

# Forward to May Day 2023! Build a mass movement of workers and youth against war and for socialism!

David North  
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On Sunday, April 30, the International Committee of the Fourth International, the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees, the International Youth and Students for Social Equality and the *World Socialist Web Site* will hold an online global rally to celebrate May Day 2023.

Two processes dominate this year's celebration of the international unity of the working class: the war in Ukraine, which is escalating toward a global conflagration, and an international resurgence of the class struggle. These two processes are profoundly related. The same economic, geopolitical and social contradictions that drive the imperialist ruling elites onto the path of war provide the objective impulse for the radicalization of the working class and the outbreak of revolutionary struggles.

The war in Ukraine is now in its second year. The most reliable casualty reports estimate that over 150,000 Ukrainian soldiers have been killed and that Russian deaths are between 50,000 and 100,000. Far from being horrified by this terrible toll in human life and issuing calls for a ceasefire, the United States and its NATO allies are pouring weapons into Ukraine. Having committed the prestige of the US and NATO to victory in the proxy war, the Biden administration cannot tolerate the political consequences of a failure of its military and geopolitical objectives. The logic of its war aims leads to reckless policies.

The pro-war media cannot restrain its enthusiasm over the prospects of an imminent Ukrainian spring counteroffensive, which, if and when it occurs, will result in casualty figures that will recall the horrors of the Battles of the Somme and Verdun during World War I. Having imposed, in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, policies that resulted in the deaths of millions, capitalist governments and the media propaganda organs are inured to the fatal consequences of their war aims in the conflict with Russia. Mass death as a consequence of the subordination of social need to the imperatives of capitalist profit making and individual enrichment has become a regular occurrence under capitalism. The earthquakes in Turkey and Syria, which are believed to have killed over 150,000 people, are among the endless series of preventable disasters that mark contemporary life.

In order to drum up support for the war, the Biden administration adheres to the absurd narrative of the “unprovoked war.” The public is expected to believe that it all began when Vladimir Putin woke up one morning and declared, for no apparent reason, “Let there be war in Ukraine.” But history shows that wars are the outcome of a complex interaction of economic, geopolitical, and social processes. More than 100 years after the outbreak of World War I in 1914, historians are still trying to understand the different levels of causation that resulted in that conflict.

As the German scholar Jörn Leonhard has recently written:

Ever since Thucydides, historians have been aware of the difference between the structural and immediate causes of war; they have also understood the need to subject official justifications of war to an ideological critique. Distinctions can be made in this area, as in the search for the causes of revolutions; the identification of long-term, medium term, and short-term causes involves separating out determinants, catalysts, and contingencies. Especially with regard to the outbreak of war, moreover, the question of external and internal factors continues to play a key role to this day. To what extent does the root cause of a war lie in the system of international relations, and to what extent does it lie in the internal composition of states and societies.<sup>[1]</sup>

The narrative of the “unprovoked war” explains nothing about the historical, economic, social and political origins of the war. It directs attention away from any examination of the connection between the US-NATO war in Ukraine and 1) the previous 30 years of virtually uninterrupted war waged by the United States in Iraq, Serbia, Afghanistan, Somalia, Libya, and Syria; 2) the relentless eastward expansion of NATO since the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991; 3) the escalating geopolitical conflict with China, which is viewed by American imperialism as a dangerous threat to its own dominant world position; 4) the protracted decline of the global economic position of the United States, which finds its starkest expression in the growing challenge to the supremacy of the dollar as the world reserve currency; 5) the series of economic shocks that have required desperate bailouts to forestall the complete collapse of the US financial system; 6) the evident breakdown of the American political system, exemplified in President Donald Trump's attempted overthrow, on January 6, 2021, of the result of the November 2020 national election; 7) the increasing domestic instability of a society scarred by staggering levels of inequality, intensified by the impact of the pandemic and a new inflationary spiral, which is radicalizing the American working class.

The most powerful refutation of the “unprovoked war” narrative is to be found in the innumerable statements of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI), posted on the *World Socialist Web Site*, which has during the last quarter century analyzed the economic, political, and social contradictions that have driven the US corporate-financial elites' desperate efforts to find a way out of intractable crises through war.

