Full transcript: “Organizing Resistance to Internet Censorship”

The World Socialist Web Site
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The following is an edited transcript of the January 16 webinar “Organizing Resistance to Internet Censorship,” featuring journalist Chris Hedges and WSWS Chairperson David North. Video of the webinar can be viewed here.

Andre Damon: Hello and welcome to the *World Socialist Web Site*’s webinar, “Organizing Resistance to Internet Censorship.” I’m WSWS reporter Andre Damon, and I will be your host for today’s event. I’m joined by Chris Hedges and David North, our guests today.

Chris Hedges is a Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist, the host of RT’s “On Contact,” and a contributor to *Truthdig*. Chris has worked for nearly two decades as a foreign correspondent for the *New York Times* and other major outlets. He is the author of numerous books, including *Empire of Illusion: The End of Literacy and the Triumph of Spectacle; Days of Destruction, Days of Revolt*; *The Death of the Liberal Class*, and; *The Wages of Rebellion*.

Also participating is David North, who has played a leading role in the international socialist movement for 45 years. He is the chairperson of the International Editorial Board of the *World Socialist Web Site.* His published works include *A Quarter of War: The US. Drive for Global Hegemony 1990–2016*, and *The Russian Revolution and the Unfinished Twentieth Century*.

Today’s event is sponsored by the *World Socialist Web Site*, which has been in publication for 20 years and is celebrating its anniversary this year. I would like to begin by inviting all of our participants to share this event as widely as possible with your friends, colleagues and co-workers on social media. I would also like to invite all of our participants to comment and ask questions on our discussion page at endcensorship.org and on the Facebook page.

Before we begin, we have received a number of messages of support for this event, and I would like to begin by reading one from journalist and *WikiLeaks* founder, Julian Assange.

“The future of humanity is the struggle between humans that control machines and machines that control humans; between the democratization of communication and usurpation of communication by artificial intelligence.

“While the internet has brought about a revolution in people’s ability to educate themselves and others, the resulting democratic phenomenon has shaken existing establishments to their core. Google, Facebook and their Chinese equivalents, who are socially, logistically and financially integrated with existing elites, have moved to re-establish discourse control. This is not simply a corrective action. Undetectable mass social influence powered by artificial intelligence is an existential threat to humanity.

“While still in its infancy the trends are clear and of a geometric nature. The phenomenon differs from traditional attempts to shape cultural and political phenomena by operating at scale, speed and increasingly at a subtlety that eclipses human capacities.

“I commend WSWS for drawing attention to this phenomenon.”

I would also like to read a statement of support from Australian journalist and documentary filmmaker John Pilger, who writes:

“As a journalist and filmmaker who has long navigated the mainstream, I offer my support to this important discussion between Chris Hedges and David North.

“Something has changed. Although the media was always a loose extension of capital power, it is now almost fully integrated. Dissent once tolerated in the mainstream has regressed to a metaphoric underground as liberal capitalism moves toward a form of corporate dictatorship. This is an historic shift, with journalists policing the perimeters of the new order: witness the anti-Russia hysteria and the #MeToo witch-hunts, especially in liberal newspapers such as the *Guardian* and the *New York Times*. With independent journalists ejected from the mainstream, the World Wide Web remains the vital source of serious disclosure and evidence-based analysis: true journalism.

“Sites such as wikileaks.org, wsws.org, consortiumnews.com, globalresearch.ca, democracynow.org and counterpunch.org are increasingly targeted as ‘offensive’ by Google and other giants; and the filtering and limiting of Google searches of these sites is rank censorship. These are not marginal sources, but crucial for people trying to make sense of a world in which science and technology have advanced remarkably while mainstream “democratic” politics have regressed to the extremism of class warfare and incessant warmongering.

“The perverse contrivance of fake news is part of this, as is Russia-gate. The broadcaster RT—which often does the job the western liberal media has abandoned—would have been destroyed had it not been backed by a powerful government. The same might be said of Julian Assange had he not demonstrated extraordinary resilience and courage and won the backing of a small, brave government. The matter is urgent; voices must be raised! I urge my colleagues to break their silence.”

I’d like to thank Julian Assange and John Pilger for those powerful statements. And I’d like to begin by going over some of the themes that they raise. Over the course of the past six months, David, the *World Socialist Web Site* has written extensively on Google’s censorship of left-wing, anti-war and progressive websites. How did you come to the conclusion that this was taking place?

David North: Well, as you said, we’ve been publishing the *World Socialist Web Site* since February 14, 1998. We have carefully tracked our readership and, over the years, have seen a substantial growth. Of course, that growth tends to vary over periods of time, periods of greater political involvement, but the general trend has been upward. Particularly in 2015, 2016 and into 2017, we saw a very rapid growth in the readership of the website, trending in the area of sixty to seventy to eighty thousand individual hosts a day.

In early May, we began to note a decline in daily readership. Initially, we thought this may be simply a seasonal trend, a certain falling off after the first wave of anti-Trump demonstrations. But it persisted into June, and at an exponential rate. We recognized that this was something which

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was not normal. We also began to examine the statistics of sites that are often compared to ours: *Truthdig*, *Counterpunch*, other sites, *Consortia News*, *Global Research*, to see whether we were uniquely affected. We discovered that they were also being substantially hit.

