# The World Up in Arms Against Austerity and Authoritarianism

written by Dan La Botz | October 26, 2019

*Much of the world at this moment is a laboratory searching for the cure for capitalism, and the social scientists running the experiments are in the streets.*

Around the world, people are rising up in arms, on nearly every continent and in more than a dozen nations. In the last six months there have been rebellions in France, Catalunya, Puerto Rico, Hong Kong, Lebanon, Chile, Ecuador, Honduras, Haiti, Iraq, Sudan and Algeria. These rebellions have in general had a popular and left leaning character and they are angry, militant, and defiant. The common feature is these are rebellions of the lower middle class, the working class and the poor. These various movements have everywhere overflown the banks of the political system. The waves of protest beat against the foundation of the state. The activists in the street everywhere call into question the system, whatever that system where they live is called. When the governments have attempted to crush these movements, the people fight back, refusing to give up the streets. What lies behind these rebellions, what has caused them, and where are they going?

The political situation in each of these countries varies tremendously and the detonating events were quite different: from an objectionable new law to a stolen election, from decades-old dictatorships that have become unbearable to increases in public transit fares. In Lebanon it was the imposition of a tax on Whatsapp telephone calls. In Ecuador the government's decision allowed an increase in the price of gasoline. In Chile an increase in the metro fare. In Honduras it was the discovery that the president aided his brother who led a drug cartel. In Puerto Rico it was a corrupt and misogynist president. In Hong Kong the promulgation of a law that infringed on local autonomy. In Catalunya in the State of Spain, the meting out of long sentences to Catalan nationalist protestors. In Iraq the people have risen up against unemployment, corruption, and an unresponsive government. In Algeria and Sudan, the populations' weariness with longstanding authoritarian governments. In Nicaragua, a social security pension reform. In Haiti too protests against a corrupt and authoritarian president.

Everywhere, there was a different trigger. Yet the central issue everywhere is the desire to be treated with dignity and respect.

There are common elements among these rebellions: economic inequality, the imposition of austerity, and governmental abuse of their power. The feeling is, they don't care about us. In many of these countries the state has lost its legitimacy and the citizenry no longer has confidence in the historic political parties, but generally speaking there is no political party in a position to put forward an alternative political agenda or a new leadership. Yet the revolts have shaken the powers-that-be in each country and sent powerful shockwaves through the international political order. We seem to be in a period of synchronized though uncoordinated political revolts demanding democracy and a better life. We have been here before.

This is not the first time that there has been an apparent international simultaneity of revolt and even of revolutions. The first such wave—almost an entire epoch—occurred the in the last quarter of the eighteenth century with the outbreak of the American Revolution in 1776, then the French Revolution of 1789, followed by the Haitian Revolution of 1804 and then the Latin American Revolutions of 1810 to 1821. Another such wave occurred with the European Revolution of 1848 that swept through France, Germany, and the Austrian-Hungarian Empire, and we might include in that wave the Chartist movement in England. The period from 1917 to 1919 brought revolutions in Russia, German, Austria, and Hungary, as well as the Ottoman Empire. And while 1968 brought no revolution, it was a year of radical upheavals from France to Czechoslovakia, to Mexico. Just as today, during each of these periods of radical upheaval the detonating events in each country were unique, yet at the same time one could see common elements and often also similar dynamics. While in most cases the bourgeoisie put itself at the head of the revolutionary movements sooner or later, still it was working people and the poor who generally gave these rebellions their radical thrust and provided the cutting edge.

In different periods, different conditions created the pre-revolutionary situation and a wide variety of events sparked the revolutionary movements, but it is usually possible to discern commonalities in each wave. The growth of international trade, imperial rivalries, and the contrast between the old aristocratic order and the emerging bourgeois society conditions the revolutions of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. The rise of capitalism in England and then in France, the factory and then the railroad, together with the rise there of the liberal state and representative government, drove the conflict of 1848 as the ideas of the West pushed East, until the threat of working class revolution drove the bourgeoisie into the arms of the aristocrats, and those together then crushed the democratic and socialist movement both. The expansion and then the domination of capitalist financiers and industrial corporations in rival states led to modern imperialism and then to world war in 1914, and the war with its millions of dead and massive destruction led to revolution and then to the collapse of the old empires: Germany, Austria-Hungary, and the Ottoman empire. The Russian Revolution of October 1917, an uprising from below of workers and peasants, led to the attempt to spread workers' councils and socialist revolution throughout Europe and beyond.

