

# A world turned upside down

## The consequences of 9/11

It is ten years since the twin towers came crashing down in New York. In the aftermath of that terrorist attack, US imperialism unleashed mass slaughter in Afghanistan and Iraq, leading some to believe that an era of total domination by the world's only superpower had arrived. But today's global economic crisis and US impotence in the face of revolution in North Africa and the Middle East has exposed the falsity of that view. Socialist Party general secretary Peter Taaffe assesses the changed world situation in an article in *Socialism Today*. Here we carry an extract.

The bloody terrorist outrages of 11 September 2001 in New York, Pennsylvania and Washington were one of the defining moments in recent history. The deaths of thousands of people allowed capitalist reaction – led by George W Bush and the now discredited British prime minister of the time, Tony Blair – the excuse to initiate a new era of terrible imperialist war and foster the poisonous fumes of ethnic division and racism, directed particularly against those of the Islamic faith.

This resulted in a colossal number of deaths and destruction which inflicted further untold misery and suffering on millions of working people and the poor, particularly in the neocolonial world.

The Socialist Party, at the time and since, unequivocally condemned al-Qa'ida, which was behind these attacks, describing its methods as those "of small groups employing mass terrorism". At the same time, we gave not a shadow of support to Bush or Blair and the cacophony of the capitalist media calling for a world-wide 'war against terrorism'.

Despite the attempts of some left groups to prettify the image of Islamic terrorists, al-Qa'ida was rooted in the doctrines of Wahhabism, a medieval version of Sunni Islam and the dominant creed of the theocratic regime of Saudi Arabia. In the past, terrorist groups which based themselves, at least in theory, on furthering the social interests of the masses, engaged in the assassination of particular reactionary figures, governments, etc.

But the origins of al-Qa'ida, with its messianic non-class opposition to the 'infidel' and the 'great Satan', the US, meant that it was indiscriminate in employing mass terror. Not only did it attack the US and its allies, it also struck down innocent workers and the poor.

### Revolutions

In the magnificent revolutions in the Middle East and North Africa, beginning with Tunisia then Egypt, al-Qa'ida was of little or no consequence. Mass occupations of the public squares, strikes and demonstrations were the political weapons for the Tunisian and Egyptian masses to overthrow Ben Ali and Mubarak.

Where religion still retains a certain base and an attraction to the masses, particularly in the neocolonial world, it partly arises from the conditions of dictatorship or in the underdeveloped economic character of some countries with a large agricultural population.

In the Iranian revolution of 1979, we witnessed a form of 'radical Islam' which appealed to the working class and poor for a time. It cannot be excluded that such phenomena can rise again in the neocolonial world.

In Egypt, initially, the masses were able to concentrate their forces in opposition to the Mubarak regime around the mosques and, to some extent, the underground independent trade unions. But the Muslim Brotherhood was the only organisation which was allowed to function in a semi-political fashion, and also as a charitable, social self-help organisation.



One of the defining moments in recent history

Naturally, therefore, for some sections these are the organisations to which they first turned in the aftermath of the overthrow of the Egyptian dictatorship.

While Islamist groups and parties exist in Tunisia they do not have, it seems, the same roots as in Egypt at this stage.

Post-Gaddafi Libya, on the other hand, could see a fracturing of the country and the growth of Islamist groups. But it is not clear that this will be the dominant trend.

In Egypt, despite the recent sizeable mobilisation of Islamists in Tahrir Square, they are by no means guaranteed to win an absolute majority even in the hastily organised early elections which would favour them. Moreover, it is not certain that the Muslim Brotherhood will remain a cohesive, unified force. There are splits, partly reflecting class divisions. There is talk of at least four different political parties being formed from the Brotherhood.

At the same time, the forces opposed to right-wing political Islam, secularists as well as socialists, are finding an echo among newly politically aroused sections of the working class in Egypt, Tunisia and throughout the region.

### Mass organisations

The vital ingredient which is missing to guarantee success in the struggle is the existence of mass organisations, of powerful trade unions and independent working-class parties.

One of the big impulses for the revolution – and the factor which allowed the Committee for a Workers' International (CWI) to expect a movement to overthrow Mubarak which we outlined last year – was the worsening social conditions throughout the region, particularly the spectacular increase in mass unem-

ployment. This in turn arose from the deepening of the world economic crisis of capitalism. This was accompanied by a deterioration in the food supply and the mass import of grain into the region.

