

James P. Cannon on the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, “An unspeakable atrocity”

7 August 2020

In commemoration of the 75th anniversary of the US atomic bombings of the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki on August 6 and August 9 of 1945, the World Socialist Web Site is posting a speech delivered by James P. Cannon, the founder of the American Trotskyist movement, to a meeting held in New York City two weeks after the bombings on August 22. The meeting had been called to mark the fifth anniversary of the August 21, 1940 assassination of Leon Trotsky, co-leader with Vladimir Lenin of the Russian Revolution and founder of the Fourth International, at the hands of a Stalinist assassin in Mexico City.

In the early part of the 20th century, Cannon (1890-1974) had been an organizer for the IWW and a member of the Socialist Party of America before becoming a co-founder of the American Communist Party in 1919. In 1928, as a delegate to the Sixth Congress of the Communist International in Moscow, he smuggled out Trotsky's critique of the Draft Program of the Comintern and declared his support for Trotsky's struggle against the Stalinist bureaucracy, thus initiating the formation of the International Left Opposition. Working in close collaboration with Trotsky during his final exile in Mexico, Cannon founded the Socialist Workers Party as the American section of the Fourth International in 1938. He, along with 17 other members of the SWP, was jailed in 1944 on charges of advocating the overthrow of the US government and was released barely six months before delivering the following speech. In 1953, Cannon authored the “Open Letter” and founded the International Committee of the Fourth International to defend orthodox Trotskyism against Pabloite revisionism, a pro-Stalinist trend that sought the liquidation of the Fourth International. Despite his subsequent political decline and support for reunification with the Pabloite United Secretariat in 1963, Cannon played a critical role in the history of the Trotskyist movement and the protracted struggle to build a revolutionary party in the American working class.

In his August 22, 1945 address defending the revolutionary legacy of Trotsky, Cannon delivered a blistering denunciation of the atomic bombings as an imperialist atrocity. The reaction of the American Trotskyists stood in stark contrast to that of the Stalinist Communist Party USA, the official union leaderships and the petty-bourgeois “left” liberals of the Nation, all of whom defended the US war crime.

Five years ago today, when the world stood in the depths of the reaction engendered by the imperialist war, our great leader and teacher, Comrade Trotsky, perished at the hands of a Stalinist assassin. We memorialized him then as the great man of ideas, not yet acknowledged by the world, but a man whose ideas represented the future of mankind. Today, on the fifth anniversary of his tragic and most untimely death, as we stand at the beginning of the greatest revolutionary crisis in the history of the world, when thoughts and words must be transformed into deeds—today we pay our grateful tribute to Trotsky as the man of action.

When we celebrated the 10th anniversary of our party in 1938, at a great

jubilee meeting, Comrade Trotsky was one of the speakers. He couldn't come to New York, but he spoke to us on a phonograph record which he had made for the occasion—a greeting to our party on its 10th anniversary. Many of you no doubt have heard that speech. You will recall that he said we have the right to take time out to celebrate past achievements only as a preparation for the future. In the same sense we can say that if we take time tonight to memorialize our noble and illustrious dead, we do it primarily as a means of preparing and organizing the struggle of the living for the goal which he pointed out to us.

The main ideas of Trotsky, the ideas for which he lived and died, are comparatively simple. He saw the great problem of society arising from the fact that modern industry, which is necessarily operated socially by great masses of people, is hampered and constricted by the anachronism of private ownership and its operation for private profit, rather than for the needs of the people. He saw that the modern productive forces have far, far outgrown the artificial barriers of the national states. These two great contradictions—the private ownership of the means of production and their operation for private profit, and the stifling of industry within the outlived framework of the national states—are the sources of the great ills of modern society—poverty, unemployment, fascism, and war.

