

May Day 2023: For the international unity of the working class against national chauvinism and war!

David North
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This is the text of the speech by David North, chairperson of the International Editorial Board of the World Socialist Web Site, opening the International May Day Online Rally 2023, held Sunday, April 30. The recording of the entire rally can be accessed here.

On this day of international working class solidarity, the International Committee of the Fourth International extends to all those throughout the world who are watching this online rally its revolutionary greetings. We declare our solidarity with all sections of workers and young people on all continents and in all countries who have entered into struggle against capitalism.

The International Committee renews its commitment to fight for the freedom of the Maruti Suzuki autoworkers in Delhi, India, who have been framed up and imprisoned for life as punishment for striking against brutal working conditions. The ICFI reaffirms its determination to mobilize the strength of the international working class to secure the freedom of Julian Assange, who has become a symbol of the fight for truth against the crimes of imperialist governments and the lies of their lackeys in the corporate media.

Today's rally is the International Committee's tenth online celebration of May Day. It takes place as the war in Ukraine is escalating relentlessly, threatening to spread beyond NATO's confrontation with Russia toward war with China and a global nuclear conflagration.

Seeking to cover over its own role in the instigation of the Ukraine war, the Biden administration adheres to the ahistorical and absurd narrative of Putin's "unprovoked war." But the invocation of the specter of Vladimir Putin—the latest in a long line of devils conjured up by Washington—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 results 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 unanswerable refutation of the "unprovoked war" narrative are the statements of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI), posted on the *World Socialist Web Site*, which have during the last quarter-century analyzed the economic, political and social contradictions that have driven the US corporate-financial elite's desperate efforts to find a way out of intractable crises through war.

The first online May Day rally of the International Committee was held less than three months after the February 2014 Maidan coup directed by the United States and Germany to overthrow Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich, who was viewed by Washington and Berlin as excessively sympathetic to Russia, and place in power a pro-NATO government. The coup was followed by the Kremlin's seizure and annexation of Crimea, which Washington had planned to turn into a Black Sea base for NATO naval operations against Russia.

In the announcement of its first online May Day rally, posted on April 12, 2014, the *World Socialist Web Site* stated that the Maidan coup had been staged "with the intention of provoking a confrontation with Russia." The statement continued:

The confrontation with Russia over Ukraine marks a new and dangerous turn in the orientation of the imperialist powers. The Gods of Imperialist War are athirst! As in the years that preceded World War I and World War II, a new division of the world is being prepared.

Those who believe that war with China and Russia is an impossibility, that the major imperialist powers would not risk war with nuclear powers, are deluding themselves. The history of the twentieth century, with its two devastating world wars and its innumerable and bloody localized conflicts, has provided sufficient evidence of the risks that the ruling classes are prepared to take. Indeed, they are prepared to risk the fate of all humanity and the planet itself.

One hundred years after the outbreak of World War I and 75 years after the start of World War II, the struggle against the danger of a third imperialist cataclysm confronts the international working class.

The International Committee did not possess a crystal ball. But it was able to draw upon the powerful weapon of Marxist theory and the analysis of the dynamics of world imperialism developed by Lenin during the First

World War. At that time, Lenin exposed the lies used by imperialist governments to justify the slaughter, as well as the sophistries that were employed by those who had repudiated their earlier pledges to oppose the war policies of capitalist governments and uphold the international unity of the working class.

Lenin's analysis rooted the war in the economic foundations of imperialism and the ensuing and inescapable conflicts between capitalist states. He rejected the claim that the war could be supported in the name of "the defense of the nation" or that military conflict was merely the outcome of an incorrect choice of policy options. The former argument was simply a hypocritical justification for capitulating to national chauvinism; the latter argument served to obfuscate the objective cause of imperialist war and its revolutionary implications for the development of a working class antiwar strategy.

Imperialist economics led inexorably to imperialist war and all its horrors. The leader of the Bolshevik Party wrote in 1916 that "imperialism is, in general, a striving toward violence and reaction..." Through the ruthless application of violence, the imperialists aimed to alter the existing division of the world's wealth and resources among the major powers. Lenin explained:

(1) the fact that the world is already partitioned obliges those contemplating a redivision to reach out for every kind of territory; and (2) an essential feature of imperialism is the rivalry between great powers in the striving for hegemony, i.e., for the conquest of territory, not so much directly for themselves as to weaken the adversary and undermine his hegemony...

Lenin continued:

The question is: What means other than war could there be under capitalism to overcome the disparity between the development of productive forces and the accumulation of capital on one side, and the division of colonies and spheres of influence for finance capital on the other.

The present war in Ukraine and the escalating conflict with China are the manifestations, though on a much more advanced and complex level, of the global contradictions analyzed by Lenin more than a century ago.

Far from being the sudden and unexpected outcome of Putin's "unprovoked" invasion—as if the expansion of NATO 800 miles eastward since 1991 did not constitute a provocation against Russia—the war in Ukraine is the continuation and escalation of 30 years of continuous war waged by the United States. The essential aim of the unending series of conflicts has been to offset the protracted economic decline of US imperialism and to secure its global hegemony through military conquest.

In 1934, Leon Trotsky wrote that while German imperialism sought to "organize Europe," it was the ambition of US imperialism to "organize the world." Using language that seemed intended to confirm Trotsky's analysis, Joe Biden, then a candidate for the presidency, wrote in April 2020: "The Biden foreign policy will place the United States back at the head of the table ... the world does not organize itself."

But the United States confronts a world that does not necessarily want to be organized by the United States. The role of the dollar as the world reserve currency, the financial underpinning of American geo-political supremacy, is being increasingly challenged. The growing role of China as an economic and military competitor is viewed by Washington as an existential threat to American dominance.

A major factor in the decision of the imperialist powers to go to war in 1914 was the fear that time was not on their side—that is, that delaying war would only allow their competitors to gain in strength. To the extent that war was seen as inevitable, it led to a "better sooner than later" attitude to the outbreak of war. This subjective conviction among capitalist political leaders and the military general staffs that conflict was unavoidable became, at a critical point, a significant factor in the decision to go to war in August 1914.

The numerous articles in the capitalist press and strategic journals prophesying war with China within the next 15, 10 or even five years testify to the prevalence of a similar mindset in present-day Washington. There is no other serious political explanation for the recklessly provocative character of the Biden administration's actions in Taiwan, which are obviously intended to goad the Chinese to take military action, to "fire the first shot" and thereby provide Washington with the propaganda narrative required to justify its long-planned military action.

The United States is the most aggressive of the imperialist powers, but the same dynamic that drives Washington toward war also operates in Europe. 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 by 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 or Germany nor "lesser powers," such as Sweden, Finland, 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.

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, which isolates a single episode from a far longer succession of events.

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.

However, the fact that the war was instigated by the United States and NATO does not justify the Russian invasion of Ukraine, let alone alter 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 the 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.

Regardless of their present conflict, the new post-Soviet ruling classes in

Russia and Ukraine share the same criminal origin in the dissolution of the USSR and the restoration of capitalism.

The war is now well into its second year. The capitalist media is chortling over the bloodshed as it anticipates the launching of a Ukrainian counter-offensive that will lead to a further loss of tens of thousands of lives on both sides.

At the present time, the bloodiest fighting is concentrated in the city of Bakhmut. Even when taking into account the manipulation of information by both Ukraine and Russia in the interests of propaganda, there is no question but that the battle for the city has exacted a horrifying toll in human life.

But for all the concentration on the military operations in and around the city, there has been virtually nothing written in the press about the history of the city itself. A review of this history testifies to the tragic character of this fratricidal conflict and the terrible social regression it represents for the people of both Russia and Ukraine.

The city of Bakhmut was a major battle front in the civil war that followed the 1917 October Revolution. It fell under the control of the anti-Bolshevik nationalist Ukrainian army of Semyon Petliura, whose regime instigated pogroms that resulted in the killing of between 50,000 and 200,000 Jews.

The Red Army liberated Bakhmut on December 27, 1919, and this victory set into motion a vast social transformation. A "Victory of Labor" factory was built, and the mines in the vicinity of the city were named after the German revolutionary Karl Liebknecht and the Soviet leader Yakov Sverdlov. In 1924, the city was renamed Artemivsk, to honor the memory of a leading Bolshevik, Fyodor Andreyevich Sergeyev, who had been known as Comrade Artyom.

His life reflected the revolutionary internationalism that inspired broad sections of the socialist-minded working class, intelligentsia and youth of the multinational Russian Empire.

Sergeyev-Artyom had joined the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party in 1901 and supported Lenin's Bolshevik faction after the 1903 split. During the 1905 Revolution, he led an armed rebellion of workers in the city of Kharkov. After the defeat of the Revolution, he was imprisoned in Siberia. But Comrade Artyom managed to escape after three years and made his way, via Japan and Korea, to Australia.

He soon became active in the struggles of the Australian working class. Known widely as "Big Tom," Artyom became in 1912 the editor of the *Echo of Australia*. As a member of the Australian Socialist Party, he led the opposition in the trade unions to Australia's participation in World War I.

Returning to Russia after the February Revolution, Artyom played a major role in the organization of the revolutionary insurrection that secured Bolshevik rule in Kharkov and the Donets Basin region. He went on to play a prominent role in the civil war that ultimately secured Soviet power. In 1921, Artyom was killed in a train accident. Three years later, Bakhmut was renamed Artemivsk.

On October 31, 1941, four months after invading the Soviet Union, the Nazi forces occupied Artemivsk. In early 1942, the Nazis, assisted by right-wing Ukrainian nationalists, carried out the murder of 3,000 Jews, who were rounded up, pushed into a mine shaft and suffocated to death.

On September 5, 1943, Artemivsk was liberated by the Red Army.

Following the 2014 Maidan coup, the right-wing regime of Poroshenko, anxious to rehabilitate the heroes of Ukrainian fascism and eliminate all political, social and cultural vestiges of the Soviet era, removed Artemivsk from the map of Ukraine and restored the city's old name, Bakhmut.

The effacement of the remnants of the October Revolution has been accompanied by the renewed glorification of Stepan Bandera, Dmitri Dontsov and other heroes of fascistic and neo-Nazi bourgeois Ukrainian nationalism.

But Putin's claim to be fighting Ukrainian fascism lacks the slightest

political credibility. He is waging war under the reactionary banner of Russian nationalism. When Putin evokes the heritage of tsarism and denounces Lenin, Trotsky, Bolshevism and the October Revolution, he is testifying to the historically reactionary and politically bankrupt character of his regime.

In demanding an end to the war, we invoke the principle of socialist internationalism. The working class has no country. Neither the Ukrainian nor Russian working class has anything to gain from this war. Eighty years ago the workers of Ukraine and Russia fought side by side in a struggle to expel the Nazi invaders from the Soviet Union. Now, as a consequence of the restoration of capitalism, they are killing each other on the very soil they once defended side by side against fascism and in defense of the conquests of the October Revolution.

The only politically viable, let alone revolutionary, answer to imperialist war is the revolutionary mobilization of the international working class on the basis of socialist policies. There is much talk today about the coming of a "multi-polar" world, which will supposedly supersede the "unipolar" hegemony of American imperialism. The rule of Washington will be replaced, according to the academic and pseudoleft theorists of "multipolarity," by a consortia of capitalist states, which will collectively and harmoniously preside over a more peaceful division of global resources.

This new version of a peaceful "ultra-imperialism" is no more theoretically coherent and politically viable than it was a century ago, when it was first proposed by the German reformist Karl Kautsky and comprehensively refuted by Lenin. The peaceful distribution and allocation of global resources among capitalist and imperialist states is impossible. The contradictions between the global economy and capitalist nation-state system lead to war.

In any event, the realization of a "multi-polar" world, setting aside its incorrect theoretical foundations, requires its peaceful acceptance by today's dominant imperialist power, the United States. This is not a realistic prospect. The United States will oppose with all the means at its disposal efforts to block its drive for "unipolar" hegemony. Thus, the utopian striving to replace a "unipolar" with a "multi-polar" world leads, by its own twisted logic, to World War III and the destruction of the planet.

In the final analysis, underlying these anti-Marxist theories and policies is opposition to a struggle against capitalism and an attempt to balance between conflicting capitalist and imperialist states.

The International Committee rejects all such cowardly adaptations to capitalist regimes and evasions of revolutionary tasks. As Trotsky stated upon the outbreak of World War II: "We are not a government party; we are the party of irreconcilable revolutionary opposition..."

We seek to implement our policies "not through the medium of bourgeois governments ... but exclusively through the education of the masses through agitation, through explaining to workers what they should defend and what they should overthrow."

Such an approach to the solution of historical problems, Trotsky acknowledged, "cannot give immediate miraculous results. But we do not pretend to be miracle workers. As things stand, we are a revolutionary minority. Our work must be directed so that the workers on whom we have influence should correctly appraise events, not permit themselves to be caught unawares, and prepare the general sentiment of their own class for the revolutionary solution of the tasks confronting us."

The dangers confronting humanity should not be minimized. The first responsibility of a genuine revolutionary is to state *what is*. But this requires the recognition that objective reality presents not only the danger of World War III and the annihilation of humanity but also the potential for world socialist revolution and a stupendous advance in human civilization.

The program of the Fourth International, the World Party of Socialist Revolution led by the International Committee, is to realize this potential

by building a mass movement against imperialist war and fighting for the transfer of power to the working class to build socialism throughout the world. This is the perspective that animates, despite all difficulties and dangers, today's celebration of May Day.



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