

The decade of socialist revolution begins

David North, Joseph Kishore
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The arrival of the New Year marks the beginning of a decade of intensifying class struggle and world socialist revolution.

In the future, when learned historians write about the upheavals of the twenty-first century, they will enumerate all the “obvious” signs that existed, as the 2020s began, of the revolutionary storm that was soon to sweep across the globe. The scholars—with a vast array of facts, documents, charts, web site and social media postings, and other forms of valuable digitalized information at their disposal—will describe the 2010s as a period characterized by an intractable economic, social, and political crisis of the world capitalist system.

They will note that by the beginning of the third decade of the century, history had arrived at precisely the situation foreseen theoretically by Karl Marx: “At a certain stage of their development, the material productive forces of society come in conflict with the existing relations of production, or—what is but a legal expression for the same thing—with the property relations within which they have been at work hitherto. From forms of development of the productive forces these relations turn into their fetters. Then begins an epoch of social revolution. With the change of the economic foundation the entire immense superstructure is more or less rapidly transformed.”

What, in fact, were the principal characteristics of the last ten years?

The institutionalization of unending military conflict and the growing threat of nuclear world war

There was not a single day during the last decade when the United States was not at war. Military operations not only continued in Iraq and Afghanistan. New interventions were undertaken in Syria, Libya, Yemen and Ukraine. Even as 2020 is just getting under way, the murder of Iranian Major General Qassim Suleimani, ordered by President Donald Trump, threatens all-out war between the United States and Iran, with incalculable consequences. The involvement of an American president in yet another targeted killing, followed by bloodthirsty boasting, testifies to the far-advanced derangement of the entire ruling elite.

Moreover, the adoption of a new strategic doctrine in 2018 signaled a vast escalation in the military operations of the United States. In his announcement of the new strategy, then defense secretary James Mattis declared: “We will continue to prosecute the campaign against terrorists that we are engaged in today, but great power competition, not terrorism, is now the primary focus of U.S. national security.” The new doctrine revealed the essential purpose of what had previously been called the “War on Terror:” the attempt to maintain the hegemonic position of American imperialism.

The United States is determined to maintain this position, whatever the financial costs and the consequences in terms of human life. As the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) states in its recently released *Strategic Survey*: “For its part, the US is not likely voluntarily, reluctantly or after some sort of battle, to pass any strategic baton to

China.”

All the major imperialist powers escalated, during the past decade, their preparations for world war and nuclear conflict. The trillion-dollar military budget adopted in 2019 by the Trump administration, with the support of the Democratic Party, is a war budget. Germany, France, the UK, and all the imperialist countries are building up their armed forces. The targets of imperialism, including the ruling elites in Russia and China, alternate between threats of war and desperate efforts to forge some sort of agreement.

The institutions developed in the aftermath of World War II to prevent another global conflict are dysfunctional. The *Strategic Survey* writes:

The trends of 2018–19 have all confirmed the atomisation of international society. Neither ‘balance of power’ nor ‘international rules-based governance’ serve as ordering principles. International institutions have been marginalised. The diplomatic routine of meetings continues, yet the competing exertions of national efforts, too rarely coordinated with others, matter more—and most often they are erratic in both execution and consequence.

The end of a “global rules-based order”—i.e., one dependent on the unchallengeable dominance of US imperialism—sets into motion a political logic that leads to war. As the *Strategic Survey* warns: “Law is made and sustained by politics. When law cannot settle disputes, they are shunted back to the political realm for resolution.” To understand the “realm” to which the IISS is referring, one must recall Clausewitz’s famous definition of war as politics by other means.

And what would a modern world war entail? The IISS calls attention to new plans for the use of nuclear weapons. “Meanwhile, the US and Russia are modernizing their arsenals and changing their doctrines in ways that facilitate their use, while the dispute between India and Pakistan over Kashmir remains a potential flashpoint for the use of nuclear weapons.” The recklessness, bordering on insanity, that prevails among policy makers is indicated in the growing conviction that the use of tactical nuclear weapons is a feasible option. The IISS writes:

All that can be said with reasonable certainty is that a limited, regional nuclear exchange, under some circumstances, has severe global environmental effects. *But under other circumstances, the effects could be minimal.* [emphasis added]

The movement toward a Third World War, which would threaten mankind with extinction, cannot be halted by humanitarian appeals. War arises out of the anarchy of capitalism and the obsolescence of the nation-state system. Therefore, it can be stopped only through the global struggle of the working class for socialism.

