

# CLASS STRUGGLE VERSUS PACIFISM

## The Lessons of the Gulf War

*As the merciless saturation bombing of Baghdad and Kuwait gave way, on February 24, 1991, to the ground war's frontal onslaught, the hundreds of thousands of Americans who had demonstrated against the Gulf war in January could only mourn in helpless bewilderment. Why, they wondered, had their large and enthusiastic movement been so utterly impotent, so incapable of altering by one iota the imperialists' plan to crush Iraq and dash the hopes of the Arab and Palestinian peoples in the process?*

### The difference between Vietnam and the Gulf

To honest socialists, the answer is clear. Unfortunately, the American left has learned almost nothing from the Vietnam experience, while the American bourgeoisie has managed to learn a great deal.

The Vietnam-era antiwar movement was marginally successful in helping to stop that war, despite its failure to take an openly anti-imperialist stance, but only because of the unique conditions of that war. The effect of

the military draft on the sons of the middle class; the nightmare experience of the soldiers on the front lines; the massive casualties; the constant televised exposure of the horror—all these factors combined with the courage and determination of the Vietnamese people (which was the decisive factor) to produce an unprecedented defeat for the imperialist army.

But the bourgeoisie has now learned from that experience. Never again (if it can possibly help it) will the bourgeoisie risk arousing mass opposition to its plans by

International Workers Order is published by the  
Revolutionary Workers League  
PO Box 10748, Oakland, CA 94618  
Labor Contact (510) 464-3084

Subscription rate: \$12  
USA: \$12 - Outside USA: \$15  
Check: IWO Distribution 100  
© IWO, Workers Power 1991

adopting military tactics that may result in widespread American casualties. The bourgeoisie now avoids provoking the white middle class by conscripting its offspring—why bother, when it can rely on poverty, abysmal schools, and high unemployment to produce an ample supply of “volunteer” soldiers from the ghettos, barrios, and impoverished rural areas? The bourgeoisie has realized that it must impose media censorship so that the masses will not be shaken from their nationalist illusions by live, on-the-spot coverage of the realities of war. In future wars, the antiwar leadership is unlikely to have the luxury of many years of gradual effort in which to build a movement capable of swerving the bourgeois locomotive from its imperialist track.

### Why the leadership failed

The miserable failure of the antiwar movement's opposition to the Gulf war has demonstrated beyond doubt that the experience of the movement against the Vietnam war cannot be repeated by simply using the same tactics. Throughout the fall of 1990 and the winter of 1991, the recycled Vietnam-era antiwar leadership blindly refused to acknowledge the new state of affairs. Frozen in a posture of opposing *war* rather than opposing *imperialism*, they were unable to acknowledge openly that the “sanctions” were a transparent cover for an unprecedentedly massive military buildup. As a result, they missed the opportunity to build the movement throughout the fall by mounting prompt, forthright opposition to the blockade of Iraq. They assumed that they would have at least several months of ground war to mobilize their followers, and they counted on massive allied casualties to inspire the American people to outrage.

Even after the bombing started, the leadership refused to organize any effective action to oppose the war. Repeatedly rejecting calls for strikes and direct labor actions, the leadership limited its efforts to marches, rallies, and appeals to the liberal Democrats in Congress. These actions, though obviously futile without the mobilization of the working class, were the only ones the leadership would consider, since they were guaranteed (precisely because of their futility) to be acceptable to the churches, petty-bourgeois pacifists, and union bureaucrats with whom the leadership allied itself.

In short, through its failure to grapple with the truth about the buildup and with the challenge posed by the imperialists' dramatic shift in tactics, the antiwar leadership doomed the movement to be impotent and short-lived. Already, by mid-March, with the active war effort over and the troops starting to return home, the hundreds of thousands who had come out for marches and rallies only two months earlier had abandoned the dwindling movement. The number of deserters from the antiwar movement is surpassed only by the number of Iraqi civilians slaughtered by the relentless allied bombing. On March 16, only a few hundred could be mustered to gather at a military supply base in Concord, California for “a day to mourn”. Some of the organizations that sponsored the January

marches are reduced to raising funds for the defense of GI war resisters. The facts that the imperialist allied army still occupies much of southern Iraq, and that Bush is still actively attempting to orchestrate the overthrow of Saddam, are almost unnoticed. No serious mobilizations are planned against the imperialist occupation of southern Iraq.