Al-Qa'ida and right-wing political Islam have nothing to offer in concrete terms either for the struggle or the realisation of the aims of the masses in this region. Not just in North Africa and the Middle East but also in Pakistan and Afghanistan, al-Qa'ida's methods represent a political dead-end. The assassination of bin Laden in July was a non-event for the mass of Pakistanis. When he was murdered on the orders of US imperialism, his organisation was effectively already politically dead.

### Red Brigades

However, the danger of terrorism and terrorist ideas attracting alienated sections of society, including young people and even some working class youth, is not restricted to the neocolonial world. As the example of the Red Brigades in Italy in the 1970s and 1980s showed, if the working class and its organisations fail to seize the initiative for change, desperate people can seek the short cut of terrorism.

The attack on the twin towers and the Pentagon ten years ago was the most spectacular terrorist act in history. It humiliated the seemingly all-powerful and multi-billion dollar financed security apparatus of US imperialism.

But al-Qa'ida has failed in the decade which has elapsed to realise its aims in defeating American imperialism and the regimes that support it in the Middle East and North Africa. At the same time, it enabled imperialism to mobilise through the so-called 'war on terror' and all the reactionary implications that flowed

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from this.

But the world balance of forces which was decisively weighted in favour of American imperialism has undergone a profound change. US imperialism was initially strengthened by 9/11 as its representatives arrogantly asserted its dominance. In 2001, it was still the main economic and military power on the globe. Its ambition to achieve 'military full spectrum dominance' was implemented in the wake of 9/11.

The capitalist media in the US and elsewhere debased themselves even more than usual in lining up behind the Bush regime. This laid the basis for imperialist intervention in Afghanistan and Iraq under the hypocritical heading of 'liberal military intervention'.

But who now can speak of a US president playing the role of a modern 'Caesar', as was the case after 9/11? Barack Obama was a bystander, incapable of intervening in the first stages of the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions. Only with the assistance of the counter-revolutionary theocratic regimes in Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and elsewhere, alongside Nato's Libyan intervention, has US imperialism managed to gain a very tentative handle on the situation in the Middle East and North Africa.

### Syria

In Syria, it has only been after a protracted period of upheaval that Obama felt able to intervene against Bashar al-Assad with the threat of economic sanctions if he does not vacate the scene. As with all the pro-capitalist forces in the region, however, Obama is terrified of what would follow if Assad is overthrown.

Assad's demise could lead to a 'disorderly' disintegration of the country and its fracturing along ethnic and religious lines. This could have immediate repercussions, with Israel, for instance, acting to secure its position if upheavals in Syria affect territories it controls, such as the Golan Heights.

Turkey is even threatening military intervention to preserve 'stability'. This means it will act if it deems it likely that the Kurdish population of Syria, free from Assad's control, could reinforce the opposition of the Kurds in Turkey to the Erdogan government. In this situation, the intervention of US imperialism largely takes the form of words.

Imperialism is about to 'declare victory and withdraw' from Afghanistan, probably using the screen of a 'coalition' government involving the Taliban, or sections of them, and some remnants of the present regime. At the same time, it may well continue to pour resources into building up the so-called 'Afghan army' while maintaining military bases in the area. A similar scenario exists for Iraq.

US forces are preparing to 'withdraw', having helped to lay waste Iraq and not solving – in effect, reinforcing – all the problems of poverty, the breakdown of basic services and utilities and, above all, ethnic and sectarian divisions.

Nevertheless, in the splendid, primarily workers', movement this year of all ethnic

groups, the Iraqi working class is beginning to re-emerge from the catastrophe. This development also reinforces our arguments against imperialist intervention to overthrow Saddam Hussein.

Our arguments were borne out in the magnificent independent movements of the masses which rose and split the army in Egypt and Tunisia. Moreover, the development of the working class and its independent organisations, even in poverty-stricken societies such as Afghanistan and Iraq, will proceed in the next period.

### Non-sectarian

The trend towards non-sectarian movements in all the upheavals we have witnessed can also develop on a regional scale. No country, even the strongest, is viable by itself, particularly from an economic point of view.

Only by combining the resources of the peoples in a socialist confederation, with full autonomy and democratic rights for all the nationalities and ethnic groups, including the recognition of language rights and of religious minorities, can the peoples of this region emerge from the nightmare which already confronts them on the basis of capitalism.

