



## Chapter 4 - Strategy and tactics in the semi-colonies

Sun, 04/06/1989 - 22:00

Since 1945 capitalism has completed its task of destroying or totally subordinating the remnants of previous modes of production. But despite this penetration of every corner of the former colonial world we have not witnessed the widespread development of strong national bourgeoisies. While imperialism has nurtured, even created, a semi-colonial bourgeoisie within formally independent states, it has not let slip its domination of the economic or political life of these states.

In the early part of the imperialist epoch the young and embryonic national bourgeoisies in the colonial countries experienced national oppression. Colonial, and later imperialist, powers pressed their large scale capital onto the oppressed nations and thereby destroyed many small local independent enterprises. In turn this deprived the local bourgeoisie of any serious political influence in the colonial administration.

Under these circumstances the colonial bourgeoisie was driven to play an important role in fighting imperialist rule. Using deceitful phrases and false promises, movements such as the Indian National Congress and the Kuomintang could mobilise a mass following of all plebeian classes in their service.

Yet these "national revolutionary movements", as the Comintern described them, were under the leadership of a class (the bourgeoisie) which was to show itself again and again unwilling to pursue a consistent struggle against imperialism. The bourgeoisie's fear of the revolutionary potential of the working class and of a land hungry peasantry made it a vacillating and treacherous leadership of anti-imperialist struggles. It showed itself willing at the first opportunity to compromise with, and sell out to, the imperialists, often drowning its "own" revolutionary movement in blood (Shanghai 1927).

After the Second World War, under the supervision of US imperialism, the old colonial empires were dismantled and gradually replaced by the semi-colonial system that prevails today. Throughout their empires the old weakened imperialist powers--Britain, France, Holland and Portugal--were forced to grant political independence to their colonies. The national bourgeoisie was unable, except episodically, to go beyond the strategy of peaceful pressure on the imperialists to withdraw.

In colony after colony, the petit bourgeois nationalists, often in alliance with the Stalinists, led the struggle for independence. Wherever the imperialists held on until the last moment (Algeria, Malaya, Vietnam, Aden, Mozambique, Angola, Zimbabwe) the petit bourgeois nationalists resorted to revolutionary nationalist methods of struggle.

Despite promises to the masses to alleviate the crushing burden of imperialist rule, once having achieved state power these same "revolutionaries" used it to repress the proletariat and the poor peasants, to shore up and develop capitalism and protect the imperialists' interests. Both bourgeois and petit bourgeois nationalists showed themselves incapable of fulfilling even the most basic bourgeois democratic tasks of the revolution against the imperialists. National independence remained a fiction as long as the countries' economies were dominated by imperialism.

Some of the new ruling classes--in Taiwan, South Korea, the Philippines, Iran, Kenya--relied on open collaboration with the imperialist powers to develop their industries and agriculture. These states developed economies tied totally to the world imperialist division of labour. They offered police state controlled labour movements and furnished a labour force that could be super-exploited as an encouragement to imperialist investment.

At the other extreme some semi-colonies experimented with nationally isolated attempts at development, minimising or severely reducing their links with imperialism, often through relying on economic links with the Soviet bloc. These regimes often took on a left Bonapartist character, balancing between imperialism on the one hand, and tightly controlled mobilisations of the masses on the other.

Consciously modelling their economic development on the experience of Stalin's industrialisation policy, they pursued major "state capitalist" projects and established large state bureaucracies as an important social prop. Through these methods such regimes sought a road to "independent capitalist development", in fact a road to join the select club of imperialist nations.

This strategy proved an economic disaster in country after country. Stagnation and imperialist pressure forced a collapse back into the arms of imperialism. Peron's Argentina, Nasser's Egypt, Bandaranaike's Sri Lanka, Nyerere's Tanzania are just a few examples of where this strategy failed. The crises in Burma, Algeria and Angola in the late 1980s show that other state capitalist regimes are following suit. Autarchy is a utopia and it is always the masses who are obliged to foot the bill for its failure.

Whichever strategy the semi-colonial bourgeoisies pursued, and some, like India tried a combination of both, the result was the same--chronically dependent economies, enormous poverty for the masses, stagnation and growing indebtedness to imperialism. Only in the exceptional circumstances of South Africa did it prove possible for a semi-colonial power to break out of this cycle and join the imperialists as a junior partner.

The bourgeois nationalists were incapable of achieving real independence and they were equally incapable of maintaining political democracy. While the imperialists hypocritically sang the virtues of "parliamentary democracy", even bequeathing constitutions modelled on their Westminster or Washington versions, they happily connived at its overthrow immediately democratically elected governments threatened their economic interests.

Only a minority of the most developed semi-colonies have been able to sustain parliamentary regimes for any significant period of time. And even here, as with the case of Chile in 1973, imperialism has directly intervened to overthrow democratic regimes that it felt threatened its interests.

Confronted with the demands of the peasantry for a comprehensive solution to land hunger, bourgeois nationalists have been unwilling to take any radical measures which could threaten their alliance with the semi-feudal landlords or big capitalist farmers.

Where they have been forced to introduce major land reforms--Bolivia, Peru, the Punjab in India--it has always been to avoid a revolutionary solution to the land question. A reformist solution imposed from above, while temporarily assuaging the land hunger of the peasants, merely delivered a new class of small peasants, starved of credit and machinery, into the hands of the usurers, banks and rich farmers.

In order to carry out and maintain its exploitation, part of the strategy of imperialism has always been to divide and rule. In many cases such divisions were introduced by imperialist powers who deliberately favoured a particular minority of the population in its colonial apparatus, as in Sri Lanka or Cyprus.

