

The Proletariat as an International Class

The program of *Revolutionary Defeatism* means that the working class in imperialist countries must never defend its “fatherland”. This reflects the sharp opposition of the working class against the imperialist state. It represents the fact that there are no common interests whatsoever between the proletariat and the oppressed on one hand and their imperialist masters on the other.

Basically this means nothing else but the application of the Marxist program and the general methods of the class struggle to the terrain of anti-chauvinist and anti-militarist struggle. It is based on the axiom that the working class is by its very nature an *international* class. This has been already most famously formulated by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels in their *Communist Manifesto* in 1847:

“The working men have no country. We cannot take from them what they have not got. Since the proletariat must first of all acquire political supremacy, must rise to be the leading class of the nation, must constitute itself the nation, it is so far, itself national, though not in the bourgeois sense of the word.” [\[1\]](#)

This statement has caused many protests as well as confusion. The right-wing chauvinists have utilized these words in order to slander socialists as “men without fatherland” (“*vaterlandslose Gesellen*” as they used to say in Germany). The opportunist social democrats and Stalinists have internalized this reactionary prejudice and work hard to prove to the bourgeois “public opinion” that they are different to

the Marxists, i.e. that they have become loyal defenders of their imperialist fatherland.

Other critiques, often progressive people with better intentions than the chauvinists and social democrats but not necessarily with more brain, interpret the words of the founders of scientific socialism in another distorted way. They deduce from the *Communist Manifesto* that socialists have not interest in the *national question* and, consequently, refuse to defend peoples against national oppression.

It needs only a small amount of historical knowledge to understand that nothing could be more at odds with the truth than such a misinterpretation. It should be sufficient to point out that, at the same time when Marx and Engels were writing the *Manifesto* and spreading it to the European continent, they rallied in words and deeds for the support of the national liberation struggle of the Polish people. In fact, the cause of Poland's independence was one of the most important factors which led to the foundation of the First International in 1864 as David Riazanov, the famous founder of the Marx-Engels Institute in the Soviet Union (until his persecution by the Stalinists in 1931), pointed out. [\[2\]](#)

Likewise Marx and Engels supported the national unification of Germany, called for a revolutionary war of Germany against Tsarist Russia and sided with the Italian people against Habsburg Empire. Later they continued their unconditional support for the national liberation struggles of oppressed people like e.g. the Irish people or the Indians fighting against the British occupation. [\[3\]](#)

At the first sight this seems to be a contradiction ... but only if one approaches this issue from a formalistic and mechanistic point of view. Let us explain the Marxist method

on internationalism and the national question in more detail.

When Marx and Engels stated that "*the working men have no country*", they meant that the working class has no "natural" loyalty to the specific country of their origin. The workers of this or that foreign country are to them as close as the comrades from their own country.

The relation of a class conscious worker to the imperialist state is similar to the relation to the corporation in which she or he is employed. The worker will have the same solidarity to the worker of another corporation (regardless whether the two corporations are rivals on the market or not) than to the worker of his or her corporation. The whole idea of workers solidarity and trade unions is built on this fundamental insight in the *class nature* of workers.

The same holds true for workers solidarity when it comes to border, passport and skin color. The class conscious worker feels the same attachment to the worker living in another country, coming from another country or having a different skin color like the worker living in his or her own country, being born in the same country or having the same skin color.

What constitutes our identity is not the passport or the skin color but our existence as a class which faces basically the same conditions of exploitation and oppression by the capitalists and their state machinery. The identity across the classes based on passport or skin color is a result of manipulation by the ruling class, their media, and their political preachers. Only the identity of class irrespective of passport or skin color is the true identity of the proletariat and the oppressed.

Internationalism and National Liberation

So why did Marx and Engels support various national struggles and why do we so today? It is because we fight for the eradication of all forms of exploitation and oppression. National oppression is a form of oppression which serves the ruling class of this or that country. This is why revolutionaries must support the struggle to smash such national oppression.

But class conscious workers approach such opposition against national oppression from an *internationalist* point of view. This means that they support the struggle for national equality of *all* oppressed people – irrespective if these oppressed people live in the same country or another, if they live on the same continent or another or if they have the same skin color or another. We fight against national oppression because we know that only the absence of any oppression can open the road to freedom and wealth for humanity and not because we share the same passport or skin color with the oppressed people concerned.