### The bankruptcy of the Left

The anti-war movement was organized to a large extent by the Left, i.e., by people who supposedly are fighting to end the capitalist system. In the San Francisco Bay area, the Left dominated the two main anti-war committees: the Emergency Committee to Stop the US War in the Middle East (“EC”) (dominated by Workers' World Party), and the Mobilization to Bring the Troops Home Now (“Mobilization”), which was a joint effort of the Committee Against A Vietnam War in the Middle East (“CAVME”) (dominated by Socialist Action) and Middle East Peace Action (dominated by the Communist Party).

Unfortunately, the Left did not have any intention of organizing the anti-war movement to fight against imperialism. Before the war, both committees rejected the RTT's proposed resolutions to include in their action program key anti-imperialist demands against the blockade and sanctions. The “socialist” leadership did not even deny that the reason why they refused to consider an anti-imperialist direction for the anti-war movement was that they wanted to include in the movement's leadership representatives of the liberal bourgeoisie—churches and liberal Democrats. They claimed that an anti-imperialist movement would not attract such “dignitaries”.

The Left in the anti-war movement did not see the movement as a means to mobilize the working class and the oppressed against the war, but as a tool to pressure the ruling class (via the liberal Democrats) to be “reasonable” and stop the war. This became clear when the Communist Party and Socialist Action rejected an RTT resolution requesting that the speakers at the January 26 rally speak to the slogans agreed upon nationally by the movement (primarily “Troops Out”), and not advocate a UN-negotiated settlement or sanctions against Iraq. Obviously, this resolution was too much for the centrist and reformist Left, since its adoption would have had the effect of excluding pro-imperialist speakers from the platform. It goes without saying that these same “socialists” did not allow open socialists to speak at the rally.

After the war started, Socialist Action and the Communist Party rejected the RTT's motion to replace the pacifist slogan “No War in the Middle East” with a call for labor actions against the imperialist war machine. When the war ended, it became obvious that imperialism intends to maintain its strangulation of Iraq until it can install a puppet dictatorship in Saddam's place. Thus, it became necessary for all those who claim to oppose imperialism to renew the demand to end the sanctions against Iraq, alongside the continued call for “Troops Out”. But the “socialists” again rejected the RTT's proposal that the movement demand an end to sanctions.

These "socialists" have not learned anything from reality. Today, it is clear that the churches, the union bureaucracy and the Democrats are rallying behind Bush and the victorious, "splendid" U.S. army. But the helpless and demoralized Leftists still hope to win them over. The continuation of the Mobilization's chauvinistic, American-centered approach to anti-war activism is demonstrated by the fact that while they are organizing to collect money for the defense of GI resisters, they rejected a proposal that they collect money for the suffering Iraqi people who have just experienced the genocide and mass murder that an imperialist assault entails.

Thus, in summary, we can say without wavering that the Left leadership played a deplorable role in the anti-war movement and is directly responsible for the demoralization of thousands of anti-war activists. (For further details of the RTT's critique of the Left's role in the anti-war movement, its capitulation to the Democratic party, its program, and its refusal to recognize the need for working class actions against the war, see International Trotskyist No. 2 (Spring 1991) and International Trotskyist Special Bulletin (February 1991).)

### What could the anti-war movement have done?

*What should have been done? What could have been done?* We do not ask these questions in a spirit of petulant Monday-morning quarterbacking. We ask them because they are critically important to the future of the working class, and indeed of all oppressed people everywhere. Without learning from the failure of today, we cannot achieve the success of tomorrow. Without understanding the answers to these questions, we cannot know how to do better when the next imperialist war comes.