At about the same time, we became aware that Google had introduced a new algorithm, which, it claimed, was going to improve reader experience. But it was very clear that this algorithm was being employed to undermine access to the *World Socialist Web Site*. The graph shows the rapidity with which this developed after April.

In fact, a new algorithm was introduced by Google and Ben Gomes, who is their chief officer in charge of this. He issued a statement on April 25th, and right after that, this precipitous plunge begins. What we were able to determine—and we did this in consultation with other experts in search optimization—was that the search terms, which most commonly brought readers to the *World Socialist Web Site*, were being targeted—inoculated, so to speak.

AD: We have some of them on the screen.

DN: Right. So, of the 150 most popular search terms, which would bring readers to the *World Socialist Web Site* in April, by August, 145 of them were bringing no readers to the website. You can see some of the words, which are on the screen: "socialism," "Russian Revolution," "class conflict." In other words, it isn't, as they claimed, that they were trying to protect people against click-bait and things like that.

What's so specifically important about this is that in a period of growing political radicalization among young people, among workers, they start to look for oppositional information, they become interested in socialism, revolution, terms like "equality." Those terms, which previously brought thousands of readers to the *World Socialist Web Site*, were now bringing no readers to the site. In other words, they were setting up a quarantine between those who may be interested in our site, and the WSWS. From being a bridge, Google was becoming a barrier, a guard preventing access to our site.

Initially, when we raised this, there were questions about whether or not the algorithm was a pure coincidence, not politically directed. No one can seriously make this claim any longer. This is an absolutely concerted, conscious effort at the suppression of the *World Socialist Web Site* and other websites that present oppositional positions, that present a critical evaluation of the policies of the American government. And that is why the organization of the struggle against this has become so critical.

AD: We can see on the screen now some of the fall in the search traffic to the *World Socialist Web Site.*

DN: Right. I'll make one additional point. In April, about 45 percent of our readers were coming to the *World Socialist Web Site* via searches. Google was a substantial section of those search enablers. Earlier this week, I checked again. Less than 15 percent of our readers are coming through Google searches. Since August, we have been able to grow our direct readers. About 50 percent of our readers come directly to the *World Socialist Web Site*, but the decline in readers coming from searches continues to escalate. The last time I looked, the figures from *Truthdig* were similar. You're facing the same situation.

AD: Yes, a whole series of left-wing, anti-war and progressive websites are being affected.

Chris Hedges: It's part of a process that has been going on now for several years. Corporate capitalism, globalization, neo-liberalism, whatever you want to call it, is in crisis. And it is in crisis in two ways. First of all, the ideology itself has lost credibility. It no longer holds any currency across the political spectrum. It has been exposed as a lie. All of the promises of this ideology, which were utopian to begin with: the idea that it would create a global middle class and spread democracy (Thomas Friedman was one of the popularisers of this utopian vision) if we get out of the way and let the market rule.

The devastation, the destruction, not only internally within the United States, but globally, has created rapacious oligarchic elites around the world, in countries like India, or here, or everywhere, and essentially rendered huge sections of the population redundant or superfluous. Surplus-labour, Marx called it.

That has forced these corporate oligarchic elites to use more and more draconian forms of control. We see it in the United States, with essentially marginal communities becoming mini-police states; the rise of mass incarceration, the use of felony convictions to turn especially poor and black and brown people into a criminal class.

The second crisis is that the ruling elites are frightened because they watched the political charade that they had set up, in both the Republican and Democratic Parties, where the leadership, whether it was the Bush dynasty or the Clinton dynasty, or Barack Obama, have all been servants of the corporate state. John Ralston Saul talks about the corporate *coup d'état*—and this is correct—in slow motion. But it's over.

So critics of capitalism, critics of imperialism, critics of the structure, such as myself, have been pushed to the margins, out of mainstream publications like the *New York Times*, where I worked for 15 years. Now what we're seeing, in essence, is that they no longer have a counter-argument to make that anybody is buying. So these marginalized critics—the *World Socialist Web Site* will print critiques of capitalism, lift up the abuse of the working class, as will a handful of sites (we're not talking about many). *Counterpunch* is very good, *Alternet.* They are being targeted because the ruling elites now find these critics to be dangerous and potent. So it's the intersectionality between these large Silicon Valley entities, like Google and Facebook. Of course they're wedded to the national security state. Bezos has a $650 million contract with the CIA, for instance. And they are working hand-in-glove, and this is the danger of revoking net neutrality; it is part of this process to essentially erase these critics from the Internet.

I would urge people to look at a very fine essay by Alexander Berkman. I think it is called "The Idea is the Thing." He talks about what happens when a ruling ideology—like, let us say, the divine right of kings under a monarchy—no longer has any kind of currency. And this is what Antonio Gramsci talks about when he refers to the interregnum: the period of time where the ruling ideology no longer has any currency, and yet there is this kind of amorphous period, where people have yet to articulate an alternative vision.