In other cases, where remnants of pre-capitalist and religious divisions were still in existence, these were seized upon, cultivated and preserved in imperialism's interests. For example, the hereditary division of labour upon which the Indian caste system rests was institutionalised by British colonialism and it helped to preserve a measure of rural docility.

Indigenous landlordism and capitalism were able to exploit this system to their advantage. Today, the systematic discrimination and institutionalised inequalities of the caste system remain strong despite the development of modern capitalism in India. Here too the "independent" bourgeoisie has been unable to unify its nation on the basis of equality of rights.

Despite the claims of the "third worldists" and dependency theorists that extensive capitalist development in the imperialised world was not possible, imperialist capital has achieved just this and in the process has created millions of new wage labourers.

In the last two decades this semi-colonial working class has entered the road of independent class action only to run up against the limits of its own syndicalist, Stalinist and nationalist leaderships. There is a crisis of leadership within the semi-colonial working class. In most countries even the nucleus of a revolutionary communist party is absent. This has allowed petit bourgeois political formations of all kinds to come to the head of anti-imperialist mass action and inevitably betray it.

In the struggle against exploitation--in the factories, mines and plantations of native as well as imperialist capital--the world working class must use the full range of transitional demands and tactics. In addition it falls to the working class to lead a revolutionary struggle for the completion of the remaining bourgeois democratic tasks.

National unity and independence, agrarian revolution and political democracy are the burning demands of millions of workers, peasants and semi-proletarians. The working class must approach the struggle for their complete fulfilment from the standpoint of permanent revolution.

The national, agrarian and democratic questions are themselves historically bourgeois questions. But in the imperialist epoch it is no longer possible to fully resolve these questions under capitalism. The military, political and economic dependence of the semi-colonies, their backwardness and economic unevenness are fundamental to the imperialist world order.

There can be no separate stage of the revolution in which capitalist property relations are maintained while the bourgeois democratic tasks are fully achieved. The whole history of the anti-imperialist struggle after 1945 confirms this basic tenet of Trotsky's theory of permanent revolution. The "victories" of anti-imperialist mass movements confirm it even more graphically than the numerous defeats.

By refusing to expropriate the companies and banks of the national as well as the imperialist bourgeoisie, by refusing to satisfy the demands of the poor and landless peasantry, the leaders of the revolutions in Nicaragua, Zimbabwe and Iran set the seal on their continued subservience to imperialism.

Even where, as in Burma, Egypt and Libya, military Bonapartist regimes were forced to nationalise the economy and create a state owned infrastructure, they have failed to break the economic chains binding the country to imperialism. Stagnation born of autarchy, debt, the re-emergence of a national bourgeoisie outside the state sector: this has been the pattern for the countries where Bonapartism entrenched itself.

Only where capitalism has been completely uprooted (China, Cuba, Vietnam, Kampuchea) have semi-colonial revolutions had the possibility to break the grip of the imperialist world economy over their countries. But even here the Stalinists have aborted the permanent revolution and have not successfully overcome the legacy of imperialist domination. In many of these states the oppression of national minorities has intensified, e.g. the Chinese in Vietnam or the Tibetans in China.

The combination of bureaucratic planning and Stalinism's "national road to socialism" has strangled the potential of the post-capitalist property relations, leaving the former semi-colonies as the weakest link in the chain of degenerate(d) workers' states. They remain heavily dependent on the willingness of the Soviet bureaucracy to underwrite their economies.

The growing reluctance of the Moscow bureaucracy to do this will increase internal restorationist pressures, strengthening the hand of those sections of the Stalinists who wish to open up the economies to imperialist penetration under the guise of "market socialism". In these countries only a political revolution which destroys the Stalinist bureaucracy and establishes genuine soviet democracy can offer a way forward for the workers and poor peasants and enable them to finally settle accounts with imperialism.

The expropriation of the major industries, banks and finance houses, the imposition of a state monopoly of foreign trade and the internationalisation of the revolution must be the first steps of every victorious semi-colonial revolution.

But only the proletariat, mobilised in workers' councils and a workers' militia can carry out these tasks in a wholly progressive manner. In the process the working class must draw to itself the massive peasant and semi-proletarian strata around the complete fulfilment of the national, agrarian and democratic questions.

### **Agrarian revolution in the semi-colonies**

Today in the semi-colonies, taken as a whole, and despite the growth of the industrial proletariat, the peasantry remains an absolute majority of the population. The proletariat must harness the grievances and aspirations of the poor and landless peasants if its revolution is to be a truly global one.

Throughout the imperialist epoch the agrarian question has proved to be one of the major, and most explosive, uncompleted tasks of the bourgeois democratic revolution. The fight of the peasantry for land has been the locomotive of the fight for national independence against imperialism. So it was in China in the 1930s and 1940s and in Indo-China in the 1950s and 1960s. In addition the agrarian revolution provided a mighty social force for political democracy against autocracy in Russia in 1917.

Since the Second World War it has been a key detonator of uprisings against hated ruling oligarchies in the semi-colonies (e.g. Nicaragua 1979, Philippines 1985). Wherever the struggle of the peasantry for land has been deliberately separated from the fight for national independence (Ireland 1880-1921) or political democracy (Spain 1931-39) none of the bourgeois democratic tasks at hand were completed.

In the imperialist epoch the bourgeoisie, both imperialist and semi-colonial, abandoned any pretence of revolutionary struggle against pre-capitalist landlordism.