And it *will* come—of this there can be no doubt. Flush with the success of Operation Desert Storm, American imperialism is now confident that it has put the shame of Vietnam behind it. The bourgeois government is ready, even eager, to resume its treasured role as policeman of the world, as guarantor of "law and order" in the interests of American imperialism. Bush's talk of a "new world order" means nothing more and nothing less. If there is any doubt of this, a moment's reflection on the progression from Nicaragua to Grenada to Panama to Kuwait will erase it. It is clear that for the last decade, the U.S. military has been rehearsing with steadily increasing assurance for the renaissance of its historic function as proud international protector of imperialism.

How can we effectively oppose this? To begin with, we must direct our tactics and propaganda toward educating the workers and students, not toward appeasing the liberal representatives of the capitalist class. We must draw out, in the consciousness of the masses, the organic connection between imperialist war abroad and capitalist oppression at home. We must demonstrate to the workers that their real interests lie in solidarity with the exploited workers and peasants of the semi-colonial countries, not in chauvinistic support for their imperialist oppressors. We must show the working class how its own experiences prove

that marching in the streets under the slogan "Stop the War" not only will not stop any particular war, but more importantly, cannot possibly do anything whatsoever to stop the next war from starting. We must work to build up labor activism through calls for proletarian methods of struggle to defeat imperialism's war machine.

### Pacifism versus anti-imperialism

All humane people are against war. Even most bourgeois politicians claim to be opposed to war generally, although they always find an excuse why a particular imperialist war is "justified." But the important question is *how* to stop war—not just the war of the moment, but all war.

Pacifists argue that war is unnecessary, and can be prevented through negotiation, compromise, and disarmament. Marxists disagree. We know that war is not simply the product of inadequate negotiation skills or innate aggression. Wars between nations can start for any of several reasons, such as imperialist aggression against a semi-colony to achieve domination of the area, or direct inter-imperialist conflicts to achieve a re-division of the world. But whatever the immediate excuse, wars are always, at bottom, a conflict over material wealth and the right to control it.

In the Marxist view, as long as the contradictions of the international capitalist system persist, wars for imperialist domination of the world's economic resources will continue to be inevitable, despite the best efforts of pacifists to prevent them. In short, war is not an aberration in class society, something that can be reformed out of existence or negotiated away. To rid the world of war, we must rid the world of class conflict. Only when society is organized to produce for human need rather than profit can we eradicate the conditions that create war.

In 1915, Lenin wrote, with reference to the First World War, "[can socialists] remain indifferent to the peace demand that is coming from ever greater masses of the people? By no means. The slogans of the workers' class-conscious vanguard are one thing, while the spontaneous demands of the masses are something quite different. The yearning for peace is one of the most important *symptoms* revealing the beginnings of *disappointment* in the bourgeois lie about a war of 'liberation', the 'defense of the fatherland', and similar falsehoods that the class of capitalists beguiles the mob with. This symptom should attract the closest attention from socialists. All efforts must be bent towards *utilising* the masses' desire for peace. But *how* is it to be utilised? To recognise the peace *slogan* and repeat it . . . would mean *deceiving* the people with illusion that the existing governments, the present-day master classes, are capable—without being 'taught' a lesson (or rather without being eliminated) by a series of revolutions—of granting a peace in any way satisfactory to democracy and the working class. Nothing is more harmful than such deception. . . . No, we must make use of the desire for peace so as to explain to the masses that the benefits they expect from peace cannot be obtained without a series of

revolutions." (Lenin, *The Question of Peace*, Collected Works vol. 21, p. 292 (emphasis original).)

Trotsky, writing in the spring of 1935 as the seeds of the Second World War were beginning to germinate, spoke as follows. "The war danger, which is a life and death question for the people, is the supreme test for all the groupings and tendencies within the working class. 'The struggle for peace,' 'the struggle against war,' 'war on war,' and similar slogans are hollow and fraudulent phrases if unaccompanied by the propaganda and the application of revolutionary methods of struggle. The only way to put an end to war is to overthrow the bourgeoisie. The only way to overthrow the bourgeoisie is by a revolutionary assault. . . . Marxists irreconcilably reject the pacifist slogans of 'disarmament,' 'arbitration,' and 'amity between peoples' (i.e., between capitalist governments), etc., as opium for the popular masses. The combinations between working class organizations and petty-bourgeois pacifists . . . render the best service to imperialism by distracting the attention of the working class from reality with its grave struggles and beguiling them instead with impotent parades." (Trotsky, *Open Letter for the Fourth International*, Writings (1935-36), p. 26.)

