

Internationalism, Anti-Imperialism, And the Origins of Campism

January 31, 2022



I began this paper as a contribution to discussions in the Internationalism from Below Group, whose members' criticisms helped to improve it. I finished it with help from the editors of New Politics. Special thanks to Steve Shalom for his comments. I alone, however, am responsible for this version of the essay.

This paper examines the ideas of people coming out of the left who call themselves “anti-imperialists,” but who have become defenders of dictatorial governments—some of which call themselves Communist or Socialist—that oppress national minorities, beat down movements for democracy, and crush workers’ struggles for a better life. Those who support these authoritarian governments have been called “tankies,” an allusion to those Communists who supported the Soviet Union’s crushing of the Hungarian Revolution of 1956, or “campists,” referring to the notion that the world is fundamentally divided into two camps, one imperialist and the other anti-imperialist. They have also, and more recently, been called “authoritarian leftists” because, though they claim to be on the left, they have become supporters of authoritarian regimes. These people often refer to themselves as “anti-imperialists,” though I would prefer the term “pseudo-anti-imperialist” because these thinkers and organizations do not in reality consistently oppose all imperialism. I have, however, used the term “campist” here simply because it is shorter and more convenient.

I will try to explain here how “campism” arose and why we socialists should reject it. We socialists are humanists. We believe in and support the fight for humanistic values, that is, for the enhancement of life for all human beings. We want a world free from oppression and exploitation, one in which all human beings can have a voice and a vote about their future. We see civil rights and civil liberties—freedom of religion, assembly, speech, and press, freedom from racial and gender oppression—as essential to the fight for socialism and to the creation of a genuine socialist society.

The Origins of Internationalism and Anti-Imperialism

Internationalism first arose in Europe in the nineteenth century as democrats (supporters of democracy) and socialists (who wanted to replace capitalism with some sort of a cooperative economy) began to support each other’s struggles for those ideals. First this internationalism took the form of support for the rights of peoples to self-determination. For example, many democrats

and socialists, Marx and Engels among them, supported the right of Poland—which was periodically erased from the map and absorbed by Prussia, Austria, or Russia—to self-determination and an independent state. Similarly, Marx supported the right of Ireland to independence from the British Empire and called upon British workers to support Irish independence. Oppressed peoples also supported each other. In Latin America, Haiti, which in a slave rebellion had won its independence from France, aided Simón Bolívar in the common struggle against European imperialism. Internationalism began as support for peoples who were being oppressed by some other nation or empire. One can see this emergence of democratic internationalism as also the beginning of anti-imperialism, though it did not yet have that name.

When in 1848 a European-wide democratic revolution broke out, accompanied in France by a struggle for socialism, democrats everywhere on the continent united against the monarchs' autocracy and authoritarianism and the privileges of the nobility. Democrats and the small socialist and labor organizations all supported the overthrow of kings and the struggle for republics. In the "Communist Manifesto," which was directed to that revolutionary movement, Marx and Engels proclaimed, "Workers of the World Unite!" They believed that workers and the oppressed could reach across their national borders and join hands in the struggles for national self-determination and for democracy and socialism.

A second manifestation of internationalism arose as workers in one country sought support from workers in others as they fought against their employers. This began in the 1850s and 1860s as a fight against scabbing, to prevent British and Western European workers from crossing borders and breaking strikes in each other's countries. This anti-scabbing movement developed into a campaign for international labor solidarity and led to the foundation of the International Workingmen's Association or the First International, of which Marx was a member of the leadership council. Marx coordinated the work of the International in a variety of countries, both monarchies and republics, and, as he had in 1848, supported the struggle for socialism in France again at the time of the Paris Commune in 1871.

Marx also believed that the left and the working class could and should take positions regarding issues in other countries. He authored many of the International's demands for improvement of working conditions in various European nations, whatever their form of government. During the U.S. Civil War, Marx led the International to support the United States' blockade of Confederate ports to keep cotton from being shipped to England's textile mills. He argued in his famous letter to U.S. President Abraham Lincoln that the working classes of Europe understood that a victory for slavery would be a victory for property and a defeat for working people in general and that therefore the European working class had an interest in the defeat of slavery.

Marx from the beginning opposed Russian imperialism in Eastern Europe and British imperialism in Ireland. He initially believed the spread of capitalism to Asia, Africa, and Latin America was progressive, because it might make possible the development of more productive capitalist economies that could create the abundance that is necessary to establish socialism. But Marx later became critical of European imperialism, identifying with the struggles of the colonial people.

