

On the threshold of the New Year

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31 December 2015

As the year 2015 ends, a general mood of fear and foreboding predominates in ruling circles. It is hard to find a trace of optimism. Commentators in the bourgeois media look back on the past year and recognize that it has been a year of deepening crisis. They look forward to 2016 with apprehension. The general sense in government offices and corporate boardrooms is that the coming year will be one of deep shocks, with unexpected consequences.

The *Financial Times*' Gideon Rachman gives expression to this pervasive feeling in his end-of-the-year assessment published on Tuesday. "In 2015, a sense of unease and foreboding seemed to settle on all the world's power centers," he writes. "All the big players seem uncertain—even fearful." China "feels much less stable." In Europe, the mood is "bleak." In the US, public sentiment is "sour."

Significantly, Rachman singles out as the "biggest common factor" in the world situation "a bubbling anti-elite sentiment, combining anxiety about inequality and rage about corruption that is visible in countries as different as France, Brazil, China and the US." This observation reflects a growing recognition within the corporate media that the coming period will be one of immense social upheavals.

Rachman's comment and others like it that have appeared in recent days confirm the assessment made by the *World Socialist Web Site* during the first week of 2015. The intervals between the eruption of major geopolitical, economic and social crises have "become so short that they can hardly be described as intervals," we wrote. Crises "appear not as isolated 'episodes,' but as more or less permanent features of contemporary reality. The pattern of perpetual crisis that characterized 2014—an essential indicator of the advanced state of global capitalist disequilibrium—will continue with even greater intensity in 2015."

In defending its rule, the ruling class seeks to cover over the reality of capitalism beneath a mass of lies and hypocrisy. War is cloaked in the language of freedom and democracy; antisocial domestic policy is portrayed as the pursuit of equality and freedom. But—and this is characteristic of a period of crisis—more and more, the essential nature of capitalism—a system of exploitation, inequality, war and repression—comes into alignment with the everyday experiences of broad masses of people. Illusions are dispelled; the essence appears.

In the sphere of world economy, any expectation of an upturn

has given way to the reality of permanent crisis. In the United States, six years into the so-called economic "recovery," real unemployment remains at near-record highs, wages are under attack, and health care and pensions for millions of Americans are being wiped out. Europe is growing at less than 2 percent a year, and large parts of the European economy—including Greece, the target of brutal austerity measures demanded by the European banks—are in deep recession. China, presented as a possible engine of world economic growth, is slowing sharply. Brazil and much of Latin America are in deep slump. Russia is in recession.

Meanwhile, the easy-money policy of the world's central banks has produced a new wave of speculative investment, centered in junk bonds and other forms of debt, which is beginning to unravel in a process that parallels the crisis in subprime mortgages prior to 2008.

The essential and intended consequence of government policy over the past seven years has been to vastly increase social inequality. During the past year, the wealth of the world's billionaires surged past \$7 trillion and the top 1 percent now controls half of the world's wealth. In the US, the scale of social inequality—and therefore political inequality—is so great that one recent scientific study concluded that "the preferences of the vast majority of Americans appear to have essentially no impact on which policies the government does or doesn't adopt."

The economic crisis intersects with and intensifies geopolitical conflicts, which in 2015 brought the globe closer to world war than at any time in the past half-century. Virtually every part of the world has either become a battlefield or is assuming the character of a potential battlefield. The Middle East has been propelled into a regional civil war stoked by the imperialist powers, with Syria now the target of an intensified war drive waged under the guise of a new "war on terror." Eastern Europe is being remilitarized as part of the US and NATO's campaign against Russia. In East Asia, the US is staging provocations against China over the South China Sea. In Africa, US and European forces are planning operations in Libya, Cameroon, Nigeria and other countries.

Imperialism operates with a level of ruthlessness and criminality that can be compared only to the period of the first half of the 20th century. Entire countries are being torn apart. Atrocities—like the deliberate bombing of a Doctors Without

Borders hospital in Afghanistan in October—are carried out with no consequences. Wars are launched without even the pretense of international legality.

