“To the staff of the WSWS and its readers”

A response from a scientist to “Science and socialism”

22 April 2017

To the staff of the WSWS and its readers,

As a scientist and supporter of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI), I applaud the WSWS for its perspective, “Science and Socialism ,” posted in anticipation of the international March for Science planned for cities around the world this weekend. This statement is an important declaration of the perspective of the Trotskyist movement regarding the prospects for and tasks of scientists and the working class in defending science in this period of capitalist crisis.

It is critically important that “Science and Socialism” be circulated broadly, especially because the ICFI is the only political movement drawing out the critical connections between attacks on science and their roots in the crisis of the system. It is also crucial that wide layers of students, scientists and workers recognize that only the revolutionary working class under the banner of international socialism can free science and society more generally from the straitjacket of capitalism and the nation-state system.

A point that I think must be specifically emphasized is the fundamentally global character of science, today and throughout history. The exchange and development of scientific ideas has always occurred on an international scale, with theories and techniques propounded by one person (or group today) being taken up, tested, debated, refined and built upon by amateur and professional scientists from around the world.

Even before science formally existed as a distinct field, mathematics wound an international course, through ancient China and Greece, India and the Arab world, and later developing through exchanges across Europe during the Renaissance and the Enlightenment (to give only an abbreviated synopsis). The development of physics, chemistry and biology took similar courses, and today all fields of science involve worldwide collaboration and the synthesis of ideas and techniques developed in every corner of the globe.

Understanding this history is important for those marching in defense of science, particularly as the ideas and political tendencies participating in such a march will not be homogeneous. One particularly pernicious tendency is typified in a recent video produced by Redglass Pictures (funded by, among other questionable participants, the US State Department and the *New York Times*) titled “Science in America,” featuring American astrophysicist and popular science figure Neil deGrasse Tyson.

In the video, Tyson begins by painting the development of the US (over images that include American flags and the Wright brothers first flight and culminate with footage of Neil Armstrong on the moon) as a product of American geniuses who “pioneered industries,” thus making science “a fundamental part of the country that we are.”

In the face of this patent appeal to American chauvinism, one is compelled to point out that science is a fundamental part of human society as a whole, if history is any evidence. It should also be said that American society, as a progressively integrated part of world capitalism, was in fact built up through the collective labor of millions of people from around the globe (and through using and developing ideas and technologies in an interrelationship with a myriad of world sources).

The video continues with Tyson’s expression of frustration over the fact that Americans seem not to believe science as they used to. As to whether or not this is even true, studies invariably show greater public

© World Socialist Web Site

trust in science than in other American institutions, such as the news media, and this trust is fairly stable going back to the 1970s, except among self-identified conservatives starting in the late ’80s. What could be the source of an apparent decline of trust in science is seemingly lost on Tyson, who goes on to explain science as “emergent truth,” apparently intended to enlighten the scientifically illiterate, whom he blames for the attacks on science.

It goes unstated (unrecognized?) by Tyson that Americans are subject to daily misinformation from the media, particularly regarding science from media on the far right. That these sources might have ties to figures with a material interest in misleading the public is apparently lost on Tyson (as well as those in liberal circles who trumpet the notion that they are smart and those who don’t agree with them must simply be dumb). Moreover, the real impact on scientific literacy resulting from the collapse of public education under the weight of poverty and economic decline are not pointed to. For Tyson and smug liberals like him, one blames the victim and places responsibility there, rather than with the real source.

Thus one can see that Tyson’s trumpeting of scientific nationalism is no accident. He and those like him may really believe that public support for science can only be rallied with appeals to patriotism (or at least, unwilling to place blame for the current crisis at the feet of the wealthy, and fearful of inciting a movement that might go too far to the left, they can only defend their own interests by reactionary means).

In order to oppose this false approach, the logic of defending science and science funding by such appeals must be explained. If one were able to, let’s say, lessen (temporarily) cuts to science funding by appealing to nationalism, one would have thereby also provided ammunition for and increased the influence of right-wing nationalist forces (including the Democrats who are onboard with economic nationalism and anti-Russian chauvinism).

One could imagine such forces being in support of “America-first” science, including denial of visas for work or travel to foreign scientists and increased Congressional control over science to ensure it serves the “national interests” (i.e., making sure research serves the R&D needs of corporations and the military and doesn’t aid “foreign regimes”). The isolation of American scientists would greatly harm scientific progress worldwide.

Ultimately, the strengthening and legitimization of nationalism will weaken internationalist and anti-war sentiment and increase the danger of world war.

Science as an issue in particular provides the opportunity to strengthen consciousness of the power and benefits of international collaboration. The importance of internationalism for science cannot be overstated, particularly when fighting forces seeking to divert mass action in its defense into right-wing, chauvinist channels.

I hope that SEP members, WSWS readers and supporters of the ICFI around the world will fight to bring this consciousness into Saturday’s protests, as well as into science and the fight for its defense more broadly. To the “Science in America” of the liberal representatives of the ruling class, the working class must oppose the perspective of “Science and Socialism.”

Fraternally,

Nicholas, Milwaukee Wisconsin

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site