As one can see, there was a strong connection between working class internationalism and anti-imperialism in Europe. People in one nation coordinated with those in other countries in their fights for higher wages, for land, for the right to vote and run for office, to speak out, to publish, to assemble, protest and petition, as well as in struggles against tyranny or foreign domination. Socialists understood these as one fight against the residues of feudalism and monarchy and a still developing capitalist system.

The Centrality of Democracy

The struggle against monarchical autocracy had already led between the sixteenth and the nineteenth centuries to a series of republican revolutions in Holland (1556-1648), England (1640), and France (1789), though the republics could not be called democratic, limiting the franchise as they generally did to landowners and the wealthy. Between the French Revolution in 1789 and Napoleon Bonaparte's fall from power, the democratic idea of equality before the law became a European-wide phenomenon. Even before the rise of a socialist movement in Europe in the mid-nineteenth century, the left already existed as a movement fighting to bring democracy, suffrage (at first male suffrage), and civil rights to societies dominated by monarchs or by bourgeois republics that excluded working people from parliament. The alternative to monarchy and bourgeois republics, the critics argued, was the creation of democratic republics where citizens had the right to elect representatives to a parliament, which necessarily entailed the right to advocate for political parties and candidates, accompanied by civil rights: free speech, free press, freedom of assembly.

In England this struggle for democracy took the form in the 1840s of the Chartist movement's fight for workers' right to vote. Marx and Engels supported the Chartists' fight for democracy, seeing the struggle for democracy as the beginning of the fight for socialism. If workers had the right to vote, they would vote for socialists and socialist policies. Marx's writings on the Paris Commune of 1871 also made it clear that for him democracy was central to the struggle for socialism. Throughout the history of modern socialism, until the rise of Stalinism in the 1920s, the great majority of modern socialists saw democracy and socialism as part of a common struggle, and came to believe that one was impossible without the other. There could be no genuine democracy without socialism, and no socialism without democracy.

Imperialism and the Fight Against It

The word imperialism, from the Latin word *imperium*, meaning "government," referred, of course, to the Roman government that ruled the Roman Empire. The ancient empires—China, Greece, and Rome, the Aztecs and the Inca—had in common several features: military conquest, seizure of territory, political subjugation, and economic exploitation of subject peoples, as well as cultural domination of those subjects. When in modern times new empires arose—Russia, the Ottomans, Spain, Portugal, France and England—it was natural for them to take and for others to give them the same name—empire—since they tended to share those same characteristics. With the rise of industrial capitalism, the early empires of 1500-1750 were transformed in the nineteenth century into capitalist, imperial Great Powers that competed with each other in a struggle for global domination. And then new imperial powers also entered into the picture around the beginning of the twentieth century: Germany, Japan, and the United States.

While in different periods different empires became dominant, with the rise of these modern empires, critics used the concept of imperialism to refer to a struggle *among* various capitalist powers seeking to dominate the world. When Rosa Luxemburg, Nikolai Bukharin, and Vladimir Lenin referred to imperialism, it was this that they had in mind: not one Great Power, but the *contest* among the Great Powers. Based on the writings of Rudolf Hilferding, Lenin saw a concentration of capitalism in the hands of high finance and a tendency of imperialism to contribute to capitalism's longevity through the export of capital, which counteracted the long-term tendency of "the increasing organic composition of capital" (a greater involvement of capital than labor in production) and a consequent lowering of profits. In that way, colonies gave empires a longer lease on life.

The revolutionary socialists of the early twentieth century recognized that England, France, Germany, Japan, and the United States (as well as other nations) were imperial powers all struggling for domination of the planet. While England had been the dominant nation, following World War I the United States began to surpass it in economic and military power. Yet the revolutionary socialists of the 1910s and 1920s did not then contemplate supporting Germany or Japan against the

United States, nor would they entertain the idea of backing England and France against Germany.

