

WORKERS' LIBERTY



LATIN AMERICA, OIL OWNERSHIP, AND US IMPERIALISM

We carry two texts by Trotsky from 1938 on confrontations between Latin American countries and US and UK imperialism, and an article by us from 1982 about why their conclusions could not be simply copy-pasted onto the British-Argentine war of that year over the Falklands-Malvinas, in which we opposed both sides.

The current US-Venezuela conflict has more in common with 1938 than with 1982.

It's not exactly 1938, either. Venezuela has long been a much more developed capitalist country than Brazil or Mexico were in 1938. By the late 1990s Venezuela's GDP per capita (a poor indicator of welfare, but a passable one of capitalist development) was higher than the

UK's in 1938. The current US policy in Venezuela is not to overthrow the Madurista regime, but to decapitate it and force the rump Maduristas into having the US "run policy" for them and control the sale of Venezuelan oil.

Whether that will "work" for Trump we do not know. There must be a good chance that it will break down under internal opposition in the USA and/or the rump Maduristas refusing to cooperate sufficiently. We hope so: a fiasco for Trump will allow workers and democrats all over the world to breathe a little easier.

Sense

On the other hand, "oppose both sides" makes little sense here, because the

"two sides", the Maduristas and Trump, are for now anyway "one side", in collaboration. We support the workers of Venezuela against Trump, against the Maduristas, and against the Trump-Madurista collaboration.

Restricted

And Trotsky as it turned out, was wrong in some aspects about World War Two. The USA and the UK restricted, but did not eliminate, bourgeois democracy in their countries during the war. After victory, the USA reckoned that old-style colonial empire was too costly and unviable. Although it had armies occupying Germany and Japan, it soon allowed them self-rule, and it aided the restoration of bourgeois democracy elsewhere

in Western Europe (even if it long continued to ally with Franco in Spain).

It does not, of course, follow that Marxists should have been neutral between Mexico and the USA in 1938, comforting themselves with the thought that maybe in a few decades' time the US would, at least for a while, consider it more sensible to accommodate Mexican ownership of oil.

As it turned out, after 1945 the USA gradually it pushed for an "imperialism of free trade", securing economic advantage mostly through market and financial pressures, rather than by direct political domination. That world regime reached its peak in 1990-2008, and is breaking down now into a world of overlapping ad hoc trade deals. □

National liberation cannot be annulled by "anti-fascism"

By Leon Trotsky

Mateo Fossa, an Argentine trade-unionist and Trotskyist, interviewed Trotsky on the eve of World War Two. The Stalinists in Latin America had a policy of backing the then-bourgeois-democratic powers, the USA, Britain, and France, for the sake of opposition to fascist Germany. They dropped agitation for the independence of the colonies of those powers.

Trotsky: In order to understand correctly the nature of the coming events we must first of all reject the false and thoroughly erroneous theory that the coming war will be a war between fascism and "democracy." Nothing is more false and foolish than this idea. Imperialist "democracies" are divided by the contradictions of their interests in all parts of the world. Fascist Italy can easily find herself in one camp with Great

Britain and France if she should lose faith in the victory of Hitler. Semifascist Poland may join one or the other of the camps depending upon the advantages offered. In the course of war the French bourgeoisie may substitute fascism for its "democracy" in order to keep its workers in submission and force them to fight "to the end." Fascist France, like "democratic" France would equally defend its colonies with weapons in hand. The new war will have a much more openly rapacious imperialist character than the war of 1914-18. Imperialists do not fight for political principles but for markets, colonies, raw materials, for hegemony over the world and its wealth.

The victory of any one of the imperialist camps would mean the definite enslavement of all humanity, the clamping of double chains on present-day colonies, and all weak and backward peoples, among them the peoples of

Latin America. The victory of any one of the imperialist camps would spell slavery, wretchedness, misery, the decline of human culture.

What is the way out, you ask? Personally, I do not doubt for a moment that a new war will provoke an international revolution against the rule of the rapacious capitalist cliques over humanity. In wartime all differences between imperialist "democracy" and fascism will disappear. In all countries a merciless military dictatorship will reign. The German workers and peasants will perish just like the French and English. The modern means of destruction are so monstrous that humanity will probably not be able to endure war even a few months. Despair, indignation, hatred will push the masses of all warring countries into an uprising with weapons in hand. Victory of the world proletariat will put an end to war and will also solve the

Spanish problem as well as all the current problems of Europe and other parts of the world.

Those working class "leaders" who want to chain the proletariat to the war chariot of imperialism, covered by the mask of "democracy," are now the worst enemies and the direct traitors of the toilers. We must teach the workers to hate and despise the agents of imperialism, since they poison the consciousness of the toilers; we must explain to the workers that fascism is only one of the forms of imperialism, that we must fight not against the external symptoms of the disease but against its organic causes, that is, against capitalism.

Fossa: What is the perspective for the Mexican revolution? How do you view the devaluation of money in connection with the expropriation of wealth in land and oil?

Trotsky: I cannot dwell on these ques-

tions in sufficient detail. The expropriation of land and of the natural wealth are for Mexico an absolutely indispensable measure of national self-defense. Without satisfying the daily needs of the peasantry none of the Latin American countries will retain their independence. The lowering of the purchasing power of money is only one of the results of the imperialist blockade against Mexico which has begun. Material privation is inevitable in struggle. Salvation is impossible without sacrifices. To capitulate before the imperialists would mean to deliver up the natural wealth of the country to despoliation, and the people—to decline and extinction. Of course, the working class organizations must see to it that the rise in the cost of living should not fall with its main weight upon the toilers.

Fossa: What can you say on the liberating struggle of the peoples of Latin America and of the problems of the future? What is your opinion of Aprismo?

Trotsky: I am not sufficiently acquainted with the life of the individual Latin American countries to permit myself a concrete answer on the questions you pose. It is clear to me at any rate that the internal tasks of these countries cannot be solved without a simultaneous revolutionary struggle against imperialism. The agents of the United States, England, France (Lewis, Jouhaux, Toledano, the Stalinists) try to substitute the struggle against fascism for the struggle against imperialism. We have observed their criminal efforts at the recent congress against war and fascism. In the countries of Latin America the agents of “democratic” imperialism are especially dangerous, since they are more capable of fooling the masses than the open agents of fascist bandits.