Trotsky saw the only way out for humanity in the revolutionary overthrow of outlived capitalism. Industry must be socialized and operated on the basis of a plan, for use and not for profit. The national antagonisms of the separate capitalist states have to give way to an international federation—the Socialist United States of the World. Socialized and planned economy can produce and provide an abundance for all the people—not only in one nation, but in all nations. The separate socialist nations, having no need or incentive to exploit others, having no conflicts over markets, spheres of influence, and fields of investment, no need of colonies to exploit and enslave—these separate socialist nations will necessarily unite in peace and cooperation based on a worldwide division of labor. The strength of one nation will become the strength of all, the scarcities of one will be made up by the plethora of others. Humanity will organize the cooperative exchange of all the conquests of art and science for the use of all peoples of all lands.

Trotsky taught that only the workers can bring about this revolutionary transformation. Only the working class, the only really progressive and revolutionary class in modern society, standing at the head of all the oppressed and deprived and exploited and enslaved—only they can bring about this great revolutionary transformation and reorganization of society. The workers are the only progressive class, and they are the most powerful class by virtue of their numbers and their strategic position in society. All the workers need is to become conscious of their historic interests and of their power, and to organize to make it effective.

“Not a party like other parties”

Trotsky taught that this struggle for the revolutionary transformation of the world, which is on the historic agenda right now, requires the leadership of a party. But—Comrade Trotsky emphasized—not a party like other parties. That was his message to our 10th anniversary meeting: “not a party like other parties,” not a half-hearted, not a reformistic, not a talking and compromising party, but a thoroughgoing revolutionary party, a thinking and acting party. A party irreconcilably opposed to capitalism on every front and to capitalist war, in particular. Such a party, he said, is required to lead this grand assault against an outlived social system.

The workers of the world needed the ideas of Trotsky in 1940. All the material conditions for the transformation of society from capitalism to socialism had long since matured. What lagged behind was the consciousness and the understanding of the masses of the workers and their organizations. They had need of Trotsky’s ideas when he spoke out—the one great voice in the world—against the slaughter of the second imperialist war. But they were not yet ready, they were not yet properly organized, to understand the ideas of Trotsky and to act on them.

The great organizations of the workers, political and industrial, had fallen under the leadership of men who were, in effect, not representatives of the interests of the workers, but agents of the bourgeoisie within the labor movement. The social democratic parties; the Communist parties of the Comintern, which had turned traitor to communism and to the proletariat; and the great trade unions—they all rejected the revolutionary program of Trotsky. They all supported the capitalist governments; and the governments plunged the people into the bloody shambles of the war.

Trotsky died confident of the victory of the Fourth International, as he said in that last message which we carry above our platform tonight. He died confident of the victory, but without having the opportunity to live and participate in it.

We have had six years of the war. The war that was supported by the labor leaders. The war that was defended by the professors and the intellectuals. The war that was blessed by the church. And now we can count up the results. What are the fruits of this war which, it was promised, was going to bring benefit to mankind? Look at Europe! Look at Asia! Or, closer home, look at the closing factories and the long lines before the unemployment offices, lines that will grow longer and hungrier, lines in which the returning soldiers will soon take their weary places—if they come back alive and able to walk from the battlefields.

Under capitalism the factories run full blast to produce the instruments of destruction, but they cannot keep open to produce for human needs in time of so-called peace. The whole of Europe, the whole of great cultured Europe, is a continent of hunger and despair and devastation and death.

The victors at Potsdam announced to Europe the fruits of the victory and the liberation. They decreed the breakup of German industry, the most powerful and productive industry on the continent of Europe. They announced that the living standards of industrialized Germany, the workshop of Europe, can be no higher than those of the devastated backward agricultural states. Not to raise the lowest to the level of the highest, but to drag the highest and most developed and cultured countries down to the level of the lowest and least developed countries—that is the explicit program of the makers of the so-called peace. Such is the program for Europe.