The imperialists attempted to curb the proletariat and the peasantry by alliances with the feudal landowners. In this way imperialism preserved the backwardness of the semi-colonies and subjected agriculture to its rule through trade or colonial plantation.

With the dissolution of the colonial empires and the establishment of US world hegemony the fight against the vestiges of semi-feudalism has been joined in the colonies and semi-colonies by the struggle against the effects of finance capital's deeper penetration of agriculture. Taking as its starting point the creation of a profitable world market for agricultural goods, finance capital spurred on the concentration and centralisation of land in the semi-colonies.

It placed huge territories under cultivation for cash crops aimed at the export market. On the one hand, finance capital helped buy out the semi-feudal landlords or transformed them into agrarian capitalists, while on the other, they bullied, defrauded and expelled millions of peasants from their land.

As a result countries which were self-sufficient in food for the internal market have been transformed into importers of the basic necessities of life while huge profits accrue to the landed oligarchies and the multinational corporations. The main dynamic of the agrarian revolution today lies in the contradiction between the mass of peasants squeezed into smaller and smaller plots of infertile land on the one side and huge capitalist plantation owners producing for export on the other.

In the post-war decades agrarian reform from above has attempted to avert a revolutionary solution to the land question from below by creating a stable strata of conservative middle peasants.

While meeting with partial success in certain countries for limited periods of time, these programmes did not, and cannot, solve the fundamental dilemma facing the semi-colonial bourgeoisie; namely, that their enslavement to imperialism ensures that they are unable either to turn the surplus, land hungry peasantry into industrial or service workers in the urban centres, or to provide sufficient aid to the smallholders to prevent their descent into poverty.

The surviving semi-feudal landlords collude with finance capital to subordinate the peasant economy to the needs of large scale agrarian capitalism. This dictates that the peasantry's solution to land hunger, high rents, rural debt and primitive technique can only be reached through an alliance with the working class in the revolutionary overthrow of capitalism and imperialism--permanent revolution.

Naturally, not all the rural classes will be firm allies along this road. The peasantry is not a modern class with a homogeneous relationship to the means of production. The further it has evolved from communal land ownership and working, the more it separates into rich capitalist farmers at one pole and rural proletarians at the other.

Where the peasantry has been able to establish a stable hold on small scale private property in the countryside it has always been capable of being mobilised as the mass base of support for reactionary Bonapartist regimes. When faced with a challenge from the proletariat these regimes demagogically portray the working class as the enemy of the small peasant.

Along the path of revolution the urban working class will look first to the growing agricultural proletariat who labour on the plantations, farms, ranches and the processing mills full time. Small in number but with great social power, these workers have shown themselves time and again to be the first to put down solid organisations (unions, committees) to fight for higher pay and better conditions. From the sugar workers in Cuba to the coffee workers in Nicaragua, it is this class that has often, by its action, decisively tipped the balance against hated dictators.

They must fight for immediate economic and transitional demands and establish a regime of workers' control and union organisation in plant and plantation alike. The history of this epoch also proves that it is vital for this layer to take the lead in defending their gains from the death squads of the landlord and planter by forming a workers' militia.

Next to this layer in importance comes the semi-proletariat: the seasonal farm labourer who has to scrape a living on his or her own tiny plot for the rest of the time; or the small peasant whose family cannot survive on the land and takes on work in the towns and cities. This class is large in Latin America, Africa and parts of Asia, often outnumbering the rural wage workers by ten to one.

Their contact with the plantations has raised them above a purely peasant outlook and they have embraced much of the fighting spirit and organisation of the proletariat. Their seasonal, migratory character has meant they have become, too, the key base of the guerrilla armies of Central America. For them it is essential to fight for equality of pay and conditions on the plantations; for permanent contracts for those who want them; for land to those who are forced to migrate because of land hunger.

The most desperate class in the countryside is the landless peasant, robbed of his or her inheritance by the oligarchy, colonial planter and "green revolution" alike. Today there are over 600 million landless peasants in the semi-colonies. In Pakistan, India and Bangladesh between a quarter and a half of the peasants are without land. In Central America over half of the rural population is landless. Most face starvation, a prospect relieved occasionally by day or seasonal labour. Many migrate to the towns in the hopeless search for work.

This class is a necessary ally of the proletariat and is the largest class. The continued support of this class must be won, even at the cost of the parcellisation of the larger estates. Before them the revolutionary working class must pledge itself to fight to realise the demands: land to those who work it; occupy the idle and under-used land; defend the land invasions of the plantations in the fight for subsistence; for committees and militias of landless peasants.

Trotskyists must stand at the head of the fight of the land hungry for land seizures, whether directed against semi-feudal or capitalist plantations. But it is essential to fight for the earliest possible formation of co-operatives as a transitional measure. To those already driven to the barrios and shanties of the big cities we must fight for a programme of public works to find them useful work and a living wage. This must go hand in hand with the organisation of the unemployed.

Struggling to prevent their own descent into the army of the landless are the poor peasants. Their smallholdings are either weighed down with onerous rent obligations or burdened with debt as a result of harsh purchase terms.

Borrowing to buy equipment and fertilisers has added to this debt, a step forced on them because the size of the plot cannot guarantee subsistence for the poor peasant family.

The poor peasant may be oppressed by the big estates or by the richer peasant. Here the key immediate demands must be: abolition of rent and renunciation of all debts to the rural usurer and urban merchant; for state credits to purchase machinery and fertiliser; for incentives to encourage the subsistence farmers to voluntarily join production and marketing co-operatives.