I will take the most simple and obvious example. In Brazil there now reigns a semifascist regime that every revolutionary can only view with hatred. Let us assume, however, that on the morrow England enters into a military conflict with Brazil. I ask you on whose side of the conflict will the working class be? I will answer for myself personally — in this case I will be on the side of “fascist” Brazil against “democratic” Great Britain. Why? Because in the conflict between them it will not be a question of democracy or fascism. If England should be victorious, she will put another fascist in Rio de Janeiro and will place double chains on Brazil. If Brazil on the contrary should be victorious, it will give a mighty impulse to national and democratic consciousness of the country and will lead to the overthrow of the Vargas dictatorship. The defeat of England will at the same time deliver a blow to Brit-

ish imperialism and will give an impulse to the revolutionary movement of the British proletariat. Truly, one must have an empty head to reduce world antagonisms and military conflicts to the struggle between fascism and democracy. Under all masks one must know how to distinguish exploiters, slave-owners, and robbers!

In all the Latin American countries the problems of the agrarian revolution are indissolubly connected with anti-imperialist struggle. The Stalinists are now treacherously paralyzing both one and the other. To the Kremlin the Latin American countries are just small change in its dealings with the imperialists. Stalin says to Washington, London, and Paris, “Recognize me as an equal partner and I will help you put down the revolutionary movement in the colonies and semicolonies; for this I have in my service hundreds of agents like Lombardo To-

ledano.” Stalinism has become the leprosy of the liberating movement.

Worthy

I do not know Aprismo sufficiently to give a definite judgment. In Peru the activity of this party has an illegal character and is therefore hard to observe. The representatives of APRA at the September congress against war and fascism in Mexico have taken, so far as I can judge, a worthy and correct position together with the delegates from Puerto Rico. It remains only to hope that APRA does not fall prey to the Stalinists as this would paralyze the liberating struggle in Peru. I think that agreements with the Apristas for definite practical tasks are possible and desirable under the condition of full organizational independence.

Fossa: What consequences will the war have for the Latin American countries?

Trotsky: Doubtless both imperialist camps will strive to drag the Latin American countries into the whirlpool of war in order to enslave them completely afterwards. Empty “antifascist” noise only prepares the soil for agents of one of the imperialist camps. To meet the world war prepared, the revolutionary parties of Latin America must right now take an irreconcilable attitude toward all imperialist groupings. On the basis of the struggle for self-preservation the peoples of Latin America should rally closer to each other.

In the first period of war the position of the weak countries can prove very difficult. But the imperialist camps will become weaker and weaker with each passing month. Their mortal struggle with each other will permit the colonial and semicolonial countries to raise their heads. This refers, of course, also to the Latin American countries; they will be able to achieve their full liberation, if at the head of the masses stand truly revolutionary, anti-imperialist parties and trade unions. From tragic historic circumstances one cannot escape by trickery, hollow phrases, and petty lies. We must tell the masses the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.

Fossa: What in your opinion are the tasks and the methods facing the trade unions?

Trotsky: In order that the trade unions should be able to rally, educate, mobilize the proletariat for a liberating struggle they must be cleansed of the totalitarian methods of Stalinism. The trade unions should be open to workers of all political tendencies under the conditions of discipline in action. Whoever turns the trade unions into a weapon for outside aims (especially into a weapon of the Stalinist bureaucracy and “democratic” imperialism) inevitably splits the working class, weakens it, and opens the door to reaction. A full and honest democracy within the unions is the most important condition of democracy in the country.

In conclusion I ask you to transmit my fraternal greetings to the workers of Argentina. I don’t doubt that they do not believe for a moment those disgusting slanders that the Stalinist agencies have spread in the entire world against me and my friends. The struggle that the Fourth International carries on against the Stalinist bureaucracy is a continuation of the great historic struggle of the oppressed against the oppressors, of the exploited against the exploiters. The international revolution will free all the oppressed, including the workers of the USSR. □



The Mexican oil expropriations of 1938

In the vocabulary of all civilized nations there exists the word “cynicism.” As a classic example of brazen cynicism, the British government’s defense of the interests of a clique of capitalist exploiters should be introduced into all encyclopedias. I am therefore not mistaken if I say that world public opinion awaits the voice of the British Labour Party regarding the scandalous role of British diplomacy in the question of the expropriation of the Eagle joint-stock oil company by the Mexican government.

The juridical side of the question is clear to a child. With the aim of exploiting the natural wealth of Mexico, the British capitalists placed themselves under the protection and at the same time under the control of Mexican laws and the Mexican authorities. No one compelled Messrs. Capitalists to do this, either by military force or through diplomatic notes. They acted entirely voluntarily and consciously. Now Mr. Chamberlain and Lord Halifax wish to force mankind into believing that the British capitalists have pledged themselves to recognize Mexican laws only within those limits where they find it necessary. Moreover, it accidentally occurs that the completely “impartial” interpretation of the Mexican laws by Chamberlain-Halifax coincides exactly with the interpretation of the interested capitalists.

The British government cannot, however, deny that only the Mexican government and the Supreme Court of the country are competent to interpret the laws of Mexico. To Lord Halifax, who nourishes warm sympathies for the laws and courts of Hitler, the Mexican laws and courts may seem unjust. But who gave the British government the right to control the inner politics and legal procedure of an independent state? This question already contains part of the answer: the British government, accustomed to command hundreds of millions of colonial slaves and semislaves, is trying to fit those same methods also to Mexico. Having encountered courageous resistance, it instructs its lawyers hurriedly to invent arguments in which juridical logic is replaced by imperialist cynicism.

The economic and social side of the problem is as clear as its juridical side. The executive committee of your party would, in my opinion, act correctly if it created a special commission for studying what British, and in general foreign, capital has contributed to Mexico and what it has extracted. Such a commission could within a short period present to the British public the stunning balance sheet of imperialist exploitation!

A small clique of foreign magnates, in the full sense of the word, pumps out the living sap of Mexico as well as of a series of other backward or weak countries. The solemn speeches about foreign capital contributing “civilization,” about its assisting in the development



President of Mexico, Lázaro Cárdenas reading the proclamation on Oil Expropriation day 1938

of national economy, and so forth, are the sheerest Pharisaism. The question, in actuality, concerns plundering the natural wealth of the country. Nature required many millions of years in order to deposit gold, silver, and oil in the subsoil of Mexico. The foreign imperialists wish to plunder these riches in the shortest possible time, making use of cheap labour power and the protection of their diplomacy and their fleet.

Development

Visit any centre of the mining industry: hundreds of millions of dollars, extracted by foreign capital from the earth, have given nothing, nothing whatever, to the culture of the country; neither highways nor buildings nor good development of the cities. Even the premises of the companies themselves often resemble barracks. Why, indeed, should one spend Mexican oil, Mexican gold, Mexican silver on the needs of faraway and alien Mexico, when with the profits obtained it is possible to build palaces, museums, theatres in London or in Monaco? Such are the civilizers! In the place of historical riches they leave shafts in the Mexican soil and ill health among the Mexican workers.

The notes of the British government refer to “international law.” Even irony powerlessly drops its hands in the face of this argument. About what kind of international law are we talking? Evidently about the law which triumphed in Ethiopia and to which the British government is now preparing to give its sanction. Evidently about that same law which the airplanes and tanks of Mussolini and Hitler are already announcing in Spain for the second year with the British government’s invariable support.

The latter held endless conversations about the evacuation of foreign “volunteers” from Spain. Naive public opinion long thought this meant the halting of intervention by the foreign fascist bandits. Actually the British government demanded of Mussolini only one thing: that he remove his armies from Spain only after he guaranteed the victory of Franco. In this case, as in all others, the problem consisted not in defending “international law” or “democracy” but in safeguarding the interests of British capitalists in the Spanish mining industry from possible attempts on the part of Italy.

Paralyse

In Mexico, the British government carries on basically the same politics as in Spain — passively in relation to Spain, actively in Mexico. We are now witnessing the first steps of this activity. What will be its further development? No one can yet foretell. Chamberlain himself does not yet know. One thing we can affirm with assurance: the further development of the attempts of British imperialism against the independence

of Mexico will to a great degree depend upon the conduct of the British working class. Here it is impossible to evade the issue by resort to indefinite formulas. Firm resoluteness is necessary to paralyse the criminal hand of imperialist violence. I therefore finish as I began: world public opinion awaits the firm voice of the British Labour Party!

Postscript

P.S. — Several imperialist newspapers have attempted to represent me ... as the initiator of the expropriation. Such nonsense does not even deserve refutation. I, a private person, enjoying the hospitality of this country, have learned only from the papers all the stages of the struggle of the foreign capitalists against the Mexican laws. But this was completely sufficient to form an opinion. To state this opinion aloud is the elementary duty of every participant in the liberating struggle of the proletariat. □

• Letter written to the *Daily Herald*, published not there but in *Forward*, 7 April 1938



Leon Trotsky's house outside Mexico City, where he lived from 1937 to 1940



1938 and 1982: the texts and the method

By Sean Matgamna

Time and again the same quotations from Trotsky have been used to justify a pro-Argentine stance in the Falklands/Malvinas war. But the main thing the quotations prove is the pro-Argentine comrades' [those in our organisation advocating positive support for Argentina then] lack of grip on the points in dispute.

Everyone in the majority [those for opposing both British and Argentina governments] would agree that if the comparison with China and the other colonies and semi-colonies of the 1930s referred to by Trotsky is legitimate, then we would not invoke the character of the Argentine regime as a reason for not siding with Argentina.

We could immediately arrive at agreement if the pro-Argentine comrades would — or could — tell us how, in what way, for what real national-liberation goals, or in what social/economic/political sense Argentina is fighting imperialism in the Falklands. But they can't.

Pro-Argentine comrades quote Trotsky (*Writings 1938-9*, p.34) saying that he would side with "semi-fascist" Brazil against "democratic" Britain in a hypothetical war because: "If England should be victorious, she will put another fascist in Rio de Janeiro [i.e. will control Brazil] and will place double chains on Brazil [i.e., conquer it, or force territorial concessions from it, or unequal treaties, or impose political conditions which tie it economically to Britain's empire]".

Trotsky was quite right, in our view. If a similar situation arises today, what he wrote will be a blueprint for our attitudes.

They quote Trotsky in 1937 rejecting defeatism for China which was, under Chiang Kai-shek, beginning to organise a national war of liberation to drive out the Japanese armies that had been on Chinese territory since 1931 and against which the Trotskyists had consistently called for a national war of liberation.

We believe Trotsky was 100% right about China. His comments as quoted would serve perfectly to guide us for any more or less comparable situation today.

But what Trotsky wrote about China naturally cannot serve as a concrete analysis of any situation today! That we must make for ourselves. And only on the basis of that analysis can we decide how much of Trotsky's blueprint is relevant to the given situation.

The comrades quote Trotsky advocating world working class support for Mexico (*Writings 1938-9*, p.64), whose radical, perhaps quasi-revolutionary, bourgeois government had nationalised British oilfields.

Yes indeed. Trotsky was a good communist! But he was also a good Marxist.

They quote him pledging support for even the "barbarian" Bey of Tunis to drive

out France! (*Writings 1938-9*, p.66). Yes! Trotsky had attended the Second Congress of the Communist International. He even wrote its manifesto, which said this:

"The Socialist who aids directly or indirectly in perpetuating the privileged position of one nation at the expense of another, who accommodates himself to colonial slavery, who draws a line of distinction between races and colours in the matter of human rights, who helps the bourgeoisie of the metropolis to maintain its rule over the colonies instead of aiding the armed uprising of the colonies; the British Socialist who fails to support by all possible means the uprisings in Ireland, Egypt and India against London plutocracy — such a socialist deserves to be branded with infamy, if not with a bullet, but in no case merits either a mandate or the confidence of the proletariat".

Wretched

He had supported the wretched Negus, Haile Selassie, against the Italian invasion. He even wrote this, which is a tremendous statement of the principles that must animate us on the national question:

"What characterises Bolshevism on the national question is that in its attitude toward oppressed nations, even the most backward, it considers them not only the object but also the subject of politics. Bolshevism does not confine itself to recognising their 'right' to self-determination and to Parliamentary protests against the trampling upon of this right. Bolshevism penetrates into the midst of the oppressed nations, it raises them up against their oppressors: it ties up their struggle with the struggle of the proletariat in capitalist countries, it instructs the oppressed Chinese, Hindus or Arabs in the art of insurrection and it assumes full responsibility for this work in the face of civilised executioners. Here only does Bolshevism begin, that is, revolutionary Marxism in action. Everything that does not step over this boundary remains centrism" (*What Next?*).

