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The end of history?

World Revolution Today

- Features - Ernest Mandel Archive - The Marxist Case for Revolution Today -

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The concept of the three sectors of the world revolution refers to the different strategic-historical tasks with which the revolutionary process is confronted today. But this only represents the first step towards a concretization of the concept of world revolution today. The question of these sectors and their interaction, and hence their growing unity, has also to be raised.

For decades, the apologists of the Stalinist dictatorship used to say that revealing the dark side of the Soviet (the Eastern European, the Chinese) reality discourages the workers in the West from fighting to overthrow capitalism. But history has fully confirmed that it is impossible to conduct a fight for a good cause on the basis of lies, half-truths or the hiding of truth. As it was impossible, in the long run, to hide the revolting aspects of Soviet reality, the mass of the workers in the West and Japan (including those adhering to or voting for Communist Parties) ended by assimilating them. What really discouraged and demoralized them was not the revelation of these facts but the facts themselves—including their decade-long suppression by the Communist Parties and their fellow travellers. One of the biggest subjective obstacles to a new development of revolutionary consciousness among the Western working class is the repulsive mask which Stalinism has put on socialism (communism). By contributing to tearing off that mask, a victorious political revolution in the East greatly advances the cause of socialism the world over. It strengthens the struggle against capitalism and imperialism instead of weakening it.

The idea that such a revolution would at least weaken the USSR (or the “socialist camp”) at state level and thereby change the military relationship of forces in favor of imperialism is likewise unfounded. It is an undeniable fact that the existence of the USSR in spite of the bureaucratic dictatorship and theory of “peaceful coexistence,” objectively contributed to the victory and eventually the consolidation of the Chinese revolution and the downfall of the colonial empires in the subsequent decades. But parallel to that objective reality must be seen the fact that the Soviet bureaucracy tried to obstruct the progress of the Chinese revolution through the strategy it advocated, and played a key role in the post World War II consolidation of capitalism in Western Europe.

Furthermore, it is wrong to disconnect military strength from its economic and social base and from the political nature of governments. A Soviet Union, not to say a “socialist camp,” governed through a pluralistic socialist democracy and a broad consensus of the majority of the toilers, would be much more efficient economically, far more influential in the world, and thereby much stronger militarily than the USSR of today. [1]

The concept of interrelationship between the three sectors of the world revolution is supported by the fact that while victorious revolutions in the Third World countries can weaken imperialism, they cannot overthrow it. In the epoch of nuclear weapons it is obvious that imperialism can only be overthrown inside the metropolis itself. But the main obstacle to that overthrow is not the objective strength of imperialism or the bourgeois state, nor the absence of periodically expressed demonstrations inside the metropolis. The main obstacle is subjective: the level of Western (and Japanese) working class consciousness and the political quality of its leadership. Precisely for that reason, new qualitative advances towards socialism in the USSR and Eastern Europe, and the removal of the bureaucratic dictatorships, would greatly assist in the solution of the problem.

On the other hand, any leap forward towards a victorious proletarian revolution in the West and the most advanced semi-industrialized Third World countries (like Brazil), which will occur under immeasurably more favorable objective and subjective conditions than the Russian October Revolution, will usher in material advantages which will operate as a powerful stimulant for the toilers of all countries, beginning with the Soviet toilers if they have not yet overthrown the bureaucracy's yoke at that moment. To mention just one key aspect of an already victorious proletarian revolution in an economically advanced country: the slogan of the half-work day would play the same role as the slogan of

“Land, Bread, Peace” played in the Russian revolution. And if that were realized no sector of the working class the world over could stay impervious to the reality.

The potential relationship-we say potential because it is obviously not yet a fact today-between the three sectors of world revolution is premised on historical/social unity of the world working class and the strength of the forces operating towards the development of conscious awareness of that unity. We know perfectly well how strong the obstacles are on the road towards that political consciousness. They have been enumerated and analyzed a thousand times. What we want to stress is that they can be overcome by the operation of still stronger objective trends.

