

The strange death of the antiwar movement

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After over 14 years of unending US wars of aggression waged in the name of fighting terrorism, humanitarian intervention and promoting “democracy,” the threat posed to mankind by the eruption of American militarism has never been so acute.

In Syria, Washington and its allies have responded to Russia’s intervention in support of the government of President Bashar al-Assad and against US-backed Islamist militias with belligerent warnings and the pumping of new arms into the conflict. The prospect of the war turning into a regional and even global conflagration, pitting the world’s two largest nuclear powers against each other, has been widely noted. French President Francois Hollande warned last week that the Syrian conflict posed the danger of “a total war, a war that will also affect our territories,” meaning Western Europe.

In Asia, the US is involved in increasingly provocative military maneuvers aimed at challenging the rise of China, with American warships set to sail into territorial waters claimed by Beijing.

American troops, meanwhile, remain engaged in the two neocolonial wars that, before his election, President Barack Obama vowed to end. In Iraq, troops have been sent back in, while in Afghanistan, plans for the drawdown of US forces are being shelved in the face of the collapse of Washington’s puppet Afghan army before the Taliban offensive in Kunduz.

Earlier this month, US forces once again carried out a war crime with the attack by an American AC-130 flying gunship on the Doctors Without Borders (MSF) hospital in Kunduz, which killed 22 medical staff and patients.

The vast majority of the American people, like people all over the planet, are opposed to war. Yet these deep-going sentiments find no expression in the present political setup. The antiwar protests of tens of millions that emerged as a powerful global force in February 2003, in the run-up to the US invasion of Iraq, have never been repeated. And the more limited antiwar protests that took place in the aftermath of the invasion have long since ended.

How is the demise of the antiwar movement to be explained? It is not a reflection of lessening opposition to war among working people. Rather, its death can be ascribed to the actions of those who previously led the protest movements—pseudo-left political tendencies that palmed off their politics as radical, anti-imperialist and anti-capitalist, when they were nothing of the sort.

In the US, these tendencies worked deliberately to channel antiwar sentiment behind the Democratic Party, which represents US finance capital. They wound down protests in advance of each election, and terminated them altogether once Obama won the White House.

This was a matter not only of the political affiliation of the American president, but, more importantly, the politics of the pseudo-left tendencies themselves.

These groups emerged largely out of the mass protests against the war in Vietnam in the 1960s and 1970s, a movement dominated by sections of the middle class that rapidly receded with the end of the draft in the US and the withdrawal of American troops.

Their subsequent rightward evolution tracked that of the ruling class itself, with their politics becoming firmly rooted in the material class interests of better-off layers of the middle class. The personal fortunes of these social layers rose along with the stock market and real estate prices, the product of the growth of financial parasitism, which was, in turn, bound up with the global eruption of American militarism.

This new constituency for American imperialism was expressed in the turn by large sections of what passed for the left to support, under the cynical banner of “human rights,” the imperialist intervention in the Balkans during the Western-provoked civil wars that dismembered Yugoslavia in the 1990s.

The International Socialist Organization (ISO) in the US, in its domestic politics, espouses a sort of left reformism, in sync with a section of the Democratic Party, liberal layers of the upper-middle class, academia and the trade union bureaucracy.

In its foreign policy, however, its class nature appears

most nakedly. Here it is among the most rabid advocates of war, objectively aligned with the factions of the state, the Pentagon and the CIA that are pushing most aggressively for military escalation.

Together with its counterparts in Europe, organizations such as the French New Anti-capitalist Party (NPA) and the German Left Party, it has backed imperialist wars for regime-change in Libya and now Syria on the pretext of human rights. It has gone so far as to portray military operations by Islamist militias backed by the US, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Qatar—among the most reactionary regimes in the Middle East—as “revolutions,” while giving the same treatment to the coup orchestrated by Washington and spearheaded by fascist thugs in Ukraine.

This orientation emerges with particular sharpness in the French NPA and the German Left Party. Speaking for the NPA, academic Gilbert Achcar provided the justification for the US-NATO war in Libya, insisting, without any objective foundation, that the Libyan military was on the verge of launching a massacre in the eastern city of Benghazi and that only an imperialist war could stop it. “You can’t in the name of anti-imperialist principles oppose an action that will prevent the massacre of civilians,” he insisted. The US-NATO war he promoted cost the lives of some 30,000 Libyans.

Subsequently, Achcar met with Syrian National Council (SNC) officials, a collection of US and French intelligence assets, to advise them on the best strategy to bring about direct imperialist intervention and suppress popular opposition to it.

These tendencies, along with academic scoundrels like Juan Cole, who traded on his inflated reputation as a critic of the Iraq war to promote war in Libya, played a central role in legitimizing US wars of aggression.

Under conditions in which the Obama administration is deeply divided over its Syria policy in the wake of Russia’s intervention, the ISO has come down heavily on the side of military escalation. It is no accident that among the most hawkish elements within the administration is Samantha Power, the US ambassador to the United Nations, whose “human rights” justifications for imperialist aggression dovetail neatly with the political sensibilities of the pseudo-left.

On its web site, *Socialist Worker*, the ISO criticizes Obama for not being sufficiently aggressive. It states: “The rebels say that promised military aid from US and European governments has never included the kind of heavy weapons, like anti-aircraft batteries, that would help them confront the Syrian military and now Russian

warplanes.”

It seeks to legitimize US aggression by falsely characterizing Russia as “imperialist.” While the government of Vladimir Putin is pursuing a reactionary agenda in Syria, based on the interests of the layer of capitalists and oligarchs it represents, Russia remains a dependent economy encircled and dominated by Western imperialism.

For the ISO, the definition of Russia as an imperialist power emerges not on the basis of a serious examination of the country’s historical evolution or the nature of the society that emerged out of the dissolution of the USSR. Rather, it is a terminological expedient that allows it to support US-led military operations against Russia. Thus, in the supposedly inter-imperialist conflict between Washington and Moscow, the ISO comes down decisively in favor of the former.

In the case of the coup in Ukraine, this organization denounced “some on the left in the US and Europe” for insisting that the “‘main enemy,’ imperialism, is ‘at home,’” the watchword of genuine Marxists in the imperialist countries for over a century. To do so, it said, amounted to “renouncing the mass uprising” that the US orchestrated to bring about regime-change on Russia’s borders.

Far from promoting an antiwar movement, such organizations internationally constitute a politically critical pro-war faction. Well funded by establishment foundations, in close communication with leading figures in the Democratic Party, and utterly hostile to any independent movement of the working class, the ISO has evolved into an extension of the capitalist state, a particular type of NGO whose task is to provide a “left” cover for imperialist aggression.

A genuine antiwar movement can emerge only in a relentless struggle to expose such organizations and demolish their influence as an essential part of the fight to mobilize the international working class independently on the basis of a socialist program to put an end to capitalism, the source of war.



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