Over fifty years later, imperialism still reigns, war is still a fact of life, and petty-bourgeois pacifists are still "beguiling the working class with impotent parades." Decades of generalized pacifist opposition to war have achieved precisely nothing. Obviously, something must change, or humanity will be living with capitalism and its wars forever. What is needed, as Lenin and Trotsky knew well, is not simply opposition to war, but opposition to capitalism and imperialism.

In the concrete situation of a war between imperialism and an exploited semi-colonial country or a degenerated workers' state, opposition to imperialism means favoring the military success of the anti-imperialist side, not favoring an end to the war regardless of who emerges with the advantage. That is why the left wing of the antiwar movement fought to replace the slogan "No War" with the slogan "Defend Iraq!" Taking a side against imperialism in such a war does not mean defending the regime of imperialism's opponent country, or refraining from criticizing that regime. It means taking a consistent position that the interests of workers in the United States are linked with those of their fellow workers and peasants who are oppressed by imperialism, not those of their bosses and exploiters.

### **How to mobilize the workers against the war**

Those among the leaders of the antiwar movement who purport to be "socialists" respond to this argument by crying that "the working class is not ready!" Nonsense! The working class will *never* be ready, if its leadership, which understands the need to overthrow capitalism, does not begin to *prepare* it for its historical tasks.

Serious Marxists are nothing if not realistic. We do not pretend that a socialist revolution can be built overnight in any of the advanced capitalist countries, in today's political and economic context. Nor do we pretend that it

is easy to convince workers of the need for such a revolution. But times of war, and people's instinctive revulsion for war, provide a unique opportunity for socialists to reach out to the most class-conscious, most progressive vanguard elements of the working class.

In our *International Trotskyist Special Bulletin* (February 1991), we wrote: "Labor actions against the imperialist war machine will not be generated overnight by waving a magic wand. There is a need for time for propaganda and preparations. The organizers of the January 26 mobilization claim that dozens of union banners were carried on January 26, with thousands of rank and file union members marching behind them. If the January 26 mobilization had had the guts to call for labor actions, and had allowed speakers to present the hundreds of thousands who wanted to stop the war with such possibilities, they would have heard a massive positive reaction. The best workers would have gone to their unions and workplaces and started to discuss the issue with their co-workers. That would have laid the groundwork for later labor actions."

These arguments must be made in a concrete way, by connecting the attacks against the workers which are intensified by the war to the need to fight back. While the war was going on, the RTT concentrated its main energy on winning workers and people in the anti-war movement to a class struggle perspective against the war. When the mayor of San Francisco, Art Agnos, tried to put a wedge between the workers and the anti-war activists by threatening that the cost of the police response to the anti-war demonstrations would result in layoffs of city workers, the RTT attempted (unsuccessfully) to initiate a resolution to stop it. The resolution proposed that the United Public Employees Union, Local 790 hold a ballot on a one day strike. If others in the various unions that were affected by the war had initiated similar resolutions, it would have been possible to organize working class actions against the war, to show the workers what lies behind hollow patriotism, and to raise the consciousness of the workers in an anti-capitalist direction. (For more on this subject, see the article on the labor movement in this issue.)

We *must* learn to take proper advantage of these opportunities. But as long as the antiwar movement continues to be dominated by petty-bourgeois pacifism, and as long as the so-called socialists in that movement continue to capitulate to the pacifist elements instead of relentlessly pushing the movement in the direction of anti-imperialism and international working class solidarity, we will continue to experience the frustration and futility that characterized the movement against the Gulf war. And, more importantly, we will miss the chance to work towards the day when worldwide socialism—not pacifism—will put an end to war for once and for all.

Today, we must build an anti-imperialist, anti-interventionist movement whose central demands should be:

- **Imperialism out of the Gulf and Central America!**
- **Imperialist troops out of Iraq, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia!**
- **No sanctions against Iraq!**
- **For working class actions against U.S. intervention abroad and capitalist attacks at home!**