

## A lecture at Humboldt University in Berlin

# Stop the war against Iran!

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*We are publishing here the text of the lecture delivered by Johannes Stern, editor-in-chief of the German edition of the World Socialist Web Site, on April 30, 2026, at Humboldt University in Berlin at the invitation of the IYSSE.*

I would like to begin with a warning.

No one should allow themselves to be deceived by the so-called ceasefire. No one should believe that the danger has passed. No one should harbor any illusions that the ruling classes in Washington, Berlin, London or Paris have suddenly switched over to diplomacy.

What we are witnessing is not a peaceful resolution. At best, it is a brief pause before the next escalation.

Especially in the last few days, Trump's renewed threats have once again demonstrated how dangerously explosive the situation is. Just yesterday, Trump wrote on Truth Social: "Iran can't get it together. They don't know how to make an anti-nuclear weapons deal. They better get smart soon!" He also posted an AI-generated meme showing himself wearing sunglasses and holding a machine gun in front of the backdrop of a destroyed Iran, captioned with the words: "NO MORE MR. NICE GUY." If the threat to wipe out an entire "civilization" was still "Mr. Nice Guy" in Trump's own self-staging, that reveals the full extent of a genuine lust for annihilation which, in its political and moral depravity, does indeed recall the language and politics of the Nazis.

This is not rhetorical exaggeration. It is a sober description of a ruling class that is once again openly thinking in categories of annihilationist war. Trump is not simply threatening a government. He is threatening an entire people, an entire society, an entire historical civilization. And that shows how quickly the situation can escalate completely.

That these threats are not empty words is shown by their immediate impact alone. Following Trump's latest outburst, the price of Brent crude rose by more than 7 percent within just a few hours and peaked at nearly \$120 per barrel. Trump's war minister Pete Hegseth threatened a months-long continuation and global expansion of the naval blockade against Iran. So the war is not over. Its next phase is already being prepared militarily, economically and politically.

Above all, the situation surrounding the Strait of Hormuz makes the explosive character of this development unmistakably clear. This is not some secondary regional theatre of war. It is a central bottleneck of the world economy. Control over this strait affects oil, gas, trade, supply chains, inflation, and thus, global economic and political stability. That is why every further escalation immediately becomes a world-political event with catastrophic social consequences.

The European powers, too, have long been preparing for a broader intervention. Chancellor Merz has declared that Germany is prepared to participate in an international mission to secure the Strait of Hormuz. Defense Minister Pistorius has already ordered a minesweeper redeployed to the Mediterranean; in addition, a command and support vessel is to be made available in order to prepare Germany's rapid participation in a possible operation. At the same time, it is being stated ever more openly in

Washington that the blockade is directed not only against Iran, but also against China. This means the present ceasefire changes nothing about the fact that the conflict is objectively continuing to escalate.

"To say what is remains the most revolutionary act," the great Marxist and revolutionary Rosa Luxemburg once declared. And that is also the task of this lecture: to state openly what the character of this war is and what must be done to stop it.

## An imperialist war

First, on its character: this is a criminal imperialist war, waged by a criminal ruling class.

It is not about the elimination of a terrorist regime. It is not about democracy. It is not about human rights. It is not about the protection of civilians. The official propaganda serves to justify a war of aggression pursuing geostrategic, economic and power-political aims.

Iran lies in one of the most resource-rich and strategically important regions of the world. It borders the Persian Gulf, Central Asia, the Caucasus and decisive Eurasian energy and transport corridors. Whoever controls, threatens or smashes Iran alters the balance of power throughout the Middle East and beyond. That is what this is about. Not freedom. Not democracy. Not a better future for the population. But domination, resources, control over vital trade routes and markets and the violent reordering of an entire region.