**The Driving Force Behind the Upheavals**

Today's revolts in all of the countries we have named are driven by several forces that have reshaped the balance of power between nation states as well as the social classes within those state and led simultaneously to the crisis of the neoliberal order and the more significant final collapse of the post-World War II order. The transformation of China into a highly successful capitalist society, the fall of the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe in the 1990s, and then the 2008 recession taken together have almost erased the old division of the world into capitalist, Communist, and Third World nation or the more recent developed and developing nations. We live now in a world with a mosaic of extreme wealth and unnecessary poverty in nearly all countries.

The driving forces underlying these developments—some of them hardly visible at the moment through the water-cannon's jets or the clouds of tear gas—will be found in financiers' reorganization

of the world economy, driven by the desire for profit and economic control. The financial and corporate moguls have in the last fifty years, and at an increasingly rapid pace in the last twenty, transformed industry by satellite and microchip, by computers and automation, by new forms of managerial organization of the workforce and have created workplaces overseen by electronic surveillance. The incredible augmentation of production throughout the world—from mineral extraction to manufacture to services—all channeled through international trade agreements and carried by the logistics industry with its warehouses and shipping containers has, within the neoliberal economic framework, led to an enormous growth in economic inequality. Everywhere the capitalist class and its political partners have enriched themselves at the expense of the working classes and the poor. All of this has led to tremendous and well-justified resentment by the majorities in countries around the globe.

There is no doubt that in the aftermath of the Great Recession of 2008, we entered into a new political period where rebellion alternates with repression, beginning in 2011 with Movement of the Plazas in Spain, Occupy Wall Street in the United States, the Arab Spring in the Middle East and North Africa. The economic crisis also gave rise to new rightwing nationalist parties and political personalities, from the Northern League in Italy to the Alternative for Germany (AfD), from Boris Johnson in England to Donald Trump in the United States. The ramifications of the crisis are still felt almost everywhere, though North America (Canada, the United States, and Mexico) remain so far practically immune to the radical contagion.

In all of the recent upheavals, we see the working classes and the poor rising up and taking action outside of or even against the social organizations and institutions, the labor unions and the political parties that have in the past pretended to represent them. When the left political parties and union bureaucracies have attempted to restrain these movements, as they have in many places, the workers themselves have either bypassed those institutions or they have tried to force them to act and have striven to push aside the current leaders and to alter the organizations' policies. Without political parties of their own working people have often been unable to formulate a clear program, but their militant actions and their slogans have made it quite evident that they demand an altogether different sort of society, one where workers' voices are heard and their needs met.

These concurrent revolts have diverse characters. In France the Yellow Vest movement, which for months tied up traffic throughout the country and then took their protest to the wealthiest parts of Paris, is made up of working people who have no unions, the hairdresser and the handyman, people who have not been defended by industrial unions of the General Confederation of Workers (CGT) or the Socialist Party. In Chile students detonated the rebellion by refusing to pay the new higher fare and jumping the turnstiles, but when the government put tanks on the streets for the first time since the dictatorship of General Augusto Pinochet, the dockworkers walked out on strike. In Hong Kong everyone from restaurant cooks to computer programmers have joined the protests. In Nicaragua the elderly were joined by students and then by the general population that barricaded entire towns.

