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Know your enemy: What is imperialism?

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The word “imperialism” is used a lot by people in the progressive and revolutionary movement. What does it mean?

Some people think imperialism is just a cuss word that radicals use to put down rotten government policies. But it’s more than that.

Imperialism is rooted in a particular economic system, capitalism, and benefits a particular class, which Marxists call the bourgeoisie or ruling class. The bourgeoisie is the super-wealthy class of corporate owners, bankers and big landlords.

Progressives know that the United States acts in an imperialist way. The U.S. government, which represents the ruling class, imposes its will on other countries by economic, political and military means.

But imperialism is not a government policy put forth by one administration or political party. It's the economic system underlying all U.S. government policies, liberal or conservative, Democratic or Republican.

Most people are taught that imperialism simply means a big country bullying a small country. Sometimes that's true, but it's not a complete definition. In the wrong hands, this seemingly common-sense definition can be dangerously misleading.

The U.S. government often accuses other governments of "imperialist" behavior. Washington takes advantage of the common, but incomplete, idea of bigger country vs. smaller country to turn public opinion against socialist and progressive nationalist countries trying to maintain their independence.

For example, when Iraq invaded Kuwait in 1990, George Bush the First called the Iraqi government imperialist. Bush neglected to mention that Iraq was responding to provocations from the U.S.-controlled Kuwaiti monarchy, which was stealing Iraqi oil.

He didn't explain how Kuwait had been arbitrarily carved off from Iraq under British colonial rule, or how the Iraqi people made a revolution in 1958 to be independent of U.S./British domination.

Imperialism = monopoly capitalism

Not every capitalist country is imperialist. In fact, most of the world's people live in poor, underdeveloped capitalist countries like Iraq that are exploited by the imperialist powers of the United States, Canada, Western Europe, Australia and Japan.

Capitalism developed first and reached its most advanced stage in those countries. Imperialism exists by keeping the rest of the world enslaved and dependent on its institutions, including the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund.

V.I. Lenin, the Russian revolutionary leader of the early 20th century, gave a complete, scientific definition of imperialism in his 1916 booklet, ["Imperialism, The Highest Stage of Capitalism."](#)

He wrote: "If it were necessary to give the briefest definition of imperialism, we should have to say that imperialism is the monopoly stage of capitalism."

Using economic statistics and historical facts, Lenin showed how capitalism's early, free-market phase led to the creation of giant industrial and banking monopolies.

Cutthroat competition constantly bankrupted businesses. More successful rivals gobbled these businesses up, until four, three, two or even a single monopoly dominated whole industries.

This process of concentration into monopolies continues today on a much bigger scale. Now giant monopolies absorb other giant monopolies. Some recent examples are AT&T's absorption of Time Warner, Amazon's gobbling up of Whole Foods or Facebook and Google's buyout of multiple big apps and websites. The merger of Walt Disney and Twentieth Century Fox, ExxonMobil, DaimlerChrysler and JP Morgan Chase — the list goes on and on.

Banks dominate

As industrial monopolies grew, so did their hunger for profits. They fought monopolies from the other imperialist powers for the right to dominate poorer countries.

Rather than just exporting goods to these underdeveloped countries, the monopolies

started to export capital — that is, they built factories, hired local labor and began to produce goods at much lower cost and higher profit than in their “home” countries.

Bosses tossed extra crumbs to some workers in the imperialist countries to keep class peace at home, while promoting racism and national chauvinism to stop workers from uniting across borders.

The big banks came to dominate the expansion process. Banks control the flow of money to the monopolies. Their representatives sit on the boards of most big industrial corporations and exert decisive influence over business decisions.

Lenin said these five characteristics define imperialism, or monopoly capitalism:

“1) the concentration of production and capital has developed to such a high stage that it has created monopolies which play a decisive role in economic life;

“2) the merging of bank capital with industrial capital, and the creation, on the basis of this ‘finance capital,’ of a financial oligarchy;

“3) the export of capital as distinguished from the export of commodities acquires exceptional importance;

“4) the formation of international monopolist capitalist combines which share the world among themselves;

“5) the territorial division of the whole world among the biggest capitalist powers is completed.”

Epoch of war and revolution

This territorial division of the world among the imperialists inevitably leads to war.

As the fortunes of each imperialist country rise or fall, those with the most power

want to expand the proportion of the globe they control. Those whose grip is weakening hold on for dear life.

Rather than eliminating competition, monopoly capitalism raises it to a higher and deadlier level.

Sometimes the imperialists fight each other directly. That was the case during World War I, when Lenin wrote his booklet on imperialism, and World War II.

At other times, they fight for domination through local proxies, like the U.S./German rivalry that tore apart Yugoslavia. But both imperialist powers united to destroy the Milosevic regime when it resisted their plans.

Finally, there are the wars of conquest fought to control strategic countries like Afghanistan, or against governments and popular movements that resist imperialist domination, like Iraq, Libya or Syria.

Sanctions are another form of war and often a prelude to military intervention, like those imposed by the U.S. today against Iran, Venezuela, Cuba, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, Russia and Zimbabwe, to name a few.

But just as inevitably, the concentration of wealth and political power into fewer hands leads to rebellions and revolutions. Imperialism contains within itself the seeds of its own demise.

Social production vs. private ownership

By expanding capitalist production all over the globe, imperialism has created a huge working class with nothing to lose and everything to gain by fighting for power.

Imperialism has made production profoundly social. That means thousands of

workers, often from dozens of countries, are involved in the production, distribution and exchange of a single product or service.

Yet the fruits of this collective labor are robbed from the workers. The bosses, who own the factories, stores, etc., take it for themselves in the form of profit. Wages paid to the workers often don't cover the basic necessities of life. Others just get by, while millions go jobless.

But as Lenin pointed out, the monopolies are ripe for the workers to take over and run themselves — to create social ownership in harmony with social production.

Ultimately, that's how imperialism can be defeated: by targeting the diseased economic system, not just its political symptoms.

It's not enough to change a government policy or the party in power. The whole system must be overturned and replaced by one that puts people's needs first.