The breakdown of democracy

The extreme aggravation of class tensions and the dynamic of imperialism are the real sources of the universal breakdown of democratic forms of rule. As Lenin wrote in the midst of World War I: “Imperialism is the epoch of finance capital and monopolies, which introduce everywhere the striving for domination, not for freedom. Whatever the political system the result of these tendencies is everywhere reaction and intensification of antagonisms in this field.”

Lenin’s analysis is being substantiated in the turn of the ruling elites, during the past decade, toward authoritarian and fascistic methods of rule. The rise to power of such criminal and even psychopathic personalities as Narendra Modi in India, Rodrigo Duterte in the Philippines, Benjamin Netanyahu in Israel, Abdel Fattah al-Sisi in Egypt, Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil, Donald Trump in the United States, and Boris Johnson in the UK is symptomatic of a systemic crisis of the entire capitalist system.

Seventy-five years after the collapse of the Third Reich, fascism is making a comeback in Germany. The Alternative für Deutschland, which is a haven for neo-Nazis, emerged during the past decade as the main opposition party. Its rise was facilitated by the Grand Coalition government, a corrupt media, and reactionary academics, who whitewash with impunity the crimes of Hitler’s regime. Similar processes are at work throughout Europe, where the fascist leaders of the 1930s and 1940s—Petain in France, Mussolini in Italy, Horthy in Hungary and Franco in Spain—are being remembered with nostalgia.

The decade saw the resurgence of anti-Semitic violence and the cultivation of Islamophobia and other forms of national chauvinism and racism. Concentration camps were constructed on the US border with Mexico to imprison refugees fleeing from Central and South America, and in Europe and North Africa as the frontline of the anti-immigrant policy of the EU.

There is no progressive tendency to be found within the capitalist parties. Even when confronted with a fascistic president, the Democratic Party refrains from opposition based on the defense of democratic rights. Employing the methods of a palace coup, the Democrats seek Trump’s impeachment only because he, in their view, has undermined the US campaign against Russia and the proxy war in Ukraine.

The attitude of the entire bourgeois political establishment to democratic rights is summed up in the horrific treatment of WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange and whistleblower Chelsea Manning. With the support of both the Democrats and Republicans, Assange remains confined in Belmarsh prison in London, awaiting extradition to the US. Manning has been imprisoned for nearly a year for refusing to testify before a grand jury called to indict Assange on further charges.

The persecution of Assange and Manning is aimed at criminalizing the conduct of constitutionally-protected journalistic activity. It is part of a broader suppression of dissent that includes the campaign of internet censorship and the jailing of the Maruti-Suzuki workers in India and other class-war prisoners.

The preparations for war, involving massive expenditures and requiring the accumulation of unprecedented levels of debt, snuff the air out of democracy. In the final analysis, the costs of war must be imposed upon the working people of the world. The burdens will encounter resistance by a population already incensed by decades of sacrifice. The response of the ruling elites will be the intensification of their efforts to suppress every form of popular dissent.

The last decade was marked by the continued and increasingly rapid destruction of the environment. Scientists have issued ever more dire warnings that without urgent and far-reaching action on a global scale, the effects of global warming will be devastating and irreversible. The deadly inferno engulfing Australia, as the year ended, is only the latest horrific consequence of climate change.

In November, 11,000 scientists signed a statement published in the journal *BioScience* warning that “planet Earth is facing a climate emergency.” It noted that over the course of four decades of global climate negotiations, “with few exceptions, we have generally conducted business as usual and have largely failed to address this predicament...”

The climate crisis has arrived and is accelerating faster than most scientists expected. It is more severe than anticipated, threatening natural ecosystems and the fate of humanity.... Especially worrisome, are potential irreversible climate tipping points and nature’s reinforcing feedbacks that could lead to a catastrophic ‘hothouse Earth,’ well beyond the control of humans. These climate chain reactions could cause significant disruptions to ecosystems, society, and economies, potentially making large areas of Earth uninhabitable.

Earlier in the year, the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change reported that 821 million people, who were already suffering from hunger, face starvation as agricultural regions are impacted by global warming. Hundreds of millions could lose access to fresh water, while many more will be affected by increasingly severe weather patterns: flooding, drought and hurricanes.

Climate change, and other manifestations of environmental degradation, are the product of a social and economic system that is incapable of organizing global production in a rational and scientific manner, on the basis of social need—including the need for a healthy environment—rather than the endless accumulation of personal wealth.

The aftermath of the 2008 crash and the crisis of capitalism

Underlying all other aspects of the social and political situation is the malignant growth of extreme social inequality—the inevitable and intended consequence of all the measures adopted by the ruling class following the economic and financial crisis of 2008.

Following the financial crash, which occurred on the eve of the 2010s, world governments and central banks opened the spigots. In the United States, the Bush and particularly the Obama administrations engineered the \$700 billion bailout of the banks, followed by trillions of dollars in “quantitative easing” measures—that is, the purchase by the Federal Reserve of the worthless assets and securities held by financial institutions.

Overnight, the federal deficit of the American government was doubled. The assets of the Federal Reserve rose from under \$2 trillion in November 2008 to \$4.5 trillion in October 2014, and the figure remains at more than \$4 trillion today. With a new \$60 billion a month asset purchase program, initiated in late 2019, the balance sheet is expected to surpass post-crash highs by the middle of this year.

This policy has continued under Trump, with his massive corporate tax

cuts and demands for further reductions in interest rates. The *New York Times* noted, in a January 1 article (“A Simple Investment Strategy That Worked in 2019: Buy Almost Anything”) that the value of almost all investment assets jumped sharply over the past year. The Nasdaq rose by 35 percent, the S&P 500 by 29 percent, commodities by 16 percent, US corporate bonds by 15 percent, and US Treasuries by 7 percent. “It was a remarkable across-the-board rally of a scale not seen in nearly a decade. The cause? Mostly a head-spinning reversal by the Federal Reserve, which went from planning to raise interest rates to cutting them and pumping fresh money into the financial markets.”

All the major capitalist powers have pursued similar measures. The allocation of unlimited credit and money printing—and this, in the final analysis, is what quantitative easing is—intensified the underlying crisis. In trying to rescue themselves, the ruling elites enshrined parasitism and raised social inequality to a level unknown in modern history.

Benefiting from the limitless infusion of money into the market, the fortunes of the financial elite rose during the past decade to astronomical heights. The 500 richest individuals in the world (0.000006 percent of the global population) now have a collective net worth of \$5.9 trillion, up \$1.2 trillion over the past year alone. This increase is more than the GDP (that is, the total value of all goods and services produced) of all but 15 countries in the world. In the US, the 400 richest individuals have more wealth than the bottom 64 percent, and the top 0.1 percent of the population have a larger share than at any time since 1929, immediately preceding the Great Depression.

The social catastrophe confronting masses of workers and youth throughout the world is the direct product of the policies employed to guarantee the accumulation of wealth by the corporate and financial elite.

The decline in life expectancy among workers in the US, the mass unemployment of workers and particularly young people throughout the world, the devastating austerity measures imposed on Greece and other countries, the intensification of exploitation to boost the profits of corporations—all this is the consequence of the policy pursued by the ruling elites.

The growth of the international working class and the global class struggle

The objective conditions for socialist revolution emerge out of the global crisis. The approach of social revolution has already been foreshadowed in the mass demonstrations and strikes that swept across the globe in 2019: in Mexico, Puerto Rico, Ecuador, Colombia, Chile, France, Spain, Algeria, Britain, Lebanon, Iraq, Iran, Sudan, Kenya, South Africa, India and Hong Kong. The United States, where the entire political structure is directed toward the suppression of class struggle, witnessed the first national strike by auto workers in more than forty years.