Almost everywhere the governments have responded with attempts to repress the movement using riot police, water cannons, tear gas, beatings, arrests. Almost everywhere there have been deaths and severe injuries. In some places like Hong Kong and Nicaragua, the police have been supplemented by gangsters or paramilitaries. In Sudan and Chile, the army was sent out to crush the movement, while outside of Hong Kong the Chinese Peoples Army remains massed on the border, awaiting a call to intervene. But the people refuse to give up the street, call out others, look for new avenues of protest, and the many-headed hydra just keeps reappearing aroud the next corner. As the revolts spread, they can begin to shape the contemporary *Zeitgeist*, legitimizing the idea of rebellion and raising the question of revolution.

Still, one must not exaggerate and we must remember that all of this turmoil takes place against a

backdrop of entrenched despotisms and authoritarian governments that rule most of the world's people: the Communist Party dictatorship that manages capitalism in China, the personal dictatorship of Vladimir Putin and his oligarchic mafia in Russia, Bashir al Assad in Syria, the personalist authoritarian regimes of Narendra Modi in India and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, and Rodrigo Duerte in the Philippines, as well as the new rightwing government of Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil. Those governments keep their populations locked down to prevent precisely the kind of militant movements for change we are discussing here.

**Stand with the People in Rebellion**

Returning to our discussion of the revolts themselves, where much of the population either sympathizes with or joins the protests, these become popular rebellions, that is, rebellions of the entire population. Consequently their class character may become vague and indeterminate, even if is the working people are driving them forward. Similarly their demands for democracy are sometimes unclear and undeveloped. Their call for democracy may obfuscate the inherent contradictions between those who want a liberal state and parliamentary democracy—dominated by the banks and business—and those who want some sort of working class democracy where everyone has an equal voice and vote. Precisely because these are mass upheavals they contain within them many social groups and widely divergent ideas and are riven with controversy and debate—and that is both necessary and very good.

The fact that many of these revolts are popular and not led by leftist parties and not guided by socialist ideologies, and that they contain many contradictory currents, has caused consternation among leftist groups both in the United States and elsewhere. Their confusion arises from the fact that they have not for almost fifty years had to try to understand and interpret such mass popular movements. When one Hong Kong demonstrator carries a sign that says "Trump Liberate Us" or a handful of Nicaraguans goes to Washington and speaks with Republican congressmen, leftists in other countries may abandon the rebellion because they have no experience with mass popular movements and their complexities and contradictions. Even in their own countries leftists may be unable to comprehend what's happening, as in France where for months much of the left characterized the Yellow Vests as fascists.

We should, on the contrary, recognize that mass popular revolts enter into a political quest and a search for their program and leaders. We know from history that that if and when social revolts become political, the leaders, parties, and programs will be tested in the struggle against the old order and in the contest between different tendencies within the movement to establish a new order. The movements need time to work out their views, perhaps to divide into different or rival positions. And to get that time, they need our solidarity.

Here again we can see some trends, though they are only that and not yet definite political alternatives. In places like Hong Kong, which want to keep the dictatorship at bay, or in Algeria or Sudan where the movement rises to overthrow and old dictatorial order, the initial demand is for a parliamentary democracy and civil rights, which represents an enormous advance over dictatorship. The same is true where the population thinks the government is betraying democratic norms, as in Puerto Rico, and Honduras.

Still, history suggests that in struggles for parliamentary democracy, working people will also raise economic and social demands while their struggles may produce new institutions as alternatives not only to the old parties but perhaps even to the old constitution and the parliament. In other places, such as France and Chile, from the very beginning the struggle over economic issues and for democracy are completely intertwined. The truth is, however, that with the exception of Algeria and Sudan, and perhaps Chile, almost none of these countries is in a pre-revolutionary situation, and in

virtually none of them has the social rebellion given rise to a revolutionary political party. Yet it is also true that much of the world at this moment is a laboratory searching for the cure for capitalism, and the social scientists running the experiments are in the streets.

All of these struggles deserve our support, unconditional in many cases, though not uncritical. We support those fighting for democracy in the street, but we also understand that, much like ourselves, they have yet to clarity their political positions and produce the necessary political tools to change the society. We are witnessing a great concurrent movement from below for democracy and economic justice across the world and we stand with those movements.