This is what Marx and Engels meant in the *Communist Manifesto* and this is what we mean when we say that the working class is essentially an international class.

From this fundamental proletarian internationalist understanding logically follows the tactics of *Revolutionary Defeatism*. The class conscious worker in the corporation A can not actively support his or her boss to prevail over the rivaling corporation B in the economic competition. The class conscious worker of the corporation A will seek contact to their colleagues employed in the corporation B so that they can stop being played against each other and fight together

against both bosses.

Likewise will the class conscious worker fight against any chauvinist position of his or her colleagues who oppose that a migrant worker could join the workforce. And so will progressive male workers reject any opposition against employing a woman worker or elder workers will reject any opposition against employing a young worker. Such opposition against any form of reactionary chauvinism and backward guildism has always been a basic principle of the workers movement since the day of the First International in the times of Marx and Engels and so it is today.

It has also been an axiom for the revolutionary workers movement that the capitalist state is a thoroughly alien body which the proletariat does not defend but which it has to be destroyed and replaced with a new commune-type of state based on workers and poor peasant councils and militias. Or, to put it in the words of Lenin:

„Imperialism—the era of bank capital, the era of gigantic capitalist monopolies, of the development of monopoly capitalism into state-monopoly capitalism—has clearly shown an extraordinary strengthening of the “state machine” and an unprecedented growth in its bureaucratic and military apparatus in connection with the intensification of repressive measures against the proletariat both in the monarchical and in the freest, republican countries..“ [\[4\]](#)

This is why the Marxists have always rejected the daydreams of reformists and centrists that the state can be reformed and capitalism be transformed without violence: *„The supersession of the bourgeois state by the proletarian state is impossible without a violent revolution.“* [\[5\]](#)

The same idea has been articulated by Nikolai Bukharin, a leading theoretician of the Bolshevik Party:

„The general pattern of the state's development is therefore as follows: in the beginning the state is the sole organization of the ruling class. Then other organizations begin to spring up, their numbers multiplying especially in the epoch of finance capitalism. The state is transformed from the sole organization of the ruling class into one of its organizations, its distinction being that it has the most general character of all such organizations. Finally, the third stage arrives, in which the state swallows up these organizations and once more becomes the sole universal organization of the ruling class, with an internal, technical division of labor. The once-independent organizational groupings become the divisions of a gigantic state mechanism, which pounces upon the visible and internal enemy with crushing force. Thus emerges the finished type of the contemporary imperialist robber state, the iron organization, which with its tenacious, raking claws embraces the living body of society. This is the New Leviathan, beside which the fantasy of Thomas Hobbes looks like a child's toy.” [\[6\]](#)

In summary, as we stated in the *Theses on Revolutionary Defeatism*, just as the workers of a given enterprise have no common interests with their boss, so has the working class no common interests with the ruling class of a given capitalist state. As the workers want to weaken, defeat and finally expropriate the owners of “their” corporation, so do the workers of a given imperialist country desire to weaken, defeat and finally overthrow the ruling class. For these reasons the workers will utilize every conflict in which their class enemy is involved in order to advance their interests and to strengthen their fighting power.

The working class will wholeheartedly defend its fatherland or

its enterprises *only after* it has overthrown and expropriated the imperialist bourgeoisie and created a socialist state and economy. Only under such conditions is any patriotism towards their country justified and progressive.

The same holds true for the working class of semi-colonial countries which is under attack by imperialist powers or oppressed people fighting against foreign occupation or a reactionary dictatorship. In such cases, the defense of the fatherland is also legitimate.

On Aristocratism and the Labor Aristocracy

We will finish this chapter by briefly discussing an argument which is raised by some sectors of socialists against our theory. There is the criticism that the international unity of the working class between the imperialist and the semi-colonial countries is not possible since the monopoly capitalists bribe the whole working class in the imperialist countries.