And what are the results in terms of human beings? I read a dispatch in the *New York Times* today from Frankfurt. It is a casual, matter-of-fact informational piece from which I quote a reference to an official report of the situation in that area. “The figures,” says the correspondent of the *Times*, “show that the average consumer in this zone is living on 1,100 to 1,300 calories a day, in contrast to the army’s ration of 3,600.” Less than one-third of the food estimated by the army to be required to maintain the

soldiers at a level of efficiency is allotted to the “liberated” people of Germany in the American zone. Surely the European people will develop a great love and appreciation for the liberators.

Surely the foundations are being laid for the peace of a thousand years. Capitalism in its death agony is dragging humanity down into the abyss. Capitalism is demonstrating itself every day more and more, in so-called peace as in war, as the enemy of the people. Bomb the people to death! Burn them to death with incendiary bombs! Break up their industries, and starve them to death! And if that is not horrible enough, then blast them off the face of the Earth with atomic bombs! That is the program of liberating capitalism.

What a commentary on the real nature of capitalism in its decadent phase is this, that the scientific conquest of the marvelous secret of atomic energy, which might rationally be used to lighten the burdens of all mankind, is employed first for the wholesale destruction of half a million people.

Hiroshima, the first target, had a population of 340,000 people. Nagasaki, the second target, had a population of 253,000 people. A total in the two cities of approximately 600,000 people, in cities of flimsy construction where, as the reporters explained, the houses were built roof against roof. How many were killed? How many Japanese people were destroyed to celebrate the discovery of the secret of atomic energy? From all the indications, from all the reports we have received so far, they were nearly all killed or injured. Nearly all.

In the *Times* today there is a report from the Tokyo radio about Nagasaki, which states that “the center of the once thriving city has been turned into a vast devastation, with nothing left except rubble as far as the eye could see.” Photographs showing the bomb damage appeared on the front page of the Japanese newspaper *Mainichi*. The report says: “One of these pictures revealed a tragic scene 10 miles away from the center of the atomic air attack,” where farm houses were either crushed down or the roofs torn asunder. The broadcast quoted a photographer of the Yamaha Photographic Institute, who had rushed to the city immediately after the bomb hit, as having said: “Nagasaki is now a dead city, all the areas being literally razed to the ground. Only a few buildings are left, standing conspicuously from the ashes.” The photographer said that “the toll of the population was great and even the few survivors have not escaped some kind of injury.” So far the Japanese press has quoted only one survivor of Hiroshima.

In two calculated blows, with two atomic bombs, American imperialism killed or injured half a million human beings. The young and the old, the child in the cradle and the aged and infirm, the newly married, the well and the sick, men, women, and children—they all had to die in two blows because of a quarrel between the imperialists of Wall Street and a similar gang in Japan.

A war for profit

This is how American imperialism is bringing civilization to the Orient. What an unspeakable atrocity! What a shame has come to America, the America that once placed in New York harbor a Statue of Liberty enlightening the world. Now the world recoils in horror from her name. Even some of the preachers who blessed the war have been moved to protest. One said in an interview in the press: “America has lost her moral position.” Her moral position? Yes. She lost that all right. That is true. And the imperialist monsters who threw the bombs know it. But look what they gained. They gained control of the boundless riches of the Orient. They gained the power to exploit and enslave hundreds of millions of people in the Far East. And that is what they went to war for—not for

moral position, but for profit.

Another preacher quoted in the press, reminding himself of something he had once read in the Bible about the meek and gentle Jesus, said it would be useless to send missionaries to the Far East anymore. That raises a very interesting question which I am sure they will discuss among themselves. One can imagine an interesting discussion taking place in the inner circles of the House of Rockefeller and the House of Morgan, who are at one and the same time—quite by accident, of course—pillars of finance and pillars of the church and supporters of missionary enterprises of various kinds. “What shall we do with the heathens in the Orient? Shall we send missionaries to lead them to the Christian heaven, or shall we send atomic bombs to blow them to hell?” There is a subject for debate, a debate on a macabre theme. But in any case, you can be sure that’s where American imperialism is involved, hell will get by far the greater number of the customers.