Twenty years ago, just one week after the Bush administration launched the March 2003 invasion of Iraq, the Socialist Equality Party, the American section of the ICFI, explained: “The strategy of American imperialism consists of utilizing its massive military power to establish the unchallengeable global hegemony of the United States and completely

subordinate to itself the resources of the world economy.”<sup>[2]</sup>

Given its central role in world capitalism, the crisis of American imperialism had destabilized the entire political and economic system. Its policies, the SEP explained, were a response to what were, in essence, a global, rather than merely national, crisis. The brutally aggressive policies of successive American governments were an

attempt to resolve, on the basis of imperialism, the world historical problem of the contradiction between the global character of the productive forces and the archaic nation-states system.

America proposes to overcome this problem by establishing itself as the super nation-state, functioning as the ultimate arbiter of the world’s fate—deciding how the resources of the world economy will be allocated, after it has grabbed for itself the lion’s share. But this sort of imperialist solution to the underlying contradictions of world capitalism, which was utterly reactionary in 1914, has not improved with age. Indeed, the sheer scale of world economic development in the course of the twentieth century endows such an imperialist project with an element of madness. Any attempt to establish the supremacy of a single national state is incompatible with the extraordinary level of international economic integration. The profoundly reactionary character of such a project is expressed in the barbaric methods that are required for its realization.<sup>[3]</sup>

While the European imperialist allies of the United States in the NATO alliance are compelled by the present global balance of power to follow the scenario set by Washington, they are by no means innocent bystanders in the confrontation with Russia. All the old European imperialist powers—weather-beaten veterans of two world wars in just the last century, along with savage crimes in their former colonies and experiments with fascism and genocide in their own countries—are beset with the same political and economic diseases that afflict the United States, while possessing even fewer financial resources to deal with them.

Although unable to pursue their imperialist ambitions independently, neither Britain, France, Italy, and Germany, nor “lesser powers” such as Sweden, Norway, Denmark, Spain, Belgium, and Switzerland are prepared to accept their exclusion from the redistribution of territory and natural resources and access to financial advantages that they expect will follow from the military defeat of Russia and its breakup into numerous statelets.

But even amidst its proclamations of unity, the NATO alliance is itself beset by deep internal divisions, which, in the near-term future, may suddenly explode in armed conflict. Among the little-discussed consequences of the war is the reopening of territorial disputes arising from the post-World War II settlement. The German ruling class has not forgotten that the Polish city of Wrocław was once called Breslau, which was at the turn of the twentieth century the sixth largest city in the German Empire.

Nor has the virulently nationalistic and fascistic Polish government forgotten that the city of Lviv in western Ukraine was, prior to the outbreak of World War II, known as Lwów, the third largest city in Poland.

Between the lines of the “unprovoked war” narrative, the fact that the Ukraine war is part of a much larger global conflict, which is leading to World War III, is being ever more openly acknowledged. The question is not so much whether there will be a war between the United States and China, but rather when it will begin, where the conflict will break out, and whether it will involve the use of tactical and/or strategic nuclear

weapons.

The former German foreign minister, Joschka Fischer, recently wrote that the war is “about the future world order, about its great revision in the 21st century.” He denounced China and Russia for having “entered into an unformalized alliance to break the dominance of the United States and the West—the two great Eurasian powers against the transatlantic and also Pacific alliance of the West, led by the United States.”<sup>[4]</sup>

Gideon Rachman, the leading foreign affairs correspondent of the *Financial Times*, wrote on March 27:

The fact that the president of China and the prime minister of Japan paid simultaneous and competing visits to the capitals of Russia and Ukraine underlines the global significance of the Ukraine war. Japan and China are fierce rivals in east Asia. Both countries understand that their struggle will be profoundly affected by the outcome of the conflict in Europe.