But the dominant and most revolutionary feature of the class struggle is its international character, rooted in the global character of modern-day capitalism. Moreover, the movement of the working class is a movement of the younger generation and, therefore, a movement that will shape the future.

Those under 30 now comprise over half the world’s population and over 65 percent of the population in the world’s fastest growing regions—Sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East and South and Southeast Asia. Each month in India, one million people turn 18. In the Middle East and North Africa, an estimated 27 million young people will enter the workforce in the next five years.

From 1980 to 2010, global industrial development added 1.2 billion people to the ranks of the working class, with hundreds of millions more

in the decade since. Of this 1.2 billion, 900 million entered the working class in the developing world. Internationally, the percentage of the global labor force that can be classified as peasant declined from 44 percent in 1991 to 28 percent in 2018. Nearly one billion people in Sub-Saharan Africa are expected to join the working class in the coming decades. In China alone, 121 million people moved from “farm to factory” between 2000 and 2010, with millions more in the decade since.

It is not only Asia and Africa that have seen a growth in the working class population. In the advanced capitalist countries, large sections of those who would have previously considered themselves middle class have been proletarianized, while the wave of immigrants from Latin America to the United States and from North Africa and the Middle East to Europe has added millions to a highly diverse workforce.

From 2010 to 2019, the world’s urban population grew by one billion, creating a network of interconnected “megacities” that are both hives of economic productivity and social powder kegs, where inequality is a visible fact of daily life.

And these workers are connected with each other in a manner that is unprecedented in world history. The colossal advances in science, technology and communications, above all the rise of the internet and the proliferation of mobile devices, have allowed masses of people to bypass the fake news of the bourgeois media, which function as little more than mouthpieces for the state and intelligence agencies. More than half of the world’s population, 4.4 billion people, now have access to the internet. The average individual spends over two hours on social media each day, largely on handheld devices.

Workers and youth can now coordinate their protests and actions on a global scale, expressed in the international movement against climate change, the emergence of the “yellow vests” as a worldwide symbol of protest against inequality, and the solidarity of auto workers in the United States and Mexico.

These objective changes are producing major shifts in social consciousness on the central question of social inequality. The 2019 United Nations Human Development Report explains that in almost all countries, the percentage of people demanding greater equality increased from the 2000s to the 2010s by up to 50 percent. The report warned: “Surveys have revealed rising perceptions of inequality, rising preferences for greater equality and rising global inequality in subjective perceptions of well-being. All these trends should be bright red-flags.”

The role of revolutionary leadership

The growth of the working class and the emergence of class struggle on an international scale are the objective basis for revolution. However, the spontaneous struggles of workers and their instinctive striving for socialism are, by themselves, inadequate. The transformation of the class struggle into a conscious movement for socialism is a question of political leadership.

The past decade has provided a wealth of political experiences demonstrating, in the negative, the critical role of revolutionary leadership. The decade began with revolution, in the form of the monumental struggles of Egyptian workers and youth against the US-backed dictatorship of Hosni Mubarak. In the absence of a revolutionary leadership, and with the assistance of disorientation introduced by the petty-bourgeois organizations, the masses were channeled behind different factions of the ruling class, culminating in the reestablishment of direct military dictatorship under the butcher of Cairo, al-Sisi.

All the alternatives to Marxism, concocted by the representatives of the affluent middle class, have been discredited: The “apolitical” and neo-

anarchist Occupy Wall Street movement in the US in 2011 was revealed to be a middle-class movement whose call for a “party of the 99 percent” sought to subordinate the interests of the working class to those of the top 10 percent.

New forms of “left populism” were promoted in Europe, including Syriza in Greece and Podemos in Spain. Syriza came to power in 2015 and for four years implemented the dictates of the banks. Podemos is now a governing party, in coalition with the Spanish Socialist Party (PSOE), which is committed to a right-wing, pro-austerity program. The “Five-Star Movement,” presented as an anti-establishment insurgency, ended up in political alliance with the Italian neo-fascists. Corbynism, which peddled the illusion of a revival of the Labour Party as an instrument of anti-capitalist struggle, proved in the end to be synonymous with political cowardice and prostration before the ruling class. Were Sanders to make his way to the White House, his administration would prove no less impotent.

