

Chomsky's pro-imperialist Afrin petition

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For the past four years, the US has maintained that the purpose of its continuous military intervention in Syria and surrounding regions is to defeat ISIS and other reactionary Islamic fundamentalist groups.

In reality, the aim of this operation, in which the US has collaborated with and, in some cases, directly armed the very forces it claimed to be fighting, has always been the ousting of the Syrian regime of President Bashar Al-Assad and establishment of a puppet government to ensure US domination of the region.

The political fiction that the US goal was to fight ISIS has been completely exposed in recent days. Notwithstanding the all but complete military defeat of ISIS, the US has announced it will establish a 30,000-strong military force to maintain an indefinite presence in Syria.

A new operation requires the creation of new lies as its justification, and right on cue, as if acting in accordance with a carefully drafted script, pseudo-left organisations and individuals have stepped forward to provide them.

This takes the form of a petition organised by Noam Chomsky and other fake-left figures and academics, including the pseudo-Marxist David Harvey, calling for the US to intervene to guarantee the safety of the people of the northern Syrian city of Afrin and its surrounding region against a military invasion by neighbouring Turkey. The petition is now being eagerly joined by pseudo-left organisations and individuals around the world in what is another example of the “human rights imperialism” that has come to form the modus operandi of these forces.

The Turkish invasion has been launched in response to the creation of the new US-backed force, which will consist in the main of fighters provided by the Kurdish YPG, with which the US military has worked, together with former ISIS fighters. Washington will deploy 2,000 US troops to play a key supervisory and leadership role.

The Turkish attack has been carried out on the pretext that the YPG is a terrorist organisation, linked to Kurdish separatist forces in Turkey itself. It is in every sense deeply reactionary. It is part of the drive by the regime of Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan to ensure its position as a key power in the region, as well as to crush internal opposition. It must be opposed by the Turkish and international working class as a key component of the political struggle to overthrow Erdogan and capitalist rule in Turkey.

But this is not the perspective of the petition organisers and their supporters. Rather, its immediate aim, as can be seen from the text, is to provide a justification for the US plan to establish a permanent military presence, both directly and indirectly through American proxy forces, in northern Syria, to be used as a base for ongoing regime-change activity directed against Assad.

The fact that this petition is headed up by two supposed radical critics of capitalism and imperialism, Noam Chomsky and David Harvey, may come as something of a surprise to their followers. But their actions flow from the politics they have advanced over decades.

Chomsky has styled himself an anarchist, with particular leanings towards Mikhail Bakunin and Bakunin's criticism of the alleged “authoritarianism” of Marx.

Bakunin, one of Marx's chief opponents within the First International,

was deeply hostile to Marx's conception that the overthrow of capitalism would involve the establishment of the working class as the ruling class, claiming that this involved a new form of despotism.

Marx replied that when the working class took power, establishing the democratic rule of the majority of the population, it would have to use governmental force for a period to prevent the return of the old ruling classes. He explained that this would be necessary until economic development had created the conditions for the disappearance of all classes and hence the necessity for any form of class rule.

On the basis of his alignment with Bakunin, Chomsky has always displayed an intense hostility towards Lenin, Trotsky, the Bolshevik party and the workers' state established by the 1917 Russian revolution. That state was necessitated by the drive of imperialism and the old ruling classes to overturn the socialist revolution and restore dictatorial capitalist rule.

Chomsky's hostility to the forging of a revolutionary party of the Bolshevik type is at bottom opposition to the revolutionary role of the working class itself. History has demonstrated, positively in the case of the Russian revolution and negatively in every other revolutionary upheaval since then—above all in Spain (1936-39), where the anarchists ended up as a prop for a bourgeois government—the indispensability of a revolutionary party if the working class is to take power and then hold it in the face of its enemies.

The necessity for such a party does not flow from the pronouncements of Marx or from his “authoritarianism,” but from the objective position of the working class in capitalist society and the necessities of socialist revolution.

