

Opening report to Online International May Day Rally

The resurgence of class struggle and the fight for socialism

David North
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On Saturday, May 4, the International Committee of the Fourth International held the 2019 International Online May Day Rally, the sixth annual online May Day Rally held by the ICFI, the world Trotskyist movement. The rally heard speeches on different aspects of the world crisis of capitalism and the struggles of the international working class from 12 leading members of the world party and its sections and sympathizing organizations around the world.

In the coming days, the World Socialist Web Site will publish the texts of the speeches delivered at the rally. We begin today with the opening report, given by David North, the chairman of the international editorial board of the WSWWS and national chairman of the Socialist Equality Party (US).

In the not too distant future, when historians begin to reconstruct and explain the origins of the revolutionary convulsions of the first half of the 21st century, and attempt to identify the point at which the threat to the very survival of the capitalist system was clearly recognized by the ruling elites, the scholars may well draw their students' attention to the annual meeting of the Milken Institute that was held in Los Angeles last week, on April 29-30, 2019.

Organized by the notorious junk bond racketeer Michael Milken, who, since his release from prison, has spent a portion of his multi-billion-dollar fortune to burnish his reputation as a humanitarian and social visionary, the gathering of capitalist luminaries was dominated by the specter of socialism. From atop their piles of wealth they peer over the horizon and see the approaching storm. "I'm concerned with this notion," said Google founder Eric Schmidt, "that somehow socialism's going to creep back." The hedge fund billionaire Ken Griffin called attention to a poll, whose frightening results were projected on a screen, showing that 44 percent of millennials would prefer to live in a socialist country.

The danger confronting the capitalist class was explained most bluntly by financier Alan Schwartz of Guggenheim Partners:

You take the average person ... they're just basically saying something that used to be 50:50 is now 60:40; it's not working for me.

If you look at the right wing and the left wing, what's really coming is class warfare. Throughout centuries what we've seen when the masses think the elites have too much, one of two things happen: legislation to redistribute the wealth ... or revolution to distribute property. There are two choices historically and debating it back and forth, saying "no, it's capitalism; no, it's socialism" is what creates revolution.

Judging from press reports, there seems to have been something of a debate as to how to deal with the growing social anger. The headline majority viewpoint was summed up by one investment company executive, who declared, "Punitive redistribution won't work." The minority view was expressed by a financial service executive, who told the *Financial Times*: "I'd pay 5 percent more in tax to make the world a slightly less scary place."

A 5 percent tax on the income of billionaires to lessen the threat of social revolution! That's the extent of the concessions to mass discontent envisioned by the most radical wing of ruling class reformers! This is the most original approach to quelling popular agitation since Queen Marie Antoinette proposed that cake be fed to the masses of Paris.

The sense of impending doom that prevailed among the attendees at the Milken Institute recalls the bleakness of Poe's "City in the Sea." The poet warned: "While from a proud tower in the town, death looks giganticly down."

The fears of the ruling class are well grounded. At last year's May Day rally, the International Committee of the Fourth International anticipated an immense upsurge of class struggle. During the past 12 months, that prediction has been vindicated by events. Social protests and strikes are spreading throughout the world. One year ago, the term "yellow vest" signified nothing more than a high visibility safety garment. Now, after more than a half-year of continuous mass protests in Paris and throughout France, the *gilets jaunes* has become a symbol recognized throughout the world of popular opposition to social inequality and capitalism.

Strikes by teachers—that is, by that section of the working class responsible for the education of the youth, who therefore play a critical role in the awakening of the social consciousness of the younger generation—have taken place in the United States, Poland, the Netherlands, India, Iran, Mexico, New Zealand, Tunisia and Zimbabwe. Fueled by opposition to social inequality, poverty, authoritarianism and militarism, the strike wave is growing and drawing into its wake ever broader sections of the international working class.

The growing worldwide interest in socialism, evident around the globe, is the reflection in mass political consciousness of the real objective intensification of class struggle. We are only at the initial stages of this process, and it can hardly be surprising that—after decades of political stagnation—there is unclarity, even confusion, about the nature of the struggle and the path that must be taken. But as Leon Trotsky, the master strategist of world socialist revolution, explained so well:

The masses go into revolution not with a prepared plan of social reconstruction, but with a sharp feeling that they cannot endure the old régime. Only the guiding layers of a class have a social

program, and even this still requires the test of events, and the approval of the masses. The fundamental political process of the revolution thus consists in the gradual comprehension by a class of the problems arising from the social crisis—the active orientation of the masses by a method of successive approximations.

This objective process of social radicalization and political orientation—away from the capitalist parties and their accomplices and toward socialism and the creation of genuine democratic organizations of mass struggle—is underway. The process will lead to the understanding that the reform of capitalism is impossible, and that nothing less than the overthrow of this system of exploitation and war is required. But confidence in the growth and power of this developing movement of the working class does not justify any underestimation of the dangers posed by the response of the ruling elite to the threats that it perceives. As socialism reenters the political vocabulary of the working class, the capitalist class revives the ideology, language and practice of authoritarianism and fascism.

There do not exist, as yet, mass fascist movements such as those that brought Mussolini and Hitler to power in Italy and Germany. But the efforts to develop a social base for the most brutal forms of capitalist dictatorship are proceeding rapidly, and examples of this dangerous tendency can be seen throughout the world.