But these quotations merely beg the question — are they relevant to the Argentine situation? Was the Falklands war remotely, or at all, comparable to what Trotsky is talking about? Essentially, no.

Even in the shortest quote, the concrete issues involved — struggle for liberation against colonial armies, defence of the right of a backward state to expropriate foreign capital, etc. — is spelled out or referred to. Imperialism still operated through colonial empires, and the struggle for such empires and for their redivision was the substance of World War Two.

But Argentina was not threatened with double chains. The Argentine regime is a protector of foreign capital. They didn't

even expropriate British capital as a gambit in the war.

Any comparison of Argentina with Tunisia, Mexico, or China of the 1930s is preposterous. In terms of its level of development, role in its region, and place in the economic network of imperialism, it might be better compared with Italy or Japan of the 1930s — except that it is more developed than Japan was, and has a more or less fully-developed bourgeois social structure, which Japan and even Italy did not have.

Repugnant

The pro-Argentine comrades' way with quotations seems to me to be repugnant to the spirit of Marxism and the opposite of the practice of Marxist analysis. It rules out specific analysis, substituting instead dogmatic recipes and formulas. They mechanically apply texts derived from past use of the Marxist method in concrete circumstances of the past. Those circumstances are not with us any more. They have evolved and developed and permuted to the present situation which is different — more or less radically different, but certainly different.

Even where changes are not very profound or major, we cannot just assume that the Marxist text dealing with some apparently similar situation is a sufficiently detailed and concrete depiction. That is to operate blindly dogmatically.

It is possible to "get by" when the changes are not all that great, and the chosen texts not too markedly ill-matched to the concrete situation (but that means that whoever matches them has done at least some work on the concrete situation). On the basic ideas worked out by the geniuses of our movement, it is possible to "get by" for a very long time indeed.

Even the most miserable of "Trotskyist" sects works from a stock that retains a tremendous potency and relevance. But to adopt the method of dogmatic text-worship is to cut the roots of Marxism and to make renewal and living development difficult and ultimately impossible.

Sooner or later it is no longer possible to "get by". The texts become dogmas preventing us from relating to reality, acting like distorting spectacles.

The notion that what Trotsky wrote in a very different world (dominated by colonial imperialism, for example) about countries like China can provide us directly with answers to the Argentine war is ridiculous. The principles, methods and ways of looking at the world remain what they were when Trotsky wrote, but to conclude that the texts embodying their results when applied to working through a concrete problem can directly offer us guidelines now, the comrades would have to establish that similar or roughly similar conditions exist — that Argentina was faced with colonial invasion or something similar.

Since many comrades in fact admit that there was no real issue of Argentine national liberation served by the seizure of the Falklands, it is a culpable departure from the Marxist method to pretend to call Trotsky's voice from the grave to tell us what he thinks we should do over the Falklands war, and to cite what he said about China's resistance to the Japanese invaders as his answer.

It is sleight of hand, sand in the eyes, asking the relics to speak — but not Marxism.

Marxists should use — or try to use — the classic texts of our movement in a different way: as models of analysis, and as guides and checks in the practice of living Marxist analysis.

If you compare any of Lenin's serious work with the texts of Stalinism, from the 1920s to the 1960s, you cannot fail to see the difference between Marxism and pseudo-Marxist scholasticism. The Stalinists quote the classics (as it suits them, of course) as themselves proof, themselves giving answers. Thus, for example, the theory of "socialism in one country" was "proved" true and Marxist by a few lines from an article by Lenin written in 1915.

Lenin's writings are studded with quotations from Marx and Engels. He cites them to establish Marx's and Engels' views on a relevant issue at a given time. He then asks if the concrete reality has changed and evolved, and if so in what way, and how does it relate to other connected issues. He asks what modifications, additions or deletions to the views of Marx and Engels must be made in accordance with their method, criteria, principles, in the light of developments.

He thinks, works it through, reworks it, concretises the answers for his own time and conditions, on the basis of scientific analysis. (See *State and Revolution* for example).

He frequently insisted against all dogmatists and quotation-mongers that "the truth is concrete". Political development in a revolutionary Marxist spirit is possible only by an unrelenting struggle for concreteness, for science.

The classic texts here are our starting point, our models, our historic "memory", our theoretical and political arsenal. We ourselves, however, must work out the political responses to our own problems and our own concrete reality. The books cannot think for us.

Quotation-mongering and "proof from texts" was, and in some cases still is, the method of our anti-Marxist opponents. It is the measure of the state of the Trotskyist movement that the same quotations on China, Brazil and so on have been almost universally cited as if they could tell us anything directly about Argentina.

It is worth following through in detail a key text of Trotsky's — his letter to Diego Rivera, a profound and brief text which



In April 1982 the Argentine military dictatorship, in power since 1976 but now fading, invaded the Falkland (Malvinas) islands in an effort to regain prestige. The islands, 400 miles off the coast of Argentina, had been British-populated since the early 19th century, and largely unpopulated before then. The dictatorship reckoned the chances of Britain retaliating scarcely higher than those of Denmark defeating a US military seizure of Greenland. However, the British Thatcher government sent ships and won a two-month war. The war boosted the Thatcher government, previously very unpopular, and enabled it to win the 1983 general election. Argentina's defeat quickly led to the fall of military rule and the restoration of parliamentary democracy. Socialist Organiser, forerunner of Workers' Liberty, opposed the war on both sides, though with a big minority going along with most of the "broad left" and positively supporting Argentina. The SWP, believe it or not, also opposed the war on both sides. More: bit.ly/f1982 □

applies the principles we all share to China in 1937.

What is the issue? "China is a semi-colonial country which Japan is transforming, under our very eyes, into a colonial country. Japan's struggle is imperialist and reactionary. China's struggle is emancipatory and progressive." "Semi-colonial" meant that until the 1930s China suffered imperialist interventions, it ceded territory to the big powers, it ceded ports, it gave them special privileges — and then in 1931 Japan invaded Manchuria, in 1937 the rest of China.

And Argentina? Argentina is a region "big power", dominating Uruguay and Paraguay, vying for influence in Latin America with Brazil, skirmishing with Chile over disputed territory. Its national integrity has been undisputed for 100 years at least. It is subordinated to imperialism not through the Falklands but by the agency of its own ruling class. Until 1930, or even 1948, it was one of the world's richer countries. It is a developed capitalist economy.