This shadow boxing between China and Japan over Ukraine is part of a broader trend. Strategic rivalries in the Euro Atlantic and Indo-Pacific regions are increasingly overlapping with each other. What is emerging is something that looks more and more like a single geopolitical struggle.<sup>[5]</sup>

Although Rachman remains a fervent proponent of the “unprovoked war” narrative, he concludes his self-contradicting analysis with a stark warning:

But the danger of a slide into global conflict is far from over. The outbreak of war in Europe, combined with the rise in tensions in east Asia – and the growing connection between these two theaters – still has distinct echoes of the 1930s. All sides have a responsibility to make sure that, this time, linked rivalries in Europe and Asia do not culminate in a global tragedy.<sup>[6]</sup>

When events leading up to the Russian invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022 are placed in the necessary historical and political context, there is no question but that the war was instigated by the United States and its NATO allies. All attempts to assess “blame” for the war by concentrating on the question of “who fired the first shot?” require an extremely limited time frame that isolates a single episode from a far longer succession of events. As Trotsky explained in 1934, “The character of war is determined not by the initial episode taken by itself (‘violation of neutrality,’ ‘enemy invasion,’ etc.) but by the main moving forces of war, by its whole development and by the consequences to which it finally leads.”<sup>[7]</sup>

Contrary to the “unprovoked war” horror story, the February 2022 invasion was the outcome of a complex of events that extend back not only to the CIA-funded and orchestrated Maidan coup of 2014, which overthrew the elected pro-Russian government of Viktor Yanukovich, but to the unleashing of reactionary nationalist tendencies, both within Ukraine and Russia, as a consequence of the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

However, the fact that the war was instigated by the United States and NATO does not justify the Russian invasion of Ukraine, let alone diminish its reactionary character. Those who defend the invasion on the grounds that it was a legitimate response to the NATO threat to Russia’s borders are simply ignoring the fact that Putin is the leader of a capitalist state, whose definition of “national security” is determined by the economic interests of the oligarchic class whose wealth is based on the dissolution and theft of the previously nationalized property of the Soviet

Union.

All of Putin's miscalculations and blunders, in both the launching and prosecution of the war, reflect the class interests that he serves. The aim of the war is to counteract military pressure from the Western imperialist powers, and to retain for the national capitalist class a dominant position in the exploitation of natural resources and labor within the borders of Russia and, to the greatest extent possible, in the Black Sea region and the neighboring countries of Central Asia and the Transcaucasus.

There is nothing progressive, let alone anti-imperialist, in these objectives. When Putin evokes the heritage of tsarism, denounces Lenin, Bolshevism and the October Revolution, he is testifying to the historically reactionary and politically bankrupt character of his regime.

Regardless of their present conflict, the new post-Soviet ruling classes in Russia and Ukraine share the same criminal origin. Less than three months before the formal dissolution of the USSR, this writer, speaking on October 3, 1991 at a public meeting held at a workers' club in Kiev as a representative of the International Committee, warned of the disastrous consequences that would flow from the nationalists' agenda:

In the republics, all the nationalists proclaim that the solution to all problems lies in the creation of new "independent" states. Allow us to ask, independent of whom? Declaring independence from Moscow, the nationalists can do nothing more than place all the vital decisions relating to the future of their new states in the hands of Germany, Britain, France, Japan and the United States. Kravchuk [leader of the Ukrainian Communist Party and future president of post-Soviet Ukraine] goes to Washington and squirms in his seat like a schoolboy while he is lectured by President Bush. ...

What path, then, should the working people of the USSR follow? What is the alternative? The only solution that can be found is one based on the program of revolutionary internationalism. The return to capitalism, for which the chauvinist agitation of the nationalists is only one guise, can only lead to a new form of oppression. Rather than each of the Soviet nationalities approaching the imperialists separately with their heads bowed and their knees bent, begging for alms and favors, the Soviet workers of all nationalities should forge a new relationship, based on the principles of real social equality and democracy, and on this basis undertake the revolutionary defense of all that is worth preserving in the heritage of 1917. ...

At the very heart of this program is the perspective of revolutionary internationalism. All the problems that haunt the Soviet people today have their origins in the abandonment of the program of revolutionary internationalism.<sup>[8]</sup>

The warnings made by the International Committee nearly 32 years ago have been tragically vindicated. The working people of Russia and Ukraine have been drawn into a fratricidal conflict. Eighty years ago, they fought together, in defense of the October Revolution, to expel the Nazi army from the Soviet Union. Now, acting on the orders of capitalist regimes, they are shooting and killing each other.