In the immediate period after 9/11, US imperialism was able to impose its will, within limits, because there were no rival powers within touching distance. During the cold war, the only rival to US imperialism was Stalinist Russia. Its astonishing economic collapse, following the demise of the 'Soviet Union' and the remnants of the Stalinist planned economy, has enfeebled this former economic and political giant.

That world situation and the unpopular position of the US following 9/11 no longer exists, particularly given the rise of China, which is estimated to overtake the US in the next decade, at least in gross economic wealth and production although not in living standards.

Unlike ten years ago, it has been brought home to the strategists of US capitalism that it can no longer pursue its policy of 'guns and butter'. In the 1990s, the US share of world defence spending appeared to be steady and sustainable. This was largely because the US share of global GDP was roughly unchanged over the decade.

### Defence burden

In the first decade of this century, however, the US share declined and its huge defence burden is no longer sustainable. But, because of the enormously wasteful interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq and elsewhere, its share of world defence spending actually increased from 36% to 42%. This now compels Obama's administration to outline cuts in defence expenditure of an estimated \$800 billion.

Predictably, this has provoked the ire of the military-industrial complex and its representatives in Congress who are quite prepared for savage cuts in social expenditure to maintain their illusions of US imperial grandeur. But, given the



Marching against the invasion of Iraq photo Molly Cooper

...rather than the triumphalist new era of strengthening and burgeoning capitalism, which its strategists fully expected following 9/11, exactly the opposite is the case ten years later. Torn by contradictions, facing its greatest crisis economically since the 1930s, capitalism in the US and globally faces an impasse

weakening of the economic foundations of US capitalism, it cannot sustain this without even greater attacks on the living standards of the working and middle classes.

This will mean that the US, while being frustrated on the international plane, will also experience the same outbreak of ferocious class struggle as has Europe recently.

Therefore, rather than the triumphalist new era of strengthening and burgeoning capitalism, which its strategists fully expected following 9/11, exactly the opposite is the case ten years later. Torn by contradictions, facing its greatest crisis economically since the 1930s, capitalism in the US and globally faces an impasse.

One of the worst consequences of 9/11 was that it allowed capitalism, particularly the far-right, to stigmatise all Muslims as open or concealed supporters of al-Qa'ida terrorism, which was not and is not the case.

As with the conflict in Northern Ireland, when completely innocent people were arrested and jailed, so Muslims have been arrested and imprisoned. Divisions and suspicions, which already existed between those from an immigrant background and other workers, have widened. This has been reinforced by Cameron with his criticism of 'multiculturalism', a barely concealed attack on immigrants. Capitalist politicians in Europe – including Angela Merkel in Germany and Nicolas Sarkozy in France – play the same tune.

### Class expression

Yet, in the aftermath of the recent riots in Britain and the mowing down of three Asian youth in Birmingham, a 'multicultural' approach was adopted by Asian, black and white people. This was largely due to the magnificent initiative of the father of one of the dead young men. This provided an opportunity for the labour movement to step in and give this instinctive coming together a class expression.

This happened in Northern Ireland in 1969 when shop stewards in Belfast took the initiative to form 'peace committees' of Protestant and Catholic workers. Unfortunately, the labour movement did

not act accordingly in Birmingham and religious organisations were allowed to step in. Only a class approach emphasising the interests of all workers, can sustain the mood and movement.

Unless a new workers' and socialist road is opened up, the poisonous influence of the far-right can grow, sometimes resulting in maniacs, such as Anders Breivik in Norway, seeking to murder innocent people in the name of an alleged 'war against Islam'. This creature was just a mirror image in employing the same fascistic methods as the right-wing political Islam typified by al-Qa'ida.

The spokespersons of capitalism have no confidence in the system. The capitalists demonstrate this by their refusal to invest the surplus extracted from the labour of the working class back into production. This is why \$2 trillion dollars are lying idle in the vaults of the big com-

panies in America and why £60 billion is also hoarded by British companies. There is no 'profitable outlet' so they do not invest, unemployment climbs, poverty spirals upwards and the working class can go to hell in a wheelbarrow.

If not consciously as yet, the mass of the working class and poor are instinctively, by their actions, rejecting the system. They have not yet managed to overcome the legacy of the last 20 to 30 years of neoliberal capitalism and its ideological campaign to bolster its system. But, socially, the masses worldwide are swinging towards the left.

The real lesson of 9/11 is that neither imperialism nor its mirror image, Islamic terrorism – or any form of terrorism – offer any way forward for the working class and humankind. It is the liberating and democratic ideas of socialism which point the way to the future.

## Socialism Today



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