That is why this war is not an accident and not a slip-up. It is the continuation of a decades-long imperialist offensive. The first Gulf War, Afghanistan in 2001, the Iraq War in 2003, NATO's bombardment of Libya, the regime-change war in Syria, the genocide in Gaza and its extension into Lebanon and the West Bank—these are not disconnected episodes. They are different stages of one connected process: the violent imperialist subjugation of a strategically central region and ultimately of the entire world.

We have stressed this connection again and again: the war against Iran is the culmination of a long series of illegal wars, all of them waged under ever-new pretexts.

If one applies the standards formulated at the Nuremberg trials, the matter is clear. There it was declared that the launching of a war of aggression is "the supreme international crime." Measured by that standard, those responsible for this war would have to be tried as the authors of a criminal war of aggression: the chief warmongers, Trump, Hegseth, Rubio and company, their accomplices in Netanyahu's Israeli regime, but also the accomplices in the European capitals, above all in Berlin, who have lined up behind the war and its barbaric methods.

I will go into the role of German imperialism in more detail later, but before that I want to deal with a particular political lie that now shapes

large sections of the public debate—both on the right and among parts of the left.

It is claimed that the war against Iran is essentially, or even exclusively, an Israeli war. The United States, so it is said, has no real independent interest in this confrontation. It has merely been manipulated or drawn in by Netanyahu or by a so-called Israel lobby. Without this influence, so the conclusion goes, Washington would pursue a fundamentally different course in the Middle East.

That is absurd.

Of course there is a powerful Israel lobby in the United States. Of course Israel has pursued a course of confrontation against Iran for decades. Of course Netanyahu plays a central role in the escalation. And naturally the Marxist movement has always fought Zionism uncompromisingly. But it does not follow from this that American imperialism is merely a passive instrument of Israeli policy.

David North, the chairman of the International Editorial Board of the *World Socialist Web Site* and of the Socialist Equality Party in the United States, gave a fundamental answer to precisely this question in his lecture here at Humboldt University about a month ago. I quote from the lecture, published on the *World Socialist Web Site* under the title “American imperialism and the oppression of Iran,” at somewhat greater length because it is politically extraordinarily important:

To explain the war as not only primarily but even solely a product of Zionist influence is profoundly wrong—not only as a historical analysis, but as a political perspective. It leads, whether its proponents intend it or not, to an apology for and even alignment with American imperialism. If the problem is Israeli influence, then the solution is to remove that influence and replace it with a “good” foreign policy that defends genuine “All-American” interests.

Foreign policy becomes a matter of hygiene—of purging a foreign contaminant from an otherwise healthy body politic. This perspective is closely related to the reactionary, and essentially antisemitic, tradition that asserts a fundamental distinction between healthy and productive Christian capitalism and parasitic, usurious, Jewish-dominated finance capital.

In the case of the present war, the Israel-centric narrative detaches the conflict from any coherent historical, geopolitical, socioeconomic and class analysis of its origins, causes, and aims. It essentially abandons imperialism as an analytical framework. It entirely ignores the long and pernicious role of British, German and finally American imperialism in the oppression of Persia-Iran. The issue of oil—the material foundation of the entire conflict—is pushed into the background. It totally disconnects this war from the protracted struggle waged by the United States against Iran since 1979, aimed at reversing the results of the Iranian Revolution. ...

Moreover, the Israel-centric interpretation severs the link between this war and the ongoing preparations of the United States for war against Russia and China.

That is precisely the decisive point.

Israel is not a substitute for imperialism. Israel is an instrument of imperialism. The war against Iran does not arise primarily from some foreign influence over an otherwise peaceful American foreign policy. It arises from the strategic interests of American imperialism itself.

For decades, the United States has fought to secure its domination over the Middle East. It wants to retain control over energy routes, maritime chokepoints, raw materials and geostrategic nodes. It wants to prevent

rivals like China or Russia from gaining further influence in this region. And it wants finally to reverse the consequences of the Iranian Revolution of 1979. Whoever ignores this and reduces everything to Israel abandons imperialism as an analytical framework—and politically ends up either with illusions in a “good” American course or in reactionary antisemitic conspiracy theories.

