

Expanding Empire Chapter 12: The simple but difficult solution

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The war crimes of the U.S. have been thoroughly catalogued elsewhere. The horrors of napalm, “Honest John” and Lazy Dog fragmentation bombs and missiles, child-killing and all the rest are reason enough to oppose the U.S. war in Vietnam. But imperialists have been slaughtering the colonial peoples for generations. The U.S. has only taken the process to a more “scientific” and efficient extreme, in a super-Nazi sort of way.

The big thing today is that the opposition is growing so fast and the crimes are being exposed. What gives the opposition hope, as well as strength, is the knowledge that a whole world is going to rise in rebellion. The world “can no longer endure the restraints of class stratification,” as Sam Marcy put it in “The Global Class War.” And the drive of big business to expand has a limit—a limit even now beginning to be defined, not by the strict rules of economics, but by the will of the masses to resist.

What must be wedded to the will of the masses is the understanding of the nature of the enemy. The enemy is imperialism. We have given a rough description of one of imperialism’s most distinctive features—its irreversible tendency to “expand or die.” The insatiable giant, already overstuffed, gorged with blood and profits, is bound to wade ever more deeply among the dead that it continues to slaughter, until it is forcibly stopped.

Where every previous imperialism in history also had to “expand or die,” each in conformity to its own specific economic and social laws, the modern, export-of-capital type of imperialism is far more dynamic, far more ruthless, and far more

compelled to take its murderous—and suicidal—path than the rest.

By the same token, since modern imperialism employs so many more millions of people in its “peaceful” exploitation, as well as in its interminable wars; since it calls into being the literate, the skilled and semi-skilled, the intellectual and artistic legions that are indispensable for its sway, it must also employ deceit on a hitherto unknown scale to keep these legions in line.

It must cover up. It must even find funny names for its most murderous weapons. It must make hypocrisy and cynicism fashionable and even admirable. Where the old capitalism made honor, love and friendship into saleable commodities, the new imperialism must turn them into apologetic jokes.

Modern youth has already begun to fight against all this. But the fight, including especially the fight against the war, must become a struggle against the imperialist-capitalist system itself. It cannot be restricted merely to the excesses of the system.

Imperialism is not a question of a policy that can be chosen at will by one group of corporations and dropped by another. And this applies with exactly the same force to the political instrument of those corporations: the government.

Imperialism is a system. It has a built-in tendency to expand—and expand abroad—because it is based on the private ownership of the now social means of production.

Since it produces for private profit instead of for the general good, it cannot employ all its own people, nor even feed them, nor can it rise beyond a certain level of production without attempting to conquer other countries.

Imperialism must be replaced with a different system—a system in which society not only operates the productive forces, as it does now, but owns and manages them in its own interest. This simple, but of course extremely difficult transformation, when

it is accomplished in all countries, will make war superfluous, and as ridiculous in fact as it now is in theory. The ideal that has been sought for centuries and even millenniums will be realized through the logical means of eliminating the material cause of war.

For every war in history—even the dynastic wars and the so-called “religious wars” and the wars over national prestige or monarchical vanity, including such semi-mythical events as the seizure of Helen of Troy—every war was over material, economic interests. And except for the occasional armed collisions between barbaric tribes desperate for hunting and living space—which are also economic causes—all these thousands of wars were in the interest of one or another exploiting class.

Even the revolutions, before the Russian Revolution, were the overthrow of one exploiting class by another—the feudal monarchy by the bourgeoisie; before that, the overthrow of the more purely feudal power by the semi-bourgeois monarchy; the overthrow of the ancient Roman monarchy by a new coalition of landlords and tradesmen to found the Republic and so on.

Up to very recently, the working masses of society never had the material possibility of removing their exploiters and finishing with them for good. But modern machinery and modern technology have now provided such a possibility.

They have made it possible for the masses to dispense with an owning and exploiting class altogether, and to produce a full and abundant life for themselves in the bargain.

To many of today's anti-war fighters, this seems somehow irrelevant. But these middle-class idealists are wrong, even from a middle-class point of view.

Many sensitive people are deeply conscious of the alienation caused by the machine age. But the great masses themselves have been forced to become actual

appendages to the machine, except when they are made superfluous and left to rot outside the field of production altogether. They are the real alienated ones, although their needs are expressed in terms of life-and-death and unemployment, rather than neuroses, on the whole. Changing their lot will almost automatically heal the middle-class malaise that now plagues the United States (because it will remove absurd inequalities, raise the intellectual level of all, eliminate guilt-consciousness to a very great degree, etc., etc.) and end the war-making system.

Society can be changed so that a constant material expansion can be accomplished without exploitation and profit making, without conquest of other countries, without war.

Under such a system, the machine will become an appendage of human beings, rather than the reverse. It will become an extension of people's faculties and a liberation from a large part of the physical drudgery of the past. So that a new renaissance can take place in the human mind, this time encompassing millions and billions of people, instead of a handful of "geniuses."

This is the perspective, not of the distant future, but of what is already materially possible. The schedule depends on events, rather than on time in the abstract. The methods of fighting against the present war, the tactics, the terminology, are of course something else.

The Vietnam War, and any similar U.S. war, can be opposed and should be opposed on the specific issues of the war itself and on the basis of its effect upon the masses at home, as well as abroad. But the war-making system, the imperialist system, cannot be eliminated without the overthrow of the power of the big business interests that run the United States. That is, only the proletarian revolution can eliminate war.

No serious opponent of the present war can rest until that revolution is successful.

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