Great power conflict—which produced two devastating wars in the 20th century—is again emerging as the basic dynamic of global relations. The relentless war drive of American imperialism is bringing it into conflict not only with Russia and China, but increasingly with other imperialist powers. The past year has seen a major effort by Germany to reassert itself as the principal European power, with calls from politicians, media commentators and academics for the establishment of a “strong state” to enable Germany to fill the role of “taskmaster” of Europe. Once again, the German ruling class is developing plans to “control Europe in order to control the world.”

For masses of people, the essential character of the state as a “body of armed men” dedicated to the defense of class rule is becoming evident. The “war on terror”—intensified following the attacks in Paris and San Bernardino toward the end of the year—is used to justify the abrogation of the formal procedures of bourgeois democracy. France has been placed under a permanent “state of emergency.” The European powers, in response to a massive refugee crisis produced by the military devastation of the Middle East, are erecting barriers and expelling migrants. Under conditions of unending war, fascistic and neo-fascistic forces (the National Front in France, Pegida in Germany, the candidacy of Donald Trump in the US) are growing.

The American ruling class, which employs torture and drone assassination in pursuit of its global ambitions, has built up a colossal apparatus of repression at home. Every day brings new reports of unarmed workers and youth being gunned down in cold blood by police officers who operate, with impunity, as self-appointed executioners.

As in every period of intense crisis, the real class interests represented by different tendencies are exposed. This goes not only for the established bourgeois parties, but also for the “left” parties of the petty bourgeoisie. The central strategic experience for the working class in 2015 was the election in Greece of Syriza, the “Coalition of the Radical Left,” whose coming to power in January was presented as a major turning point in world politics. Over the course of the year, however, Syriza betrayed every one of its election promises and is now implementing the very policies it claimed to oppose. As the year came to a close, elections in Spain showed a significant growth in support for Syriza’s ally, Podemos, with new claims that the era of austerity is over.

In fact, as the experience in Greece demonstrated, parties like Podemos, Syriza and many others internationally are thoroughly hostile to the working class. Politically and theoretically, they are rooted in the anti-Marxist conceptions of postmodernism, obsessed with race, sex and gender. The past year has not only exposed the political bankruptcy of the pseudo-left, but contributed to a growing realization that what

has been called “left” is, in fact, only one expression of the general rightward movement of bourgeois politics as a whole.

What these experiences prove is that there is no alternative except the revolutionary mobilization of the working class in opposition to the capitalist system.

Against this background, the final and most decisive expression of the capitalist crisis is the intensification of class struggle and the growing signs of the emergence of the working class as an independent force. There is deep and profound anger and opposition that is continually erupting in different forms—strikes, protests, demonstrations—which the ruling class seeks to isolate and suppress through a combination of violence and the mobilization of its auxiliary agencies in the pseudo-left and the trade unions.

In the final months of the past year, opposition among US autoworkers brought them into conflict with both the auto companies and the corporatist United Auto Workers union. The efforts of American workers, paralleled in countries throughout the world, to break through the barriers erected by the reactionary unions are entering a new stage. This process, though in its initial stages, will become increasingly pronounced. The period in which the class struggle has been artificially suppressed, in which opposition to war, inequality and dictatorship has been excluded from political life, is coming to an end.

The past year was not lived in vain. Workers all over the world are beginning to draw the lessons, to acquire a greater consciousness of the social and political forces they confront. In this regard, it is significant that the struggle of autoworkers corresponded to a sharp growth in the readership of the *World Socialist Web Site*, as thousands of workers turned to the WSWS as a source of truth and perspective. This can and will be repeated on an ever-larger scale in countless forms in the coming period.

Political problems are posed with enormous sharpness. That capitalism confronts an existential crisis is now self-evident. The question raised is: How will this crisis be resolved? Which will develop more rapidly, the tendency toward world war and dictatorship or the tendency toward socialist revolution? That is the great question that is posed as the New Year begins.



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