

The working class, the fight against capitalist barbarism, and the building of the World Party of Socialist Revolution (Part Four)

WSWS International Editorial Board
6 January 2024

This is the fourth of a four-part statement. Part one was published January 3, part two was published on January 4 and part three was published on January 5.

The growth of the class struggle and the fight for socialism

1. The previous sections of this statement have concentrated on the major elements of the crisis of the world capitalist system at the beginning of 2024: 1) The escalation of imperialist militarism, spearheaded by the United States, resulting in a proxy war against Russia, the overt preparation for war against China, and, in Gaza, the adoption of genocide as a legitimate instrument of state policy; 2) A massive regression in social policy, exemplified by the deliberate repudiation of basic public health measures to counter the COVID-19 pandemic and save countless millions of people throughout the world from illness, debilitation and death; 3) The extreme concentration of wealth in the upper echelons of capitalist society, resulting in staggering levels of social inequality in the advanced capitalist countries and on a global scale; which underlies 4) The world-wide erosion and breakdown of democratic forms of rule and the resurgence, on a scale not seen since the 1930s, of authoritarian and fascist political organizations and governments.

2. All the “red lines” that demarcate civilization from barbarism are being effaced. The motto of capitalist governments is: “Nothing that is criminal is alien to us.” Nuclear war is being “normalized”; genocide is being “normalized”; pandemics and the deliberate culling of the infirm and elderly have been “normalized”; unfathomable levels of wealth concentration and social inequality have been “normalized”; the suppression of democracy and the resort to authoritarianism and fascism are being “normalized.”

3. Taken as a whole, the normalization of different forms of social barbarism signify that the capitalist class has arrived at a dead end. A class whose policies consist of different forms of sociocide has clearly exhausted its historical, economic, social and political legitimacy.

4. The prospects for humanity would be bleak were it not for the historically verified fact that the contradictions that drive capitalism to destruction also set into motion the conditions for its overthrow and the reorganization of society on a new and progressive, i.e., socialist, foundation. The potential for this reorganization is rooted in the objective being of the working class. The class struggle is the means by which the objective possibility of socialist reorganization is realized in practice.

5. Attention must therefore be turned to the development of the class struggle. As the year opens, to what extent has the crisis of capitalism generated a countervailing movement of the working class?

6. An examination of the social struggles of 2023 provides clear evidence of a significant *quantitative* and *qualitative* development of the class struggle. The quantitative is the undoubted growth in the sheer number of workers who have engaged in strikes and related forms of protest against exploitation, declining living standards, attacks on democratic rights and militarism. The qualitative development is the global scale of the class struggle, the tendency of the movement of the working class to sweep over national borders and acquire an international character.

7. This process was anticipated by the International Committee of the Fourth International as far back as 1988. Working through the implications of the developing globalization of the process of production and the emergence of transnational corporations, the opening report delivered at the Thirteenth National Congress of the Workers League (predecessor of the Socialist Equality Party in the United States) on August 30, 1988 stated:

We anticipate that the next stage of proletarian struggles will develop inexorably, beneath the combined pressure of objective economic tendencies and the subjective influence of Marxists, along an internationalist trajectory. The proletariat will tend more and more to define itself in practice as an international class; and the Marxian internationalists, whose policies are the expression of this organic tendency, will cultivate this process and give it conscious form. [*Fourth International*, July-December 1988, p. 39]

8. This perspective has been verified by events. The past year continued the trend of increasing protests and strike action internationally. The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace reported in December that “the tide of anti-government protests that has roiled countries across the globe in recent years continued in 2023,” including new protests in 83 different countries. “Seven countries that had not experienced major protests in the past five years joined the club: Denmark, French Polynesia, Mozambique, Norway, the Republic of Ireland, Suriname, and Sweden. In addition, some demonstrations that began prior to this year persisted, including teachers’ protests in Hungary, anti-ruling party demonstrations in Bangladesh, and displays of opposition to Tunisian President Kais

Saied's July 2021 'self-coup' and his crackdown on the opposition.”

9. Protests over rising prices, accelerated by the US-NATO war against Russia, occurred in many countries, including Pakistan, Portugal, and Slovenia. “Grievances about monetary policy and cash shortages sparked demonstrations in Ghana and Nigeria. In France, strikes and protests against pension reform, which raised the national retirement age from sixty-two to sixty-four, roiled the country early in the year. Demonstrations regarding pension reform also occurred in the Czech Republic and several Indian states.”

10. There were also strikes involving hundreds of thousands of railworkers, dockworkers, teachers and other sections of workers in the UK, which continued from the middle of 2022 through 2023; major strikes in Portugal, Belgium and Germany; a strike of 420,000 public sector workers in Quebec; protests of more than one million in Poland against the far-right Law and Justice Party; and, prior to the Gaza genocide, protests involving hundreds of thousands in Israel against Netanyahu's anti-democratic judicial reforms. As the year came to an end, tens of thousands of workers participated in mass demonstrations against the new far-right president of Argentina, Javier Milei.

11. There was a significant rise last year in strike activity in the United States, both in the number of workers involved and in the different sections of the working class that the struggles encompassed. In 2023, there were 36 major strikes involving 1,000 workers or more, up from 23 in 2022, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. Last year's major strikes involved nearly 500,000 workers, almost four times the 120,600 who struck in 2022. In October 2023, 4.5 million days were lost due to work stoppages, the most of any month in four decades. A third of the major strikes (12) involved nurses and other healthcare workers, including 75,000 Kaiser Permanente workers. Another seven involved teachers and graduate students.

12. The database of work stoppages by the Cornell University School of Industrial and Labor Relations reports that there were 421 strikes of all sizes, involving 508,000 workers. This includes 70 strikes by 100 or more workers lasting more than a week, an increase of 59 percent from the year before. While the total number of strikes of all sizes in 2023 was about the same as in 2022 (421 compared to 424), the number of striking workers more than doubled, from 224,000 to 508,000.

13. The involvement of 11,000 writers and 65,000 actors in the developing strike movement expressed the broadening of the definition of the working class itself, which encompasses growing layers of the population that would have previously considered themselves “middle class.” Revolutionary advances in science, including artificial intelligence (AI), which hold enormous potential for the development of humanity, are being used to increase the exploitation of cultural and technical workers and facilitate a broad restructuring of the economy as a whole.

14. Alongside this global development of the class struggle, a mass anti-war movement against the genocide in Gaza swept the globe in the final three months of 2023 and will continue in the new year. This is already the largest and most sustained anti-war movement since the 2003 protests against the US invasion of Iraq, taking place at a far more advanced stage in the breakdown of world capitalism. In hundreds of cities on every habitable continent, millions of people have taken to the streets to voice their opposition to the brutality of the Israeli government and its imperialist backers. These protests have involved broad cross-sections of society, with youth playing a leading role.

15. The largest demonstrations in the imperialist countries have taken place in London (nearly 1 million on November 11 and 100,000s in multiple other protests); Washington D.C. (over 300,000 on November 4); New York City, Chicago and Los Angeles (10,000s in multiple demonstrations); Sydney and Melbourne (each over 50,000 on November 12); Berlin (over 10,000 on October 28 despite police bans); Paris (over 15,000 on October 22); Amsterdam (over 15,000 on October 15); Toronto

(over 15,000 on October 10); and Tokyo (1,500 on November 20). Millions more have protested against the genocide, in particular throughout the Arab world.

16. The corporate media have done everything possible to cover up both the genocide itself and the global protests. The reality of the war and opposition to it can only be fully grasped through social media, where masses of people have closely followed developments and organized demonstrations. As a result, the oligarchs who control these platforms, in particular Elon Musk (Twitter/X) and Mark Zuckerberg (Facebook, Instagram and Threads), are increasingly resorting to flagrant censorship.

17. It does not detract from the objective significance of the strikes and protests to draw attention to the fundamental problems revealed in the initial stages of the global resurgence of class struggle. There remains an immense gap between the advanced level of the objective crisis and the subjective comprehension of this crisis and its political implications in the consciousness of the working class. This gap finds expression, first and foremost, in the continued domination of the workers' struggles by the reactionary pro-imperialist trade union bureaucracies and their allies in the social democratic, ex-Stalinist and various forms of petty-bourgeois pseudo-left organizations.

18. In country after country, the struggles of workers were strangled by the pro-corporate and nationalist trade union apparatus, and mass protests have been smothered and shut down by various left and pseudo-left organizations that function as part of the political establishment.

19. In France, opposition to President Emanuel Macron's pension cuts was overwhelming, with two-thirds of the population supporting a general strike in order to stop them. The CGT and CFDT union bureaucracies, however, worked with Jean-Luc Mélenchon's Unsubmissive France to demobilize the protests and limit strike action. They promoted the fiction that the attack on pensions could be stopped through negotiations with the Macron government or through the institutions of parliament, while covering up the connection between the assault on workers and the US-NATO war against Russia over Ukraine. In the end, Macron was able to force through the cuts in an extra-parliamentary maneuver, while the unions worked to isolate and suppress the strikes and protests that followed.

20. In Sri Lanka, mass protests over rising prices and IMF-backed reforms forced the resignation of President Gotabaya Rajapaksa in July 2022. The trade union apparatus, backed by groups like the Frontline Socialist Party (FSP), worked to keep opposition within the parliamentary framework and the official opposition parties. Rajapaksa was replaced in a parliamentary vote by Ranil Wickremesinghe, one of the most hated political figures in all of Sri Lanka. Throughout the past year, Wickremesinghe has worked in league with all the major bourgeois parties to force through the same IMF policies supported by Rajapaksa, including, at the end of 2023, new taxes that sharply increased the cost of basic goods and will bring a sharp increase in poverty.

21. In the US, all the major strikes of 2023 were isolated and shut down by the union apparatus, working closely with the Biden administration. The UAW, under the leadership of President Shawn Fain, carried out a phony “stand-up strike” in September and October, which kept the vast majority of the 145,000 Big Three auto workers on the job, and then shut down the strike before workers had even voted on the sell-out contracts that met none of the workers' demands. Fain was heavily promoted by pseudo-left groups, including the Democratic Socialists of America, which has been brought directly into the pro-corporate union apparatus.

22. The actions of the UAW are not unique. Everywhere, the unions are controlled by an upper-middle class stratum with distinct social interests, independent of and hostile to the interests of the workers they claim to represent. The cumulative income of the trade union bureaucracy in the United States, which employs hundreds of thousands of individuals, runs into the tens of billions of dollars. The annual payroll for the staff

employed in the Detroit headquarters of the UAW exceeds \$75 million. High-level executives in the unions affiliated with the AFL-CIO, such as Randi Weingarten, president of the American Federation of Teachers, receive substantial six-figure salaries that are ten to twenty times higher than the wages of the rank-and-file members of the trade unions.

23. In 1940, Trotsky analyzed the degeneration of the trade unions in what he termed “the epoch of imperialist decay.”

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 to and growing together with the state power. This process is equally characteristic of the neutral, the Social-Democratic, the Communist and “anarchist” trade unions. This fact alone shows that the tendency towards “growing together” is intrinsic not in this or that doctrine as such but derives from social conditions common for all unions.

Monopoly capitalism does not rest on competition and free private initiative but on centralized command. The capitalist cliques at the head of mighty trusts, syndicates, banking consortiums, etcetera, view economic life from the very same heights as does state power; and they require at every step the collaboration of the latter. In their turn the trade unions in the most important branches of industry find themselves deprived of the possibility of profiting by the competition between the different enterprises. They have to confront a centralized capitalist adversary, intimately bound up with state power. Hence flows the need of the trade unions – insofar as they remain on reformist positions, ie., on positions of adapting themselves to private property – to adapt themselves to the capitalist state and to contend for its cooperation.

24. The tendency identified by Trotsky *84 years ago* has since assumed such monstrous proportions that the organizations presently described as “trade unions” bear, in practice, no relationship whatsoever to the historic meaning of the term. Even prior to his 1940 essay on “Trade Unions in the Epoch of Imperialist Decay,” Trotsky warned (in 1937) against the tendency to make a fetish of terminology, to the extent of determining policy not on the basis of the objective role of a particular organization, but on its formal title. He wrote:

The character of a workers’ organization such as a trade union is determined by its relation to the distribution of national income. The fact that Green and Company [at that time the leaders of the American Federation of Labor] defend private property in the means of production characterizes them as bourgeois. Should these gentlemen in addition defend the income of the bourgeoisie from attacks on the part of the workers; should they conduct a struggle against strikes, against the raising of wages, against help to the unemployed; then we would have an organization of scabs, and not a trade union. [“Not a Workers and Not a Bourgeois State”]

25. Employing the criteria of Trotsky, the major national trade union organizations and federations function as “scab” organizations, even in the most literal sense of the word. The task of the sections of the International Committee is to assist the working class in the preparation of a full scale insurrection of the rank and file against the trade union bureaucracies, to develop new forms of militant rank and file organization in factories and workplaces to which all decision-making power will be

transferred. This approach is based on the *Transitional Program*, in which Trotsky urged the cadre 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.”

26. The International Committee of the Fourth International has fought to free workers from the constraints of the trade union apparatus through the development of organizations controlled by the workers themselves. When it launched the initiative for the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) in April 2021, the ICFI explained that it would “strive to unify workers in a common worldwide struggle, opposing every effort by capitalist governments and the reactionary proponents of the innumerable forms of national, ethnic and racial chauvinism and identity politics to split up the working class into warring factions.”

Naturally, conditions confronting workers vary from region to region and country to country, and these may affect the choice of tactics. But it is undeniably true, in all countries, that the existing bureaucratized trade unions function as an institutionalized police force, determined to protect the corporate and financial interests of the ruling elites and their governments against growing popular resistance.

27. The trade union bureaucracy will stop at nothing to block the development of socialist influence among the rank and file. But notwithstanding its resources, augmented by the support of the capitalist state and the pseudo-left, it is not invincible. The growing militancy of the working class, within the United States and internationally, is being driven by the objective crisis of capitalism. The task that confronts the party is to intervene in the struggles of the working class and imbue that militancy with a fully worked out socialist perspective that is consciously directed toward the overthrow of capitalism and the establishment of workers’ power on a world scale.

28. Four years ago, the *World Socialist Web Site’s* New Year statement was posted on January 3, 2020 beneath the headline, “The decade of socialist revolution begins.” No doubt this appraisal of the world situation gave the political bankrupts of the middle-class pseudo-left organizations a good laugh. Nothing seems more invincible to them than capitalist rule, above all in its North American fortress. They not only consider the onset of a revolutionary crisis in the 2020s inconceivable; they can hardly imagine a socialist revolution in the remaining 76 years of the twenty-first century. Rejecting Trotsky’s theory of permanent revolution, the political practice of the pseudo-left is based on an unshakeable faith in the permanence of capitalism.

29. But all that has occurred since January 2020 has substantiated the political prognosis of the International Committee. Before the first month of the new decade had ended, COVID-19 was spreading throughout the globe. Almost exactly one year after the statement was posted, an attempt was made by Trump and his mob to overthrow the Constitution and establish a fascistic dictatorship. Years three and four have been dominated by escalating war and mounting social resistance of the working class.

30. There is no reason to believe that the crisis of world capitalism will abate and that its symptoms will recede like a short-term flu. On the contrary, the crisis will intensify and the global resistance of the working class will grow more determined and politically conscious. In the latter process, the role of the International Committee will assume a decisive character.

31. This is not an idle boast. The International Committee of the Fourth International is a party of history. Its theoretical, political and practical work is based on the vast experience of revolutionary struggle in the imperialist epoch, spanning more than a century. It alone represents the continuity of Marxism, as it has been defended and developed by the Trotskyist movement since its founding in 1923, in opposition to Stalinism, social democracy, Pabloite revisionism, bourgeois nationalism, and petty-bourgeois radicalism of every reactionary variety.

32. The International Committee does not minimize either the dangers that confront the working class or the enormous scale of the challenge that confronts the revolutionary vanguard. The ICFI does not yet lead a mass movement. For that to occur requires a development in the mass struggles of the working class. However, the growth of Marxist influence among workers has been foreshadowed in the recent campaign of Will Lehman for the presidency of the United Auto Workers. Campaigning openly as a socialist and advocating the program of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees, Lehman received the votes of almost 5,000 auto workers. The achievement was all the more significant as the bureaucracy failed to inform workers of the election and managed to limit the voting to less than 10 percent of the UAW membership.

33. The foundations for a significant growth of the cadre of the ICFI and the building of new sections have been laid. The *World Socialist Web Site*, in the course of a quarter-century of continuous daily publication, has established a large international readership. Despite relentless censorship, the WSWWS is read by tens of thousands every day, and its influence in the international working class and among student youth is growing steadily.

34. The work of the Trotskyist movement, moreover, does not occur in a political vacuum. The world crisis is radicalizing tens and hundreds of millions. The chasm between the essential interests of masses and the privileges of the ruling class is becoming ever more obvious. Imperialism's normalization of war, genocide, pestilence, and fascism will provide a mighty impulse for the revolutionizing of mass consciousness and, therefore, the normalization of socialism in the political outlook of the working class.

35. We call on all readers of the *World Socialist Web Site* to draw the inescapable conclusion that follows from this perspective. Stop the descent into barbarism! Mobilize the power of the working class against dictatorship, inequality and war! Take up the fight for Trotskyism, the Marxism of the twenty-first century! Join the Socialist Equality Party and build the World Party of Socialist Revolution!



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact