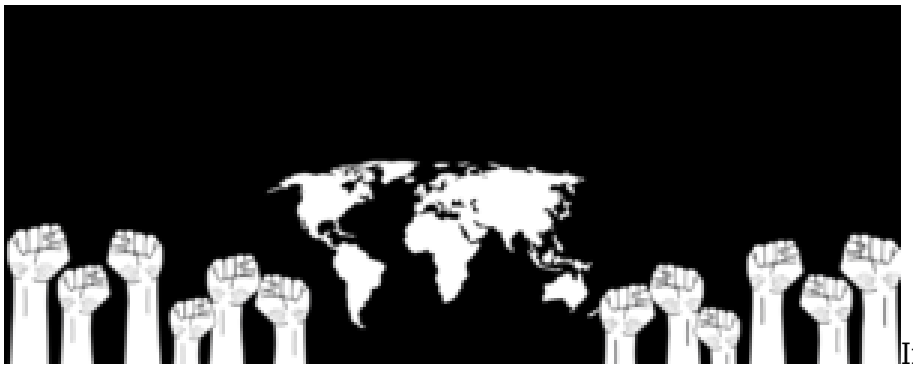
When Your Enemy's Enemy is Not a Friend

written by John Clarke | March 19, 2021



In a world based on exploitation and oppression, resistance is ever present. Most of the time it simmers below the surface but sometimes it takes the form of huge social explosions. It would seem natural for those on the left to wish for such mass resistance to occur on a truly global scale. There is, however, a complicating factor. A section of the left has embraced a 'campist' view, in some ways a hangover from the Cold War period, that sees global politics primarily in terms of a conflict between a US led predatory group of countries and another 'anti-imperialist camp.' That we should hate and oppose US imperialism, with it's agenda of global domination, is certainly not in dispute. However, there are practical results that flow from the campist position that stand in the way of international working class solidarity and that need to be challenged.

The US and its junior partners compete with their major rivals and pose a terrible threat to the poor and oppressed countries they seek to dominate and exploit. However, we can't forget that those countries are themselves class divided societies and that not all the exploitation and oppression that their populations face comes out of Washington. Domestic capitalists are also the enemy and the governments of those countries, even where they clash with US objectives, still represent the interests of these home grown exploiters.

The problem with the campist perspective is that it so fixates on the role of imperialism and places so much emphasis on its 'anti-imperialist camp' that it ends up taking a very forgiving view of oppressive regimes. Moreover, when local working class populations challenge that oppression on the streets, campists find such struggles decidedly inconvenient. Indeed, they are often ready to hurl accusations that such movements of resistance, however real their grievances, are simply the product of Western manipulation. The material put out by The Grayzone is a particularly glaring and crude example of just this approach.

There is an equally serious and related difference on the left over the question of China, clearly the main global rival of the US. In that case, disagreements over supporting social resistance are compounded by the insistence of some that China is no mere component of an anti-imperialist camp but a socialist society. It is suggested that, under the leadership of the Communist Party, a 'socialist market economy with Chinese characteristics' is being developed. In advancing the perspective that hostility to US led imperialism shouldn't prevent solidarity with working class struggle in every part of the earth, the nature of Chinese society will have to be taken up in more detail. However, I'll first look at the changing US agenda of global domination because it is necessary to properly acknowledge the very large grain of truth that contributes to the political disorientation of campism.

The Main Enemy

The Trump administration certainly pushed an agenda of global rivalry but its strategies and methods were crude and erratic. Biden represents a restoration of 'US global leadership' that seeks to put a 'human rights' face on an agenda that will be even more brutal but significantly more efficient and credible. For Biden, containing the growing economic power of China will be the prime consideration. Certainly, rivalry with Russia will still be pursued, the effort to contain the regional ambitions of Iran will continue and there will be ongoing initiatives to advance the US capacity to exploit on a global scale. However, the immediate period after the collapse of the Soviet Union, when US hegemony seemed much more secure, is long gone and it is China that poses the greatest threat by far. The World Economic Forum breaks down key 'global sectors and industries' and shows that the US still holds the dominant position but 'China is coming up very fast.'

The US, then, remains the main enemy and it brings along with it a grouping of lesser imperial powers, including Canada. Those of us who live in these countries have a particular duty to oppose and challenge their ongoing robbery with violence. When they try to impose client regimes on poor and oppressed countries, we must do all we can to expose and disrupt their plans. We can give no support to their rivalry with other major powers. When they express selective moral outrage at the 'human rights abuses' of those rivals, we should denounce their hypocrisy and challenge them on the crimes they are party to. Yet, none of this means that oppression is not occurring within the 'anti-imperialist camp' and neither does it mean that we should regard challenges to that oppression with disdain or hostility.

The Role of China

I recently saw a comment on Facebook from someone who viewed China as a socialist society. He suggested that the working class is in power and, while there are sometimes problems with capitalists, the state invariably takes the side of the workers. This view is simply at odds with ample and readily available evidence to the contrary.

I have already pointed to the huge growth of the Chinese economy in the last several decades. It has emerged as an economic powerhouse that has a central role in the global supply chain that has developed during the neoliberal decades. In 2020, it replaced the US as the EU's top trading partner. At the same time, it has also overtaken the US as the world's 'top destination for new foreign direct investment.' Example after example can be drawn on to show conclusively that China is becoming ever more powerful at the expense of the US to a degree that threatens its hegemonic position.

However, the supposedly socialist political leadership that has overseen this incorporation into the global capitalist marketplace has strikingly failed to to prevent many of the things that could be expected from a capitalist regime. Income inequality now rivals that of the US. 'The share of public property in national wealth has declined from about 70 per cent in 1978 to about 30 per cent in 2015. More than 95 per cent of the housing stock is now owned by private households, as compared to about 50 per cent in 1978.' Last year, China had 389 billionaires, second only to the US and this is enormously telling. That so many people have such a massive control of the wealth of the country speaks to a situation that is beyond a question of inequality and additional privileges. With such massive wealth comes great power and influence that even a 'socialist political regime' would have to reckon with.

The working class that has grown so enormously during this period of economic expansion, has emerged as part of the reordered global workforce of the neoliberal era. That growth and vulnerability to exploitation has been created by way of level of internal migration from rural areas

that is historic in scale. By 2009, there were 145 million rural-urban migrants in China, comprising 11% of the population. In that same year, the number of factory workers in the country was reckoned at 99 million. The largest employer was the notorious Foxconn, employing 1.3 million workers. The terrible working conditions faced by these workers have given rise to the term 'Foxconn suicide.'

Foxconn's Longhua plant, on the outskirts of Shenzhen, has a sign posted outside its gates that reads, 'This factory area is legally established with state approval. Unauthorised trespassing is prohibited. Offenders will be sent to police for prosecution!' One former worker summed up the conditions in the plant with the observation that, 'It's not a good place for human beings.' He and another man tell of 'a high-pressure working environment where exploitation is routine and where depression and suicide have become normalised.' These suicides are described in an article in the Guardian.

"In 2010, Longhua assembly-line workers began killing themselves. Worker after worker threw themselves off the towering dorm buildings, sometimes in broad daylight, in tragic displays of desperation – and in protest at the work conditions inside. There were 18 reported suicide attempts that year alone and 14 confirmed deaths. Twenty more workers were talked down by Foxconn officials."

The political leadership and state agencies in China can't seriously be presented as socialists overseeing a process of accumulation that has made some necessary concessions to capitalist methods. Efforts of workers and communities to challenge injustices and demand their rights are met with repression. Union organizing is an activity fraught with risk and major consequences. Examples of efforts to crush working class resistance are easy to find. In 2018, workers at the welding-equipment manufacturer Shenzhen Jasic Technology tried to form a union. Their key issues were arbitrary fines imposed on them by the company and its failure to make proper payments into a government fund to meet their housing costs. Six workers who were involved in forming a union were fired and taken to the police station when they showed up for work. Twenty others who marched to the station in support were also arrested. One of the protesting workers told the police, "When the boss says we're making trouble, you, the cops, trust them and rush to the factory, beat us up and take us to the police station… In your eyes we are just like tiny bugs waiting to be stepped on."

Community based protests are also very common in China and the authorities employ an adroit combination of concessions and repression to contain them. In 2019, thousands of people took to the streets for several days in Wuhan to challenge plans to build a toxic waste incineration plant in their community until riot police crushed the community action. The threat of social unrest and the ongoing effort to contain it are preoccupations for those who govern China.

The Uyghurs are one of a number of national minorities and they undoubtedly face a large scale migration of majority Han Chinese settlers into their homeland, along with a 'resource colonialism' that is very much part of the incorporation of China into the global order of neoliberal capitalism. It is worth noting that, in their efforts to pose as noble defenders of the human rights of the Uyghurs, the Tories who put forward the motion in the Canadian parliament had nothing to say about the involvement of this country's mining companies in the process of oppression and exploitation unfolding in Xinjiang.