"Today he [Chiang Kai-shek] is forced despite himself, to struggle against

Japan for the remainder of the national independence of China..." This was not a symbolic war in which an aspirant regional imperialism and agent of big-power imperialist penetration led a fight over an irrelevant issue — it was a real national liberation war, against national subjugation.

Scandalous

Trotsky's example of the strike has been scandalously misused by the IMG [forerunner of today's *Anti-Capitalist Resistance*]. The union exists apart from the hideous things its leaders may do — or even its members (racist strikes). We are for the union, despite everything. It is a class organisation. We criticise it fundamentally by way of fighting to transform it. Trotsky uses the analogy of the union to point to what is threatened and worth defending, irrespective of what Chiang Kai-shek may do: the freedom of the Chinese people from Japanese control.

The Argentine people were not struggling to throw out an invader, they were not threatened with subjugation.

"If Japan is an imperialist country and if China is the victim of imperialism, we favour China. Japanese patriotism is the

hideous mask of world-wide robbery. Chinese patriotism is legitimate and progressive. To place the two on the same plane and to speak of 'social-patriotism' can be done only by those who have read nothing of Lenin..."

Argentina is not the victim of colonial imperialism (which Trotsky is talking about). It never has been. In his World War One writings, for example, Lenin distinguished Argentina from the "semi-colonies" and bracketed it with Portugal (which itself had a vast colonial empire) as an economic satellite of Britain though politically independent. (Since then Argentina has long ceased to be an economic satellite of Britain.)

The exploitation of the Argentine workers is in part conducted by foreign capital — in tandem with the Argentine bourgeoisie. What have the Falklands got to do with that? What did the war have to do with that?

Chinese patriotism was not primarily backward-looking, xenophobic, etc., but progressive. Why? Not because it had been entirely purged of those aspects, still less because those aspects could ever be progressive, but because it was

the patriotism of a people rousing itself to modern political life, and rousing itself to struggle to throw out its conquerors. It was an expression of that struggle.

The attitude to the patriotism of the Chinese was determined by the real content of the struggle, which was a progressive struggle.

And our attitude to Argentine patriotism? We evaluate it as internationalists. We ask what cause it serves, what role it plays, how it relates to the struggles which have to be fought. We cannot answer these questions without an assessment of the issues in the war.

Argentine patriotism was as progressive as the cause it served — as progressive as the bourgeois military junta, on whose coat-tails the masses followed, tied by it. It was not progressive in the war. In relation to the Falkland Islanders it was chauvinist.

Independence

The sentence from Trotsky's article "A Fresh Lesson" usually cited on support for Mexico against Britain is preceded by this comment: "We deem it not only the right but the duty of workers in these [backward colonial and semi-colonial



countries] actively to participate in the 'defence of the fatherland' against imperialism, on condition, to be sure, that they preserve the complete independence of their class organisation and conduct a ruthless struggle against the poison of chauvinism." In the Chinese war of national liberation we would denounce as Chinese chauvinists any anti-imperialist militants — and especially any communist militants — who would treat any national, ethnic or religious minority the way Argentina wanted to treat the Falklanders.

We might have to say: the Argentine masses are chauvinist on the Falklanders, but that's a detail — if it were a mere detail. It was not: control over the islands was the issue over which the rival ruling classes, guided by prestige and chauvinism, clashed.

In fact, the attempt to treat Argentine nationalism as pure anti-imperialism is nothing but wishful thinking as far as I can make out. The comrades do not present any arguments, but only assertions and assumptions. At best they derive the progressive character of Argentine nationalism from the reactionary character of British imperialism: but the conclusion does not follow. We do not always put a plus where our enemies put a minus.

It does not follow that because mass militant mobilisation even on the Falklands issue could have opened channels in Argentina blocked [by the military coup] six years ago and (like the consequences of any wild adventure or gamble often do) created great dangers for the junta, that Argentine nationalism is progressive or that we should support it.

A movement is progressive by its goals and its own logic, not by its possible side-effects. If the nationalist upheaval opens opportunities for Argentine socialists, we should be glad of the outcome. We cannot derive our own assessment of nationalism from that hope.

Argentina suffered British and French intervention some 140 years ago. Modern Argentina, however, has essentially taken shape over the last 100 years. Argentina had no war of liberation. Its population is, to within one per cent, of European immigrant origin — most from immigration within the last 100 years. Its mass popular nationalism dates from the 1920s. This nationalism was, especially in its labour movement manifestations, shaped and consolidated by Peronism.

Peronism was not and is not fascism. But corporatism and fascism are its essential ideological sources.

Peron had been in diplomatic service in Italy at the end of the 1930s, and consciously copied fascism. Peronist nationalism is narrowly Argentine — directed against Chile and Brazil, for example. It has been antisemitic: the murder gangs sponsored by the last Peronist government (1973-6) daubed walls with the slogan, "Kill a Jew a day". (There are about half a million Jews in Argentina.)

The "anti-imperialist" rhetoric of Per-

onism was a variant of the envious jingoism common to all fascist or fascist-coloured movements. It was hostile to the USA and Britain... and Brazil. In 1973 Peron called for a Spanish-speaking alliance against the English-speaking and Portuguese-speaking Americans.

The anti-imperialism of the Peronists is like the anti-bourgeois sentiment of the fascists — imprecise, lacking scientific content, lacking definite, rational goals or means of struggle. It was and is harnessed by the bourgeoisie. To be progressive, the anti-imperialist sentiment needs to be refined and organised into an independent working-class movement with rational goals which will really strike at imperialism.

The pro-Argentine comrades' position amounts logically to this: we must follow any predatory junta in a (relatively) backward country when it clashes with an imperialist power — for the sake of the symbolism of the clash! But no, comrades! We need an independent working-class point of view.

Communist anti-imperialism gives us that. It is not derived from a spurious two-camp pattern imposed on the world. It is derived from a unified working class viewpoint.

Everywhere that the working class exists, revolutionary Marxists identify it as the protagonist. Where national oppression exists, we still look to the working class as the protagonist.

From that point of view we approach a situation like 1937 in China where a Chiang Kai-shek may be beginning to fight "our war". We never abandon our own politics, which include the drive to replace the Chiang Kai Sheks — even during a life-and-death war like the Sino-Japanese.

In contrast, the pro-Argentine view would turn us into passive consumers of world politics. We must pick and choose within the options. We dare not refuse our support to one side, even in a miserable business like the invasion of the Falklands. We strap the distorting spectacles tightly on our eyes, and we see the world around us not in terms of facts, class rule, class interests and real interactions — instead just imperialist and non-imperialist nations.

Obviously the hierarchy of the capitalist world economy is not irrelevant. But it cannot transform oppression into liberation, predatory pro-imperialist juntas into anti-imperialist fighters, the concrete realities of the Junta's petty land-grab into episodes of a supposed world liberation drama.

The two-camp spectacles are altogether too crude, too thick with layers of petty bourgeois politics, with the layers of previous accommodation by the post-war Trotskyist movement to various national liberation and Stalinist movements. In the notion of treating Argentina as meaningfully anti-imperialist — and necessarily so, despite the issue it clashed with imperialism on! — a whole trend in post-war Trotskyism reached the outer limits of a recurrent swing away from class politics.



"In a war between two imperialist countries, it is a question neither of democracy nor of national independence, but of the oppression of backward non-imperialist peoples. In such a war the two countries find themselves on the same historic plane. The revolutionaries in both armies are defeatists. But Japan and China are not on the same historic plane."

Note well: Trotsky uses not abstract categories and labels, or static comparisons, but dynamic interactions as his criteria. It is possible for countries to be on the same historic plane (in relation to a concrete conflict or issue) without being identical. The idea that there is an absolute and stable division between imperialist and non-imperialist capitalisms is unhistorical and undialectical.

Reality

Trotsky did not get drunk on words and phrases, mistake images for concrete reality, or chase will-of-the-wisp "symbols" into the misty realm of fantasy politics where a Galtieri is designated the banner-bearer of anti-imperialism without reference to concrete analysis.

Trotsky continues: "The victory of Japan will signify the enslavement of China, the end of her economic and social development, and the terrible strengthening of Japanese imperialism. The victory of China will signify, on the contrary, the social revolution in Japan and the free development, that is to say, unhindered by external oppression, of the class struggle in China."

This "terrible strengthening of Japan" would not be a matter of prestige, "authority", or the figure it cut in the world. It would be strengthened by the plunder of China and the exploitation of hundreds of millions of Chinese — which was why Japanese victory would be the end of Chinese economic and social development.

What goal does Trotsky spell out for the Chinese war of liberation? "Free development... unhindered by external oppression." And he speaks particularly of free development of the class struggle.

Concrete, precise, definable — not something derived from a different type of situation and imposed as a pattern on the Chinese events. The programme and attitude of the Marxists were grounded in the concrete situation, the real choices, and the consequent necessary development of the workers' struggle in China.

Chiang Kai Shek was to be "supported" with gritted teeth because the war was necessary and at that point he headed it. This did not mean political support to Chiang Kai-shek — on the contrary.

In Argentina? Few comrades would venture the view that the Falklands war was necessary. They would say only that defeat of Britain by the Argentine junta's army (not by the British working class) was necessary for its symbolic importance to anti-imperialism. The war was not necessary — but we should have supported Galtieri in the war because of the symbolic significance of it, once the junta had set it going. And that despite the fact that no-one on the left would have campaigned for the starting of the war (the invasion), and many condemn it!

Wherever the pro-Argentine stance comes from, it is not from Trotsky's and other communists' attitude during the wars of the Chinese and others against colonial imperialism. That's for sure!

What does defencism mean?

Trotsky's attitude was: "But can Chiang Kai-shek assure the victory? I do not believe so. It is he, however, who began the war and who today directs it. To be able to replace him it is necessary to gain decisive influence among the proletariat and in the army, and to do that it is necessary not to remain suspended in the air but to place oneself in the midst of the struggle. We must win influence and prestige in the military struggle against the foreign invasion and in the political struggle against the weaknesses, the deficiencies, and the internal betrayal. At a certain point, which we cannot fix in advance, this political opposition can and must be transformed into armed conflict, since the civil war, like war generally, is nothing more than the continuation of the political struggle.."

If Trotsky's arguments for supporting China were relevant to Argentina, then so also should have been this approach. Pro-Argentine comrades should have focused their criticism of Galtieri on his weakness and insufficient ruthlessness in fighting for the islands.

The Peronists of course did that, so apparently, did the PST (Socialist Workers' Party, Morenist). But most pro-Argentine comrades shy away from this conclusion. Is it because they are half-aware of the falseness of treating Galtieri's war as a national liberation struggle?



The Japanese Army killed some 300,000 civilians in the conquest of Nanking, 1937

Further: for Trotsky defencism did not exclude working for civil war in nationalist China. On the contrary, the fight for national liberation demanded it — and anyway working class politics did.

Yet the WSL minority write:

“Defeatism means the defeat of your own ruling class by the working class. It means ‘the main enemy is at home’. It means ‘British workers and soldiers turn your guns on your own officers and ruling class’, because our own ruling class is an imperialist ruling class. That is a basic Marxist position that we hold in all wars at any time which are being waged by our own ruling class. The question is what position do we hold for the other side in the war, in this case Argentina? If we hold a revolutionary defeatist position for the Argentine working class, then we are saying, ‘Both working classes defeat your own ruling class; the outcome of the war is irrelevant; a victory for one side would not be more progressive than the other’.”

That’s exactly what we are saying.

But you don’t have to be a defeatist to say “Both working classes defeat your own ruling class”. That is what Trotsky said in 1937 — even while standing with Chiang Kai-shek against Japan. Not to say it is to abandon the ground of working class politics (“for the duration”).

In China in 1937 it was a real struggle for liberation against imperialism. Chinese “patriotism” flowed from our politics. We could therefore have an independent view on the matter from that of the Chinese nationalists.

Abandoned

We provisionally and conditionally arrived at the proposal of a national liberation bloc with them on the basis of our independent politics, which were never abandoned or shelved, never in any circumstances and not to the slightest degree.

On the Falklands, the pro-Argentine comrades have passively adopted

someone else’s viewpoint. They have proceeded not by analysing the concrete issues, but by fitting the war into a super-abstract image of the world as two camps, imperialist and non-imperialist capitalist states being separated by an unbridgeable chasm.

To fight in a war of liberation like the Chinese is not to abandon our politics — on the contrary, it is the only way we can maintain our class viewpoint as a living political force. By participating we serve, promote and develop our politics. We serve our politics by following where the logic of the class struggle and the real struggle against oppression and exploitation directs us.

