

Q&A on the Afghan war

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What does Workers Power say about the war?

Our position on the imperialist attack on Afghanistan is that we are for the defeat of Britain/USA and its allies and for the victory of all the Afghan forces that resist them.

So our policy is for revolutionary defeatism with regard to the imperialist states, and revolutionary defencism with regard to Afghanistan. Afghanistan is a semi-colony - a country that despite formal state independence is fully dependent on the world market dominated by the imperialist powers and their monopolies.

Does this mean supporting the Taliban?

In the event of imperialist attack, the LRCI stands clearly for the military victory of all Afghan forces that resist the US/UK offensive. That includes Taliban forces if they resist the imperialist offensive.

This in no way implies political support for the deeply reactionary Taliban regime or for the terrorist policies pursued by Osama bin Laden and the al-Qaeda organisation.

The LRCI condemned the indiscriminate mass terrorism of the attack on the World Trade Centre and the killing of the passengers of civilian airliners. This is not the way to struggle against imperialism. But we stress that imperialism is the biggest terrorist, having killed many, many times more innocent civilians during the past 10 years than bin Laden or the Taliban.

But aren't the Taliban just as bad as imperialism?

Afghanistan is a poor, devastated country - held in backwardness by decades of imperialist-sponsored civil war and economic dependency. US imperialism and its allies are the great powers responsible for poverty, wars and ecological disaster all over the globe.

Certainly the Taliban are a deeply reactionary force, which has banned all opposition, suppresses other religions and minorities, and has driven women from work and education.

But this war is not a war between democracy and reactionary Islamism. It is a war for US and imperialist control of a semi-colony. It is from this fundamental point of view that we defend semi-colonial countries - the regime in power at the time of the war is a secondary question.

We have to analyse this war not from just a short-term snapshot of the current situation but from the socio-economic fundamentals. The key starting point for Marxists is the relationship of the contending states to the world capitalist order and the interests of the class struggle against global capitalism.

So what is this war about?

The war is not about terrorism or Islamism. It is about imperialism's determination to crush any opposition around the globe. Imperialism wants to have the right to dictate to any country in the world what type of government it should have. The USA wants the right to intervene within other states at any time on the pretext of a "war on terrorism". The USA also wants control of the central Asian region and to secure territory for its oil supplies. From the Afghan side this war is about the defence of the country's sovereignty

against the imperialists? grip.

Revolutionary communists are not champions of nation states - we want to see a world free from borders and nationalism. But national independence must not be abolished by the dictat of powerful nations over weak ones. It can only be overcome through the free and voluntary association of nations in an international socialist society, in which inequality and exploitation have been abolished.

But how can you side with a force in a war without supporting its politics? Surely this is a complete contradiction?

No it isn't. In the class struggle it is often the case that revolutionaries have to take sides in a conflict with forces to whose leadership and policies we are completely politically opposed. This does not and must not mean that we endorse or prettify their politics in any way.

The reason we are obliged to take sides is because of the real, practical, objective situation and what it means in terms of the worldwide conflict of forces. The war is not fundamentally a choice between US democracy and Taliban theocratic despotism. It is between the right of the USA and Britain to dominate and plunder the natural resources of central Asia and the right of semi-colonial countries to resist imperialist aggression.

There are countless situations in the class struggle in which revolutionaries have been obliged to support military forces which are at war with imperialism despite their counter-revolutionary politics. This was the case in the Falklands or Malvinas War in 1982 and the Gulf War in 1991. In the former case Workers Power (Britain) and the Irish Workers Group called for victory to Argentina. In the latter case the LRCI called for victory to Iraq. We did this without for a single moment supporting the dictatorship of General Galtieri whose Junta had murdered thousands of workers and leftists when it came to power. Likewise we did not express any political support for a Saddam Hussein the butcher of the Kurds and the Shiite population of southern Iraq.

"It is in the direct interests of the Iraqi and Kurdish people to defend Iraq against imperialism without for a minute abandoning their just struggles for national freedom, democracy and class emancipation. In the war they should propose a military united front against the attacking imperialist forces. In practice this would require that the regime cease all repression against the progressive forces.

But whatever the regime's actions against progressive forces, imperialism remains the main enemy while the armed conflict continues. It is from within the war effort that forces must be rallied to overthrow the Ba'athist regime and create a workers' and peasants' government. Proceeding towards an armed insurrection to achieve that goal during the course of the war with imperialism will have to be considered in the light of the need to secure a military victory against the main enemy - imperialist forces in the Gulf."
(?Victory to Iraq?, LRCI Resolution in Trotskyist International, No. 6, April 1991)

Does this approach have any history in the revolutionary movement?

