

The November 5 conference, “Socialism vs. Capitalism and War,” and the building of a new movement against imperialist war

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On November 5 at Wayne State University in Detroit, Michigan, the Socialist Equality Party and the International Youth and Students for Social Equality are holding an antiwar conference, “Socialism vs. Capitalism and War.” The purpose of this conference is to examine the growing danger of war and lay the political foundations for a movement against imperialist war in the United States and internationally.

The conference has been called in the midst of an immense geopolitical crisis, centered on the ever-expanding war drive of American imperialism. Far more rapidly than most people are aware, the quarter-century of war waged by the US since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, and the fifteen years of the “war on terror,” are metastasizing into a direct confrontation with the larger geopolitical rivals of the United States.

In the final weeks before the US elections, the Obama administration is preparing a major escalation in Syria while simultaneously intensifying its campaign against both Russia and China. In Sunday’s town hall presidential debate, Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton reiterated her support for a “no-fly” zone in Syria, which US military leaders have acknowledged could precipitate a war with Russia.

Last week, in an event virtually ignored by the American media, US officials gathered in Washington DC at the annual conference of the Association of the US Army, where they issued bellicose threats and demanded a massive expansion of the military.

Army Chief of Staff Mark Milley said a future war involving large nation-states “is almost guaranteed.” To those who “try to oppose the United States,” he declared, “we will stop you and beat you harder than you’ve ever been beaten before.”

Deputy Defense Secretary Robert Work warned that the American military is prepared to “pound the snot” out of any “adversaries [who] think they can keep us out.” Major General William Hix said that “a conventional conflict in the near future will be extremely lethal and fast,” and urged military officials to prepare for “violence on the scale that the US Army has not seen since Korea.”

This immense war danger has been virtually excluded from the presidential election campaign and all but ignored by what presents itself as the political “left” in the United States. After a quarter-century of unending war, including eight years under Obama—the first president to serve two full terms with the country continuously at war—there is no functioning antiwar movement.

The conference called by the Socialist Equality Party and the IYSSE is *the only effort to mobilize opposition to imperialist war*. This is an

extraordinary fact that requires explanation.

What accounts for the disappearance of organized antiwar opposition? It is not that the people of the United States and the world have become pro-war. The antiwar sentiment that erupted in demonstrations of hundreds of thousands, in some cases millions, in the run-up to the invasion of Iraq in 2003 has not gone away. Rather, the organizations that largely led these protests have become the most fervent advocates and apologists for imperialist intervention.

An example of the arguments advanced by these forces is an article published by Stanley Heller on the web site *New Politics*, which bills itself as an “independent socialist forum.” The founding editors of *New Politics*, Julius and Phyllis Jacobson, were political associates of Max Shachtman, who broke with the Trotskyist movement in 1940 and later became a champion of US imperialist intervention in Korea and Vietnam. The editorial board of *New Politics* includes members of an array of pseudo-left organizations.

In his September 28 article “Rage for Aleppo and Syria,” Heller attacks those who “are acting as if this was 2003 and everyone need to focus on Western imperial adventures... The main carnage right now has little to do with ‘the Empire.’”

The issue is not the role of US imperialism, Heller insists, but the government of Bashar al-Assad, who is “assisted (and in some ways commanded) by foreign powers, one semi-fascist [a reference to Russia], and the other a theocracy [Iran].” He blackguards anyone opposing the CIA-backed operation in Syria as a supporter of Assad and Russian President Vladimir Putin.

Repeating the worst propaganda from the US war in Iraq, Heller invents popular support in Syria for US intervention, claiming that “Syrians have called for a no-fly zone for years.” He writes that he is “repulsed by the ‘anti-imperialist’ left who demonize as an ‘agent of the Pentagon’ anyone who demands a NFZ [No Fly Zone].”

Heller concludes by calling on the “peace movement” to “put pressure on the candidates for president,” particularly Clinton, to take a more aggressive line on Syria. “Only Hillary Clinton,” he writes, “expresses any sentiments about doing something to protect Syrian civilians,” including supporting a no-fly zone. He bemoans the fact, however, that even if Clinton wins, “she doesn’t take office until January.”

Heller, a periodic correspondent for the International Socialist Organization’s *Socialist Worker*, is also a leader of the misnamed “Revive the Peace Movement” group, which is endorsed by the ISO, CODEPINK, the Middle East Crisis Committee, and various other groups. The Revive the Peace Movement recently published an “Open

Letter on Syria” to which Heller makes reference in his above-quoted article.

The letter centers on attacking the Obama administration for last month’s failed cease-fire, claiming that it would undermine the campaign against Assad. “Under the Kerry-Lavrov deal,” the letter states, “Washington and Moscow will be collaborating to maintain Assad in power.”