“We were the first to propose [a military bloc of the CP with the KMT]. We demanded, however, that the CP maintain its entire political and organisational independence, that is, that during the civil war against the internal agents of imperialism [In the mid 20s, Chiang Kai-shek led one side against the regional warlords of Northern China], as in the national war against foreign imperialism, the working class, while remaining in the front lines of the military struggle, prepare the political overthrow of the bourgeoisie. We hold the same policies in the present [anti-Japanese] war. We have not changed our attitude one iota, The Oehlerites and the Eiffelites, on the other hand, have not understood a single bit of our policies, neither those of 1925-7, nor those of today.”

Likewise in 1982 the inverted Oehlerites and Eiffelites of the right fail to understand. In China there was an anti-imperialist war — defined as such by an independent Trotskyist assessment of the issues.

Either there is or there isn’t a real issue of national liberation. If there is, then we have our own criteria, and a vast range of political independence in relation to a Chiang Kai-shek (or a Galtieri). If there is not, and if we side with Galtieri for the symbolic anti-imperialist significance of

his war, then for all the concrete issues we have to accept (for the time being) someone else’s viewpoint.

If we go begging to the table of the Argentine junta for symbols, then we must take what we get — take things as they define them, rally to the issues they raise (which “in themselves” we may not even accept). We have to dance to their tune, on their terrain.

For the Trotskyists in China, the starting point was: this is our war. They started from the issues. In contrast, a position on the Falklands war which starts from a vague, symbolic “anti-imperialist” identification with Argentina can only proceed by shelving independent judgement on the issue of Argentina’s claim to the islands and adopting someone else’s judgment instead.

This is the method pursued by Trotsky’s epigones for 30 and more years. It is not Marxism. It is not building in the class struggle.

It is instead an utterly artificial approach: the un-concrete, un-Marxist construction of a scenario, a world-picture, in which comrades ascribe an anti-imperialist role (that it isn’t playing) to the pro-imperialist and sub-imperialist ruling class of the comparatively developed capitalist state of Argentina.

The scenario approach comes from a vision of two great camps, imperialist and non-imperialist. We have argued that this is a falsely static and undialectical view of capitalism. It seems to me that the comrades are borrowing a pattern from the view of the world as divided between the Stalinist states and capitalism.

Now between the USSR and imperialism there is a difference of class character. [In 1982 we still held to a “degenerated workers’ state” description of the USSR]. For imperialism and “non-imperialism”, both “camps” are capitalist.

The vision is therefore false. But the method of taking sides on issues automatically with the “progressive” camp is

radically false even for the USSR.

A model of how to judge from an independent proletarian standpoint even those states (China in the 1930s, the USSR) that we may have good and imperative reason to support, is given in a discussion by Trotsky with Li Fu-Jen [in fact the American Frank Glass].

“Trotsky: ... The slogan ‘for revolutionary unity with the Soviet Union, with the proletarians of the whole world’ should rather be, ‘Unity with the proletariat of the whole world. and for an alliance with the Soviet Union on the basis of a concrete programme in the interests of the liberation of China.’ The Soviet Union is now the bureaucracy — no blind confidence in the Soviet Union!

Li Fu-jen: If the Nanking [Chiang Kai Shek] government should enter into an alliance with the Soviet Union, and the alliance should be of such a nature as to harm China and benefit only the Soviet Union, what should our attitude be towards it?

Trotsky: A military alliance against Japan would be in any case preferable for China, even with the bureaucracy as it is. But then we must say that we demand that the Soviet Union deliver munitions, arms for the workers and peasants; special committees must be created in Shanghai, in workers’ centres; the treaty must be elaborated with the participation not only with the KMT but also with the worker and peasant organisations.

We ask for an open proclamation from the Soviet bureaucracy that at the end of the war no part of China would be occupied without the consent of the Chinese people, etc.

Li Fu-jen: Do you then think that the Soviet Union could be capable of conducting an imperialistic policy?

Trotsky: If it is capable of organising frame-ups, killing the revolutionaries, it is capable of all possible crimes.”

(Trotsky on China, p.562-3, emphasis added).



Remarkable dialogue! Carefully, precisely and with the brutal honesty we need in order to be revolutionaries able to grasp and change reality, Trotsky sizes up the allies he is supporting (and he supported the USSR against imperialism unconditionally).

Would Trotsky be capable of forgetting about the concrete issues like the Falklands, or of consoling himself with the idea that Argentina was non-imperialist and therefore the junta could not possibly conduct an "imperialistic" policy?

No, he would not. He did not accept the Chiang Kai-shek clique or the Stalin bureaucracy for their symbolic value. He had concrete class reasons for allying with them. Those set the limits of the alliance. There was no ideological or political subordination. He never ceased to look at them in all their details with the eyes of a mortally hostile opponent. He never let the dark shadows of their imperialist opponents obscure the hideous anti working class features of Chiang Kai Shek or Stalin.

Trotsky could never have fallen into the method which allowed comrades to reach pro-Argentine conclusions on the Falklands.

This method was to take the elements in the situation (war, working class chauvinism in Argentina expressed in Peronist "anti-imperialist" terms, etc.) and rearrange them into a superoptimistic scenario culminating in revolutionary working class victory.

The chauvinist mobilisation on the political coat-tails of the bourgeoisie became transformed — in some people's heads — into a mobilisation against the system.

Faded

Everything "favourable" to the scenario was highlighted, the rest faded out. The most blatant example was when the USFI [Mandelite] press reprinted a speech by the junta's foreign minister, Costa Mendez, as anti-imperialist good coin. More widely, much was made of a jingo Argentine demonstration where the slogan was chanted, "Malvinas Yes, Galtieri No". Faded out was the other part of the same chant — according to the Economist — "The Malvinas are Argentina's, the people are Peron's". And Peron's legacy was what Galtieri was trying to appropriate: he was attempting to answer the call of the Peronist leaders

for a new caudillo.

The scenario was constructed; then, in deference to the great revolutionary prospects, assessment of the war was read backwards from the scenario. The sordid details of Galtieri's sally were transmuted by the assurance that it was only the first stage of a process due to culminate in the most militant anti-imperialist struggle.