The International Committee's call for the unification of the international working class has not only acquired greater urgency. Objective conditions are now far more favorable for its mobilization on the basis of the program of revolutionary socialist internationalism. Alongside the deepening crisis of US imperialism and the intensification of global capitalist contradictions, there has been an immense growth of the international working class. Its economic weight and potential power has been vastly augmented by the emergence of massive urban centers,

populated by tens of millions of workers, in countries where the proletariat had been until the last decade of the twentieth century only a small fraction of the population.

During the past decade there has been a steady escalation of the class struggle. A striking characteristic of the class struggle has been its international character. The revolutionary advances in communications technology are dissolving the barriers between the workers of different countries. Regardless of where it begins, the social conflict in any particular country almost immediately acquires an international audience and becomes a world event. Even the age-old barrier of language is being overcome by the application of translation and transcription programs that make documents and speeches, regardless of the languages in which they were written and spoken, easily comprehensible to a global audience.

These advances in technology facilitate a global revolutionary response to economic, social and political problems that confront the working class of all countries. China's sudden abandonment of its Zero-COVID policy in late 2022, resulting in more than one million deaths within less than two months, has demonstrated the impossibility of devising a national solution to a global crisis. This fundamental truth is being hammered home by the reality of the deepening social crisis.

The Ukraine war and the massive growth of military budgets have assumed the form of a war against the social conditions of workers in every country. Inflation, unemployment, and the slashing of budgets for social services has provoked an upsurge in strike activity throughout the world. Major social struggles have broken out on every continent.

Notwithstanding the differences that exist between countries, certain common features manifest themselves in the political conditions confronted by the working class in all countries. Regardless of how limited the demands of workers are, they confront bitter resistance from the employers and the state.

With ever greater frequency and intensity, the capitalist state is assuming direct leadership, on behalf of the ruling class, of the war against the working class. In countries as different in their economic development as Sri Lanka and France, the working class confronts as its central enemy the leader of the state—in Sri Lanka, President Ranil Wickremesinghe, in France, President Emmanuel Macron. Despite their use of democratic phraseology whenever it is politically convenient, their decisions, relying on the police and military for their enforcement, assume a blatantly dictatorial character. The present universal breakdown of bourgeois democracy confirms the analysis of Lenin: "Political reaction *all along* the line is a characteristic feature of imperialism."<sup>[9]</sup>

For this reason, the logic of the class struggle assumes the character of a political struggle against the state and raises the necessity for the development of independent organs of workers' power. The call of the Sri Lankan section of the International Committee for the convening of a Socialist and Democratic Congress of Workers and Rural Poor, and the demand raised by the French section of the ICFI for the bringing down of the Macron government, are both necessary responses to the escalating conflict between the working class and the capitalist state.

A basic lesson of the twentieth century is that the struggle against imperialist war can be waged successfully only through the political mobilization of the working class on the basis of an uncompromisingly anti-capitalist, socialist program. All proposals for opposing war that ignore and cover up for the causes of war—which are rooted in the nation state system and the capitalist profit system—are doomed to failure.

The great obstacle to the mobilization of the working class is the political influence retained by the pro-capitalist bureaucracies in the trade unions, reactionary labor and fake socialist parties, and a broad array of pseudo-left organizations of the affluent middle class. Their insidious influence must be overcome.

The International Committee has made significant advances in the development of an alternative revolutionary leadership in the working

class. The International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) is the concretization of the perspective advanced by Trotsky in the *Transitional Program* for the formation of factory committees. He called on the sections of the Fourth International “to create in all possible instances independent militant organizations corresponding more closely to the tasks of mass struggle against bourgeois society; and if necessary, not flinching even in the face of a direct break with the conservative apparatus of the trade unions.”<sup>[10]</sup>

Moreover, the impulse given by the International Committee to the development of the IWA-RFC is based on Trotsky’s analysis of the fate of trade unions in the epoch of imperialism. In an uncompleted manuscript found on Trotsky’s desk after his assassination, he had written: “There is one common feature in the development, or more correctly the degeneration, of modern trade union organizations in the entire world: it is their drawing closely together with the state power.”