The letter is signed by a broad coalition that includes Ashley Smith of the ISO; David Finkel, managing editor of *Against The Current*; Howie Hawkins of the Green Party; Joanne Landy, co-director of the Campaign for Peace and Democracy; Fred Mecklenburg of the News and Letters Committees; Dan La Botz, co-editor of *New Politics* and leading member of Solidarity; and representatives of the Antiwar Committee in Solidarity with the Struggle for Self Determination, the Black Lives Matter-affiliated “Moral Mondays” group, and many more.

This list encompasses virtually the entirety of the pseudo-left in the United States, whose constituent organizations maintain an incestuous relationship rooted in their common opposition to Marxism and hostility to the working class. *Against the Current* is published by Solidarity, which is a fusion of various Shachtmanite organizations and also maintains a political affiliation with *International Viewpoint*, published by the Pabloite tendency that broke with Trotskyism in the early 1950s. The ISO is another branch of Shachtmanite politics. News and Letters has its origins in the “Marxist Humanism” of Raya Dunayevskaya and CLR James.

Finkel himself is a former member of the Socialist Workers Party, which reunited with the Pabloites in 1963 and the following year expelled the tendency that would go on to form the Workers League, the predecessor of the Socialist Equality Party. Finkel recently interviewed Gilbert Achcar, an associate of the New Anti-capitalist Party, the main organization behind *International Viewpoint*. As the *World Socialist Web Site* recently noted, Achcar, along with the ISO’s Ashley Smith, is a leading campaigner for intervention in Syria and also backed the war in Libya.

Those pseudo-left groups that did not sign the open letter abstained not out of opposition to the principles elaborated therein. Socialist Alternative, for example, has ignored the drive to war in order to cover for American imperialism. Its last article related to US foreign policy, dated September 4, downplays the risk of war and paints a Pollyannaish picture of American imperialism. Socialist Alternative writes that “a full-blown military intervention at this point in Syria, let alone in Iraq, is politically inconceivable for them [the US].” An earlier article by the same organization refers to what it claims is the “extreme reluctance of American politicians to commit ‘boots on the ground.’”

Such statements are made despite the fact that hundreds of thousands of soldiers are presently deployed at US imperialism’s nearly 1,000 bases worldwide. Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, American foreign policy has been based on an extreme *recklessness* in undertaking military adventures abroad. With respect to Syria, the US has been bombing the country for over two years in a de facto alliance with the Al Qaeda-linked al-Nusra Front and other proxy Islamist forces. The United States’ war for regime change has led to the deaths of hundreds of thousands of Syrians and turned millions more into refugees. Washington bears primary responsibility for the virtual destruction of Syria.

During the primary campaign in the US, Socialist Alternative devoted itself entirely to promoting the campaign of Bernie Sanders

for the Democratic presidential nomination. While posing as a “socialist” opponent of Wall Street, Sanders gave his full support to Obama’s war policy throughout his primary campaign. He is now enthusiastically campaigning for Clinton, who is running largely on the basis of anti-Russian agitation and advocating military escalation against the forces of Assad and Russia in Syria.

The pro-imperialist orientation of the pseudo-left is not fundamentally the product of mistaken ideas or the rotten politics of one or another individual. The unanimity of these organizations expresses class interests.

They constitute a faction of bourgeois politics. They speak for sections of the privileged middle class that want a bigger share of the wealth of the top 10 percent and more influence and power within the corporate elite, the trade union apparatus and the state. The upper-middle class, approximately the top 10 to 1 percent of the population, has benefited greatly from the post-2008 stock market boom, which is itself dependent on the domination of American imperialism abroad and austerity and wage cutting at home. The pseudo-left’s use of radical and “socialist” phrases is aimed at obscuring its pro-war and pro-capitalist orientation.

The development of a new antiwar movement is the most urgent political task, one that must be taken up by workers, students and youth in opposition to the treacherous politics of the pseudo-left. As the February 18, 2016 statement of the International Committee of the Fourth International, “Socialism and the Fight Against War,” insists, such a movement “must be based on the working class, the great revolutionary force in society, uniting behind it all progressive elements in the population.” The fight against war must be international, it must be socialist, and it must be completely independent of and hostile to all of the political parties and organizations of the capitalist class.

The ICFI is the only organization that is mobilizing opposition to war because it is the only organization that fights for the program and perspective of world socialist revolution. The same capitalist crisis that produces war also produces the objective basis for putting an end to war in the growth of the class struggle. The anger and opposition of workers all over the world must be politically organized and directed in a revolutionary movement against the capitalist system. A political leadership must be built, and it is for this purpose that the SEP and the IYSSE have organized the November 5 conference in Detroit.

For more information and to register for the November 5 conference, Socialism vs. Capitalism and War, click here.



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