Yes - Trotsky supported Chinese government forces against Japanese imperialist invasion in the 1930s, at the head of which stood Chiang Kai-shek, who had massacred 250,000 Chinese communists in the late 1920s. Trotsky explained this position very clearly with regard to Brazil in 1938 and, as with a great deal of the revolutionary ideas of Marx, Engels, Lenin and Trotsky, this method is directly relevant, and can be applied, to the situation today.

Trotsky wrote: "In Brazil there now's reigns a semifascist regime that every revolutionary can only view with hatred. Let us assume, however, that on the morrow England enters into a military conflict with Brazil. I ask you on whose side of the conflict will the working class be? I will answer for myself personally - in this

case I will be on the side of ?fascist? Brazil against ?democratic? Great Britain. Why? Because in the conflict between them it will not be a question of democracy or fascism. If England should be victorious, she will put another fascist in Rio de Janeiro and place double chains on Brazil. If Brazil on the other hand should be victorious, it will give a mighty impulse to national and democratic consciousness of the country and will lead to the overthrow of the Vargas dictatorship. The defeat of England will at the same time deliver a blow to British imperialism and will give an impulse to the revolutionary movement of the British proletariat. Truly, one must have an empty head to reduce world antagonisms and military conflicts to the struggle between fascism and democracy. Under all masks one must know how to distinguish exploiters, slave-owners, and robbers!?

("Anti-imperialist struggle is key to liberation", September 1938, in Writings, 1938-39, p.34).

How does this apply today?

There is a fundamental difference between the USA and Afghanistan - a far deeper one than the contrast between their internal democratic and dictatorial regimes.

The USA is the greatest danger to the working class and poor peasantry of the world. It is the new imperialist monopole - the sole superpower. Its military might is driving globalisation and seeking to establish a new world order based on the unrestricted advance of capital across the globe. Afghanistan on the other hand is an extremely weak semi-colonial country which has been racked with imperialist sponsored war for decades. Even the triumph and reactionary policies of the Taliban are in large measure the result of US policy since 1979. The Taliban were created out of the efforts of imperialism to defeat the Soviet-backed PDPA government in the Afghan civil war and to resist the USSR's invasion. Afghanistan's development is blocked primarily by imperialism. The greatest enemy of the workers and peasants of the region is imperialism.

Can't we say we are for the defeat of the imperialists without being for the victory of Taliban forces?

This would be a complete evasion. If we are for the defeat of the imperialists, it means we want the forces that are fighting them to win. Anything else would reduce our anti-imperialism to a mere phrase.

Does this mean that workers and progressive forces in Afghanistan should be in a united front with the Taliban?

The Taliban won't allow this. They are still imposing a brutal dictatorship over all other forces in the country. This would make a united front practically impossible because of their absolute intolerance of any opposition and their refusal to collaborate with non-Islamic forces (which is a very broad category according to their world view!) They would seek to prevent any independent organisation or arming of the peasants or workers. This, together with their venomous hostility to women's rights and the rights of the non-Pashtun nationalities, are massive obstacles to a large-scale mobilisation of the masses to defeat imperialism. If they persist in these policies this will enormously contribute to imperialism's triumph or the imposition by Pakistan and others of a compliant pro-imperialist regime in Kabul.

What is more, it would be unprincipled to enter a formal ?united front? or alliance in which the revolutionary communists were obliged to drop or hide their politics.

The LRCI's programme The Trotskyist Manifesto explains that the anti-imperialist united front involves: ?Striking tactical agreements with non-proletarian forces at both leadership and rank and file level. Such agreements might involve striking 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."

But revolutionaries and working class forces should fight for an anti-imperialist united front.

Without giving an iota of support to the arch-reactionary Taliban government in Afghanistan or the movement of Osama bin Laden, we call for and support the united action of all Afghan forces - including Islamist forces - to repel the imperialist assault.

How could an anti-imperialist united front ever be possible if the Taliban refused it and allowed no space for independent forces to organise?

Inside Afghanistan, the slogan of the anti-imperialist united front would be both:

- * A rallying call on the people to fight the imperialist invasion; and
- * An attempt to mobilise those who are fighting under the leadership of the Taliban to force the Taliban leaders to abandon their dictatorship and broaden the basis of resistance to imperialism.