Many peasants find that the only way to make a living is to cultivate crops related to the narcotics industry. They are ruthlessly exploited by the narcotic barons and persecuted by the imperialist "anti-narcotic" agencies. We demand the right of the peasants to cultivate narcotic related crops on a free and legal basis. We demand the purchase of such crops by the state at prices fixed by workers' and peasants' price committees.

The middle peasantry, usually a small layer that is suspicious that the proletariat plans to abolish its private property, generally has enough surplus to sell at a profit in the towns. Nevertheless, they too are often exploited by the middleman. In any clash over wages and conditions between the middle peasant and any labourers they employ the proletariat must support the latter.

Against the demands of the middle and small peasants for better prices for their products (a demand that arises especially in situations where the workers have forced governments to control the prices of basic goods) we put forward a different solution: make the bosses and landowners pay, not the workers! We demand the abolition of debt, extension of credit, the promotion of co-operatives and the building of joint price committees of workers and peasants, to plan and exchange the respective fruits of their labours.

The rich exploitative peasants will in general find themselves on the side of the bourgeoisie wherever semi-feudalism has been eradicated and imperialism, in alliance with the imperialised state, has integrated the rich peasant into the world market. Here revolutionaries will side with the poor peasants to expropriate the land of the rich peasant. But wherever semi-feudal bonds remain that also oppress the rich and the poor peasant a common struggle is possible to end that oppression.

The imperialist agribusiness, capitalist farmer and the absentee landlord will on the other hand find in the working class an implacable enemy. Their property stands before the workers and poor peasants as the mechanism of impoverishment.

We must impose upon the national bourgeoisie or petit bourgeoisie struggling against landed oligarchies the demand: nationalise their land without compensation; nationalise the imperialist plantations and place them under workers' and poor peasants' control; for a massive programme of public works to improve conditions for the masses of the countryside--electrification, irrigation of the land, provision of clean water and adequate sanitary facilities, the provision of cultural facilities.

Only such a programme can prevent the mass exodus of peasants, driven by sheer hunger to the cities. The transformation and planning of agricultural production will decrease the dependence on cash crops for export, improve the productivity of the land and increase the amount of food for home consumption.

Such measures in themselves will help ease the pressure on the rural environment. In transforming the countryside capitalism has extended the ecological crisis into ever new regions of the globe. Deforestation, destruction of traditional water systems for irrigation, pollution of rivers by industrial waste and chemical fertilisers continue to create real ecological disasters in many parts of the "third world". The proletariat and poor peasants' fight must include a programme of immediate measures to prevent ecological catastrophe--the ending of massive deforestation and the undertaking of replanting and irrigation schemes.

The years since 1945 have shown that the only real solution to the servitude of the poor peasantry and land hunger is the abolition of capitalism itself. The revolutionary party must lead the class struggle in the countryside to its culmination.

We put forward a programme for the revolutionary expropriation of all capitalist plantations and rich peasant farms without compensation by councils of workers and poor peasants. We fight for a policy of state farms together with voluntary collectivisation for the small and middle peasant as a programme of socialist transition in agriculture.

### **The national question in the semi-colonies**

Although national unity and independence were political goals for the bourgeoisie, they had a social and economic purpose: the creation of a unified national market, protected against foreign competition, within which domestic capital could expand.

Today, despite formal national independence, imperialism's former colonies and mandates are in reality no nearer to this economic independence than they were at the dawn of the imperialist epoch. They remain oppressed nations. Backwardness and, at best one-sided, dependent industrialisation remain the norm in the semi-colonies. No amount of formal political independence can compensate for this.

The chains of economic dependence are forged from capitalist social relations and can only be smashed by the expropriation of capitalism itself. For this reason only the working class has the interest and ability to fully abolish the national oppression of the semi-colonies. It must fight for:

? The expulsion of all of imperialism's armed forces, the forces of its gendarmes, including the UN, and its security installations and advisers.

? The abolition of the standing armed forces--trained by and loyal to imperialism--and their replacement by an armed workers' and poor peasants' militia.

? The cancellation of all debts and interest payments to the imperialist finance houses. The imperialists do not want the debt to be paid off because this will mean an end to the super-profits it generates and the loss of one of its weapons for exercising economic, political and military control of the semi-colonies. The debt has been contracted under terms set by imperialism. But the limitations of the semi-colonial bourgeoisie's challenge to imperialist domination is evidenced by their acceptance of these terms. The practical effect of this cowardice is austerity for the masses, unemployment, restrictions on political and trade union activities, export oriented production and, as a result, starvation.

? Against the strategy of limiting repayments to a percentage of exports or GNP. Against the moratorium on the external debt which only means paying imperialism more later. This debt has been paid off several times already through extortionate interest rates and the looting of the semi-colonies' natural resources.

? The repatriation of all payments and the restoration of natural resources. For the repatriation of the priceless archaeological heritage stolen over the years by the imperialist plunderers.

? The nationalisation without compensation of the banks, finance houses and major industries and the cancellation of all special arrangements and joint ventures between state owned industries and finance capital.

As well as breaking imperialism's stranglehold on the semi-colonial economy the proletariat must fight for both national unity and the right of self-determination for the nationalities oppressed within the semi-colonies.

The arbitrary borders carved out by imperialism in its collective division and re-division of the world in the 1880s, 1919 and 1945 divided many nationalities and peoples, creating national minorities within the colonial and semi-colonial states. Whereas the nationalism of the developing bourgeoisie of the colonies had a relatively progressive content insofar as it was aimed against remnants of feudalism or against imperialism, on achieving political power this nationalism was often transformed into a weapon of oppression against national minorities, as in Turkey and Burma.