And Berkman likens it to boiling water in a kettle: that you don't see the ferment at first. Everything appears to be quiet. Everything appears to essentially buttress the status quo. But underneath, some very dangerous—to the ruling elites—undercurrents are happening, and then when it explodes, he said it is like the steam and the whistle coming out of the kettle.

That's where we are at, and the elites know it. So they are carrying out a pre-emptive attack against those of us who are enemies of the corporate state and corporate capitalism.

AD: We've obviously transitioned to the broader context of censorship. I'd like to direct a question to David. At the beginning of the year, the *World Socialist Web Site* posted a perspective, in which it made a prognostication that this year would see a substantial intensification of the class struggle. At the same time, as we have written, the New Year has already brought a very sweeping attack on Internet freedom, just over the course of the past two weeks. Could you speak a bit about this relationship?

DN: I think Chris has raised what are very critical issues. He has spoken of Gramsci. I think we should go right back to what Marx said. We're going to be marking, this year in May, the 200th anniversary of the birth of Marx; last year, we were commemorating the 100th anniversary of the October Revolution—two events of immense contemporary significance. After all, if one wants to understand the world we live in, for all of the changes in capitalism over the course of 150 years, the basic laws

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uncovered by Marx remain valid. You can't talk about, or understand the world we live in without understanding the concept of value, the concept of profit, the declining rate of profit …

CH: … or the concept of labour, which modern economists have erased …

DN: Right. In the end, in the final analysis, all value is derived from the exploitation of the labour of workers. And far from the working class disappearing—another favourite mantra of the liberal and petty-bourgeois academics—we actually are living in a world in which the very process of globalization has vastly increased the size and scale of the international working class.

CH: Let's call them the working poor. That's what the working class has been reduced to.

DN: There is a very important distinction with Marx. Again, the great achievement of Marx, and of Engels, was to see the working class not only as an exploited class, but as a revolutionary class. And it is a revolutionary class because, in the final analysis, it operates and is, of all the productive forces, the most important. When we return to these very early writings of Marx, they were, in fact, the period where he was developing the critique of utopian socialism and petty-bourgeois conceptions of improving society; where he sought to establish a scientific analysis. He not only elaborated the materialist conception of history, but he said that the operation of the class struggle leads to the socialist revolution, to the assumption of power by the working class, or had created the objective conditions for that to take place.

Chris correctly asks, "Why are they frightened?" The ruling class has a very, very fine instinct. I often feel that one of the problems on the left is an excess of pessimism, and not grasping, for all the difficulties and all the problems (and no one who seeks to fight the capitalist system is unaware of the enormous problems and dangers involved) the revolutionary potential in the situation. But the ruling class tends to be very aware of these dangers. And, correctly, you say this is a pre-emptive strike. If what we were saying were of no significance, there would be no need to censor us.

CH: And I think we should say that, for several years, those of us who carried out these kinds of critiques were certainly pushed to the fringes. But there was nothing put in place to, in essence, impede us. We couldn't reach a mainstream audience, but we could express ourselves on the Internet. That is now what they are seeking to eradicate.

Let me just add a little bit to what you said about Marx. Marx built his hopes, with Engels, around the industrial working class. We are sitting here in the heartland of deindustrialized America. Through global trade agreements, the global corporate oligarchs have moved industrial production into places like China, where you make $1 an hour and work 12 hours a day; or Bangladesh, where you make 32 cents an hour. In essence, they are rolling us all the way back to the mid-19th century, with the birth of the industrial revolution, when workers were wage-slaves, when workers were in absolutely horrendous conditions. That has all been replicated in places like China. China uses, extensively, prison labour, and we have one million incarcerated people in this country who work for for-profit corporations.

So—and I think the *World Socialist Web Site* is aware of this—we can't get caught up in national boundaries. If we can't bring a kind of consciousness and build alliances and solidarity with, for instance, sweatshop workers in Bangladesh, we're never going to bring this system down.

This has to be a global fight, where the oppressed working peoples, whose interests are our interests, create international connections, because we are all fighting the same enemy, and it is super-national. We see it with the tax havens—I think $4 trillion in offshore accounts. Even before the 2017 tax bill, a tax boycott has been created. Companies like General Electric, Bank of America don't even pay taxes.

This is a global battle. This is really something that Marx and the old communist movement got, and which we have to recapture.

DN: And the astonishing element of this, which is actually true, is that the objective conditions now existing in the world are leading directly to this. The emergence of transnational corporations, international capital flows, have, objectively speaking, internationalized the working class. There is no longer, in scientific terms, anything like a purely national product, or a national economy. The integration of capitalism has produced a globally-integrated working class.

What is unique about the period that we're now in, is that the class struggle is going to unfold, objectively, as an internationally-coordinated process. We are seeing that develop.

This really goes to what underlies, in the most fundamental sense, the fear of the Internet. That is, it is not only a means of getting out news. It is a powerful instrument of international coordination. We see that from our own experiences.