In this way we fight to arm the people and break the Taliban's dictatorship over them. It is a political fight for a mass independent resistance to imperialism. At the same time as focusing the armed struggle on the imperialist invasion as the main enemy, it involves an ongoing political struggle to mobilise the forces which can overthrow the Taliban and destroy their dictatorship. It poses the need for democratic rights, class independence, rights for secular forces, the arming of the masses, an end to persecution of women and national minorities, but it does so unambiguously from the perspective of fighting imperialism as long as the latter is attacking. It is not a suspension of struggle against the Taliban but the best form of it in the circumstances of imperialist attack

This distinguishes us from the bourgeois and pro-imperialist opposition by stressing that our criticism is not that the Taliban are fighting imperialism, but that because of their oppression of women, their reactionary Islamist agenda, dictatorial hatred of the democratic rights of the people etc, they are not capable of a consistent or effective fight against imperialism.

Does this mean we should suspend the struggle to overthrow tyrannies like the Taliban or Saddam during the course of the war against imperialism?

No, it means that the struggle to overthrow them proceeds along a new path - the path of mobilising forces from within the struggle against imperialism. When preparing and planning the insurrection, we would take into account the imperialist onslaught. Otherwise, we would be saying we were indifferent to the outcome of the war.

The Spanish Civil War gave an example of how revolutionaries could even support an insurrection against a regime that it was fighting alongside against fascism, if that regime tried to weaken or disarm the workers organisations. In this case the workers in Barcelona in May 1937 rose up in arms against the capitalist popular front regime without stopping fighting at the front against the fascists and without stopping producing arms for the war. This is far from being excluded in countries like Afghanistan.

But if we said in the process that we didn't care about the war with the imperialists, and if our tactics didn't ensure that the anti-imperialist struggle were not set back, then we would be cutting our own throats - or rather, ensuring that the imperialists cut our throats if they won the war.

But the Taliban are not actually fighting against imperialism - they are not progressive enemies of USA but reactionary ones. So how can an anti-imperialist united front be right?

There is only one sense in which Taliban or bin Laden actions are anti-imperialist - and it is only in that

sense that we support their action.

Is it terrorist actions against US workers? No - we condemn them.

Is it rejecting modern society and banning TV and modern dress? No - we fight it.

Is it the barbaric oppression of women? No - we expose it and arouse the struggle of the people against it.

Is it resistance to the US/UK military attack on Afghanistan? Yes. This and only this is progressive. And it is this and only this that we support.

So does this mean that we raise the slogan 'Victory to the Taliban'??

Definitely not. That would be a gross accommodation to the arch-reactionary politics of the Taliban. We never said victory to Saddam Hussein, victory to Galtieri and the Argentine Junta, victory to Stalin or victory to any reactionary governments. We are for the victory of the Afghan forces against imperialism - not for confirming their political leaderships in power.

But would a victory for the Taliban not lead to greater reaction in Afghanistan?

Temporarily, perhaps. Certainly, if they were the only force that stood up to imperialism. If all the anti-Taliban forces back the US invasion, or if progressives fail to oppose it, the Taliban would be in an even stronger position still. If they won the war they could claim sole credit and there would be no opposition with any anti-imperialist authority. And if they were beaten after mounting the only resistance, their brand of Islamism would gain enormous prestige in the Middle East and central Asia. Anyone who stood back or colluded with the imperialists would be utterly compromised in the eyes of the masses as the full consequences of an imperialist victory became clear.

The way to defeat imperialism and minimise the reactionary advantage that the Taliban would seek to seize is to fight for the independent mobilisation of the masses against the US/ British attack. This requires the bold use of the revolutionary tactic of the anti-imperialist united front.

How can we explain this to workers who rightly hate the Taliban?

Directly, and without equivocation. Many workers in imperialist countries will object to our position on chauvinist lines - others will take a pacifist line that opposes the war without supporting resistance to imperialism. But we are revolutionaries and we must state what is the truth, not adapt our position to the present consciousness of the majority. We need to use clear, patient language but not give in to the wave of chauvinism or imitate the pacifism that almost inevitably accompanies the onset of war in an imperialist country.

Anyway - we don't draw our line from the existing consciousness of the workers in this or that country but from the interests of the international working class.

As Trotsky explained: 'The mentality of the class of the proletariat is backward but the mentality is not such a substance as the factories, the mines, the railroads, but is more mobile and under the blows of the objective crisis, the millions of unemployed, it can change rapidly.'

("Discussions with Trotsky", in The Transitional Programme, Pathfinder edition, p127)

It will change rapidly if there is a prolonged war - and we must have clear revolutionary arguments to win new forces and build a powerful anti-imperialist movement.

We have the utmost confidence that the national sections of the LRCI and the REVOLUTION youth groups will do this imaginatively and clearly, taking account the psychology and mood of the working class and anti-capitalist youth.

We appeal to all organisations that support our view to work with us to defeat the US/Allied imperialist war drive and build a new revolutionary international to unite revolutionary communist forces around the world.

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