

May Day 2017: Lessons of history and the fight for socialism

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This speech was delivered by WSWs International Editorial Board Chairman David North to open the 2017 International May Day Online Rally held on April 30.

On behalf of the International Committee of the Fourth International and the international editorial board of the *World Socialist Web Site*, I extend our revolutionary greetings to our members, readers and supporters all over the world. For the fourth consecutive year, the International Committee of the Fourth International is celebrating the historical day of international working class solidarity with an online rally. The first of these rallies was held in 2014, on the eve of the one hundredth anniversary of the outbreak of World War I in August 1914, and the seventy-fifth anniversary of the start of World War II in September 1939.

This year's May Day also coincides with an auspicious anniversary: the centenary of the 1917 Russian Revolution. One hundred years ago, May Day was celebrated throughout Russia just eight weeks after the overthrow of the Romanov dynasty. Hatred of the war was a major factor in the outbreak of the February Revolution. But the Russian bourgeoisie had no intention of ending it without achieving the territorial gains that had led the tsar to go to war in the first place. By the time of May Day, Nicholas II had been removed from power, but the interests of the imperialist ruling elite had not yet been satisfied. The bourgeois Provisional Government was determined to continue the war.

The reformist leaders of the Soviet of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies—the Mensheviks and the Socialist-Revolutionaries—supported the Provisional Government and refused to demand an immediate end to the war. They used the overthrow of the tsar as a pretext to rebrand the imperialist war as a war for democracy. For the bourgeoisie, the war's continuation was seen as necessary, and not only to gain control of Constantinople. It was intended as well to disorient the masses and maintain their subordination to the capitalist state. "A war to exhaust the enemy," Trotsky later wrote, "was thus converted into a war to exhaust the revolution."

Only one party opposed the war—the Bolshevik Party, though it adopted its intransigent anti-war stance only after Lenin had returned to Russia from exile in early April. It required nearly three weeks of intense political struggle by Lenin within the Bolshevik Party to shift its position from support for the Provisional Government to the revolutionary overthrow of the capitalist state and the transfer of power to the soviets.

In historical retrospect, where outcomes often are seen as inevitable, one tends to underestimate the intensity of the political struggle that was required for Lenin to change the policy of the Bolshevik Party. But it must be understood that this struggle did not take place in a vacuum. The "defensist" position of many party leaders—that is, support for the continuation of the war under the newly unfurled banner of democracy—was, to a considerable extent, an adaptation to the confused patriotic sentiments of the masses in the first days and weeks of the revolution.

A section of Bolshevik leaders argued that the renunciation of

"revolutionary defensism" would isolate the party from the working class. It would be, they warned, reduced to a "group of propagandists." Lenin emphatically rejected this argument. He wrote:

Is it not more becoming for internationalists at this moment to show that they can resist "mass" intoxication rather than to "wish to remain" with the masses, i.e., to succumb to the general epidemic? Have we not seen how in all the belligerent countries of Europe the chauvinists tried to justify themselves on the grounds that they wished to "remain with the masses?" Must we not be able to remain for a time in the minority against the "mass" intoxication? Is it not the work of the propagandists at the present moment that forms the key point for *disentangling* the proletarian line from the defensist and petty-bourgeois "mass" intoxication? It was this fusion of the masses, proletarian and non-proletarian, regardless of class differences within the masses, that formed one of the conditions for the defensist epidemic. To speak contemptuously of a "group of propagandists" advocating a *proletarian* line does not seem to be very becoming.

How profoundly different Lenin's principled politics was from that of all opportunists, then and now, who habitually justify their betrayals as necessary accommodations to the existing level of mass consciousness.

Reoriented by Lenin, the Bolsheviks fought against the chauvinist "intoxication." Even by May Day, this mood had not entirely dissipated. One story published in the *New York Times*, as filthy then as it is today, on the May Day rallies in Petrograd, was headlined: "Russian Crowds Hoot Lenine." The journalist of the *Times* reported, with satisfaction: "Speeches made by followers of the Radical Socialist agitator Lenine were greeted with cries of: 'Enough! Hold your tongue.'"