Far from solving the many national problems caused or exacerbated by imperialism's division of the world, the inability of the semi-colonial bourgeoisie to unify or economically develop the nation results in the deepening of

regional economic differences, the re-emergence of old national antagonisms and the creation of new ones (e.g. in India).

Wherever a real national movement based in consciousness, language, culture and territory exists, the proletariat must support its right, as an oppressed nation, to self-determination. This support is unconditional: that is, we do not demand that the nationalists adopt communist methods of struggle before we give our support. However, just as we are critical of the goal of the nationalists, so we criticise their methods which frequently reduce the national struggle to the armed actions of a select few. However, no right to separate statehood exists where the exercise of self-determination is based on the national oppression of another people e.g. Israel, Northern Ireland.

The proletariat is an internationalist class seeking to unify, on a socialist basis, peoples and nations, through voluntary union or federation. Our general programme is not for the creation of ever more separate nation states or the breaking up of large "multi-national" states into a number of constituent parts as a means of liberating such countries from either imperialist or capitalist enslavement.

While arguing against these false solutions, communists recognise that once such a demand is embraced by the mass of workers and peasants, expressed for example in referenda or by mass armed struggle and civil war (Bangladesh), revolutionaries must move into the forefront of such a struggle to achieve a separate state. Both within the oppressor nation and in the secessionist area, communists raise this demand, while continuing to warn that only socialist revolution, not secession, will offer a lasting solution to the masses.

While the working class must champion the legitimate national rights of oppressed peoples, its internationalist strategy means that it fights all nationalist ideologies, even of those held to by the oppressed. Such nationalism will inevitably clash with the development of the working class into a conscious force, defending its own class interests, and will thus become reactionary. While we support the struggles for self-determination, up to and including secession, for example in Kurdistan, Tamil Eelam, Kashmir, Euskadi etc, we point out the utopianism of the nationalist project of developing these areas as truly independent bourgeois states.

The proletariat must fight for the expropriation of capitalism and the extension of democratic planning on the largest possible scale. There can be no solution to the basic economic demands of the oppressed nations through a retreat behind even more limited economic boundaries.

Against the imperialists' deliberate policies of "Balkanisation" aimed at dividing and ruling weak and unstable nation states, communists put forward the demand for a genuine federation of socialist states for those countries that are linked by historical ties of language, culture, trade etc. Such transitional slogans can have a powerful mobilising effect for the masses, for example in the Middle East, in Latin America and on the Indian sub-continent, cutting across both imperialist engineered divisions and bourgeois and petit bourgeois nationalist prejudices.

### **The struggle against military dictatorship and Bonapartism in the semi-colonies**

Retarded in their economic and social development by imperialism, most semi-colonial regimes have been unable to sustain a stable bourgeois democracy. Elections and parliaments have been episodic, temporary or generally attenuated by various restrictions on the right to vote, the introduction of literacy and language qualifications, and a myriad of obstacles to voter registration.

Consequently various forms of Bonapartism have been the norm. Such regimes, while being resolute defenders of capitalism, have achieved a degree of independence from the ruling class, normally through their control of the army and state machine. They have deprived the capitalist class of its own direct political rule, as well as containing or repressing the exploited classes.

Bonapartist rule in the semi-colonies has varied between "anti-imperialist" and pro-imperialist forms. The "left" variant of Bonapartism has often taken the form of nationalist officers' movements drawn from the petit bourgeois middle strata and reflecting the outlook of this class.



This layer, seeing its future blighted by economic stagnation, corruption and the subservience of its own bourgeoisie to imperialism, has seized power in numerous countries since the Second World War--as in Argentina, Peru, Libya, Egypt, Burma for example. Their ideologies have borrowed elements from Stalinism, occasionally from fascism, and typically have proclaimed a "third way" between capitalism and communism.

These regimes have attempted to overcome the failure of economic development in their countries by restricting imperialist penetration. They have staked all on promoting "independent capitalist development"--utilising trade barriers, state capitalist industrialisation and land reform. They have often combined a vicious anti-communism with attempts to develop and co-opt the trade union movement and peasant organisations as a prop of support for their regimes against imperialist pressure from without and within.

But nowhere have such regimes opened the road to socialism, nor could they by their very nature. In fact they have re-fortified the capitalist state and economy through attacks on the workers, not stopping at full-scale repression and even massacres.

In the event of a serious clash between these regimes and imperialism and its most reactionary agents the proletariat may be obliged to struggle alongside the nationalist and democratic military sectors. But throughout the workers must maintain the firmest class independence and opposition to these temporary allies. The proletariat needs no military saviours or leaders. It can seize power only through its own insurrection, not by army coups.

It is the gravest error to establish strategic blocs with sections of the officers or to sow illusions in their capacity to arm and lead the proletariat. It leads to class collaboration and programmatic concessions and can do nothing but weaken the proletariat's drive to establish independent workers' militias and to organise the rank and file of the army.

The inevitable failure of this economic and political strategy, the repeated concessions to the imperialists and the resulting disillusionment of the masses, all prepare the way for the overthrow of these regimes and their replacement by more pliant, pro-imperialist ones.

Millions of workers and peasants throughout the world suffer at the hands of vicious right wing Bonapartist regimes. Such regimes have often emerged either from the failure of left Bonapartism (Indonesia 1965, Argentina 1955, Peru 1975) or, as in Chile during 1973 and Bolivia after 1971, from the crushing of revolutionary situations. These regimes are marked by their subservience to imperialism, their attempts to crush the workers' and peasants' organisations, and their use of death squads, torture and widespread violation of human rights.