Unlike the bourgeoisie, which overthrew feudalism on the basis of its vast property holdings within feudal society, the working class is a property-less class. Its only weapon is organisation, that is, the creation of a revolutionary party that is able to lead and guide it in the most complex and difficult task in history—the overthrow of capitalism and establishment of workers' power and socialism.

Without the forging of this political weapon to establish and fight at every point for its political independence, the working class is merely a mass available for exploitation. That is why in every struggle, whatever the immediate circumstances, Marxists, basing themselves on the revolutionary role of the working class, seek to develop a political perspective through which it can establish itself as an independent political force in opposition to the bourgeoisie.

The starting point of Chomsky's position with regard to Afrin is the need to defend the Kurdish people against the attacks of the Turkish state and the Erdogan regime. But his rejection of the revolutionary role of the working class, embodied in his hostility to the creation of a party of the Bolshevik type, leads him to the practice of *Real Politik*—in this case, directly into the camp of imperialism.

The Kurds must be defended. But, in Chomsky's view, that defence cannot be carried out through a turn to the Turkish and international working class and the development of a struggle to overthrow the reactionary Erdogan regime, but through the only force that seems to be immediately at hand—US imperialism and the force of its arms.

Similar, but not identical, issues apply in the case of David Harvey. He presents himself as a critic of capitalism and its depredations, claiming to draw upon Marx. But his Marxism is of a purely academic character. Running through all his writings, above all when addressing the vital question, “What is to be done?”, is a persistent theme. The working class is not the sole revolutionary force created by capitalism through the wages system, whose historical task is its overthrow. Other social forces, based on identity politics or various protest movements, must play a leading role. He continually inveighs against what he considers to be the one-sided focus of Marxism on the revolutionary role of the proletariat.

Consequently, like Chomsky, for all his criticisms of capitalism—which amount to little more than a call for reforms—he turns to the capitalist state when it comes to politics. For example, at the height of the invasion of Iraq by US imperialism in 2003, he maintained that the drive of imperialism for profit, which lay behind the invasion, could be curbed, if not halted entirely, if investment opportunities were opened up at home through some kind of New Deal. More radical solutions, he acknowledged, were in the wings, but for the foreseeable future that was the best that could be hoped for.

Similarly, in the case of the Turkish invasion, he directly turns to the American state as the only “realistic” means to defend the interests of the Kurds, if necessary through military force.

The utter hypocrisy of the Chomsky-Harvey-led petition is apparent from the very first paragraph, in which it calls for the leaders of Russia and Iran, which are supporting the Turkish action, together with the US to “ensure that the sovereignty of Syrian borders is not breached by Turkey.” It passes over in silence the continued and explicit violations of Syrian sovereignty carried out by the US since it began its regime-change operation, in collaboration with Islamist jihadist forces, in 2011.

In what amounts to a call for US military intervention, it insists that the Turkish military operation is able to go ahead only if there is “inaction by the US to stop it.” This is underscored in the concluding paragraph, which calls on “US officials and the international community”—that is, other major imperialist powers—to “guarantee Afrin’s stability and prevent further Turkish aggression from within Syria and across the Syrian border.”

This demand is couched in claims that only such action can ensure the security and safety of the civilians and refugees of Afrin and the surrounding region and bring peace.

The petitioners obviously hope that the world’s people have learned nothing from the past 17 years of the “war on terror” and the depredations carried out by US imperialism under this bogus banner. Every US military intervention, starting with the invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, supposedly to root out Al Qaeda, which had earlier been financed and assisted by the US and its ally Saudi Arabia, has been organised on the same pretext—that the US is seeking peace and security.

The invasion of Iraq in 2003, one of the consequences of which was the formation of ISIS and other reactionary Islamist groups, was supposedly carried out to protect the world from “weapons of mass destruction.” The overthrow of Gaddafi in Libya in 2011 by US-led NATO forces, turning that country into a modern-day hell, was purportedly carried out to prevent a massacre by the regime.