Trump's relentless appeals to anti-immigrant chauvinism are intertwined with his increasingly hysterical denunciations of socialism. In France, President Macron, as he deploys the police and army against the yellow vests, pays tribute to the memory of General Petain—the old Nazi collaborator and criminal head of the fascist Vichy regime—as a national hero. Matteo Salvini, the deputy prime minister of Italy, makes no secret of his admiration for Benito Mussolini. In Brazil, President Jair Bolsonaro glorifies the dictatorship that imprisoned, tortured and murdered thousands during its reign of terror in the 1960s and 1970s. Viktor Orban's Fidesz party in Hungary, Jarosław Kaczyński's "Law and Justice" party in Poland, and, of course, the Alternative für Deutschland in Germany are only a few of the most well-known examples of growing organizations that are seeking to create fascist regimes.

The emergence and growth of these movements are manifestations of a far advanced and universal breakdown, within the ruling elites throughout the world, of support for and adherence to the legal norms of constitutional democracy.

The prosecution of Julian Assange and Chelsea Manning, the imprisonment of Maruti Suzuki workers in India, the firing of striking Mexican workers in Matamoros, and the brutal treatment of immigrants are parts of the conversion of the world, as in the 1930s, into a foul prison.

What is the objective economic and social basis of the growth of political reaction?

The last three decades have witnessed an unprecedented concentration of extreme and obscene levels of wealth within an infinitesimal segment of the world's population. The principal mechanism for this concentration of wealth has been the staggering rise in share values on the world's stock exchanges, and especially in the United States.

The principal aim of economic policy has been to guarantee constantly rising share prices, far beyond what can be rationally justified by corporate earnings. The crash of 2008, the direct product of criminal speculation, intensified—in the form of quantitative easing—the federal government's complete subservience to the financial elite.

In late 2018, a very modest rise in interest rates triggered a significant sell-off on Wall Street. This led almost immediately to the Federal Reserve's abandonment of its plan for further rate hikes, thus confirming that the government will continue to provide unlimited liquidity to underwrite rising share prices. Wall Street has responded euphorically to

the capitulation of the Federal Reserve with another substantial rally.

But the support for Wall Street's financial parasitism has very real political and social consequences. Under conditions of growing recessionary pressures, intensified by trade warfare, how will corporations be able to generate the levels of profit required to sustain rising share values, or, more ominously, prevent the collapse of the market? In fact, President Trump has declared that the Dow Jones average should rise another 10,000 points—that is, by another 40 percent.

The answer is: through a massive intensification of the levels of exploitation of the working class. This is the objective impulse that underlies the turn to fascism and war.

The violations of democratic norms within countries are accompanied by outright criminality in the conduct of foreign policy. The term "international law" has become an oxymoron. The worldwide operations of the United States are an unending exercise in political criminality. The Trump administration's conduct toward Venezuela bears a striking resemblance to that of the Nazi regime in 1939 toward Poland.

The violation of constitutional norms in the conduct of domestic policy and the resort to gangster methods in foreign policy are rooted, in the final analysis, in the crisis of the capitalist system. The desperate efforts of the United States to maintain its position of global dominance, in the face of geopolitical and economic challenges from rivals in Europe and Asia, require a state of permanent and escalating war.

This reckless policy will prevail with or without Trump. Indeed, the anti-Russia hysteria that has gripped the Democratic Party makes it reasonable to suspect that, were it to regain the White House, the danger of a world war will be even greater. And for those who still harbor illusions that the victory of Bernie Sanders would produce a "kinder and gentler" imperialism, let us take note of the fact that this practitioner of unprincipled and opportunist politics has denounced his political rival, former Vice President Biden, for underestimating the threat to American interests posed by China.

No matter what verbal sallies the loquacious senator may direct from time to time against "the billionaire class," Sanders' promotion of trade warfare is sufficient to brand him as an accomplice and lackey of American imperialism. Those who promote Sanders as a socialist, let alone a revolutionary, are perpetrating a political fraud.

Thirty years ago, in 1989, a series of events occurred that were to profoundly influence the course of social and political life in the ensuing decades. The Stalinist regimes in Eastern Europe began their self-liquidation. In China, the Maoist regime responded to mass protests by ordering the massacre in Tiananmen Square in Beijing.

In both cases, however different the political forms, the economic outcome was the reversion to capitalism. Two years later, in 1991, the Kremlin bureaucracy completed the process of capitalist restoration with the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

The breakdown of the Stalinist regimes was hailed by the international bourgeoisie as the decisive refutation of socialism as an alternative to capitalism. The various forms of political and intellectual reaction that ensued during the next three decades have developed on the basis of this theme. Of course, the underlying narrative was based on a colossal historical lie: that the Stalinist regimes represented socialism. This lie could be sustained only to the extent that the history of the struggle waged by the Trotskyist movement against Stalinism was minimized, distorted or ignored.

But now the contradictions of the capitalist system are creating the conditions for the renewal of a mass movement of the working class. The historical perspective of the Fourth International—that this is the epoch of the death agony of capitalism—is being confirmed. But this confirmation must be understood in an active and revolutionary—not merely contemplative—sense.

The task of the Fourth International is not only to interpret the world,

but to change it. And it is in the actual intervention of the Socialist Equality parties throughout the world in the developing class struggle that the intersection of objective events, Marxist analysis and the revolutionary practice of the International Committee of the Fourth International finds its most politically conscious expression.

This understanding of the intersection of the objective revolutionary potential and the critical role played by the Trotskyist movement in bringing about its fulfillment inspires our call to workers and youth on the occasion of this May Day celebration.

Take up the fight for socialism!

Build the International Committee of the Fourth International as the World Party of Socialist Revolution!



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