The repeated utilisation of such dictatorships by the imperialists and their agents means that the demand for political democracy remains a burning issue for millions of proletarians and non-proletarians around the globe, from Indonesia to Paraguay. Wherever the proletariat fights alongside petit bourgeois and bourgeois forces for democratic rights it must do so from the standpoint of its strategic goal: workers' council power.

What it defends within bourgeois democracy is essentially its organisations of struggle, those legal and constitutional concessions wrung from the bourgeoisie and those forms of bourgeois democracy (parliaments etc) that the working class uses as a tribune to mobilise and agitate among the masses. But workers' council power is the most democratic form of class rule in history and it supersedes the democratic republic as a strategic aim in the imperialist epoch.

Despite our rejection of the confinement of the revolution to a separate democratic stage, we cannot conclude, like the sectarians, that democratic slogans are unnecessary. Brutal dictatorships constantly give rise to democratic aspirations and to illusions in bourgeois democratic institutions.

Only hardened sectarians, disdainful of the necessity of relating to what is progressive in the democratic illusions of the masses can believe that it is possible to "skip over" the consciousness of the masses. If these illusions are to be broken in practice more than the demand for socialism is necessary.

Where the ruling classes attempt to deny the full democratic rights of the masses, we mobilise around democratic

slogans including that of the sovereign constituent assembly. We must fight for an election process in which there are no prior limitations or secret agreements, one which is really democratic for the masses: universal, direct, secret and equal suffrage with no property or literacy qualifications.

There should be freedom of publications and assembly for all the parties of the workers and peasants, defended by an armed militia. We must also demand the proportional representation of all parties in the assembly according to votes received, without any minimum threshold.

However, recognising the importance of such demands does not mean embracing the opportunist methods of the centrists who have turned the fight for the constituent assembly into a democratic stage through which the masses must pass. Centristism of a Trotskyist origin (Lambertism, Morenoism, the United Secretariat of the Fourth International) has consistently tailed the Stalinists or petit bourgeois nationalists by using the constituent assembly slogan in a way which relegates the fight for workers' councils and workers' power until after such an assembly has been won.

At the same time the centrists have sown illusions in the "socialist" potential of such assemblies. The "anti-imperialist" left Bonapartists have shown themselves equally adept at this. Be it the Dergue in Ethiopia, Mugabe's "one party state", Ortega's powerless "popular committees", or Qadhafi's people's committees, these organisations are actually used to deprive the workers and peasants of their freedom to organise.

The constituent assembly, therefore, contains no inherently progressive essence. It can be, and in ninety-nine cases out of a hundred has been, merely a bourgeois parliament charged with drawing up a constitution. Worse, in semi-colonial countries (Brazil 1982), and even in some imperialist countries (Portugal 1975) it is only convened subject to military Bonapartist restrictions on its powers, and with a prior pact already made between the reformist parties and the military as to the constitutional outcome.

Often constituent assemblies have proved reactionary bodies counterposed to the revolutionary organs of struggle and power of the workers and peasants. This can happen in the semi-colonies where the huge weight of the peasantry can be used by the bourgeoisie against the working class.

The capitalists mobilise the equal votes of all "citizens" to act as a brake on the revolution. For this reason it is essential to fight for, and convene, the constituent assembly through the building of workers', soldiers' and poor peasants' councils. Only then can the assembly be a weapon of revolutionary democracy and not a tool of Bonapartism, only then can the assembly be pushed aside by the workers' and poor peasants' councils when its role has been exhausted.

Even under constitutional regimes in the semi-colonial countries, massive elements of Bonapartism exist and are repeatedly used against the working class: the presidency with its power to declare states of emergency; the senate, with its ability to check legislation; the unelected judiciary, and above all the paramilitary police and the standing army. All these offices and forces repeatedly reduce "democracy" to a completely empty shell.

Against these assaults on democratic rights, the working class should raise in its action programme the abolition of the presidency and the senate and the creation of a single chamber assembly elected at least biennially, with the power of the electors to recall their deputies. To this we should add the demand for the dissolution of the paramilitary squads, the police and standing army and the creation of an armed popular militia.

### **Stalinism, petit bourgeois nationalism and bourgeois democratic tasks**

In all its forms Stalinism has remained implacably hostile to the theory and strategy of permanent revolution. The triumph of Stalinism was marked by the official adoption of the doctrine of socialism in one country by the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. The idea of a national road to socialism flowed from this theory.

In the semi-colonial and colonial countries this road involved passing through distinct and separate political stages: first the stage of fighting for political democracy and independent capitalist development in alliance with the national bourgeoisie; then the evolution towards socialism when the level of the productive forces were deemed ripe for this

stage.

In the imperialist epoch this strategy could only mean the Stalinists sanctioned the denial of the proletariat's independent interests wherever they clashed with those of the national bourgeoisie in the democratic stage. Since the Second World War Stalinism has often abandoned any pretence that the second stage is possible for the semi-colonies, given that independent industrialisation is impossible.

We do not rule out that there may emerge "stages" in the living struggle for working class power. But there can never be self-contained stages, each based on a separate strategy for a separate period. The distinct tasks, bourgeois democratic and proletarian, are combined and openly fought for at every moment, with the single strategic goal of working class power.

But the working class must lead the urban and rural petit bourgeoisie in the fight for the democratic tasks. The whole of post-war development proves that the complete fulfilment of remaining democratic tasks will only be accomplished under the dictatorship of the proletariat, that is, on the basis of the destruction of capitalist private property and its system of nation states.