## A front in a developing Third World War

This brings me to another central point: the war against Iran is only one front in a developing third world war.

It cannot be viewed in isolation. It is directly connected to the NATO offensive against Russia in Ukraine and to the war preparations against China. What we are witnessing is a new imperialist redivision of the world.

And the cause of this lies not in the personalities of individual politicians. It lies in the fundamental contradictions of capitalism itself.

First: the economy is globally organized, but the world remains split into competing nation-states.

Second: production is social, but its outcome is subordinated to the private property and profit of a tiny ruling class.

From these contradictions arise crises, trade wars, rearmament, dictatorship and finally open war. Imperialism is not a freely chosen policy that can simply be tamed or switched off by better rhetoric or more skillful diplomacy. It is the inevitable product of capitalism itself.

The International Committee of the Fourth International has always held firmly to this Marxist assessment. When, after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, liberal commentators, academics and pseudo-left organizations spoke of the “end of history” and proclaimed the end of socialism, the Trotskyist movement insisted that the restoration of capitalism by the Stalinist bureaucracy did not signify the failure of Marxism, but its greatest confirmation.

Trotsky, together with Lenin the central leader and organizer of the October Revolution and later the founder of the Fourth International, had already explained in 1936 in his central work *The Revolution Betrayed* that the Stalinist bureaucracy would either be overthrown by the working class or would itself restore capitalism. That is exactly what happened. The bureaucracy transformed itself into a new possessing class, appropriated social property, and opened the door to imperialism for a new period of war, plunder and reaction.

Based on this understanding, David North was already able to declare on August 30, 1990, on the eve of the first Gulf War:

This international gang-up against Iraq is an expression of the historical essence of the Persian Gulf crisis. It marks the beginning of a new imperialist redivision of the world. The end of the postwar era means the end of the postcolonial era... The deepening crisis confronting all the major imperialist powers compels them to secure control over strategic resources and markets.

And further:

Former colonies, which had achieved a degree of political independence, must be resubjugated. In its brutal assault against Iraq, imperialism is giving notice that it intends to restore the type of unrestrained domination of the backward countries that existed

prior to World War II.

Equally farsighted was the ICFI manifesto of May 1, 1991, “Oppose Imperialist War and Colonialism!” which declared:

With the connivance of the Kremlin, imperialism is asserting with increasing brazenness its right to assume control of the vast territories of the USSR. It is impossible for the imperialists to ignore the economic significance of the Soviet Union’s raw materials, vast productive potential and huge market. Indeed, the fate of the USSR, as well as that of Eastern Europe, is already assuming a prominent place in the calculations and rivalries of the imperialist powers.

And further:

The European and Japanese imperialists do not intend to leave their fate in the hands of the United States. In the aftermath of the war, the Europeans have taken steps to establish their own “rapid deployment force,” independent of the NATO structure in which the United States still plays the leading role.

This assessment has been fully confirmed.

The German government supports the war against Iran politically and strategically. Surely everyone here still has the image of Merz in their mind when, shortly after the outbreak of war, he obsequiously kissed Trump’s ring in the Oval Office. At the same time, Germany is pursuing its own interests. If Merz now occasionally appears somewhat more reserved, or even more critical, or points to economic risks and the lack of a US exit strategy, that is not because German imperialism has suddenly become peaceful. On the contrary. When Berlin voices criticism, it does so above all because it wants to be not merely a spectator but an active shaper and dominator in the imperialist reordering of the Middle East. Germany wants to play a leading role in determining how markets, spheres of influence, transport routes and access to raw materials are redistributed.

This is directly connected with the comprehensive return of German militarism.

The federal government’s new military strategy, presented last week by Defense Minister Pistorius and Bundeswehr Inspector General Carsten Breuer, openly declares that by 2039 the Bundeswehr is to be developed into the “strongest conventional army in Europe.” Russia is defined as the central threat. The state, the economy and society are to be comprehensively oriented toward war-readiness under the framework of so-called “total defense.” Conscription is being reintroduced in order to create the necessary cannon fodder for future wars.

The Defense Ministry itself formulates Germany’s claim to leadership in Europe and globally quite openly. Breuer declared, for example, at the presentation of the strategy: “Military strategy follows the idea that Germany, as Europe’s largest economy, in an increasingly complex and acute threat environment, must and will assume a leadership role in NATO—including militarily. It is a sign of a paradigm shift and underlines our claim to shape developments.”

To implement these new German plans for world power—and that is what this is—enormous financial resources are being provided. Just yesterday, Wednesday, the federal cabinet adopted yet another war and austerity budget. In the core budget, defense spending is to rise to €105.8

billion by 2027; together with special funds and aid to Ukraine, this will amount to €144.9 billion. By 2030, the core budget itself is to grow to €179.9 billion. Including additional expenditures, the total war budget will then stand at over €200 billion. This gigantic militarization, comparable only to German rearmament before the two world wars, is being financed through massive cuts cynically sold as “reforms.” That is the social logic of militarism: billions for war, cuts for workers, youth, the sick and pensioners. At the end of this rearmament orgy, nothing will remain of the social gains the working class historically fought for.

### **Germany is de facto at war with Russia**

The fact that Germany is simultaneously continuing to massively arm Ukraine stands in continuity with the old German drive to the east. Here too, it must be stated openly what is: de facto, Germany is once again at war with Russia—and is thereby reconnecting with its disastrous historical tradition. Already in the 20th century, German imperialism attempted twice to militarily subjugate Russia, committing enormous crimes in the process. Today, the ruling class is making a third attempt. As in both world wars, Ukraine is once again a central battlefield.

During Zelensky’s visit to Berlin, military cooperation, joint armaments projects and investments in long-range strike capabilities were expanded yet again. The issue is “deep strike capabilities” and intensified drone cooperation in order to hit targets deep inside the Russian hinterland. Ukraine thus functions—much like Israel in the Middle East—as a geostrategic bridgehead of European and especially German imperialism in the confrontation with Russia.

And within the existing political system, there is no opposition to this development.

There is hardly any need to say much about the Greens anymore. Ever since Joschka Fischer helped organize the Kosovo war, they have been among the most aggressive advocates of German military interventions. Today they criticize the military strategy not from the left, but from the right. The Greens’ spokesperson on security policy in the Bundestag, Sara Nanni, declared explicitly in an interview with Deutschlandfunk that the direction of the strategy was correct; the only question was whether the mobilisation goes far enough and whether the planned expansion of the army to 460,000 active soldiers and reservists is sufficient. She is calling for the population’s readiness and qualifications to be recorded more systematically, including in IT and drones. That is a demand for an even more comprehensive mobilisation.

And the Left Party, too, stands on the war question not on the side of the working class, but on the side of the capitalist state and German imperialism. It approved the government’s war credits in the Bundesrat, enabled Merz’s rapid election as chancellor, and since then has functioned de facto as an extended arm of the government. On the central questions, its line corresponds essentially to that of the government, except that it pushes for an even faster independence of European and German imperialism from Washington.

No one should allow themselves to be deceived by its rhetoric in a few Sunday speeches during election campaigns. The Left Party is not a left-wing, let alone socialist, party. It is a historically evolved bourgeois party that represents the interests of the state and of affluent middle-class layers.

Its roots lie in the SED, the Stalinist ruling party of East Germany. This party oppressed the working class for decades and in 1989-90 itself organized the restoration of capitalism. In this process, the Stalinist bureaucracy transformed itself into an openly bourgeois force, securing property, privileges and influence for itself and integrating itself into the reunified German state. In so doing, it carried the nationalist and anti-

Marxist character of Stalinism through to its final consequence.