In Latin America, the “left” bourgeois nationalism that was part of the “Pink Tide”—Lulaism in Brazil, the “Bolivarian Revolution” of Chavez in Venezuela, and Evo Morales in Bolivia—has been shipwrecked by the crisis of world capitalism. Their own austerity and pro-corporate policies prepared the way for a sharp shift to the right, including the rise to power of Bolsonaro in Brazil and the US-backed military coup against Morales in 2019.

The trade unions, which have long served as mechanisms for the suppression of the class struggle, have been exposed as agents of the corporations and the state. In the United States, the struggles of auto workers have been waged in conflict with the corrupt executives of the UAW, under indictment or investigation for taking bribes from the companies and stealing workers’ dues money. The UAW, however, is only the clearest expression of a universal process.

A vast political and social differentiation has taken place between the working class and an international tendency of politics, the pseudo-left, which is based on sections of the affluent upper middle class who purvey the politics of racial, gender and sexual identity. The politics of the upper middle class seeks access to and a redistribution of some of the wealth sloshing about within the top 1 percent. They wallow in their obsessive fixation on the individual, as a means of leveraging “identity” into positions of power and privilege, while ignoring the social interests of the vast majority.

The tasks of the International Committee of the Fourth International

In many of the comments in the bourgeois press, the protests and struggles over the past year are referred to as “leaderless.” But this is only a preliminary stage in the development of the consciousness of the masses. The masses, accumulating experience in the course of struggle, are undergoing a profound change in their social and political orientation. It is in the context of this revolutionary process that the fight for socialist consciousness will develop.

The new decade of social revolution brings with it a new stage in the history of the International Committee of the Fourth International. The practice of the revolutionary movement is decisive. The resolution of the Socialist Equality Party (US) National Congress in 2018 explained:

An evaluation of the objective situation and realistic appraisal of political possibilities, which excludes the impact of the intervention of the revolutionary party, is utterly alien to Marxism. The Marxist revolutionary party does not merely comment on

events, it participates in the events that it analyzes, and, through its leadership in the struggle for workers’ power and socialism, strives to change the world (see: “The Resurgence of Class Struggle and the Tasks of the Socialist Equality Party”).

There are many signs of the growing international political influence of the ICFI. During 2019, the WSWS experienced an enormous growth in its readership, despite a campaign of internet censorship. The total number of page views increased to 20 million, from 14 million in 2018 (a growth of more than 40 percent). The largest period of readership, with more than two million people accessing the site each month, corresponded with the General Motors strike and the auto workers’ struggle in September and October.

These developments mark a significant advance, but there is no cause for self-satisfaction. The growth of the influence of the ICFI poses all the more clearly the immense responsibilities and tasks that lie ahead.

The turn must now be to the working class, to the active intervention in every manifestation of the opposition of workers and youth to inequality, war and dictatorship. There must be tireless work to raise the political level, to create a cadre in the factories and in the schools, to explain the lessons of history and the nature of capitalism. There will be no shortage of people determined to fight for socialism.

But this determination must be armed with a strategy that unifies the struggles of the working class in a worldwide movement for socialism.

This year marks the 80th anniversary of the assassination of Leon Trotsky—the co-leader with Lenin of the Russian Revolution and founder of the Fourth International—by a Stalinist agent on August 20, 1940. In the final years of his life, Trotsky placed enormous emphasis on the role of revolutionary leadership. “The historical crisis of mankind is reduced to the crisis of revolutionary leadership,” he wrote in the founding document of the Fourth International.

Now it is a question of building the ICFI internationally, of expanding the Socialist Equality Parties in countries where they exist, and building new sections in countries where the ICFI does not yet have an organized presence. The enormous historical foundation upon which this movement rests, the conscious repository of the experiences of the international working class, must be brought forward in the developing struggles of the working class and forging the path to socialism.

As we begin this decade, the ICFI recalls the words with which Trotsky concluded the founding document of the Fourth International:

Workers—men and women—of all countries, place yourselves under the banner of the Fourth International. It is the banner of your approaching victory!

For information on joining the SEP or building a section of the ICFI in your country, click here.



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