It was, therefore, necessary “to mobilize the masses, not only against the bourgeoisie, but also against the totalitarian regime within the trade unions themselves and against the leaders enforcing this regime.”<sup>[11]</sup>

When the petty-bourgeois pseudo-left agents of the ruling class denounce the ICFI for opposing the unions, what they really are attacking is the refusal of the International Committee to accept the subordination of the working class to the dictatorship of the pro-imperialist and corporatist labor bureaucracies. Far from abstaining from the struggles of workers who remain within the prison walls manned by the police guards of the AFL-CIO in the United States, the IG Metall in Germany, the CGT in France and their equivalents all over the world, the IWA-RFC is involved in countless struggles within the trade unions, doing all it can to encourage and strengthen the rebellion against the bureaucratic apparatus. The votes cast by 5,000 auto workers in October 2022 for Will Lehman, the socialist candidate for the presidency of the UAW, who ran on a program that called for the establishment of workers’ control of the auto industry and the obliteration of the union apparatus, testifies to the growing influence and organizational and political potential of the IWA-RFC.

The International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees is creating a worldwide network to assist in the development of a global strategy and the tactical coordination of the class struggle against corporate power and capitalist rule. Its aim is not to apply pressure upon and reform the reactionary bureaucracies, but to transfer all decision-making and power to the rank and file.

The International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) is expanding its work to educate young people as Marxists, to develop their understanding of the struggle waged by Trotsky and the Fourth International against Stalinism and all forms of national opportunism, to turn to the working class, and to direct their boundless energy to the fight to build the World Party of Socialist Revolution.

The *World Socialist Web Site*, which is now celebrating 25 years of daily publication, is continuously developing the depth and scope of its political coverage and analysis of the class struggle, and on the basis of this essential theoretical work expanding the influence of Trotskyism in the struggles of the international working class.

The May Day rally will build on these achievements and dedicate the celebration of this historic day of working class unity to advancing the struggle against war and for the transfer of power to the working class and the building of socialism throughout the world.

Jörn Leonhard, *Pandora’s Box: A History of the First World War*, translated by Patrick Camiller (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2018), pp. 62-63

“Into the Maelstrom,” in David North, *A Quarter Century of War: The U.S. Drive for Global Hegemony 1990-2016*, (Oak Park: Mehring Books, 2016), p. 277.

Ibid

“Former German foreign minister Joschka Fischer declares Ukraine war

is ‘Global power struggle for future world order’”, by Peter Schwarz, *World Socialist Web Site*, 4 April 2023, <https://www.wsws.org/en/articles/2023/04/05/ijhm-a05.html>

“China, Japan and the Ukraine war,” by Gideon Rachman, *Financial Times*, March 27, 2023, <https://www.ft.com/content/9aa4df57-b457-4f2d-a660-1e646f96c8cb>

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“Trade unions in the epoch of imperialist decay,” in *Marxism and the Trade Unions* (New York: 1973), pp. 9-10

[1] Jörn Leonhard, *Pandora’s Box: A History of the First World War*, translated by Patrick Camiller (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2018), pp. 62-63

[2] “Into the Maelstrom,” in David North, *A Quarter Century of War: The U.S. Drive for Global Hegemony 1990-2016*, (Oak Park: Mehring Books, 2016), p. 277.

[3] Ibid

[4] “Former German foreign minister Joschka Fischer declares Ukraine war is ‘Global power struggle for future world order’”, by Peter Schwarz, *World Socialist Web Site*, 4 April 2023, <https://www.wsws.org/en/articles/2023/04/05/ijhm-a05.html>

[5] “China, Japan and the Ukraine war,” by Gideon Rachman, *Financial Times*, March 27, 2023, <https://www.ft.com/content/9aa4df57-b457-4f2d-a660-1e646f96c8cb>

[6] Ibid

[7] “War and the Fourth International” by Leon Trotsky, *Writings of Leon Trotsky, 1933-34*, (New York: Pathfinder, 1975), p. 308

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