

Economic nationalism, war and the fight for international socialism

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Fundamental questions of perspective and orientation for the international working class are raised by the promotion of economic nationalism, which is assuming an ever more prominent role in the political life of one country after another under conditions of deepening economic crisis, mass unemployment and worsening social conditions.

In the campaign over Brexit—the referendum on June 23 to decide whether Britain is to remain within the European Union—both the “Leave” and “Remain” camps, reflecting different sections of the British bourgeoisie, are couching their arguments in terms of what is “best” for Britain. In the United States, the presidential election campaigns of both the leading Republican contender Donald Trump and the self-styled “socialist” Democratic candidate Bernie Sanders are making appeals on the basis of an economic nationalist agenda.

Seeking to exploit the legitimate anger and hostility of workers to the destruction of jobs and living conditions as factories are closed and jobs outsourced to cheaper labour areas, Trump promises to “make America great again” and denounces “unfair” trade deals, while Sanders lashes out against trade agreements with China and Mexico as “stealing American jobs.”

Despite their differences, the two sides share a common platform. They seek to remove the question of the “export of jobs” from its foundation—the capitalist system itself and its drive for profit.

They speak not for American workers, but express the interests of sections of the ruling class who feel themselves disadvantaged by major transnational corporations and aim to exploit the working class no less ruthlessly than their rivals.

There is no question that the various so-called “free trade” deals are not aimed at advancing economic and social conditions, but rather are designed to benefit giant corporations, enabling them to site their operations so as

to secure the maximum profit at the expense of the working class.

But it does not follow from this that in opposing such agreements and their reactionary provisions workers should put a nationalist minus where the dominant sections of the corporate and financial elite put a plus. They must develop their own independent perspective based on a thoroughly worked-out and scientific analysis.

Such an analysis begins by posing the question: where is the campaign of economic nationalism leading? What would be the consequences of a return to isolated national economies? The tortured and bloody history of the twentieth century provides the answer.

The resort to economic nationalism arises out of the breakdown of the global capitalist order signalled by the financial crisis of 2008. The last great breakdown of the capitalist system, which began with the outbreak of World War I and led to the Great Depression, shows where it is heading. The rise of economic nationalism during the 1930s, as each country sought to protect itself from the collapse of the world market through the erection of customs and tariff barriers, created a disaster.

From the introduction of the protectionist Smoot-Hawley Act in the US in June 1930 to the end of 1932, it has been estimated that world trade contracted by as much as one half to two-thirds, leading to the disintegration, not advancement, of entire economies. The inevitable outcome was World War II and the relapse into barbarism.

The reactionary logic of economic nationalism was demonstrated most clearly in the case of Germany. Adolf Hitler came to power on the basis of a program of economic autarchy. But within a very short space of time an economic crisis began to develop, as this policy ran up against the constrictions of the German nation-state. Further national economic development therefore required territorial expansion—Lebensraum—and from 1936

onwards the entire economic policy of the Hitler regime was based on military conquest, a program that led directly to World War II and all of its resultant horrors.

In determining its standpoint, the working class must ground itself on a broad understanding of the role of capitalism in the historical development of mankind.

Mankind's ascent, as Marx and, following him, Trotsky continually emphasised, is grounded on the development of the social productivity of labour, which is the basis for all social and economic advancement. In smashing down the constrictions of feudal particularism and establishing nation-states, capitalism provided a mighty springboard for the development of the productive forces and laid the basis for modern civilisation.

But the growth of the productive forces did not stop at the borders of the national state. Over the last 175 years it has increasingly assumed a global character through the expansion of international trade, the extension of investment to every corner of the world and, over the past three decades, the development of globalised production based on a further development of the international division of labour.

The globalisation of economic life is in itself an enormously progressive development. It increases the social productivity of labour and thereby lays the material foundations for the development of a society in which, for the first time in history, the economic and cultural interests of the entire world's people, rather than a privileged few, can be met and advanced.

However, this enormous potential cannot be realised within the suffocating framework of the capitalist profit and nation-state system. Rather, these constrictions lead inevitably and inexorably to war and the descent into barbarism.

The great historical task, therefore, is not to try to drag the productive forces back into the reactionary and outmoded framework of the nation-state system—as the proponents of economic nationalism whether from the right or the “left” propose—but to liberate the productive forces by abolishing the reactionary social and political framework that constricts them.

This is not some utopian ideal. The material basis for its realisation has been created by the very globalisation of production itself. It has created an immense social force, the international working class, united objectively by the process of capitalist production and opposed by its very life-situation in every country to the depredations of the profit system.

Its task is to tear down the walls and barriers of the

nation-state system, overturn the profit system, and take political power into its own hands in order to establish a new and higher socio-economic order based on the harmonious development of the productive forces on a global scale through a planned, consciously regulated and democratically controlled economy.

The sceptics and apologists for capitalism scoff at such a perspective and declare it violates so-called human nature, the highest expression of which, they insist, is the market and the capitalist profit system—a veritable libel on the human race.

But just as capitalism has created its own gravedigger in the form of the international working class, so it has forged the material foundations for a planned socialist economy. There is not a single transnational corporation or international financial institution in the world today that does not plan its global operations on a minute-by-minute, or even second-by-second basis. In its drive for profit, the capitalist system has established a vast system of information and technology spanning the world.

This complex and globally-integrated system of production and its associated information and other technologies have been created and are maintained, not by the handful of ultra-wealthy individuals who at present reap its benefits, but by the collective physical and intellectual labour of billions of working people—from the worker on the production line to those who maintain and design the technologies for its regulation.

Having created this enormous productive force, the international working class must now wrest control of it and utilise it for the development of society as a whole.

The perspective of economic nationalism advanced by the Trumps and Sanders of this world represents an attempt to drag mankind back into a new dark age.

The perspective of international socialism is the next stage in mankind's advancement. But it can be realised only if it is consciously fought for, and that requires a decision to join and build the International Committee of the Fourth International as the revolutionary leadership of the international working class.



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