It is the classic Marxist position, which the RCIT has defended and elaborated in various documents, that the upper stratum of the proletariat in the imperialist countries is indeed bribed by the bourgeoisie. [\[7\]](#) However, we think it would be a wrong and superficial exaggeration to imagine that the *mass of the workers* in the imperialist countries have been bribed. True, *to a certain degree* the mass of the workers in the imperialist countries gain from the super-exploitation of the semi-colonial world – for example from the import of cheap consumer commodities like clothes, television or mobile telephones. This was not the first time in capitalism's history. For example, as a result of its world hegemonic role

as a colonial power British capitalism enjoyed price deflation in the last quarter of the 19th century. Theodore Rothstein – a Russian-Jewish publicist living in Britain who was a supporter of the Bolsheviks and a leader of the left wing of the British Socialist Party – elaborated in his book on the history of the workers movement in Britain the important role of price deflation in strengthening reformism and the politics of class collaborationism in the working class and hence the labor bureaucracy. [\[8\]](#)

But this must be qualified against the disadvantages of capitalist globalization for the mass of the workers in the imperialist countries. The outsourcing of production, the depression of wages because of the international trade and migration etc. – all this is to the disadvantage of the lower and middle strata of the proletariat in the imperialist countries.

As we have shown above the mass of the working class – the low- and middle-skilled labor – in North America, Western Europe and Japan have massively lost income in the past decade and only the upper stratum, often part of the privileged labor aristocracy, has been able to increase their share of income. But it is this low- and middle-skilled labor which constitutes the majority of the proletariat – even in the old imperialist countries.

In Table 27 we see that 60.7% of the labor force in the old imperialist countries belongs to the low- and middle-skilled sectors. (The share of the low and middle strata of the global labor force is even bigger with 82%.) If we bear in mind that not all labor force are part of the working class (just take into account the salaried intermediate layer among which a disproportional high share is high-skilled), we can see that a decisive majority of the working class in the old imperialist

countries does not belong to the upper stratum of which a significant sector is part of the bribed labor aristocracy.

**Table 27: Share of Employment by Broad Occupation (Skill),
World and Regions, 2013** [\[9\]](#)

<i>World region</i>	<i>Low-Skilled</i>	<i>High-Skilled</i>	<i>Medium-Skilled</i>
World total	16.0%	18.0%	66.0%
Developed Economies	39.3%	50.9%	9.8%
Central Europe & South Eastern	52.4%	14.1%	33.5%
East Asia	8.2%	12.1%	79.7%
South Pacific East Asia and the	65.6%	22.0%	12.4%

South Asia			
27.7%		58.5%	
	13.8%		
Latin Caribbean	America	and	the
61.3%	19.0%		
		19.8%	
Middle Africa	East	and	North
	12.0%		
65.7%		22.4%	
Sub Africa			Saharan
		16.2%	
	79.2%		
4.6%			

In our opinion one can say that while the labor aristocracy has some short-term (but not fundamental, historic) interests in keeping capitalism, this is not the case for the mass of the workers in the old imperialist countries. They have no interest whatsoever in defending the capitalist system. Their interest is to join the big majority of the world proletariat which is living in the semi-colonial and emerging imperialist countries and to fight together for the permanent revolution to build world –wide socialism.

Given the fact the huge majority of the international proletariat lives outside the old imperialist countries and given the fact that it is less infected by the imperialists' pacifying mechanism (the weight of the class-collaborationist ideologies of reformism, the hope to be part of the "rich islands" in a tumultuous world, the sophisticated techniques of an manipulating and integrating media world, etc.), it is

clear that the focus of the international class struggle and of the world working class is outside of the old capitalist countries. In other words, the focus has moved to the South as well as new capitalist countries with a powerful proletariat like China.

From this follows also the specific and important role of migrants as they are coming from the South and live now on North America, Western Europe or Russia. They can play the role of transmission belts between the two parts of the world: they can bring the militant fighting spirit from their home countries to the North and transmit various skills and experiences from the North to the South.

[\[1\]](#) Karl Marx and Frederick Engels: Manifesto of the Communist Party (1847), in: MECW Vol. 6, pp. 502-503

[\[2\]](#) See David Riazanov: Die Entstehung der Internationalen Arbeiter-Assoziation (Zur Geschichte der Ersten Internationale), in: Marx-Engels-Archiv. Zeitschrift des Marx-Engels Instituts in Moskau, Vol. 1, pp.165-173, Marx-Engels-Archiv Verlagsgesellschaft, Frankfurt am Main 1925 (Politladen-Reprint, Erlangen 1971)

[\[3\]](#) For Marx and Engels approach on the national question see e.g. Roman Rosdolsky: Engels and the "Nonhistoric" Peoples: The National Question in the Revolution of 1848, Critique Books, Glasgow 1986; Michel Löwy: Marxists and the National Question, in: New Left Review 96, March-April 1976, pp. 81-100; Neil A. Martin: Marxism, Nationalism, and Russia, in: Journal of the History of Ideas, Vol. 29, No. 2 (April-June 1968), pp. 231-252