Breaks

This has been the method of "Pabloism" (a bad term, but a common one) for 30 years. It is not Marxism. It is even below the level of the serious bourgeois commentators. It breaks with what Trotsky defined as a cardinal rule of the Fourth International: "To face reality squarely... to call things by their right names, to speak the truth to the masses, no matter how bitter it may be."

In the final analysis, "scenario" politics is fantasy politics, and fantasy politics is passive politics. Instead of using Marxist realism as a preparation for a revolutionary changing of the world, it means "changing the world" in our heads by way of wishful thinking.

It means failing to follow the cardinal

injunction of Marxism, expressed by Trotsky in the Transitional Programme thus: "To be guided by the logic of the class struggle."

The "logic of the class struggle" includes for us the logic of genuine liberation movements. These can be complementary to, and not counterposed to, the class struggle of the working class internationally and in the oppressed country. But if there is no issue of liberation struggle actually involved in the war, then it becomes possible to take sides only outside of the logic of the class struggle.

In the letter to Rivera Trotsky describes the sectarians as following closely behind and "correcting" him: "When it is a woman, they decorate her with a heavy moustache. When we draw a rooster, they put an egg under it..." He did not foresee that 45 years later most of those calling themselves Trotskyists would use the art of collage to cut out the picture he drew of China in 1937 and to paste it over the figure of Argentina in 1982 — an Argentina that has more in common with the Japan of 1937 than with the China of that time. □

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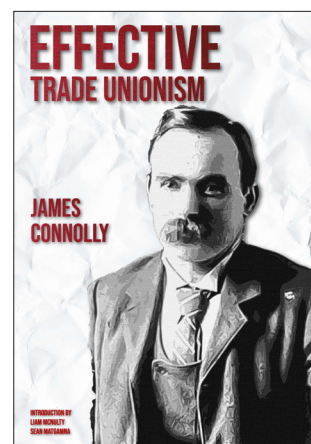
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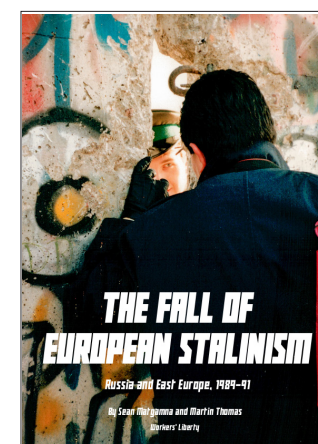
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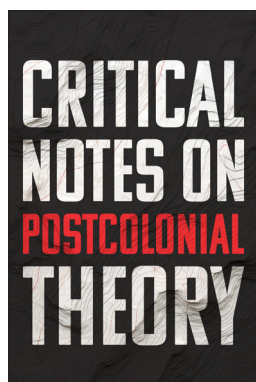
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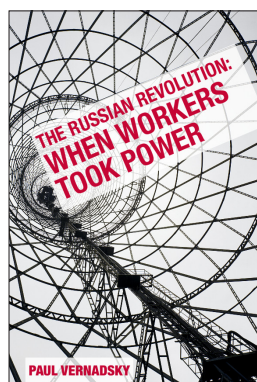
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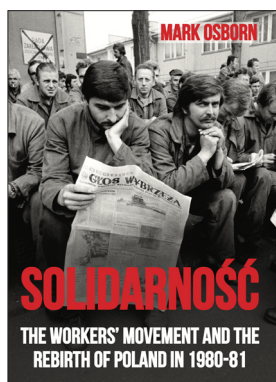
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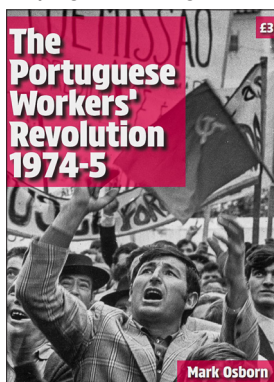
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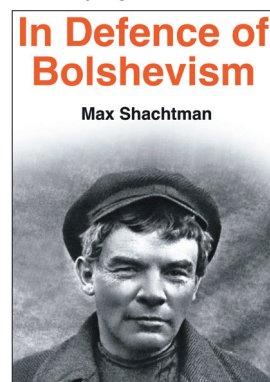
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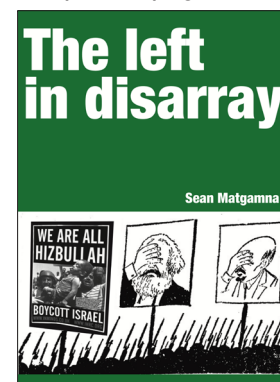
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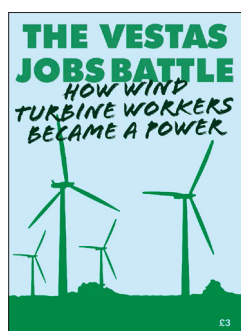
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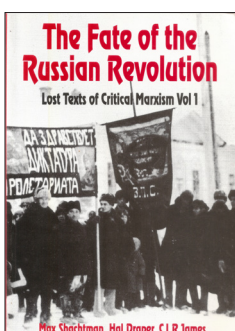
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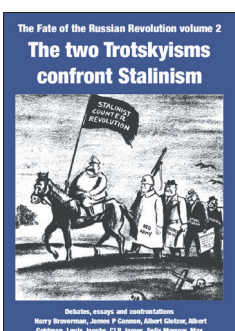
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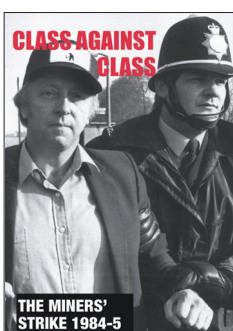
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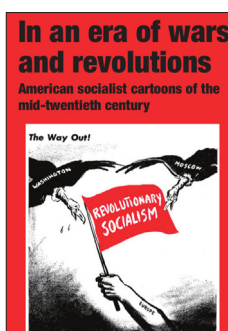
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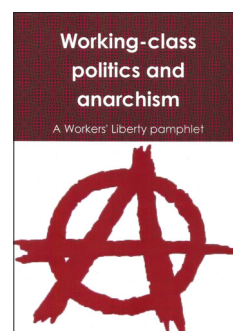
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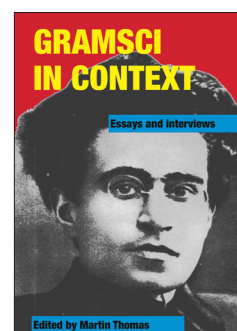
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