Another article assured American readers that virtually all Russian socialist leaders supported the war, and concluded with the information: "Manifestoes now being issued are undisguisedly advocating that Lenine share the fate of Rasputin." But within six months, the Bolsheviks, with the support of the working class, overthrew the Provisional Government. The October Revolution marked the beginning of the end of World War I.

It is entirely appropriate to review the political lessons of 1917, but not only because this is the centenary of the Russian Revolution. The struggle against the imperialist preparations for war is the spearhead of the revolutionary struggle against capitalism. Never has the danger of a nuclear conflagration been as great as it is today.

In the three previous online May Day rallies, the International Committee has called urgent attention to the relentless growth of geopolitical and inter-imperialist tensions. We have warned that without the building of a mass working class movement against war, based on an international socialist perspective, the ruling elites will plunge mankind

into a catastrophe.

Even among the supporters of the International Committee, not to mention the many thousands of readers of the *World Socialist Web Site*, these warnings may have been viewed as overstated, and even alarmist. But in light of the events of the past several months, do the warnings of the International Committee still seem exaggerated?

The most experienced experts in imperialist geo-politics are being compelled to recognize the possibility of a catastrophic war. In the current issue of *Foreign Affairs*, the leading publication of the American foreign policy establishment, a series of essays has been published under the collective title “Present at the Destruction?” The tone of these articles is set in an essay written by a leading US foreign policy specialist, G. John Ikenberry. Surveying the reckless policies of the Trump administration, he writes: “Across ancient and modern eras, orders built by great powers have come and gone—but they have usually ended in murder, not suicide.” And what form will this suicide take? The second essay in *Foreign Affairs* bears the title “A Vision of Trump at War,” by Philip Gordon, a senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations. His article outlines several geo-political scenarios in which conflicts spiral out of control and lead to war with Iran or North Korea, Russia or China.

The scholarly journal *Comparative Strategy* published an article in late 2016 titled “Reconceptualizing nuclear risks: Bringing deliberate nuclear use back in.” The authors—both professors at Georgetown University in Washington, DC—argue against the widespread assumption that a nuclear war would most likely take place as a result of a political miscalculation or accident. That is not the case, they say. The main danger of such a war, they warn, arises from the growing willingness of leaders to consider the use of nuclear weapons “as tools of statecraft.” The authors define *deliberate nuclear use* “as the intentional detonation of a nuclear weapon or weapons against an enemy target, or engaging in an intentional process of nuclear threat and escalation whereby a nuclear detonation against an adversary is the end result.”

The essay specifies five well-known military strategies that may lead to the deliberate use of nuclear warfare: 1) *Nuclear use against a nonnuclear opponent*, in which “a nuclear-capable state may be tempted to use nuclear weapons to try to end the conflict;” 2) *Splendid first strike*, whose purpose “is to destroy all of an adversary’s nuclear weapons in a single campaign, leaving the adversary unable to retaliate;” 3) *Use ‘em or lose ‘em*, a strategy that may be employed in a confrontation involving two nuclear-armed states, where one of the states decides to launch a nuclear attack before its own arsenal is wiped out; 4) *Nuclear brinksmanship*, in which the risk of war is deliberately escalated in the hope that the adversary will back down. But this strategy is pursued with the understanding that the confrontation may lead to war; and 5) *Limited nuclear war*, a strategy based on the concept that nuclear war, once started, can be contained without escalating into a full-scale and unlimited thermo-nuclear exchange.

Who are the maniacs who have devised this strategy? The willingness to consider any of these strategies is, itself, a sign of madness. The use of nuclear weapons would have incalculable consequences. Will this fact deter the ruling classes from resorting to war? The entire history of the twentieth century, not to mention the experience of just the first 17 years of the twenty-first, argues against such a hopeful assumption. The political strategy of the working class must be based on reality, not self-deluding hopes. Just two weeks ago, the United States dropped a 21,600-pound Massive Ordnance Air Blast bomb on Afghanistan.