When resistance to the social devastation of Agenda 2010 then intensified, what is now the Left Party was founded not in order to develop this opposition, but to contain and control it. The PDS, successor party to the SED, fused in 2007 with the WASG, a coalition of former SPD and trade union functionaries who feared above all one thing: that the SPD, because of its right-wing policies, might no longer be capable of suppressing the class struggle.

Since then, the Left Party has fully established itself as a component of the capitalist system. Everywhere it has joined governments, it has demonstrated what class character it really has. In Berlin in particular, its participation in government was inseparable from major social attacks: job cuts in the public sector, privatizations, cuts and austerity programs. In this way it proved that it defends the interests of capital just as reliably as the SPD and CDU.

At the same time, it played an important role in the political preparation of the return of German militarism. A decisive step was the participation of its foreign policy spokesman Stefan Liebich in the 2013 strategy paper “New Power – New Responsibility.” This paper openly formulated Germany’s claim to once again play a leading military role internationally, thereby preparing the policy shift that was openly proclaimed at the Munich Security Conference in 2014 and has since been aggressively implemented—including by the Left Party itself.

In recent years it has supported the course toward war ever more openly. It lined up behind the NATO escalation against Russia, behind imperialist operations in the Middle East, behind the genocide in Gaza and most recently also behind the war of aggression against Iran and its barbaric methods.

Shortly after the beginning of the war, Left Party chairman Jan van Aken stated literally:

There is also no doubt at all that we all, I personally as well, am glad that Khamenei is dead, that many of the regime’s henchmen are dead. One should never rejoice over the death of a person and nevertheless I think it is good that they’re gone and may they rot in hell.

That hardly differs from the outbursts of Trump himself. It is the language of regime change, state violence and imperialism. Contrary to what pseudo-left tendencies within and around the party repeatedly claim, there is no progressive answer to war and militarism within the framework of the Left Party. Whoever defends capitalism inevitably ends up at rearmament, loyalty to the state and reaction.

### **A socialist anti-war movement within the working class**

And that brings me to the final, decisive point: the necessary perspective in the struggle against militarism, fascism and war.

First of all, it is important to understand that the same capitalist contradictions that give rise to war also drive the working class into struggle.

The ruling class cannot wage its wars without shifting the costs onto the workers. To the extent that it rearms, it organizes historic attacks on jobs and wages, on education and healthcare; it organizes social cuts, inflation, austerity and privatizations, and it builds dictatorship at home in order to enforce these attacks. But in doing so, it also creates the conditions for growing social resistance.

There is an increasingly strong objective basis for the development of a socialist anti-war movement in the working class. As I said, the same capitalist crisis that drives the ruling class to war drives millions of workers into struggle. Internationally, a growing strike and protest movement is developing.

In Germany, there have been new strikes this month at Lufthansa. At Aldi, among transport workers, and in key auto and supplier plants, resistance is developing against mass layoffs and the sellouts of the trade union bureaucracy. In Belgium, a nationwide strike against government policy is being prepared for May. In Norway, labor struggles are brewing in the energy sector. In Turkey, miners marched on the capital just a few days ago in order to express their protest. In Australia, workers at a major LNG facility voted by an overwhelming majority for strike action. These are only individual examples. But they show that the working class is beginning to move internationally.

And this is only the beginning. Workers are expected to pay for war and militarism—with declining real wages, social cuts, growing insecurity and finally with their lives. That is precisely why the class struggle will continue to develop and radicalize.

It is particularly significant that the class struggle is also developing in the United States—that is, in the center of world imperialism itself. And this is taking place in the year of the 250th anniversary of the American Revolution. That has enormous historical symbolism. In the country of the most powerful imperialist state in the world, an opposition is developing that will take on ever more political and, as throughout the world, inevitably revolutionary forms.

In this context, the initiative of Will Lehman is of particular significance. Lehman, a worker at Mack Trucks and socialist candidate for the office of UAW (United Auto Workers) president, introduced a resolution against the Iran war at a UAW meeting on April 25. It was titled: “No to the imperialist US-Israeli war against Iran—For the independent mobilization of the working class.”