I will give you an example. We were reporting on a strike by autoworkers in Romania. Then we became aware of the fact that our articles on the Romanian strike were being translated into Romanian. We were being contacted by workers in Romania. And they are carefully following international developments.

This webinar is an international broadcast. In a certain sense, what is happening here is an expression, I hope at a very conscious level, of an objective process. What we're trying to give expression to is something that is objectively taking place. We're living in a period of world socialist revolution. Marx wrote, "all the governments of the world are frightened." Well, all the governments in the world today are terrified of a force that they cannot control.

CH: And that's why you see Internet censorship in places like China; the attempt to impose Internet censorship in India.

Julian Assange's book with Jacob Applebaum, *Cyber punks*, was one of the first I read that laid out the Janus-like quality of the Internet. Because everything you say is true.

On the other hand, it is a mechanism for surveillance, for building profiles, for monitoring dissidents. Because people use electronic forms of communication to organize—or, actually, I would say, electronic forms of communication are not good organizing tools; they are good for creating the logistics to organize.

Organization has to be done face-to-face, as we saw in the Occupy Movement, as we see in any movement. It can't be done in front of a screen. But you can set it up logistically. And after the eradication of the Occupy encampments, we saw the security and surveillance state.

I was especially aware of it with the figures who were driving the occupation in Zuccotti Park. In the weeks and months afterwards, the security and surveillance apparatus—the FBI and Homeland Security and others—targeted the most important individuals. And they got the right people. I will refer to one case, where they literally manufactured a charge that one of the activists had tried to assault a New York City police officer with a pair of scissors.

They had filmed everything in Zuccotti. They had cranes where they were filming. But of course they didn't have that moment on the film because it was a manufactured charge. They hauled this person in front of a court, and assaulting a police officer is a seven-year sentence. It is a felony conviction. They forced them to plea out, but take a felony conviction with a five-year probation. This means that if they do anything within that five-year, they can go serve that seven-year.

So, unfortunately, they used the Internet, the mechanisms of social media that were important. This is something that Julian has written and spoken about quite a bit. That also has to be an element, that the Internet is not a benign force. It is in the hands of the people that we are trying to—let's not mince words—overthrow. And that gives them tremendous amounts of power. The complete concentration of systems of information under corporate control, which is very dangerous.

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DN: This is of course a danger. With every technology, it depends, in the end, on who controls and who uses it. But I think when we look at the situation, the very fact that a discussion such as this one can take place, and be followed by an international audience, and ideas such as these can be presented, represents and contains within it a tremendous potential. And it is that which they are trying to stop.

CH: Right.

DN: In a certain sense, the Internet has unleashed a force that is shaking every government.

Just to come back to the question of repression: anyone who is serious about the struggle against capitalism must take that seriously. But, if I can just take up the issue of the experience, not just of Zuccotti Park, but of the events of 2011, which were very important. You had a genuine mass movement of the working class in Egypt, not a movement of the middle class asking to occupy Wall Street. This was a mass movement of the working class. The problem was the absence of political perspective, the absence of an understanding of what it was they were fighting, the confusion over the nature of the Muslim Brotherhood, the confusion over the nature of the army, the state.

Ultimately, the issue of perspective is the critical question. Does one have a correct analysis and correct policies, which can be oriented to the working class?

This is the central issue. We are now living 50 years after the May-June event in France. I suppose you're a bit of a youngster, and you might not remember it. But I still do. It was the birth of the period of the New Left. And in the aftermath, there was a rejection of the role of the working class, and, for many reasons, a period of tremendous political confusion. Now one is seeing a re-emergence, a renewal of interest in socialism, a renewal of interest in Marxism. And that is not part of the conversation.

I am struck, though, that just yesterday, Bernie Sanders wrote a column decrying all the ills of inequality, and he managed in such an article never to mention the word "socialism," or the word "capitalism."

CH: He also never mentions the word, "imperialism."

DN: Of course not, and he is pro-war.

CH: You can't be a socialist unless you're an anti-imperialist.

DN: Precisely.

CH: This is my problem with Sanders.

DN: I think you have many problems with Sanders. But that is a significant one.

CH: I think all that you say is true. However, we can't be naive to the fact that we are also, as any society that becomes polarized is, in essence, dysfunctional. What happens when an elite or cabal seizes power, whether that be monarchic or Stalinist or fascist? In essence, they create political paralysis. Because systems of government are ostensibly set up under a liberal capitalist democracy to ameliorate the problems of the working class—this is what we saw with the New Deal—to create enough reforms to bring insurgent forces back into the system.

Roosevelt writes about this quite openly, and says that his greatest achievement was that he saved capitalism. In one of his letters, his private letters, he talks about revolution. He is writing to a fellow oligarch and says: either we begin to give up some of our money now, or we will lose all of our money. That system has broken down, and *Death of a Liberal Class* is a book about it. That system no longer works.

DN: There are objective reasons for that. American imperialism no longer occupies the position that it had at the end of the Second World War.