The unity of the process of world revolution is related to the growing internationalization of the productive forces and of capital-exemplified in the emergence of the transnational corporation as the typical late capitalist firm predominant in the world market-which leads unavoidably to a growing internationalization of the class struggle. Hard material reality will teach the international working class that retreating toward purely national defensive strategies (exemplified by protectionism) leaves all the advantages to capital and increasingly paralyzes even the defence of a given standard of living and of political rights. The only efficient answer to an internationalization of capital's strength and maneuvers is international coordination, solidarity and organization of the working class.

During the last decades, the objective need for world revolution as a unity of the three world sectors of revolution has received a new and frightening dimension through the growth of the destructive potential of contemporary technological and economic trends, resulting from the survival of capitalism beyond the period of its historical legitimacy. The accumulation of huge arsenals of nuclear and chemical weapons; the extension of nuclear power; the destruction of tropical forests; the pollution of air and water the world over; the destruction of the ozone layer; the desertification of large tracts of Africa; the growing famine in the Third World: all these trends threaten disasters which put a question mark on the physical survival of human-kind. None of these disasters can be stopped or prevented at national or even continental level. They all call for solutions on a worldwide scale. The consciousness about the global nature of humanity's crisis and the need for global solutions, largely overlapping nation-states, has been rapidly growing.

Mikhail Gorbachev and his main advisers and intellectual supporters tend to draw from a correct perception of the globalization of problems and of the absolute necessity to prevent a nuclear war the conclusion that progressively, these global problems will be solved through an increased collaboration between imperialist and “socialist” states. They base themselves on two assumptions in that regard. First they believe that a course towards world revolution exacerbate inter-state relations to the point where the outbreak of a world war would become more likely, if not unavoidable. Second, they tactily presume that the inner contradictions of capitalism will tend to decrease, that the real class struggle will become less explosive, that trends towards increased class collaboration will prevail in the 21st century. Both these assumptions are utterly unrealistic. They are of the same type as the hope to achieve the building of a really socialist society in a single country, of which they represent in a certain sense the logical continuation.

The fact is that while victorious or even unfolding revolutions have undoubtedly led to counter-revolutionary interventions by imperialist powers, they have on several occasions prevented larger wars from occurring. Without the German revolution of 1918-1919, and the revolutionary general strike in that country in 1920, the preparations for a general strike in Britain that same year, a major war of all imperialist powers against Soviet Russia would probably have occurred. Without the victory of the October revolution, the first World War would probably have been prolonged at least for one if not for more years. The revolutionary upsurge in Spain, France and Czechoslovakia in 1936 significantly slowed down the march toward World War II. If it would have been victorious even only in Spain, not to say in France and Czechoslovakia as well, World War II could have been prevented. So to identify revolutions with unavoidable war is just a misreading of the historical record. In fact, a victorious revolution in France and Britain today, not to say in the USA, would be the surest way to make world war impossible.

The real reasoning of the neo-reformist Gorbachev version of “globalization” is based on the classical reformist illusion of a decline in the explosiveness and intensity of the inner contradictions of capitalism and of bourgeois society. We have already dealt with the unrealistic character of that assumption. It errs especially by not taking into account the structural link between the destructive uses of technology and economic resources on the one hand, and competitive attitudes, competitive strife, private property and market economy on the other hand. Bourgeois society can never lead and will never lead towards a world without weapons and without technological innovations applied regardless of their costs to the natural and human ecology. You need socialism to achieve these goals. And you have to achieve these goals if humanity is to survive. The strongest justification for world revolution today is that humankind is literally faced with the long-term dilemma: either a World Socialist Federation or Death.

[1] The Mexican sociologist Pablo Gonzales Casanova has tried to refute the legitimacy of the political revolution in the bureaucratized workers states on the basis of a hierarchy of revolutionary tasks on a world scale. As long as imperialism survives, revolutionists (socialists, anti-imperialists) everywhere in the world should give priority to the fight against that monster over and above all other struggles. (See his “La Penetración metafísica en el Marxismo europeo,” in *isabado*, suplemento de *Unomasuno*, 8/1/1983). Underlying that reasoning is the hypothesis that an ongoing, not to say a victorious, political revolution in a bureaucratized workers' state somehow weakens the fight against imperialism. But that supposition is completely unfounded, for the reason we have advanced.