This resolution is extraordinarily important politically because it clearly works out the connection between war abroad and class war at home. It condemns the war as criminal, draws the connection to attacks on democratic and social rights domestically, denounces the gigantic Pentagon budget and the cuts to Medicare, Medicaid, food assistance, housing and education, and warns against the conversion of civilian production into weapons production.

Particularly powerful is the fact that the resolution openly states the central political conclusion: the working class can rely on neither the Democratic Party, nor the Republicans, nor the institutions of the capitalist state in the struggle against war. It must rely on its own independent strength. The resolution states that the war “can only be stopped through the independent mobilization of the working class,” and not through appeals to Congress, not through lobbying the Democrats, and not through trust in any faction of the capitalist establishment.

That is exactly the perspective that matters.

The question is not whether there is an objective basis for a new anti-war movement. There is. It is growing with every price increase, every layoff, every social cut, every new war credit, every new arms shipment and every further escalation.

The question is political leadership.

The resistance of the working class must be made conscious, united internationally, and given a socialist orientation. It must not be subordinated to the trade union bureaucracies, the pseudo-left organizations, or the established parties. It must be built on a revolutionary program.

That is why the International Committee of the Fourth International has formulated four principles for the building of a genuine anti-war movement. We summarized them in our statement “Stop the criminal US-Israeli war against Iran!”, which is also published in our current

book *Where Is America Going?*, and I want to quote them here in conclusion.

First: The fight against war must be based on the working class, the great revolutionary force in society, into whose struggle all progressive elements in the population must be drawn.

Second: The new anti-war movement must be anti-capitalist and socialist, since there can be no serious fight against war except through the struggle to end the dictatorship of finance capital and the economic system that is the fundamental cause of militarism and war.

Third: The new anti-war movement must be completely independent of, and hostile to, all political parties and organisations of the capitalist class.

Fourth: The new anti-war movement must, above all, be international, mobilising the vast power of the working class in a unified global struggle against imperialism.

And I also want to quote the final paragraph of that statement, because it summarizes this perspective very precisely and gets to the heart of the matter:

Workers have nothing to gain and everything to lose in a war that will cost lives, deplete resources, fuel inflation and accelerate the turn to dictatorship. The struggle against war is inseparable from the struggle against the capitalist system that gives rise to it. Imperialism is not a policy choice, but the inevitable outcome of the contradiction between a globally integrated economy and its division into rival nation-states. The ruling class in each of these countries pursues its own interests through the exploitation of the working class at home and the plunder of resources and markets abroad. The struggle to end this war is the struggle to overthrow the profit system itself. The obsolete division of the world into rival nation-states must be ended and replaced with a socialist world federation, in which the globe's productive forces are harnessed for the benefit of all humanity.

That is the decisive conclusion.

And in closing I want to stress once again:

It is a political dead end to simply protest against this or that war while appealing to governments or hoping in the United Nations, the Left Party, the Greens or some "reasonable" wing of the state.

What is necessary is the conscious building of a new revolutionary leadership in the working class.

That means the building of the International Committee of the Fourth International and its sections. And here at the universities, the building of the IYSSE.

For without revolutionary leadership, even the greatest objective resistance remains politically toothless. But with a clear revolutionary leadership, the immense social power of the international working class can be transformed into a conscious political force—against war, against dictatorship, against capitalism.

That is what matters now.

**The war against Iran must be stopped.**

**The genocide in Gaza must be stopped.**

**The NATO offensive against Russia and the war preparations against China must be stopped.**

**German militarism must be stopped. The development toward a third world war must be stopped.**

And that can succeed only through the building of an independent, international socialist movement of the working class.

To paraphrase Rosa Luxemburg once more: the alternative is not reform, or a bit more pressure, or diplomacy. The alternative is: socialism or barbarism.



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