CH: And also, the fact that the corporate structures cannibalized and destroyed the very institutions that acted as a kind of safety valve to bring enough balance within the system to thwart revolt. All of that system has been destroyed in the name of anti-communism. Because after they destroyed the radical movements—the Wobblies, the Communist Party, the Socialists, the Progressive Party—they turned on the very liberal institutions. Everything that Roosevelt did came out of those radical movements. This is the point of Howard Zinn's *A History of the United States* .

For instance, what we don't read, because they've been erased from history, is that the Communist Party was organizing sit down strikes in the 1920s. What happened in the 1930s was a tactic that was lifted from the Communist Party. Those radical movements, which were the true engines that opened up American "democracy," were destroyed.

This was always a closed system, and we still live in one. It's how the person who wins the popular vote by three million votes is not president. It has nothing to do with Russia. It has to do with the Electoral College.

And with the death of those liberal institutions, what we get in all systems serves the interests of a tiny cabal—at the moment, the naked kleptocracy. And that creates paralysis; we are potentially on the cusp of a government shutdown.

If that paralysis continues—in essence, the inability of government and official institutions to respond to the increasing grievances and difficulties of the working class—the system eventually seizes up. And that is where we are.

DN: Again, because you're raising so many issues, which is very important, we have to always come back to what are the fundamental objective causes of these phenomena.

Why is it not possible for the American ruling class to produce a Roosevelt? Why do they come up with a Trump? Trump is not some monster, who has interloped on what was previously a Garden of Eden.

You know as well as I do that the choice presented between Trump and Clinton was, as far as the masses of people were concerned, no choice at all. And Trump only won because he tapped into a deep anger over social conditions, conditions that exist for the great masses of people. We see this phenomenon not just in the United States, but in other countries as well. Its underlying cause is the breakdown of any viability of a national program.

CH: Right.

DN: And there is no national solution to the problems of American capitalism. The United States is seeking to overcome this through a policy of war. Because what, ultimately, is imperialism? The inability to solve the problems of the nation-state within national borders drives the policy of war and conquest. That is what is emerging. Under conditions of war and the threat of war, under conditions of growing and immeasurable inequality, democracy cannot survive. The tendency now is for the suppression of democracy. And just as there is no national solution for capitalism, there is no national solution for the working class.

CH: That's right, and I also want to throw in that these conditions are fertile ground for proto-fascism or fascism, which we see in the Christian right. I wrote a book called *American Fascists: The Christian Right and the War On America.* I graduated from Harvard Divinity School. I don't use the word "fascist" lightly. They are fascists, and that fusion of the iconography and language of the state, of American nationalism, with the iconography and language of the Christian religion, is exactly what the Nazi German Christian church did.

Trump is a political vacuum, and we are watching this Christian fascism fill that vacuum. That's why Noam Chomsky says: you can think that getting rid of Trump is great, but Michael Pence will be worse.

AD: I just wanted to take this opportunity to interject, since the topic of war was brought up by both of you, and the need for internationalism. I wanted to read a statement of support that was sent in by Cindy Sheehan, the anti-war activist, who became famous for her outspoken opposition to the Iraq War:

"I send my most comradely greetings to this very important and necessary event and the esteemed speakers; I also would like to send my gratitude to the WSWS and SEP for taking leadership in this urgent struggle against internet censorship.

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"I have read and completely agree with the statement from journalist John Pilger and would not have much to add on the subject of internet censorship, except that I would add the national security state is devising more and more ways to not only suppress dissent, but guide internet users to think the way the empire wants us to think: The owner of the largest social media site has brazenly admitted as such with surprisingly mild, if any, outrage against it (present company excluded). And, hey, if propaganda isn't working fast enough to have us marching in lockstep with the war machine, a very convenient, yet fake, ballistic missile warning to the people of Hawaii might do the job?

"I hope to be tuning in online, but I also hope we will hear what we need to do to oppose this latest vicious attack on our freedom of speech and freedom to gather in opposition to the US empire."

She obviously raises very critical issues and topics that we've been discussing. She also raises many of the questions that our own readers and viewers have asked over the course of this discussion: What next? Carolyn writes: "So, what is the solution?"

We have a comment from Joseph: "What specifically can the citizenry do as individuals to end Internet censorship?"

Another, from Ben Franklin, writes: "Do you think socialists and revolutionaries have to set up alternate channels of communication over the Internet, or is it more likely that we will have to resort to classical print-based publications?"

Derek3 writes: "Please describe the organization process. How can Internet users have the slightest hope of preventing the corporate takeover of Internet infrastructure?"

This is addressed, obviously, to both of you.

DN: There are a lot of questions there. This discussion is taking place within the context of enormous crisis internationally. Anyone who believes that the *World Socialist Web Site* has been exaggerating the danger of war just has to see what happened over the weekend in Hawaii. I don't think one would have had such a response of panic had it not been for the fact that people are internalizing these events. They are taking it seriously and beginning to realize that the threat—to borrow a term used by Julian Assange—is existential, that the danger of war is enormous. Such dangers tend to concentrate attention and consciousness. People begin to recognize that they must involve themselves in politics, and examine questions more profoundly and seriously.

From the standpoint of "why," what is the danger of war all about? Ultimately, the United States is seeking to establish its global hegemony, and there is no pacific way that can be done. There are many articles on the website, along with statements by many high-level people in the military itself, on how great the danger of war is.

What can stop it? Only a movement toward socialism. These questions are integrated. The vast levels of inequality, the imminent danger of war: such conditions are not compatible with democracy. Democracy needs to be suppressed.

CH: Let me throw in: we are at war, and we have been at war now for 16 years. I was the Middle East bureau chief for the *New York Times*. I spent seven years in the Middle East, and many months in Iraq. This was the greatest strategic blunder in the late American empire, equivalent to the Athenian empire's invasion of Sicily, in which their entire fleet was sunk and most of their soldiers were killed. That then saw an outbreak of revolts throughout the empire.

This, in essence, is our Suez, where, in 1956, the British and the French attempted to counter Nasser's nationalization of the Suez Canal, and had to withdraw in humiliation. The British Empire never recovered after that, until the pound sterling was removed as the world's currency, and sent the British economy into freefall.

Once the US dollar is no longer the world's currency, we will suffer instant economic collapse. We certainly are going to suffer another economic meltdown, because Wall Street is playing all the games.

We see the stock market, once again, is rising in this fictitious bubble. But that forces empire to retract. This strategic miscalculation, which is characteristic of all late empires, is draining the lifeblood of the United States already.

Dave, it is right that they are so foolish that they may attempt to open another war-front. But we have already spent, I think, $7 trillion, not to mention the human cost of the war, not only for Americans but, in particular, for Iraqis, Afghanis, Pakistanis, Yemenis (this is the Saudi campaign in Yemen, which nobody wants to talk about, with horrific cholera outbreaks …).

So, that is the classic response of late empire, and we may very well see something with North Korea because, as Randolph Bourne said, "war is the health of the state."

In the name of war, we already are seeing dissidents such as us attacked as "foreign agents of Russia." One of the things David didn't mention, although you're well aware of it, and you've written on it, is that, ostensibly, the reason these algorithms are in place is to stop "fake news." Now, neither your website, nor *Truthdig*, nor *Counterpunch*, publishes "fake news" for Russia. But they are using that argument, and in a time of war it is much easier to demonize dissidents.

Karl Liebknecht, the great German revolutionary, who was killed after the Spartacist uprising with Rosa Luxemburg, used to say, "the enemy is at home," i.e., the enemy is German militarism. And our enemy is at home.

Why, for instance, are we continuing these wars, especially in Afghanistan, which we have lost? The Taliban is totally resurgent. Unlike Iraq, only about 20 percent of Afghans live in urban areas. There are 80 percent who live in the countryside, which are either in dispute or in control by the Taliban, and even parts of Kabul and Kandahar have Taliban presence.

Why do we continue those wars? Why ramp up potentially a war with Russia? Because of an arms industry, because war is a good business for Raytheon and Haliburton and Northrup Grumman.

When I was in Warsaw, I landed at the airport, and there was a giant billboard for Raytheon. President Reagan had promised Gorbachev, with the fall of the Berlin Wall, that NATO would not be expanded beyond Germany.

Yet it was expanded all the way up to Russia's border, which makes no sense. It's antagonistic and unnecessary, except for the arms industry, because Czechoslovakia, Poland, all of these countries then have to reconfigure their entire weapons systems, which were Soviet, to be compatible with NATO weapons systems. It involves billions and billions of dollars. That's what you've seen with the Trump administration. It has been unable to fight the "deep state" and the arms industry on this.

DN: They are so closely integrated and, in the final analysis, I think it is always important to come back to this: War is catastrophic, but they see no way out. War is not an expression of the strength of the system. It is an expression of profound and deep crisis.

Trotsky said in the *Transitional Program: "*The ruling elites toboggan with eyes closed toward catastrophe." In 1939, they went to war, as in 1914, aware of the potentially disastrous consequences. Certainly, in 1939, they knew what the consequences of war were: war brings revolution. But they could not see a way out.

The global problems that exist can only be solved in one of two ways: the capitalist, imperialist solution is war and, as you said, fascism. The working-class solution is socialist revolution. This is, I think, the alternative we're confronted with. So, the question which has come up, in the broadest sense, is: what is the answer to the problems we face? Building a revolutionary party.

CH: And just to get to some of the specifics about organizing. The elites seek, and have been quite successful at, channelling energy back into a dead system, i.e., the Democratic Party. This is why—not that he cared or

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that it mattered—I would not endorse Bernie Sanders. Because all of that money, all of that energy—and remember, he even used the word "revolution"—ended up with him running around the country telling everyone to vote for Hilary Clinton.

DN: Which was perfectly predictable …

CH: Which was completely predictable. The Democratic Party establishment …

DN: … and he had many enablers …

CH: Yes, … was never going to allow Sanders to take the nomination. We see it with the leak of the DNC emails, and then the chairwoman's own confession in her book, that Hilary Clinton was running the DNC [Democratic National Convention]. They had mechanisms, for instance, to preclude independent voters from voting in the primaries (and I would just throw out that primaries, by the way, are not paid for by the parties; they are paid for by the taxpayers), the stealing of the Nevada caucus, $1 billion of dark money, of corporate money pumped into the coffers of the Clinton campaign. This was never going to happen.

I think we should not be seduced or fooled into thinking that the system is capable of reforming itself, or that we are capable of reforming the system. Our motto has to be a South African model of non-cooperation. Everything we do has to impede the structures of power.

I was out at Standing Rock in North Dakota. The water protectors provided a good example for that, in, essentially, physically blocking the Dakota access pipeline. Of course, when Trump comes to office he signs it into law. Look at the difference between that and the "women's march" in Washington, which was really political theater, much of it orchestrated by the Democratic Party. Debbie Wasserman Schultz was there, speaking at one of the venues, which gives you an insight into it.

Look at the response in Washington compared with the response at Standing Rock: over 700 arrests, brutal evictions, rubber bullets, pepper spray, attack dogs, water cannons laced with pepper spray, in sub-zero temperatures, constant infiltration.

When I was there, 24 hours a day, that encampment was being buzzed with aircraft, photographing. They blocked the roads in November, so we had to go all the way around and come in from the other side. But even on the back roads, we were running into roadblocks set up by private security, mercenaries, who were wearing military-style uniforms and were carrying military weapons, but had no form of identification at all.

AD: On the topic of civil war, certainly the ruling elite sees the question of control over the Internet as an existential threat. We reported on the *World Socialist Web Site* about hearings in the Senate and the House, in which you had testimony from the various heads of Google, Facebook and Twitter, as well as intelligence officials. One of them, Clint Watts, wrote: "Civil wars don't start with gunshots; they start with words. America's war with itself has already begun. We must all act now on the social media battlefield to quell the information rebellions that can quickly lead to violent confrontations and easily transform us into the divided states …"

CH: Let me just interject and say, everyone should read Max Blumenthal's article in *Ultranet* about him, because he's a total nutcase. He's a right-wing conspiracy theorist who has no credibility at all. But of course he is useful at this particular moment.

DN: When we speak about the Internet, and why the *World Socialist Web Site* is a critical instrument of the struggle for socialism, the most critical issue is the development in the working class of program.

There is going to be, and there is already unfolding, massive social struggles. The question of social revolution is not utopian. It is a process which emerges objectively out of the contradictions of capitalism. The argument can be made—and we made this argument—that really, since 2008, we have been witnessing an acceleration of crisis. It has never been solved, and indeed, the massive levels of social inequality are themselves the expression, not of a healthy, but of a deeply diseased socioeconomic order. It is fueling, at every level, social opposition.

Of course, the great problem, then, is overcoming the legacy of political confusion, produced, as a matter of fact, by the defeats and the betrayals of the 20th century: the betrayal of the Russian Revolution by Stalinism; the betrayals of the working class by Social Democracy; the subordination of the working class in the United States to the Democratic Party. These are the critical issues and lessons which have to be learned. The education of the working class in these issues, and the development of perspective, is the most critical point.

It's important to understand the dangers, but one has to understand the possibilities, and also understand the significance of the historical lessons. Our approach is that these lessons are critical in the development of the new revolutionary movement. The basic problem is not an absence of courage. It is not an absence of the desire to fight. It is an absence of understanding …

CH: … and organization …

DN: But there are many different forms of organization. There is the organization proposed by middle-class groups, confrontations of one sort or another, absent a perspective; absent an understanding of the historical trajectory of revolutionary struggle, drawing from the greatest experience of the 20th century, which is the October Revolution, both from the victory and the tragedy of its betrayal. No one can speak intelligently today about politics if you are not familiar with Trotsky's struggle against Stalinism. Why did the *New York Times*, in the past year, devote so many articles to denouncing and distorting and falsifying the Russian Revolution? That is the experience that they're frightened of. That was an example of the intersection of a conscious Marxist leadership with an objectively mass revolutionary movement of the international working class. If we look at the present historical period, this world movement is resuming. That's what they're frightened about. The ruling elites would say that to them, the Internet poses an existential threat. How can they stop it?

I would like to make a number of suggestions. First of all, the question of what we can do comes in at several levels. Most broadly, and I hope I have got this point across, we need to build an international revolutionary movement of the working class, and we appeal to all those who are listening to become active in the Socialist Equality Party and the International Committee, and promote the readership of the *World Socialist Web Site*. But we also today are discussing, within this framework, the need for a rigorous and determined defense of free speech and democratic rights.

I think the debate that we're having, approaching these issues from different standpoints, is immensely valuable. Cannon, the founder of the American Trotskyist movement, once said: "The truth never hurt anyone, provided he was on the level." And we're both on the level, so we're not going to get hurt by this type of discussion.

What we're going to propose is, first of all, and I hope that this will be taken up, is the formation of a coalition of socialist and anti-war websites. We welcome participation, regardless of differences that we may have on questions of interpretation, program and history.

For those who are committed to the fight for socialism and opposition to war—and that means, inevitably, opposition to the Democratic Party, the two-party system, the bourgeois political set-up—a coalition needs to be formed to rigorously defend Internet freedom, net neutrality, to organize the defense of both websites and individuals who come under attack. This is critical, and I hope that this appeal receives a very strong response. The *World Socialist Web Site* and the International Committee, are willing, on this principled basis, to work with those who understand the critical issues involved.

But above all, we want to defend Internet freedom, because we believe that the need for the development of an understanding of the crisis of capitalism, the fight for revolutionary program, is the most critical issue. Issues can be fought out, debated, as they must be, and that is how we see

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the path forward.

CH: I think I would agree with all of that. A lot of it has to do with building that consciousness. There are powerful mechanisms, and I don't want to go back to my books, but *Empire of Illusion: The End of Literacy and the Triumph of Spectacle* is like Guy Debord, or if you look at Cicero, the way he attacked the arena when the Roman citizenry, at the height of the decadence of the Roman imperial empire, invested its emotional and intellectual life in the games.

There are powerful distracting mechanisms of spectacle. That what all totalitarian societies are good at. Ours is no different. It requires people to be proactive, to break themselves. I don't have a television in my house, and yet I am, because of airports and public spaces, covered with the crap, the garbage, that is spewed out, in terms of popular entertainment. These are all mechanisms to anesthetize ourselves intellectually.

If you want to understand how systems of corporate capitalism work, then you have to be rooted in a print-based culture. You have to read Marx. You have to read Trotsky. You have to read Polanyi. You have to read Sheldon Wolin's *Democracy Incorporated*. I look at these diversions as essentially mechanisms, now delivered 24 hours a day on handheld electronic devices, to stop people from examining the objective conditions that have brought us to this point.

I can't stress the importance of education, in that sense, enough. It can be auto-didactic, you don't have to go to a fancy school to get it. As a matter of fact, most people going to fancy schools—I just taught at Princeton last Spring—are going to Goldman Sachs. But you have to be conscious. And I think an important part of that consciousness is going back to the classic revolutionary texts. We mentioned Gramsci, Rosa Luxemburg. Being conversant with revolutionary theory, understanding how power works, Canetti's *Crowds and Power*, there are all sorts of great works we still have access to. They haven't taken that away from us. That is an important element in building resistance.

DN: Since Chris has mentioned his books, and I do recommend them, they are very good and interesting books, and Chris is just completing another one. The title is...

CH: It's called *America: The Farewell Tour*.

DN: It will be a bumpy one. I'd like to urge people to read *The Russian Revolution and the Unfinished Twentieth Century*, and not because I've written it, but because it is an attempt to sum up the critical experiences of the 20th century. You may recall that after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the word went out that history was over, the "end of history." Well, it wasn't the end of history, it wasn't even the end of the 20th century. We are working through, and must work through, the lessons of the past revolutionary experiences. I certainly recommend the reading of Liebknecht and Luxemburg. Liebknecht said, "for all that and all that," which he took from Robert Burns. But the point is, whatever the obstacles are, objective conditions are producing a revival of revolutionary struggle.

With all the dangers (and they're immense) and the problems (and they're huge), we are responsible for what we do. Our challenge is to provide an increasingly insurgent world movement of the working class with the ideas and the program that it needs to understand the political situation it confronts.

You mentioned a number of works. What was the answer to "What is to Be Done?" Socialist consciousness must be brought into the working class. I'd like to appeal to our readers, and especially young people. There is a working class. That working class is open now and receptive to revolutionary ideas. Our challenge is to create the conditions. The workers will not learn this in the universities.

The Marxist movement, the Trotskyist movement, must provide the working class with the intellectual, cultural tools that it requires, so that it understands what must be done. It will provide the force, it will provide the determination. The emotional and passionate fuel of every revolutionary movement is present. But what it requires is understanding.

We are seeking to defend Internet freedom because we want to make use of this medium, along with others, to create the conditions for this education and revival of revolutionary consciousness to take place. That's our central purpose.

I want to appeal to our many listeners: become active, contact us, all the contact information is there, and also to others who are active in websites to take seriously what we are saying. We are perfectly prepared and, in fact, very eager to create the best conditions for an indefatigable defense of democratic rights. We yield to nobody in our determination to do this, and I think we will find an enormous amount of support among youth, students and workers, for this.

AD: It looks like our hour is up for the program.

DN: I want to thank Chris for being brave enough to come and participate. I really do appreciate it. I also want to thank Julian Assange for having sent this message, and John Pilger for having come forward and made these statements. We hope that this is the beginning, on such a basis, for further discussions and collaboration and for the development of a powerful movement in defense of democratic rights.

AD: I'd like to thank both of our guests for participating today, and I would appeal to all of our readers and listeners and viewers to contact us on the form below the view screen, or at endcensorship.org, and also to donate to the *World Socialist Web Site*. If you'd like to see more live events and discussions like this, and this is only the beginning, it requires financial resources. So I would ask you to get involved, donate, and contact us today. Thank you very much.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

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