capitalist system. “The ‘peaceful’ intervals between the eruption of major crises—geopolitical, economic and social—have become so short that they can hardly be described as intervals,” we wrote. “Crises, on the other hand, appear not as isolated ‘episodes,’ but as more or less permanent features of contemporary reality.”

As the world enters the final months of 2015, it can be said that not only the frequency, but also the intensity of crises is reaching a new inflection point. The necessity of resolving the crisis of revolutionary leadership is posed with ever-greater urgency.

The global economy remains mired in the contradictions that erupted to the surface seven years ago. The policy of the ruling class in response to the Wall Street crash has reached an impasse. The flooding of financial markets with money has inflated asset bubbles while failing to produce any significant economic growth. Yet any move to curb the easy money policy of the Federal Reserve and other central banks risks sparking a financial panic even more severe than that which erupted in 2008.

This week, the International Monetary Fund cut its global growth forecast to just 3.1 percent for 2015, the slowest growth rate since 2009. “Six years after the world economy emerged from its broadest and deepest postwar recession,” IMF Economic Counselor Maurice Obstfeld reported, “a return to robust and synchronized global expansion remains elusive.”

This is a considerable understatement. In the more advanced capitalist countries, economic growth is stagnant, with persistent widespread unemployment and flat or declining wages. The situation is even worse in the so-called “emerging markets.”

Lawrence Summers, US treasury secretary under President Clinton, pointed to the crisis facing the ruling class in a comment published in the *Washington Post* on Thursday. Under the headline, “A global economy in peril,” Summers wrote that the dangers “are more severe than at any time since the Lehman Brothers bankruptcy in 2008.” He continued: “The problem of secular stagnation—the inability of the industrial world to grow at satisfactory rates even with very loose monetary policies—is growing worse in the wake of problems in most big emerging markets, starting with China.”

The world economy is faced with the “specter of a global vicious cycle in which slow growth in industrial countries hurts emerging markets, thereby slowing Western growth further,” Summers declared, adding, “Industrialized economies that are barely running above stall speed can ill afford a negative global shock.”

The economic crisis at once intensifies and is compounded by mounting geopolitical crises and international conflicts, driven above all by the relentless pursuit of global hegemony by American imperialism. For a quarter century, the American ruling class has been engaged in endless wars of ever-expanding geographical scope. For the past fifteen years, the military interventions have been waged under the banner of the “war on terror,” the ideological framework used by the American financial aristocracy to reorganize the Middle East and Central Asia through bloodletting and violence.

One country after another has been targeted for regime change or subversion by the US and its allies: Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Syria, Yemen. The carnage produced by these wars has led to a virtual collapse of state structures throughout the Middle East, producing a flood of desperate refugees to which the ruling classes of Europe have responded with violence and repression.

Here too, the crisis is reaching a tipping point. The local wars in the Middle East are leading increasingly to direct conflict between the major powers. This week, French President Francois Hollande declared that the conflict in Syria risked devolving into “a total war, a war that will also affect our territories,” i.e., Europe.

Over the past week, the Russian ruling class has sought to defend its interests in Syria by more openly backing the government of President Bashar al-Assad, which is targeted for overthrow by US-backed Islamist militias. The US and NATO powers have responded with extreme belligerence.

Speaking at a meeting of NATO defense ministers in Brussels on Thursday, US Defense Secretary Ashton Carter declared that Russia’s moves “will have consequences for Russia itself, which is rightly fearful of attacks. In coming days, the Russians will begin to suffer casualties,” he warned ominously.

Even as it intensifies its threats against Russia, the US is ratcheting up its military maneuvers in Asia. According to media reports, the US is planning within the next two weeks to sail warships inside territorial waters claimed by China. These

provocative actions follow the finalization of the Trans Pacific Partnership, a trade and investment deal between the US, Japan and other Asian economies concluded with the specific aim of isolating China and countering its influence in the region.

The United States is not the only imperialist power asserting its interests on the global stage. Japan is remilitarizing and expanding its arms industry, currently with the encouragement of the Obama administration. Germany is once again asserting its claim to hegemony over the European continent, and has global ambitions. German imperialism, which came into conflict with the United States in the two world wars of the Twentieth Century, has its own interests in Syria, Iran, Russia and China.

To the economic and geopolitical crisis must be added the extreme crisis of bourgeois rule. The old political institutions, used by the ruling class for decades, are breaking apart or in disarray. In the United States, in the midst of an election campaign dominated by the spokesmen of various billionaires, the political system is increasingly dysfunctional.

One of the principal parties of the ruling class, the Republican Party, has been thrown into chaos following the withdrawal of Kevin McCarthy, the current House majority leader, from the contest to become the new House speaker. According to media reports, representatives who had gathered to select the speaker of the house—the second person in the line of presidential succession—were in “total shock,” with some audibly weeping as the gathering broke up.

All of these crises are surface manifestations of something more profound: the crisis of the world capitalist system itself. This crisis brings with it the danger of world war and a descent into barbarism. At the same time, it creates the objective basis for the overthrow of the capitalist system—the radicalization of the working class internationally.

Decades of war, intensifying economic crisis and growing social inequality have produced immense changes in the consciousness of billions of workers and young people internationally. These subterranean processes are beginning to break to the surface. There is everywhere a growing restlessness and desire to fight.

In a period of crisis, the class character of political tendencies emerges more clearly. In Greece, opposition to austerity swept the Coalition of the Radical Left (Syriza) to power at the beginning of the year. The organization was proclaimed by all manner of pseudo-socialist and pseudo-left organizations to be the hope for the future, an alternative to the bank-dictated impoverishment of the Greek working class and youth.

Ten months later, Syriza leader Alexis Tsipras is leading the campaign to impose a new round of EU-backed austerity. “We have to tighten our belts,” he declared this week as he unveiled the government’s new budget, “to dare to implement the reforms this country needs.” Meanwhile, former Syriza Finance Minister Yanis Varoufakis, the self-described “erratic Marxist,” has announced his admiration for Margaret Thatcher.

Not only have the pseudo-left representatives of more privileged sections of the middle class been exposed in Greece as the accomplices of austerity, they have also served as champions of imperialist operations in the Middle East. In Syria, groups and publications such as the International Socialist Organization and *International Viewpoint* have provided the “human rights” justifications for the CIA drive to bring down the Assad regime by stoking a catastrophic sectarian civil war. Parroting the most rabidly militaristic factions of the US ruling class, they criticize the Obama administration for not moving quickly or aggressively enough to oust Assad.

A political realignment is beginning to take place, bringing with it a growing intersection between the perspective and program fought for by the International Committee of the Fourth International and the upsurge of working-class struggle. In the United States, the WSWs has played a central role in a growing movement of autoworkers, who are striving to cast off the dead weight of the trade unions and take an independent path. This is a significant indication of a radicalization and political reorientation of the working class in the United States.

The expanding crisis is a symptom of capitalism in an advanced state of disintegration. The basic question is: which will develop more rapidly, the drive of the ruling class to barbarism and war or the independent political mobilization of the working class in the world socialist revolution?

For this question to be answered in a way that opens up a new stage for the future of humanity, there must be a development of socialist political consciousness in the working class through the building of revolutionary leadership, that is, the building of the International Committee of the Fourth International as the World Party of Socialist Revolution.



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