So thoroughly committed to the "democratic stage" has Stalinism been that it has even fused with petit bourgeois nationalist formations, all the better to "tighten the noose around the proletariat's neck", as Trotsky said.

Wherever the working class has spontaneously broken out of the limits that Stalinism has designated for the proletariat in the revolutionary process Stalinists have become the most fervent advocates of crushing the workers and pressing them back inside those limits. The bitter consequence has often been, not the realisation of the democratic stage, but bloody counter-revolution and dictatorship (Indonesia, Chile, Iran).

As the imperialist epoch has progressed petit bourgeois nationalism has increasingly taken up the mantle of the "national revolutionary" struggle in the semi-colonial era. It has often taken up revolutionary methods of struggle (insurrections, guerrilla warfare) in pursuit of national independence. On some occasions petit bourgeois forces have sanctioned, even if they have not organised, class struggle methods (strikes, occupations, land seizures). Nevertheless, the goal petit bourgeois nationalism sets out to achieve is a reactionary utopia.

The fight for an "independent capitalism" which espouses "social justice" at home and "non-alignment" abroad is, in the epoch of imperialism, an illusion. Usually led by urban professional classes, members of the intelligentsia and disillusioned sons and daughters of the ruling oligarchies, the petit bourgeois parties cannot break with capitalism. Only in exceptional circumstances can the aid of existing Stalinist states make it possible for such parties to bureaucratically overthrow capitalism. This course of action has only taken place when it has been forced upon them as their only means of surviving in a conflict with imperialism. In the process they fuse with or are transformed into Stalinist parties.

Where such parties rule for any length of time without overthrowing capitalism (Nicaragua) they rob the workers and peasants of the fruits of their struggle in the attempt to conciliate a "patriotic" capitalist class. This invariably ends with a conservative counter-revolution within the regime (Egypt, Algeria, Iran) and the ascendancy of the bourgeoisie or the overthrow of the petit bourgeois regime by pro-imperialist forces (Guatemala, Grenada).

Since their Stalinist degeneration the official pro-Moscow Communist Parties have time and again discredited not only themselves but the very idea of proletarian leadership by supporting reactionary dictatorships in the interests of the Kremlin's diplomatic manoeuvres. Bourgeois and petit bourgeois nationalism have drawn strength from these betrayals.

But in their turn these forces too have led the workers and peasants to defeat. This has allowed the masses to turn to religion for comfort and the inspiration to fight. Thus ideologies which at the dawn of capitalism receded in the face of a confident and rising bourgeoisie with its rationalism and secularism, now, in the reactionary epoch of capitalism are strengthened.

Religious institutions generally play a counter-revolutionary role in the struggles of the oppressed. For most of the time

they purvey the ideology of submission or of peaceful reform. But at times they stand at the head of mass revolts with the aim of preventing the masses from attacking the capitalist order itself.

Most often in the guise of the leading church hierarchies they have acted to pacify resistance and poison the minds of the workers and peasants. On occasion in certain countries (e.g. Central America) the lower levels of the clergy or lay priests have helped peasants and rural workers to organise independent trade unions, encourage literacy, stimulate political consciousness and overcome passivity.

The reformist and class collaborationist projects that have informed this work have often in turn been cast aside by the workers and peasants; then the clergy have turned against the workers. This does not of course preclude individual members of the clergy, still less the mass of believers, becoming involved in militant or even revolutionary struggle. But the task of Marxists is resolutely to oppose the influence of all religious ideologies.

In Iran such a reactionary ideology hegemonised the majority of the exploited and oppressed even at the moment when the mass movement overthrew the pro-imperialist Shah. In power the full reactionary content of religious ideologies has been displayed: the denial of democratic rights, the persecution of independent proletarian organisations and the oppression of women, have all been the staple diet of semi-colonial capitalist states which have been infused with religious dogma. In the face of this revolutionaries must fight to protect proletarian democracy against religious castes and for the separation of church and state.

### **The anti-imperialist united front**

Despite its dependence on imperialism, the semi-colonial bourgeoisie remains a national class capable of limited conflict with imperialism. The more openly imperialism solves its crises at the expense of the semi-colonial ruling class, the more the latter tends towards rhetorical and even actual resistance.

In no sense does this make the national bourgeoisie, or even fractions of it, revolutionary. But so long as bourgeois or petit bourgeois forces have a real mass influence in the anti-imperialist struggle it is necessary for the working class to use the tactic of the anti-imperialist united front. This involves striking tactical agreements with non-proletarian forces at both leadership and rank and file level. Such agreements might involve formal alliances or committees.

Where this is the case the fundamental pre-conditions for entering such blocs are: that the bourgeois or petit bourgeois forces are actually waging a struggle against imperialism, or its agents, that no limitations are placed on the political independence of the revolutionary organisation within this bloc and that there are no bureaucratic exclusions of significant forces struggling against imperialism.

It is even possible that this united front may have to be carried out within the base organs of a mass organisation with a popular frontist character within which distinct class parties have not yet emerged. What is vital is that this unity should be aimed at mobilising the broadest anti-imperialist forces for precise common objectives such as the introduction of democratic rights and the expulsion of the imperialists.

Whilst the struggles of the semi-colonial bourgeoisie are aimed at broadening their own scope for exploitation, the entry of the working class into that conflict carries the threat of ending exploitation altogether. Thus there is nothing consistently anti-imperialist or revolutionary about the semi-colonial bourgeoisie, and no permanent place for it should be reserved in an anti-imperialist united front.

The purpose of anti-imperialist united action must be to aid the proletariat to mobilise the masses so that they burst through the restraints of their traditional leaderships and organisations. For that reason the proletariat must advance the most audacious forms of mass direct action and organisation, strike committees, popular assemblies, mass meetings (cabildos) etc, which will aid the development of workers' and peasants' councils, workers' militias and soldiers' committees.

The proletariat must never give political support to "left" regimes or collude with their suppression of democratic

rights. The working class vanguard should refrain from an armed insurrection against these regimes whilst democratic liberties exist and the majority of workers still support such regimes. The only support possible for these regimes is joint military co-operation against a reactionary coup, or against imperialist intervention. Thus Trotskyists can support military actions by bourgeois governments against imperialism. But we at no stage renounce our struggle to overthrow and replace these governments with a workers' and peasants' government.

The nationalists and reformists always want to transform the front for action against imperialism into a strategic bloc to win political power (a popular front). They seek to fuse the anti-imperialist forces into a governmental coalition that will guarantee the survival of "national capital" against the socialist revolution. Revolutionary communists fight to install governments which are based on workers' and peasants' councils and militias. Only a government of the proletariat, in alliance with the poor peasantry, can solve the unfinished tasks of the bourgeois democratic revolution.

The class content of the government is spelt out in advance. The slogan is for a revolutionary workers' and peasants' government. Such a government will not, indeed cannot, confine the revolution to a distinct democratic stage or it will succumb to the pressures of the counter-revolution. With this perspective the Bolsheviks were able to draw behind them the radicalised movements of the petit bourgeoisie like the left SRs and the peoples' parties of Central Asia. The constitution of a strategic bloc with diverse left forces without this objective will simply obstruct the road to the proletarian dictatorship. Entry into a government or a coalition government on the basis of the maintenance of private property, its armed forces and state, constitutes the highest form of treason to the proletariat.

### **The working class and the guerrilla strategy**

Trotskyists are opposed to the strategy of guerrilla war whether in a "foco" or "peoples war" variant. Petit bourgeois guerrillaism is opposed to the construction of a workers' party, to workers' councils and to a Bolshevik insurrection. It wants to dissolve the proletariat's interests into the cross-class programme of the petit bourgeoisie. It wants to impose bureaucratic organisations and avoid the development of workers' councils and autonomous democratic workers' militias.

Even where it succeeds in downing a decrepit dictatorship (Cuba, Nicaragua) it paves the way for a Bonapartist solution. Guerrilla victories, even in the exceptional form of bureaucratic social overturns or, more usually, military-Bonapartist regimes, are always accompanied by the crushing of the proletariat's independent organisations.

Behind an ultra-left phraseology and methodology guerrillaism in fact evinces a tremendous lack of confidence in the working class and a predisposition to make deals with sections of the bourgeoisie. It involves surrendering political leadership to the urban bourgeoisie and petit bourgeoisie and, in so far as it seeks a mass base for its actions (i.e. people's war), it dissolves the independent interests of the working class into that of the petit bourgeoisie. In that sense guerrillaism as a strategy always has the tendency to be an armed popular front.

Guerrillaism downgrades economic and political struggle in favour of episodic and often desultory military action. Individual terrorism, the destruction of factories (centres of proletarian concentration) and spectacular military actions are methods counterposed to the strategy of the working class. Against Marxism's dictum that the emancipation of the workers can only be carried out by the workers themselves, the guerrillaists proclaim that liberation will be the act of external saviours.

By its undemocratic and elitist attitude towards the masses they claim to represent, the guerrilla leaders can often leave the masses defenceless in the face of the state's superior military forces or of vigilante groups.

To withdraw the most fearless and combative fighters from the factories, the urban centres and densely populated rural districts, is to strip the workers' and peasants' organisations of their cadres and their leaders. Guerrillaists may also attack the workers' organisations themselves, as in the case of Sendero Luminoso in Peru.

For Trotskyists guerrilla action is a tactic that can be used in the anti-imperialist struggle. We do not reject the military united front with guerrilla armies, either in the form of separate battalions or of communist cell work within bourgeois

or Stalinist led armies. But the aim of this military united front is to prepare the widespread and independent arming of the working class and poor peasantry. By these means communists fight to force the guerrilla armies and their political apparatus to expropriate plantations, back land seizures and recognise the sovereignty of workers' and peasants' councils and militias.

But this remains a subordinate tactic to a strategy whose principal protagonist is the working class. The programme of permanent revolution subordinates all military action to what is politically appropriate, given the level of class struggle and revolutionary consciousness of the working class and poor peasantry. In general, broad military action by armed militia in town and country should only be undertaken when the existence of dual power and generalised workers' control sharply poses the need to organise the insurrection.

We categorically reject all generalised military action of a non-defensive nature that leaves the masses politically passive. At all costs the working class has to maintain its independence and opposition to guerrillism. It must criticise, and in extreme cases condemn, any actions which are opposed to its perspectives.

In the armed conflict between the petit bourgeois guerrillas and the bourgeois state we at all times defend them against state repression. We do not recognise the state's right to judge those fighting against it. We fight for the right of prisoner of war status for captured guerrillas and for their release. In the case of guerrillas attacking the workers' organisations we do not call for defence by the capitalist state.

We demand the workers' movement itself, through meetings and in its trade unions, issue a verdict by organising workers' and peasants' defence squads against the guerrilla attacks. We do not flinch from the inevitable military confrontation with the bourgeois and Stalinist commanders which flow from the divergent programmes of the proletariat and the petit bourgeoisie.

---

**Source URL:** <http://www.fifthinternational.org/content/chapter-4-strategy-and-tactics-semi-colonies>