World War II was a continuation of that imperialist struggle. But the rise of Fascism in Italy, Nazism in Germany, and the Japanese military state (the Axis Powers), forced revolutionary socialists, Social Democrats, and Communists to rethink the issues of international alliances. In order to defend the Communist ruling class of his regime and the Soviet Union which it ruled, Stalin signed a pact with Hitler in 1939, but when Germany invaded the Soviet Union in June 1941, he entered into an alliance with the Allied Powers: Great Britain, France, and the United States—all of them imperialist powers who were continuing the struggle begun in World War I for control of the planet. Social Democrats, who strove to become managers of capitalist states, also supported the allied nations. But some revolutionary socialists opposed both war camps, supporting both the European resistance movements and colonial rebellions. Stalin's alliance with the Allies allowed him, following the defeat of the Axis Powers, to sit down with Winston Churchill and Franklin Roosevelt at the end of the Second World War to literally divide up the nations of Europe. The division of the spoils was followed almost immediately by the Cold War, the creation of two camps—capitalist and Communist—and the rise of an alternative Third Camp of the world's workers and oppressed peoples.

The Origins of “Campism” within the Socialist Movement

What we today call “campism” has its origins in the history of the Russian Revolution. The Bolshevik Party, headed by Vladimir Lenin, led a revolution in Russia in October 1917 that thrust power on the *soviets*, councils of workers, soldiers, and peasants. Soviet Russia (later the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, or USSR), the first workers' government, won the support of millions of workers around the world. Many working people and leftists came to see the Soviet Union as a place where workers had taken power and were in the process of creating socialism.

At the same time, Soviet Russia experienced a series of civil wars, invasion by more than a dozen foreign powers, enormous destruction of agriculture and industry, and then economic and political isolation because of the failure of the European revolutions, especially in Germany, a revolution that the Bolsheviks had counted on. In these conditions of what the Bolsheviks called “war communism,” in the early 1920s workers' power diminished as the *soviets* atrophied and the labor unions weakened. At the same time, the Bolsheviks, now calling themselves the Communist Party, outlawed or otherwise eliminated all other parties. The leadership of the CP also abolished factions, ending any internal democracy in the Communist state. Soviet Russia became a one-party state.

It was in these circumstances that in the mid-1920s Joseph Stalin led a counterrevolution and by 1929 had virtually achieved dictatorial power. Over the next decade he consolidated the power of his bureaucratic regime, murdered tens of thousands of old Bolsheviks, and through the process of the collectivization of agriculture brought about the deaths of five million peasants, while the industrialization of the country resembled a compressed history of early capitalism, intensely exploiting the working class to build hydroelectric plants, mills, and factories.

The Communist Party had established the Communist or Third International in 1919 to coordinate attempts at workers' revolutions around the world. The Communist International, led by Lenin and the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, intervened in many workers' parties and in their struggles around the world, attempting to reorganize the former Socialist Parties along Bolshevik lines and encouraging them to establish soviet-style governments. While internationalism was the dominant trend, when the interests of Soviet Russia were at issue, as in the case of Turkey, Lenin and the Russian Communists were willing to sacrifice Turkish Communists in order to preserve a strategic alliance with the Turkish government.

By the time Stalin took command not only of the Soviet Union but also of the Communist

International, everything became subordinated to the interests of the new Communist ruling class and the defense and expansion of the Soviet Union. Still, the Russian Revolution enjoyed great esteem, and the Communist parties around the world continued to organize workers to defend the “workers’ homeland.” When Stalin signed the mutual non-aggression pact with Hitler in August 1939, including the division of Poland and its occupation by German and Soviet troops, Communist Party members in many countries resigned, but the parties stood by the USSR. Similarly, Communists supported the Soviet Union’s war against Finland in November 1939. However, with Hitler’s invasion of the Soviet Union in June of 1941, followed by Japan’s attack on Pearl Harbor, the Soviet Union and the Allied Powers (Britain, France, and the United States) became at first tacit partners and soon actual allies.

With the end of the war, the Soviet Union’s Red Army simultaneously “liberated” the Eastern European countries from the Nazis and subjugated them to the Soviet Union, so that the Communist system and the Soviet empire expanded enormously. For Communists and their fellow travelers, not only the Soviet Union, but now the states of Eastern Europe also became the “workers’ homeland,” or what the Communists and their fellow travelers called the “socialist camp.” Then, between 1949 and 1959, China, North Korea, North Vietnam, and Cuba also became part of this camp. Communists and their fellow travelers, even if they recognized the “crimes of Stalin,” saw all of this as an extension of socialism. They supported that enlarged Communist camp against the capitalist camp.

As one can see, through the process that began in the mid-1920s, the notion of international working-class solidarity was replaced by the concept of loyalty to the Soviet Union and then by allegiance to the entire Communist camp. Around the world, Communist support for the Soviet Union as the workers’ homeland also came to be construed as support for the anti-imperialist camp. The Cold War transformed the Soviet Union and the Communist camp in the eyes of many, both supporters and opponents, into the anti-capitalist, anti-imperialist alternative to capitalism. Those Communist campists defended their camp even when Stalin’s crimes became widely known, even though millions had been sent to Gulags (concentration camps), even though there were no political or democratic rights in the USSR, even though the Soviet Union had become a major imperial power in Europe. Loyalty to the Communist camp overrode all objections to the situation within the USSR in the minds of its supporters. This was the birth of the first campism.

That loyalty meant that when there was a workers’ revolution against Communism in Hungary in 1956, a democratic revolution in Czechoslovakia in 1968, or an enormous workers’ rebellion in Poland in 1980, the Communist campists supported the Soviet Union or the other Communist states when they used their tanks to crush those movements. (Thus the term “tankie.”)

Maoism and Third Worldism

Contemporary campism, however, probably owes more to Maoism and Third Worldism than to Soviet Communism. The Communist movement began to fracture after World War II: Yugoslavia became an independent Communist state in 1948, while more importantly, in the early 1960s, rivalry broke out between Beijing and Moscow. Communism was no longer one unified world movement. It became polycentric, with rival Communist nations seeking to extend their influence and power.

At the same time, a movement for an end to the empires, for the independence of the colonies, and for freedom for their peoples began just after the war, with some initial support from both the United States¹ and the Soviet Union,² each claiming it was anti-imperialist and each for its own reasons interested in seeing the dismantlement of the enormous British and French and other European empires.³ As the grip of the empires loosened, dozens of new nations were established and hundreds of millions of people became citizens of the new countries, free from foreign rule. In Asia, the transformation was most dramatic: the Philippines became independent in July 1946; India in

August 1947; Indonesia in August 1949; China ending its semi-colonial status in 1949—more than half of the world's people. Between 1957 and 1990, virtually all of the African colonial nations became independent (a few had won nominal independence earlier). Similarly in the Caribbean between the 1950s and the 1980s the former British colonial island nations became independent. A sea change in world history took place: the Third World emerged.

The Third World was a fact, but it also became an ideology. The term and concept of “Third World,” which first appeared in print in France in 1952, referred to those nations that were not formally part of the capitalist or Communist spheres, that is, to the two-thirds of humanity living in Asia, Africa, or Latin America who had experienced colonialism or semi-colonialism and whose populations were made up of people of color, most of whom were peasants. This development found expression in the Bandung Conference of 1955 that brought together 29 Asian and African nations, including China, and rejected “imperialism in all of its manifestations,” that is the imperialism of both Western capitalist countries and the Soviet Union. Those original 29 nations, joined by the countries of Latin America, and later scores of others, then created the Non-aligned Movement.

Yet it was not exactly non-aligned. It leaned toward Communism. Both the Communist governments of Josip Broz Tito in Yugoslavia and of Fidel Castro in Cuba, came to play a role in the Non-aligned Movement. In 1966, Cuba held a Tricontinental Conference of 80 nations in Havana that once again attempted to give political form to the Third World. Expressing support for anti-imperialism and anti-colonialism, it created the Organization of Solidarity of the Peoples of Africa, Asia, and Latin America. The Tricontinental criticized U.S. imperialism, but made no mention of Soviet imperialism, given that Cuba was resisting the U.S. blockade and was aligned with the Soviet Union. So gradually the Third World took form politically.

While the United States initially supported the dissolution of the old empires, as the Cold War developed, for political and economic reasons it often supported the European powers in their attempts to maintain control of their colonies (as in Vietnam) or later to exercise neo-colonial control of the new, nominally independent nations (as in Ghana and the Congo). The Soviet Union and China, on the other hand, having no economic interest in the colonies and politically opposed to the capitalist West, generally supported the colonial independence movements, voted with them at the United Nations, and assisted them militarily. (Of course, the Soviet Union would not countenance objections to its absorption of Eastern Europe into its empire between 1945 and 1948, and China objected to any criticism of its takeover of Tibet in 1951.) The point is that the new Third World often had ties to the Communist world, and came to be seen as associated with the struggle for Communism.

Third Worldism became an ideology. It was the idea that these peoples' anti-imperialist, anti-colonial movements would continue the process of socialist revolution that had begun in the Soviet Union, China, or later Cuba. The Third Worldist notion of a world divided into capitalist nations and proletarian-peasant nations got a grip on the minds of many leftists. During the 1960s the view that Third World peoples' liberation struggles were the vanguard of the world revolutionary movement influenced the far left, Maoists, Trotskyists, and others. The popularity of Maoism and Guevarism (after Cuba's Ernesto “Che” Guevara) derived in part from this outlook. While the Third Worldist project had clearly failed by the late 1970s, some Third Worldists now transferred their allegiance from revolutionary movements to various governments of the Global South, none of which were socialist and nearly all of which represented a new capitalist class, had authoritarian governments, often personal dictatorships, and were in no way progressive.

Campism Today

The principal event that triggered the rise of contemporary campism was the collapse of the Soviet

Union between 1989 and 1992. If one could no longer support the Soviet Communist camp, what force could one support against capitalism? Third Worldist theory provided an answer for some: One could support the poor, dark nations of the Global South struggling against the imperialism of the rich, white nations of the Global North.

In this clearly bifurcated world, the campists argued, one had to be on the side of the governments that rule the proletarian-peasant world, a world of black and brown working people fighting against the capitalist powers of the wealthier white world. The capitalist and imperialist nations of the Global North, including Australia and New Zealand, all white except Japan, South Korea, Singapore, and Taiwan, exploited and oppressed the peasant-proletarian nations of the Global South, all made up of people of color. The white capitalist powers were by definition imperialist, and the proletarian-peasant nations, made up of people of color, were, the campists argued, inherently anti-imperialist. In this way a nation such as Iran, which had never had a socialist government, or the Assad family dictatorship in Syria, could be enrolled among the anti-imperialist nations. Obviously, this view tended to downplay or totally ignore the class divisions within both the capitalist and the so-called proletarian-peasant worlds. For the campists, the camp was thus more important than the class.

Many older, former leftists who today are campists adopted this mindset with its origins in Maoist or Third Worldist notions. Some of these political analysts and activists today, who still think of themselves as leftists, tend to subordinate all questions to imperialism, arguing that it is the most important and virtually the central issue. If a state opposes the United States, then it is by definition anti-imperialist, so that its government's own political, economic, and social system is irrelevant to that principal world conflict, which is imperialism. Moreover, whatever the problems of any of the so-called anti-imperialist states, they should not be examined or criticized, because that might weaken support for the anti-imperialist camp and its struggle against the United States and its allies. So, today's campists will not discuss the authoritarian and oppressive political powers or the exploitative economic systems of what they consider to be the "anti-imperialist nations," such as Russia, China, or Cuba, or of Iran or Syria. The campists are even more hostile to the notion that one should examine the class character, governmental system, and economic regimes of beleaguered nations like Venezuela or Nicaragua. To question these governments, they argue, is to aid U.S. imperialism. So traditional Marxism, based on analyzing the political economy, social classes, class struggle and oppression in a country, as well as its international relations, is discarded.

These same people generally also tend to define imperialism to mean only U.S. imperialism, ignoring or pushing aside the practices of other imperialist nations and their acts. Since in the eyes of these activists the United States is the only or by far the dominant imperial power everywhere, they then define nations that are opposed to the United States—such as Russia, China, Iran, or Syria—as anti-imperialist nations. And having defined those nations as anti-imperialist, they often then become apologists for the governments of those nations, even though they are authoritarian governments ruling capitalist countries. They will even attribute to these nations "socialist" or "democratic" characteristics that their governments do not in fact have.

The logic is something like this: X is an enemy of the United States, therefore X is anti-imperialist, therefore we support it, and since it is anti-imperialist, it must be progressive. It follows that any criticism of country X is reactionary. People who criticize any anti-imperialist nation such as X must be on the side of imperialism. So, for example, since the United States is an imperial power, and China opposes the United States, then China must be progressive (some will even say socialist). So then, the argument goes, those who criticize China for putting some 1.5 million Uyghurs in concentration camps or for its crushing of the democratic movement in Hong Kong, must be allied with the United States government and are objectively pro-imperialist. This is the campist logic.

Campists argue that those who criticize the so-called anti-imperialist nations (Russia, China, etc.)

place themselves on the side of U.S. imperialism. Yet capitalist and imperialist parties and governments frequently take different sides and change sides, and their doing so is something over which we on the left can have little if any influence at this time. Trump, for example, seemed to become a supporter of Vladimir Putin, the dictator of Russia, and expressed admiration of Xi Jinping, taking the same position held by some who call themselves anti-imperialists. Yet these same anti-imperialists object when internationalists come to the defense of the Uyghur people of Xinjiang Province, because both the Trump and Biden administrations have said they support the Uyghurs.

The truth is that socialist internationalists who support the Uyghurs do so *despite* the fact that the U.S. government says it supports them. We do so for our own reasons and while continuing to oppose U.S. imperialism. We do so because the Uyghurs, like the Poles and the Irish in Marx's time, have a right to self-determination, and shouldn't be politically, economically, and culturally subjected to China's authoritarian state and its Han nationalism.

Today if we wish to know if any nation is imperialist, we should see if it engages in any of the five criteria mentioned earlier, that is, military conquest, seizure of territory, political subjugation, economic exploitation, and cultural domination. Certainly, the United States has engaged in all of these, and there is no doubt that it is an imperialist nation. The same can be said of the Western European nations and of Japan. At the same time, China conquered Tibet militarily and then seized its territory, politically subjugated it, and has tried to eradicate its culture, partly through colonization. Today China seizes territory—in this case rights to the sea—by creating small islands in the South China Sea, threatening its neighbors such as the Philippines. In 2014, Russia seized militarily and annexed the Ukrainian territory of Crimea, the first such development in Europe since World War II.

So then, how did the idea develop among campists that the United States is the only imperialist power? Once again, we can trace this back to Maoism. Maoists argued that in the analysis of any political problem one should locate the "primary contradiction" to which all other issues are subordinate, and fight to overcome that primary contradiction. The campists took up this notion and applied it to world politics arguing that imperialism was the principal issue and that the United States was the dominant power. The struggle then should be against U.S. imperialism and not over issues in those other countries that have to do with democracy, economic reforms, women's rights, or even the struggle for socialism. This idea of the primary contradiction thus tends to eliminate the fight for working class internationalism. Campists argue that one dare not support people fighting for democracy, workers fighting for labor unions, or women seeking equality in nations like Iran or Syria—even when those people are imprisoned—because that will distract from the primary contradiction, which is the role of those nations as anti-imperialist powers in the struggle against the United States.

The Apparent Coincidence of Capitalist and Socialist Positions

The so-called anti-imperialists who support countries like China, Russia, Syria, and Iran argue that those of us who support democratic or socialist oppositions in those countries are somehow automatically supporting the United States. They argue that our support for democracy necessarily implies support for U.S. sanctions or military intervention, even when we have not supported or have even explicitly opposed such measures.

Consider the incredibly complex case of Syria where in 2011, at the time of the Arab Spring, democratic internationalist socialists supported the initial movement of farmers and then some urban people in their struggles against the dictatorship of Bashar al-Assad. We supported that movement without calling for U.S., European, or Middle Eastern intervention in the country. The democratic forces in Syria attempted to keep the struggle against the Assad regime non-violent so

that it could include the largest number of participants. Assad, however, decided to violently repress the opposition, even bombing and virtually destroying Syrian cities, with tens of thousands of lives lost. Then local powers with ambitions to exert regional influence—Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Qatar—further militarized and encouraged the struggle, providing arms to their local allies. While Russia, Iran, and Lebanon’s Hezbollah provided arms and military personnel to defend the Assad regime, we international socialists affirmed the right of the Syrian people to get arms to fight wherever they could, just as other nations had done during the anti-colonial movements of the twentieth century.

Assad had in effect declared war on his own people and made it clear that he was willing to turn the provincial cities into rubble littered with corpses in order to keep power. Beginning in 2015 Assad invited Russia to make airstrikes in Syria. Soon, some Syrian oppositionists at home and abroad sought support or even intervention from the U.S. or European governments, a development that we internationalists did *not* support. At the same time, ISIS (or Daesh), another reactionary power, began to assemble and mobilize its own forces there. The United States supported the Syrian Democratic Forces, which became dominated by the great powers. Meanwhile 5.6 million Syrians fled the country, and the possibility of democratic revolution was no longer on the agenda. Subsequently, while allied with Assad, the Russians and the Iranians pursued their own regional imperial interests.

While it is true that both the Western capitalist powers and the socialist internationalist left apparently supported the democratic revolution in Syria, we actually supported different political groups, at different moments, and different forces for different reasons. The capitalist West decided that it wished to replace Assad with a more amenable government — Assadism without Assad — while we internationalists supported the initial uprising from below in its desire to create a democratic government chosen by the people to represent their interests.

Internationalism is the Real Anti-Imperialism

Those who support authoritarian regimes in the name of anti-imperialism not only do a disservice to all of those people who in countries like Russia, China, Iran, Syria, Venezuela, and Nicaragua fighting for democracy and in some cases for socialism too, but they also violate fundamental tenets of socialism, and they weaken the actual struggle against U.S. imperialism.

Let’s take the case of China. Today China and the United States, while they are economic competitors, are also intimately bound together in the world capitalist and imperialist system. China holds \$1.1 trillion in U.S. debt, while China exports annually \$443.45 billion dollars in products to the United States, and the United States sells \$106.4 billion to China. These economic relations represent some of the largest and strongest relationships in the world economy, a system in which both nations play leading roles. It is for this reason that Republicans and Democrats have both vacillated in their attitudes toward China, though President Joseph Biden is now taking a hard line.

Those on the left should recognize that one cannot imagine overthrowing U.S. imperialism without simultaneously destroying the Chinese economic system, since both countries form part and parcel of the same world economic arrangement. Beyond the U.S.-China relationship, in what is really classical imperialism, China has invested trillions in the development of coal and mineral mines, oil and gas, and other resources in countries in Asia, Africa, and Latin America, and its “new silk road” or “China’s Belt and Road Initiative”—highways, railroads, and pipelines—that would connect Europe with China and enhance its links with Africa and Asia. All of this is about expanding Chinese finance, industry, and commerce, that is, the economic underpinnings of Chinese imperialism. As always in the history of imperialism, one can expect that on these economic foundations China will build a military force to defend them, as we already see in the South China Sea. China’s economic

imperialism will likely at some point in the not-too-distant future lead to military conflict with the United States or its Asian allies, that could become a nuclear war and destroy the human race.

Let us take another quite different case, Nicaragua. Since at least 2006, Nicaragua has been a dictatorship ruled by Daniel Ortega, a thoroughly capitalist regime, where his Frente Sandinista Party was allied with the Conservative and Liberal Parties. Ortega controls the presidency, the legislature, the Supreme Court, and all of the major news media of the country. His government opposes labor union organization in the maquiladoras, denies women's right to abortion, and jails its political opponents.

One can see that despite its claim to be a socialist government, Nicaragua was a thoroughly capitalist country. And it was repressive. When farmers and environmentalists protested against a proposed transoceanic canal in 2014, they were violently beaten. When in 2018 the elderly and then students protested against a reactionary reform of the pension system, they were beaten, or shot and killed. That led to what became in 2018 a full-scale national rebellion that was met with extreme violence and hundreds of murders at the hands of Ortega's police and thugs. The so-called anti-imperialist left refused to support the democratic movement. It attributed the national uprising to the United States, a government that had been happily working with Ortega for years. Nicaragua received in 2019 some \$44 million in *U.S. government aid*, between \$100 million and nearly \$200 million *from the World Bank* in 2017; the European Union provided \$169 million from 2014-2020; and Ortega collaborated with the U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency, with the U.S. military Southern Command (receiving U.S. military equipment), and with U.S. immigration policy (stopping migration from or through Nicaragua). The campists complain that Nicaraguans have sometimes turned to the U.S. government for assistance, which is true. Yet the campists ignore the alternative, which is to build a Nicaraguan solidarity movement of the American people (not the U.S. government) and people around the world to support the democratic opposition (as we did when the Nicaraguan people faced the U.S.-backed Somoza dictatorship).

Anti-imperialism should begin with internationalism, with support for movements of working people around the world. Opposition to imperialism requires strengthening the movements of workers, peasants, the urban poor, as well as the ruined lower-middle classes throughout the world. We should see the struggle against imperialism as based on the many democratic social movements, labor movements, and in some cases socialist movements in myriad countries living under governments that call themselves capitalist or socialist. We as socialists should attempt to support these movements—whether in Argentina or Venezuela, in Iran or Algeria, in Japan or China, in France or the Ukraine, in Germany or Russia—while also helping first in theory and then in practice to bring them together in one international movement for liberation.

Notes

1. The United States, for example, supported Indonesia in its struggle to end first Japanese and then Dutch rule over the colony.
2. The Soviet Union supported Vietnam's independence movement.
3. Both the United States and the Soviet Union supported the creation of the independent states of Syria and Lebanon in 1944 and the U.S., the USSR and France all supported the creation of Israel, carved out of the British Palestinian mandate.