[\[4\]](#) V. I. Lenin: The State and Revolution. The Marxist Theory of the State and the Tasks of the Proletariat in the Revolution; in: CW Vol. 25, p.326

[\[5\]](#) V. I. Lenin: The State and Revolution. The Marxist Teaching on the State and the Tasks of the Proletariat in the Revolution (1917), in: LCW Vol. 25, p. 405. See also: „*The proletarian revolution is impossible without the forcible destruction of the bourgeois state machine and the substitution for it of a new one which, in the words of Engels, is “no longer a state in the proper sense of the word.”* (V. I. Lenin: The Proletarian Revolution and the Renegade Kautsky, in: LCW Vol. 25, p. 237). Lenin’s position, which has become the fundament for the Marxist theory of revolution (despite the rejection by the revisionists of past and present who believe in the possibility of peaceful transformation to socialism like Kautsky in the last century and Peter Taffee’s CWI or Alan Woods IMT today), is based on the analysis of Marx and Engels. See e.g.:

„The centralized State power, with its ubiquitous organs of standing army, police, bureaucracy, clergy, and judicature organs wrought after the plan of a systematic and hierarchic division of labour- originates from the days of absolute monarchy, serving nascent middle-class society as a mighty weapon in its struggles against feudalism. (...) ; but its political character changed simultaneously with the economic changes of society. At the same pace at which the progress of modern industry developed, widened, intensified the class antagonism between capital and labour, the state power assumed more and more the character of the national power of capital over labour, of a public force organized for social enslavement: of an engine of class despotism.” (Karl Marx: The Civil War in France, in: MECW Vol. 22, pp. 328-329)

“This executive power with its enormous bureaucratic and military organisation, with its extensive and artificial state machinery, with a host of officials numbering half a million, besides an army of another half million, this appalling parasitic body, which enmeshes the body of French society like a net and chokes all its pores, sprang up in the days of the

absolute monarchy, with the decay of the feudal system, which it helped to hasten. The seignorial privileges of the landowners and towns became transformed into so many attributes of the state power, the feudal dignitaries into paid officials and the motley pattern of conflicting medieval plenary powers into the regulated plan of a state authority whose work is divided and centralised as in a factory. The first French Revolution, with its task of breaking all separate local, territorial, urban and provincial powers in order to create the civil unity of the nation, was bound to develop what the absolute monarchy had begun: the centralisation, but at the same time the extent, the attributes and the agents of governmental power. Napoleon perfected this state machinery. The Legitimist monarchy and the July monarchy added nothing but a greater division of labour, growing in the same measure as the division of labour within bourgeois society created new groups of interests, and, therefore, new material for state administration. Every common interest was straightway severed from society, counterposed to it as a higher, general interest, snatched from the activity of society's members themselves and made an object of government activity, whether it was a bridge, a schoolhouse and the communal property of a village community, or the railways, the national wealth and the national university of France. Finally, in its struggle against the revolution, the parliamentary republic found itself compelled to strengthen, along with the repressive measures, the resources and centralisation of governmental power. All revolutions perfected this machine instead of breaking it. The parties that contended in turn for domination regarded the possession of this huge state edifice as the principal spoils of the victor." (Karl Marx: The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte (1852), in: MECW Vol. 11, pp. 185-186)

[\[6\]](#) Nikolai Bukharin: Toward a Theory of the Imperialist State (1915), in: Robert V. Daniel: A Documentary History of Communism, Vol. 1, Vintage Russian Library, Vintage Books, New

York 1960,
p. 85, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/bukharin/works/1915/state.htm>

[7] See on this e.g. Michael Pröbsting: Marxism and the United Front Tactic Today. The Struggle for Proletarian Hegemony in the Liberation Movement in Semi-Colonial and Imperialist Countries in the present Period, RCIT Books, Vienna 2016, <https://www.thecommunists.net/theory/book-united-front/>, Chapter III

[8] See Theodore Rothstein: Beiträge zur Geschichte der Arbeiterbewegung in England, Vienna 1929, Chapter “Die Periode des Trade Unionismus“

[9] International Labour Office: World Employment and Social Outlook – Trends 2015, pp. 72-89, Supporting Data

<https://www.thecommunists.net/theory/anti-imperialism-in-the-age-of-great-power-rivalry/chapter-13/>