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# Low-wage workers of the world, unite!

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War and Lenin in the 21st century, part 5



Labor and community action at Port of Tacoma, Washington, to block a U.S. military shipment to Israel, November 2023.

Lenin's "Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism" was written and published during World War I to show that the war was imperialist on all sides. Lenin also exposed the Second International's betrayal. The leading socialist parties abandoned international working-class solidarity to give support to their own governments in the war.

Lenin denounced the opportunism and social chauvinism of Karl Kautsky and the

leaders of the Social Democratic parties. The betrayal, however, was not simply blamed on flawed leaders. Behind these leaders stood material interests that are based on larger economic forces.

Colonialism and imperialism had oppressed, colonized, and enslaved peoples around the globe. They had been robbed of their land, resources, and culture.

In "[Imperialism](#)," Lenin finds the root of the betrayal in imperialist superprofits.

Lenin writes that "capitalism has now singled out a handful of exceptionally rich and powerful states which plunder the whole world ... Obviously, out of such enormous superprofits (since they are obtained over and above the profits which capitalists squeeze out of the workers of their 'own' country), it is possible to bribe the labor leaders and the upper stratum of the labor aristocracy. And that is just what the capitalists of the 'advanced' countries are doing: they are bribing them in a thousand different ways, direct and indirect, overt and covert."

## **The class struggle**

The exploitative relationship between imperialist monopoly capitalism and the working class and oppressed peoples constantly shifts as conditions evolve. In its drive for profits, monopoly capitalism is always seeking new ways to exploit workers as the economic and political landscape transforms.

Even as workers organize and fight to improve working conditions and increase wages, the system undermines those gains for the benefit of the capitalist class.

In the current era, advances in science and technology have dramatically increased the productive capacity of workers in industry and agriculture — especially in robotics, computer-aided design/manufacturing, energy production, health care, transportation and logistics, automated warehouses, self-driving trucks, and AI. These developments have allowed monopoly corporations to reshape global

production networks and supply chains.

They have incorporated hundreds of millions of low-wage workers worldwide into industry and services. This globalization has broken down many borders, internationalizing jobs and wages. By accessing labor in the Global South, monopolies are driving down wages and benefits of workers in the imperialist industrialized countries. The scientific-technological revolution has thus enabled a new phase of exploitation and oppression. This relentless pursuit of profit through global labor arbitrage impacts the working class everywhere.

### **Globalization drives migration**

Global labor arbitrage means moving jobs to countries with low wages and where business costs (such as environmental regulations) are inexpensive. At the same time, impoverished workers migrate to countries with higher-paying jobs.

In the past, the imperialist powers were limited in their ability to exploit workers by geographical constraints. However, advances in science and technology have removed these barriers. Multinational corporations can now easily tap into labor forces across the entire planet. Workers anywhere can potentially be subjected to super-exploitation in the drive for ever greater profits.

The scientific-technological revolution has enabled a new form of boundary-less capitalist exploitation. The tools of high-tech globalization have allowed exploitation by monopoly capitalists to become truly global in reach. Geography and borders no longer restrict their ability to maximize profits through labor exploitation worldwide.

When Lenin was writing in 1916, imperialist export of capital, colonialization, and its superprofits were used to cultivate an opportunist section of labor leaders and politicians in the imperialist countries. While that has continued, it is being scaled back.

With the global exploitation of labor, the export of capital and the drive for imperialist superprofits are going in another direction. Today, it is used to lower living standards for all workers in imperialist countries, not just the most oppressed. The top tiers of workers and parts of the middle class are being down-graded. Job security and social benefits are being dismantled. Rather than pacifying a privileged layer of workers, imperialist monopoly capital now uniformly undercuts wages, benefits, and rights across the working class in the imperialist countries. It aims to maximize profits globally.

The continued global integration of production and the rapid expansion of the international working class has made cross-border solidarity an urgent necessity. As more aspects of work become globally interconnected, workers around the world are facing common challenges of exploitation and oppression under imperialist capitalism.

The only way to fight back is through unified resistance across all borders. The growing ranks of international labor from all corners of the world have shared class interests. Workers need to build solidarity networks across borders to confront the forces of monopoly capital.

### **In the U.S.**

Over the last four decades, most of the working class in the United States has experienced a continuous erosion of wages and benefits. Throughout these 40 years, workers struggled unsuccessfully against an unrelenting and oppressive union-busting campaign. Union membership has been severely eroded. The United States now has the lowest union membership rate (about 10% of workers) of any of the imperialist industrialized countries.

Wages have stagnated or declined in the U.S. since 1973. Real (inflation-adjusted) wages have fallen by 4-10% since then. According to the U.S. Census Bureau,

women still make 20% lower wages. The U.S. poverty rate rose to 12.4% in 2022 from 7.8% in 2021, the largest one-year jump on record, the Census Bureau reported Sept. 12. At the same time, poverty among children has more than doubled.

The summer of 2023 has been marked by a wave of strikes across the United States. Workers in a variety of industries, including health care, education, manufacturing, and transportation, have walked off the job to demand better pay, working conditions, and benefits. Rising inflation has seriously cut wages.

In order to win, these strikes require unity across the working class through solidarity with other labor and community organizations. That means fighting for equality for Black, Latinx, Asian, and Native peoples; fighting for equal pay for equal work for women workers; defending equality for lesbian, gay, bi, trans, and queer workers; equality for immigrant and undocumented workers.

Labor must build these alliances and show support beyond just their membership. Isolated strikes will struggle. But strikes backed by a united working-class front can win. Solidarity is key.

To borrow a phrase:

Low-wage workers of the world, unite!

## **War and Lenin in the 21st century**

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