The Syrian regime-change operation, launched in 2011 on the basis that it was necessary to protect the people of that country from Assad, has resulted in at least 500,000 deaths, the creation of 5 million refugees and the displacement of 6 million more from their homes. These are only a few of the most egregious examples of the results of US “peace” operations.

Apart from the invocation of the same kind of justifications used by US imperialism itself, there is another highly significant aspect of the Chomsky-organised petition.

It maintains that the Turkish military operation cannot be undertaken

“without the approval of Russia, Iran and Syria.” This dovetails with the wider goals of the US decision to establish a permanent military force on Syrian soil. It is aimed not just at the Assad regime, but also at Russia and Iran.

As set out by US Defence Secretary James Mattis, the retired general who oversaw the destruction of Fallujah in Iraq, the National Defense Strategy issued by the Pentagon last month asserts that “great power competition—not terrorism—is now the primary focus of US national security.” This is directed not only against Russia and China, but also against would-be regional powers such as Iran in the Middle East, which are viewed by the US as impediments to its drive for world domination.

In issuing the petition, its organisers are relying on the supposed “anti-war” credentials of its signatories to gain support. Anyone who is duped by this attempt is ignoring one of the most significant changes in world politics over the past decade and a half: the transformation of formerly “anti-war” and pseudo-left tendencies that express the interests of privileged layers of the upper-middle class into the most ardent supporters of imperialism.

One of the key turning points in this transformation can be clearly delineated—the emergence of mass international opposition to the launching of the US invasion of Iraq in 2003. In the 15 years since then, the anti-war movement has all but disappeared as a mass political phenomenon.

This is not because the hostility of masses of people the world over to war and the actions of US imperialism has lessened. Rather, it has intensified. However, opposition to war has been unable to find any independent expression because the eruption of hostility to the Iraq war was sabotaged, first by subordinating it to appeals to other imperialist powers and the United Nations, and then by a conscious operation to channel it back into support for the Democratic Party in the US and its political equivalents around the world.

Chomsky himself is a case in point. In April 2004, this once-radical critic of American foreign policy came in from the cold, revealing the real class basis of his anarchist politics, when he endorsed John Kerry as the Democratic Party presidential candidate against George W. Bush.

This movement to the right was continued and deepened in the 2008 presidential election, when virtually all of the so-called anti-war forces of the middle class “left” backed Barack Obama as the “transformative” president. Obama finished his eight-year term in 2016 as the only two-term president under whom the US had been continually at war.

Another significant turning point came with the eruption of the Egyptian revolution in 2011. Reacting to the enormous dangers posed by this independent movement of the working class, US imperialism sought to bolster its position by launching regime-change operations in Libya and Syria.

This was duly paralleled by a shift in the orientation of the pseudo-left. It backed imperialist-led operations in both countries, universally adopting the position that it was now time to dispense with “knee-jerk anti-imperialism” and invoking the defence of “human rights” and the “responsibility to protect” as it swung violently to the right.

The Chomsky-organised petition signals a further movement, directly in response to the new Pentagon doctrine that inter-state and great power competition is the central axis of US strategy.

Chomsky once co-authored a book with the title *Manufacturing Consent*. It aptly sums up this operation. Its aim is to try to manufacture consent not only for the actions of US imperialism in the Middle East, but for its ever more frenzied drive for global dominance, if necessary through world war.

Workers, youth, students and intellectuals—all those around the world concerned with the fight against imperialism and the threat of a new world war—must draw the necessary conclusions.

Not only must this pro-imperialist petition be opposed and denounced, a

genuine anti-war and anti-imperialist movement must be built. This can proceed only by turning the petition's signatories, organisations and individuals into political anathemas as part of the fight for a socialist anti-war movement based on the international working class.



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