American imperialism has brought upon itself the fear and hatred of the whole world. American imperialism is regarded throughout the world today as the enemy of mankind. The First World War cost 12 million dead. Twelve million. The Second World War, within a quarter of a century, has already cost not less than 30 million dead; and there are not less than 30 million more to be starved to death before the results of the war are totaled up.

What a harvest of death capitalism has brought to the world! If the skulls of all of the victims could be brought together and piled into one pyramid, what a high mountain that would make. What a monument to the achievements of capitalism that would be, and how fitting a symbol of what capitalist imperialism really is. I believe it would lack only one thing to make it perfect. That would be a big electric sign on the pyramid of skulls, proclaiming the ironical promise of the Four Freedoms. The dead at least are free from want and free from fear. But the survivors live in hunger and terror of the future.

Who won the war that cost over 30 million lives? Our cartoonist in the *Militant*, with great artistic merit and insight, explained it in a few strokes of the pen when she drew that picture of the capitalist with the moneybags in his hands, standing on top of the world with one foot on the graveyard and the other on destroyed cities, with the caption: “The Only Victor.” The only winner is American imperialism and its satellites in other countries.

What are the perspectives? How do our masters visualize the future after this great achievement of the six-year war?

Planning for a Third World War

Before the Second World War, with all its horror and destruction of human life and human culture, is formally ended, they are already thinking and planning for the third.

Don’t we have to stop these madmen and take power out of their hands? Can we doubt that the peoples of all the world are thinking it cannot go much further, that there must be some way to change it? Long ago the revolutionary Marxists said that the alternative facing humanity was either socialism or a new barbarism, that capitalism threatens to go down in ruins and drag civilization with it. But in the light of what has been developed in this war and is projected for the future, I think we can say now that the alternative can be made even more precise: The alternative facing mankind is socialism or annihilation! It is a problem of whether capitalism is allowed to remain or whether the human race is to continue to survive on this planet.

We believe that the people of the world will waken to this frightful alternative and act in time to save themselves. We believe that before

American imperialism, the new master of the world, has time to consolidate its victories, it will be attacked from two sides and defeated. On the one side the peoples of the world, transformed into the colonial slaves of Wall Street, will rebel against the imperialist master, as the conquered provinces rose against imperial Rome. Simultaneously with that uprising, and coordinating our struggle with it, we, the Trotskyist party, will lead the workers and plebeians of America in a revolutionary attack against our main enemy and the main enemy of mankind, the imperialists of the United States.

Five years ago today we first mourned and commemorated our great man of ideas, Comrade Trotsky. Today, as revolutionary action is becoming a life-and-death necessity for hundreds of millions of people, as we prepare to go over from ideas to action—to action guided by ideas—we commemorate Trotsky as the great man of action, the organizer of workers, the leader of revolutions. That is the spirit in which we commemorate Comrade Trotsky tonight.

He enjoined us above everything else to build a party. And again I repeat what he said: “Not a party like other parties,” but a party fit to lead a revolution, a party that does not dabble, does not go halfway, but carries the struggle through to the end.

If you are serious, if you mean business, if you want to take part in the fight for a better life for yourself and for the salvation of mankind, we invite you to join us in this party and take part in this great struggle.

There is no place for pessimists or fainthearted people in our party, no place for self-seekers, careerists, and bureaucrats. But the door is wide open to resolute workers who are determined to change the world and ready to stake their heads on the issue.

Trotsky has bequeathed to us a great heritage. He gave to us a great system of ideas which constitute our program. And he set before us the example of a man who was a model revolutionist, who lived and died for the cause of humanity, and who, above all, showed how to apply theory in action in the greatest revolution in history.

With this heritage we are armed and armored for struggle and for victory. All that we, the disciples of Trotsky, need for that victory is to understand those ideas clearly, to assimilate them into our flesh and blood, to be true to them, and, above all, to apply them in action.

If we do that, we can build a party that no power on Earth can break. We can build a party fit to lead the masses of America—to answer the imperialist program of war on the peoples of the world, with revolution at home and peace with the peoples of the world.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact