May Day 2024: The working class and the struggle against imperialist war

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The following speech was given by World Socialist Web Site *International Editorial Board chairman David North at the International May Day 2024 Online Rally, held Saturday, May 4.*

The International Committee of the Fourth International opens today's celebration of May Day with a call for action by the working class against the criminal policies of the imperialist governments that are leading humanity to a global catastrophe.

The working class must come to the defense of the embattled people of Gaza and force the end of the genocidal war being waged by the Nazi-like government of Benjamin Netanyahu with the support of imperialism.

The international working class must recognize the inseparable link between the struggle against the Gaza genocide and the necessity for a global movement against the reckless escalation of US imperialism and its NATO accomplices in the war against Russia and preparations for war against Iran and China. The brutal sacrifice of hundreds of thousands of Ukrainian lives for the sake of the geopolitical interests of the imperialist powers must be stopped.

American workers must take action in defense of student youth who are being assaulted by the police storm troopers at universities and colleges throughout the United States. The same responsibility falls upon workers in all countries where anti-genocide protesters are under attack.

The International Committee denounces the slanderous identification of protests against genocide with antisemitism, which has always been and is today the trademark of right-wing capitalist politics and a weapon in its war against socialism.

The International Committee renews its call for the immediate release of Julian Assange from prison. The conspiracy against his democratic rights must be ended.

The International Committee also calls for a global campaign to force the release of Comrade Bogdan Syrotiuk, a socialist opponent of the war in Ukraine and fighter for the unity of the Ukrainian and Russian working class. He was arrested last week by the fascistic Zelensky government.

Ten years ago, the International Committee held its first online celebration of May Day. On that occasion, it offered the following description of the state of world capitalism:

> The political organization of society seems more and more to assume the structure of a prison for the criminally insane. But in this global prison, it is the sane—the great mass of the people—who are behind bars, while the madmen—consisting of capitalist politicians, the professional killers of the state intelligence agencies, corporate gangsters, and the swindlers of high finance—patrol the walls of the penitentiary, shotguns in hand.

The celebration of May Day in 2014 took place only three months after the Maidan coup in Kiev that was instigated by the United States and Germany. Assessing this event at the May Day meeting, the International Committee stated:

> The purpose of this coup was to bring to power a regime that would place Ukraine under the direct control of US and German imperialism. The plotters in Washington and Berlin understood that this coup would lead to a confrontation with Russia. Indeed, far from seeking to avoid a confrontation, both Germany and the United States believe that a clash with Russia is required for the realization of their far-reaching geopolitical interests.
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> For German imperialism, the confrontation with Russia is welcomed as a pretext for the repudiation of the constraints on militarism imposed in the wake of the unspeakable crimes committed during the years of Hitler's Third Reich.

As for the role of the United States, the International Committee warned:

> There is an extraordinary level of recklessness in the conduct of American foreign policy. One or another of the confrontations provoked by Washington could spiral out of control with disastrous consequences for the United States and the entire planet.
>
> But Washington's reckless brinksmanship is, in the final analysis, the manifestation of the extreme crisis of American capitalism. The imperialist strategists in Washington see no other means to counteract the protracted decline in the global economic position of American capitalism other than through the mechanism of war. The fact that China, according to the most recent reports, is poised to overtake the United States as the world's largest economy by the end of 2014 will increase Washington's propensity to use military force to shift the balance of power in its favor.

The events of the past decade have fully substantiated the analysis presented by the International Committee. But the confirmation of our analysis is not cause for self-congratulation. The analysis made 10 years ago was presented as a warning. But that of which we warned has become a reality. What began as a proxy war deliberately provoked by US imperialism and its NATO allies has become, de facto, an open conflict with Russia. The Biden administration has ignored the "red lines" that, once crossed, lead to a rapid escalation toward nuclear war.

A veritable war frenzy grips the leaders of world imperialism. In an interview published this week in *The Economist*, French president Emmanuel Macron again insists that NATO should not rule out the

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deployment of troops in Ukraine, declaring "We have undoubtedly been too hesitant by defining the limits of our action to someone who no longer has any and who is the aggressor."

The political leaders and media pundits refer casually to a nuclear war as an acceptable strategic option. In an article published on April 24, the *New York Times* – reporting on massive NATO military exercises on Russia's borders – speculated with remarkable nonchalance on the consequences of war with Russia:

> If NATO and Russia went to war American and allied troops would initially rush to the Baltic countries Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania – NATO's "Eastern Flank" – to try to block penetration by a Russian force.
>
> How that war would end, and how many people might die, is a different story. Tens of millions were killed in World War II. This time, the stakes have never been higher. Mr. Putin has brought up the potential for nuclear war several times since Russia invaded Ukraine more than two years ago.

Far from attempting to lessen the danger of a catastrophic confrontation with Russia, the Biden administration and NATO are relentlessly escalating the conflict. Just one day after the report on NATO's military exercises, the *New York Times* informed its readers:

> Ukraine forces will be able to use a newly delivered coveted long-range missile system to more effectively target Russian forces in occupied Crimea, senior Pentagon officials said on Thursday.
>
> President Biden's decision in February to send more than 100 of the longer-range systems to Ukraine was a major policy shift.

The recklessness of this "major policy shift" cannot be overstated. The Biden administration would like the public to believe that the Putin government will not hold the US and its NATO allies responsible for attacks by NATO on Russian territory with the weapons that they provided.

But what if Putin, invoking the precedent set by President John F. Kennedy during the Cuban missile crisis in 1962, declares, paraphrasing Kennedy's warning, that attacks on Russian territory by Ukraine with missiles supplied by NATO "will be regarded as an attack" by NATO upon Russia, "requiring a full retaliatory response upon" upon NATO countries?

It is high time for Biden and his NATO colleagues to tell the people that their pursuit of "victory in Ukraine" means risking nuclear war and describe in necessary detail what will happen to their countries and the world if the confrontation with Russia goes nuclear.

In fact, the Biden administration knows very well – based on scientific studies conducted by the US government in the 1950s and 1960s – what the result of thermonuclear war would be. In February 2015, *The Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* published an article titled: "What would happen if an 800-kiloton nuclear warhead detonated above midtown Manhattan?" What follows are several passages from that article:

> The warhead would probably be detonated slightly more than a mile above the city, to maximize the damage created by its blast wave. Within a few tenths of millionths of a second after detonation, the center of the warhead would reach a temperature of roughly 200 million degrees Fahrenheit (about 100 million degrees Celsius), or about four to five times the temperature at the center of the sun.
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> A ball of superheated air would form, initially expanding outward at millions of miles per hour. It would act like a fast-moving piston on the surrounding air, compressing it at the edge of the fireball and creating a shockwave of vast size and power. …
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> The fireball would vaporize the structures directly below it and produce an immense blast wave and high-speed winds, crushing even heavily built concrete structures within a couple miles of ground zero. ...
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> At the Empire State Building, Grand Central Station, the Chrysler Building, and St. Patrick's Cathedral, about one half to three quarters of a mile from ground zero, light from the fireball would melt asphalt in the streets, burn paint off walls, and melt metal surfaces within a half second of the detonation. Roughly one second later, the blast wave and 750-mile-per-hour winds would arrive, flattening buildings and tossing burning cars into the air like leaves in a windstorm. Throughout Midtown, the interiors of vehicles and buildings in line of sight of the fireball would explode in flames. …
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> Two miles from ground zero, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, with all its magnificent historical treasures, would be obliterated. Two and half miles from ground zero, in Lower Manhattan, the East Village, and Stuyvesant Town, the fireball would appear 2,700 times brighter than a desert sun at noon. ...
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> Within tens of minutes, everything within approximately five to seven miles of Midtown Manhattan would be engulfed by a gigantic firestorm. The fire zone would cover a total area of 90 to 152 square miles (230 to 389 square kilometers). The firestorm would rage for three to six hours. ...
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> Those who tried to escape through the streets would have been incinerated by the hurricane-force winds filled with firebrands and flames. ...
>
> The fire would extinguish all life and destroy almost everything else. Tens of miles downwind of the area of immediate destruction, radioactive fallout would begin to arrive within a few hours of the detonation. But that is another story.

This description of the impact of a single nuclear warhead on Manhattan is not speculation. It accurately depicts the horrendous effect on a city of a nuclear blast. And yet, there have been numerous statements by US and European leaders and high-ranking military personnel, parroted in the media, that NATO should not allow itself to be intimidated by the possibility of nuclear war. What this means is that the longstanding assumption that nuclear bombs operate as a deterrent to conflict between powers that possess them is no longer valid.

If statements disavowing the principle of deterrence are taken seriously – and they must be – one cannot avoid the conclusion that decisions that could determine the fate of the planet are being made by maniacs. And yet, this is not an adequate explanation. Nor is it correct. Biden, Sunak, Macron, and Scholz are not insane individuals. But they are leaders of a capitalist system riven by crises for which they cannot find progressive, socially rational, let alone humane solutions.

The predatory character of modern imperialism, which drives it toward war and dictatorship, has long been the subject of Marxist analysis, which even predates the outbreak of the first imperialist world war in 1914. The delegates at the 1910 International Socialist Congress held in Copenhagen adopted a resolution that stated:

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> The wars nowadays are the result of capitalism, especially the external, competitive fight of capitalist states for world markets, and of militarism which is the chief instrument of bourgeois class domination in the domestic affairs and of the economic and political repression of the working class. War will cease completely only when the capitalist economic order is abolished.

The world war foreseen by the socialist movement erupted in August 1914. The historical significance of the bloody conflict was explained by Trotsky in his brilliant 1915 document, *War and the International*:

> The War proclaims the downfall of the national state. Yet at the same time it proclaims the downfall of the capitalist system of economy. By means of the national state, capitalism has revolutionized the whole economic system of the world. It has divided the whole earth among the oligarchies of the great powers, around which were grouped the satellites, the small nations, who lived off the rivalry between the great ones. The future development of world economy on the capitalistic basis means a ceaseless struggle for new and ever new fields of capitalist exploitation, which must be obtained from one and the same source, the earth. The economic rivalry under the banner of militarism is accompanied by robbery and destruction which violate the elementary principles of human economy. World production revolts not only against the confusion produced by national and state divisions but also against the capitalist economic organizations, which has now turned into barbarous disorganization and chaos.

There have been, of course, vast changes in world economy and the balance of forces among capitalist nation-states during the past century. The growth and complexity of the world economy and the scale of the productive forces upon which it is based are greater by several orders of magnitude. But so is, therefore, the scale of the crisis of the imperialist system.

The American ruling class is determined to defend and secure its hegemony against all potential rivals. It arrogantly proclaims that it is defending what it calls "the rules-based order," by which it means: "We make the rules and the world follows our orders." It has denounced those states which are perceived as a threat to the US-dominated world order – principally Russia, Iran, North Korea and, above all, China – as an "axis of upheaval." A threatening and belligerent tone pervades the foreign policy journals that articulate the aims of American imperialism. A typical example of this genre is an article published earlier this month in the journal *Foreign Affairs.* It is titled "No Substitute for Victory: America's Competition With China Must Be Won, Not Managed."

But undermining the drive to global hegemony is the reality of the deterioration of the economic foundations of American capitalism. To put the matter bluntly, it faces the basic problem that has inevitably confronted a degenerate economic system: state bankruptcy.

In 1971, the year President Richard Nixon severed the link between the dollar and gold, the US national debt stood at $398 billion. In 1982, the national debt passed $1.1 trillion. By 2001, the national debt had increased by almost five fold, to $5.8 trillion. In 2008, the year of the Wall Street crash, it rose to $10 trillion. In 2014, the year of our first online celebration of May Day, the national debt reached $17.8 trillion. By this point, the growth of the debt bore a morbid resemblance to an uncontrollable malignant tumor. During the past decade, the national debt has almost doubled and now stands at $33.2 trillion.

The economic situation looks even more parlous when the public debt is measured as a percentage of Gross Domestic Product. In 1971, the public debt was 35 percent of GDP. By 2001 it had risen to 55 percent of GDP. Ten years ago, in 2014, the public debt was as large as the GDP. During the past year, the national debt reached 120 percent of the Gross Domestic Product.

The deterioration of US capitalism in relation to its global competitors is starkly exposed by the balance of trade figures. In 1971, the US recorded a small surplus of $626 million. By 2001, the annual US trade deficit had reached $377 billion. In 2014, the trade deficit reached $509 billion. In 2022, the last year for which there exists an accurate measurement, the trade deficit was calculated at $971 billion, just short of $1 trillion annually.

The United States and its main NATO allies are convinced that the maintenance of their dominance depends, in the final analysis, on the destruction of their would-be competitors through war.

The unfettered access of imperialism to the vast and strategically critical resources of Eurasia cannot be achieved without war. As one of the most astute commentators of the *Financial Times* of Britain, Gideon Rachman, has recently written:

> The "western alliance" is now a reality, a global network of allies that sees itself as engaged in a series of linked regional struggles. Russia is the key adversary in Europe. Iran is the most disruptive power in the Middle East. North Korea is a constant danger in Asia. China's behavior and rhetoric are becoming more aggressive, and it can marshal resources that are not available to Moscow or Teheran.

Thus, the struggle against the relentless escalation of military conflict toward a nuclear catastrophe is the greatest task that confronts the working class. But the success of this struggle, upon which the survival of humanity depends, requires a strategy that is rooted in a correct appraisal of the nature of imperialism. All anti-war programs that are based on the hope that the ruling classes can be pressured and persuaded to accept a nonviolent solution to the contradictions of world capitalism are self-deluding panaceas that block the development of a genuine mass movement against imperialism.

The indifference to mass death and debilitation since the outbreak of the COVID pandemic in January 2020 is an unanswerable refutation of appeals to the conscience of the capitalist class. It subordinated all concerns for human life to the relentless drive for corporate profits and the accumulation of private wealth. It accepted 27 million excess deaths as a necessary consequence of the operation of the capitalist process of production.

The policy joyfully proclaimed by British Prime Minister Boris Johnson as COVID ravaged the country – "Let the bodies pile high" – is, from the perspective of the ruling class, no less appropriate in the pursuit of its global interests.

The genocidal violence unleashed by the Israeli state against the Palestinians has aroused the anger of workers and youth all over the world. But it must be recognized that the genocide in Gaza and the war against Russia are interconnected fronts in the global war unleashed by imperialism. The same interests that dictate the policies of Genocide Joe Biden in the Middle East determine the actions of his administration in Central Europe, as well as in Asia.

History has demonstrated that the deep-rooted contradictions of global capitalism that gave rise to wars also lead to social revolution. The process of mobilizing the resources necessary to wage war compels the ruling elites to escalate their assault on the living conditions and democratic

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rights of the working class. This will be met with ever greater resistance.

But for this resistance to be equal to the historic tasks requires the development of a revolutionary perspective. The impact of the crisis will provide a powerful impulse for vast changes in the political orientation of the working class. But the necessary conversion of objective processes into revolutionary political action requires the building of a Marxist leadership of the working class.

How will this be achieved? In his last great manifesto, written in 1940 shortly after the outbreak of World War II and just three months before his assassination by a Stalinist agent, Trotsky defined the essence of the revolutionary struggle against war:

> Independently of the course of the war, we fulfill our basic task: we explain to the workers the irreconcilability between their interests and the interests of bloodthirsty capitalism; we mobilize the toilers against imperialism; we propagate the unity of the workers in all warring and neutral countries; we call for the fraternization of workers and soldiers within each country, and of soldiers with soldiers on the opposite side of the battle front; we mobilize the women and youth against the war, we carry on constant, persistent, tireless preparation for the revolution…

Only the International Committee conducts the struggle against war on the basis of this socialist perspective. The strategic foundation of this struggle is the international unification of the working class, which can be realized only through irreconcilable opposition to the capitalist state. This strategy determines not only our opposition to the predatory policies of imperialism, but also to the retrograde nationalist policies of the capitalist regimes in Russia and China. The Fourth International, as Trotsky insisted, is the party of irreconcilable revolutionary opposition. We conduct the struggle against imperialist war not in alliance with any capitalist state, but exclusively through the political mobilization of the working class on the basis of an international socialist program.

In a speech that Comrade Bogdan Syrotiuk wrote just three days before his arrest, and which he had planned to deliver at this online rally, he declared:

> On the day of international solidarity of the working class, we, members of the Ukrainian branch of the Young Guard of Bolshevik-Leninists and the entire YGBL, call for the unification of the Ukrainian and Russian proletariat with the proletariat in the imperialist countries to end this war!
>
> We call for the construction of sections of the International Committee of the Fourth International in all former Soviet republics.
>
> And we call on the proletariat of the whole world to unite under the banner of its leader – the International Committee of the Fourth International.
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> Let the words of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels sound louder and stronger: “Proletarians of all countries, unite!”

May his words inspire workers and youth throughout the world to put an end to capitalism and save civilization from destruction by building the Fourth International, the World Party of Socialist Revolution.

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