It must be acknowledged that Chinese economic activity on the international stage is also lacking in socialist credentials. Chinese companies are operating across the globe and their track record is very little different to the kind of exploitation and abuse we would associate with Western corporations. Last year, two workers in Zimbabwe, employed by a Chinese mining company, who

complained over unpaid wages, were shot and wounded. The Zimbabwe Environmental Lawyers Association (ZELA) issued a statement that read in part, “The problem of ill-treatment of workers is systematic and widespread and what that shooting did was to expose the rampant abuse of workers. Wages are often very low and in many cases are not paid on time.”

There is no doubt that, relative to the model of a capitalist society that exists in the West, the state sector in China is much larger and the capacity of the governing authorities to intervene in the economy greater. The recent marshaling of resources, albeit after a costly delay, to deal with the public health crisis of the pandemic shows this, as do the measures taken to ensure a more rapid economic recovery than was possible in the West. However, the restoration of private capitalism has occurred on an enormous scale. I mentioned already that China now has the second largest number of billionaires in the world (and is producing more of them at an unrivalled rate) with much larger numbers of lesser capitalists. It would be absurd to suggest that this social class, with its vast wealth, doesn’t possess enormous political power. The evidence clearly suggests otherwise.

In 2001, the rules of the Communist Party were changed to allow capitalists to become members, thereby ‘attracting the people who have the social status and the economic clout to govern.’ By 2011, some 90% of the thousand richest capitalists in China were members or officials of the Communist Party. In 2017, roughly 100 of the delegates to the Chinese parliament were billionaires and the 209 richest delegates had an average wealth of $300 million. Together this group were worth $500 billion, roughly equivalent to the GDP of Belgium.

Without doubt, the authoritarian Chinese regime intervenes far more vigorously in economic affairs than is the case in the West and individual capitalists have very much less room to move. However, linked in their business dealings, in political life and socially to the grandees of the state structure, the Chinese capitalist class is decisively influential. Given the existence of this class, the enormous role of foreign investment, the place within the neoliberal supply chain and the predatory role on a global scale, I feel that China must be viewed as a capitalist society. In my opinion, even with state owned enterprises still holding 48.1% of the stock of capital employed in industry, as of 2017, the subservience of this component to the needs of a market economy and private capital creates a very different reality to that which led to the characterization of the Soviet Union as either a deformed workers’ state or as state capitalist.

However, the view that present day China represents some kind of transitional society would not undermine the inescapable conclusion that the working class in that country faces exploitation at the hands of an oppressive regime. From this it flows that resistance in the face of that oppression is not only permissible but essential and that the path to socialism will not be found in an alliance between a state bureaucracy and several hundred billionaires but through working class revolution.

Internationalism

If we take the side of Chinese workers and oppressed minorities and reject the notion that the repressive regime in Beijing is defending socialism, we must also support working class resistance and popular struggles throughout the ‘anti-imperialist camp.’ We must reject the notion that we can build a global movement with one list of countries where we celebrate the class struggle and another where it is frowned upon. I would suggest that there are some basic considerations that must inform a valid concept of international solidarity.

First of all, I’d repeat and emphasize that the campists have it right when they present US led imperialism as the main enemy and the defeat of that enemy on its home turf is always our main focus and responsibility.

Secondly, we must never be embarrassed by the class struggle. If working class people take to the streets in a country that US led imperialism has it's boot firmly planted on, as is happening in Haiti at the moment, we do all we can to support their struggle. However, with just as much enthusiasm and, with a spirit of working class independence, we back resistance in countries that are major rivals to the US. We also support social resistance in countries where the US seeks to tighten its oppressive grip, such as Iran. We do all we can to create an awareness and a sense of solidarity with working class struggle wherever it is being waged.

Thirdly, we don't shy away from the complications and contradictions that exist in the context of global rivalry and imperialist domination. The campists are not wrong that the US State Department and Western intelligence agencies look to gain influence over movements of resistance in countries with governments they are at odds with. In Hong Kong, some two million people have taken to the streets to protect democratic rights. They know that their limited and hard pressed freedoms are vital if they are to resist the neoliberal hell that the Beijing regime and local capitalists are imposing on them. Yet, supporters of that regime on the left will ignore this mass expression of popular sentiment and gleefully point to someone in the crowd waving the Stars and Stripes. The left in Hong Kong is well aware of the role that 'right wing localists' play and of their links to reactionary Western politicians. Unfortunately, we can't order up an antiseptic class struggle in the messy realities of global capitalism.

Finally, we need to understand that the pandemic triggered crisis and its aftermath will unleash huge and explosive struggles on a truly international scale. In such a context, building a much stronger sense of global solidarity will be essential and we can't operate with a campist double set of books. The class struggle will be waged and must be fully supported on every part of this earth.

Originally posted at John Clarke's blog.