This was the largest bomb used by the United States in a military action since the dropping of nuclear bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August 1945, nearly 72 years ago. One might have assumed that this event would have dominated world news for weeks. Far from it. The use of this bomb received little more than routine coverage and then faded quickly from the news.

Just three days ago, Donald Trump stated: “There is a chance that we could end up having a major, major conflict with North Korea. Absolutely.” This was said in a casual way, as if Trump were discussing whether he planned to play golf this coming weekend. And the media reported Trump’s remarks without demanding that he explain precisely what he meant, what the outcome of a war would be, how many would be killed, wounded, maimed, what the ecological consequences of such a war would be.

What is one to make of this phlegmatic response by the media to a statement by the president of the United States that there is “absolutely” a real danger of a “major, major conflict”—that is, a nuclear war—with North Korea? It expresses a blind and unquestioning acceptance of the logic of imperialism. The media and the rest of the political superstructure of the capitalist state—and I am speaking of all the major capitalist states, not only the US—are, with their lies as well as with their silences, preparing for war.

As the ruling elites prepare for war, the working class must be mobilized to prevent it. The essential foundation for the struggle against war is an understanding of its causes. As Lenin explained in 1917, war is the product of the development of world capitalism “and of its billions of threads and connections.” It cannot be stopped, he said, “without overthrowing the power of capital and transferring state power to *another* class, the proletariat.”

Therefore, the fight against war poses, in the sharpest form, the fundamental political problem of this historical epoch: the resolution of the crisis of revolutionary leadership. Never has the contradiction between the very advanced state of the crisis of capitalism and the subjective consciousness of the working class been so great. But it is this very contradiction that provides the impulse for an immense and rapid development in political consciousness.

As capitalism hurtles toward the abyss, it is creating the conditions for the political radicalization of the working class—billions of human beings—in all parts of the world. It is true that social consciousness lags behind social being, but that does not mean that the working class is blind to the bankruptcy of the existing social system, which has nothing to offer the masses—least of all hope for a better future. The idea of progress has disappeared from bourgeois thought. Where does one still hear predictions that conditions of life on this planet will be better twenty years from now than they are today? If a global poll were taken, in which all people were asked what they considered to be more probable within the next fifty years—the elimination of poverty or the destruction of the planet through a military and/or ecological disaster—is there any question as to what the overwhelming majority would answer?

Yes, there is a crisis of political leadership in the working class. But it is a crisis that can be solved, because the working class is a revolutionary force that embodies the objectively existing potential for the socialist reconstruction of society.

This is the foundation upon which the International Committee fights to carry out the historical task posed by Trotsky when he founded the Fourth International as the World Party of Socialist Revolution in 1938.

We do not underestimate the immensity of the challenges that confront the International Committee in building this world party. But no other party will undertake this task. There is not another organization in the world that can claim, with any degree of seriousness, that it either represents the interests of the working class or advances a revolutionary program.

Our use of the term “pseudo-left” is not a factionally motivated exaggeration. It is a precise definition of organizations of the affluent middle class that have nothing to do with Marxism, Trotskyism, or the revolutionary struggle for socialism. The International Committee does not tail behind such nationalist charlatans as Tsipras, Iglesias, Melénchon or Sanders. The political organizations led by or allied with such figures

are, to borrow a phrase from Trotsky, “rotten through and through.”

Without succumbing to immodesty, the International Committee and its sections have every right, in this centennial year of the Russian Revolution, to look to the future with confidence. The influence of the *World Socialist Web Site*, the voice of the International Committee, is growing rapidly. As our readership expands, so will the size of our organizations. And we are convinced that the global radicalization of the working class will lead to the establishment of new sections of the International Committee. We hope that our listeners in many parts of the world will be among those who take this vital initiative and found new sections in the countries in which they live.

One hundred years ago, upon returning to Petrograd, Lenin wrote: “We are out to rebuild the world,” and that is, indeed, what the Bolsheviks did. This is the aim of the Fourth International—the rebuilding of the world on a socialist foundation—that is, a world without poverty, exploitation, political oppression and war. We call upon all those who are attending this rally, in all parts of the world, to join us in this fight.



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