

INTRANSIGENCE

Publication of Internationalist Communists in the United States

Issue N° 1 – October 2017

Introduction

The last fifty or so years have undoubtedly been some of the most discouraging for the working class. When the post-Second World War boom came to an end in the 1970s, we entered the downward phase of the latest cycle of capital accumulation. The first attempts to make the working class pay for the decline in profitability provoked a massive response across many countries at that time. For a while, it seemed as though this struggle was leading to another major confrontation with capital, not unlike that of 1917-21. However, the success of the unions in keeping the struggle contained within the economic sphere and the dampening effect of mass unemployment led to the dissipation of the movement.

Since the 1980s, the working class has suffered from further capitalist attempts to raise profitability. The diversion of capital investment into speculation in the financial sector, the transferal of production to low-wage regions of the world, and the introduction of new labor-displacing technologies have attenuated capitalism's profit shortfall, but have not solved it. Worse than that, they have led to a massive retreat of our class.

The dispersion of the proletariat brought on by its retreat, i.e., the dilution of its consciousness into a confused mass of social categories and 'identities', has led to the abandonment of class positions. The working class has not disappeared as a social entity and neither has the class struggle, but the failures of the last fifty years loom large in its collective psyche, planting seeds of doubt within even its most militant members as to the potential of its struggle for emancipation. If it is to resume its fight and win its freedom, the proletariat must re-appropriate its own class consciousness.

This publication is called 'Intransigence' because that is the only word that accurately describes the position of those of us who continue to defend the doctrine of class struggle against doubters, enemies, and falsifiers. Though the enemies of the doctrine are forthright in their commitment to the perpetual servitude of our class, its falsifiers are no less dangerous. They wear many

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disguises, but in general they constitute the “left-wing” of capital. Knowingly or not, they serve the bourgeoisie by derailing workers’ struggles and recruiting them as cannon fodder in conflicts between different capitalist factions.

These falsifiers are the descendants of Social Democracy that betrayed the working class on the eve of the first World War, as well as the Stalinists who rose to power by extinguishing the last remnants of the proletarian revolution in Russia. The consequences of that defeat remain with us in the political fragmentation of the working class and in the lie that state-capitalism in the USSR and other places was “communism”.

“*Capital*”, Marx said, came into the world “*dripping from head to foot. . .with blood and dirt.*” The prelude to capitalism involved the eviction of European serfs from their lands, the extermination of the indigenous population of the Americas, and the mass kidnapping and enslavement of peoples in Africa. Horrors such as these would later be extended to Europe, capitalism’s continent of origin, where it made ample use of child labor and subjected workers to conditions so abhorrent that it caused many of them to drop dead from physical exhaustion.

However, in its ruthless extinction of past modes of production and the development of industry and manufacturing through the pursuit of profit, capitalism has created the basis for a communist society in which the conscious regulation of production and distribution by the freely-associated producers replaces cutthroat competition by capitalists. But this can only come about once capitalism has been overthrown. Its gravedigger is the proletariat: an international class of wage-earners which can only rid itself of its condition by abolishing private property.

Having created the basic preconditions for its own transcendence, capitalism has already more than fulfilled its historical objective. It is no longer capable of contributing to social development and any further growth or “expansion” of the system is not only redundant, but endangers the very survival of our species.

Previously, capitalist crises lowered labor and capital investment costs sufficiently to restore profit rates to a healthy level, allowing production to resume. Today, in its decadent epoch, the mass of reproducible capital and its expansion requirements have grown too large for crises to have any curative effect on their own, making the

destruction of capital values on a scale that only an imperialist war can deliver necessary. As a result, the last century gave us two world wars and a succession of “smaller” armed conflicts that produced hundreds of millions of cadavers.

Such wars, along with the development of biochemical and nuclear weapons capable of exterminating the entirety of humanity within minutes; the rising severity of environmental catastrophes; the inability of capitalism to structurally accommodate further meaningful reforms; and the gradual, but uninterrupted, decline in the living standards of the proletariat provide definitive proof of the decadence of capitalism and the urgent need for communist revolution on a global scale. In short, the decadence of capitalist civilization manifests itself in the structural incompatibility between its relations of production and the productive forces, which have more than acquired the capacity to free themselves from the social limitations imposed on them by commodity exchange.

In light of the advanced state of rot of the present society and the urgency of the threat that it poses, the primary task of those of us who call ourselves “militants” can only be to regroup around a set of core principles to constitute ourselves as a political organization capable of participating in the struggles of the class. Such an organization would also be tasked with preparing the material and organizational means of struggle, engaging in a theoretical appraisal of the system to better fight against it, and putting forward the interests of workers against those of their exploiters in every situation. It will take an uncompromising stance against every faction of the exploiting class, not excluding its “left-wing” foot-soldiers, exposing them before workers and demonstrating to the latter how they collude with the enemy and sabotage their struggles.

Though we are likely quite far removed from the formation of such a nucleus in the United States, it is still something that those of us who are devoted to the final victory of our class should work towards. This publication aspires to be nothing more or less than a link in the chain of the process that helps bring that about. If it takes us even a single step forward in that respect, then it will have achieved its intended purpose.

Capital's Health Dilemma

Introduction: Insurance and Cost of Living Explosion

It feels almost redundant to describe the crisis that health care costs represent for many people today. Health care costs are one of primary causes of personal bankruptcy.¹ Along with rising rent, health today is the sharp edge, the most obvious example, of a world we can't afford. In 2016, US health care spending rose the most in 32 years,² prompting increases in Obamacare premiums and arguably aiding in the election of Donald Trump.³ While calculating such things is head spinning, we can see Obamacare premiums that wind-up between \$200 and \$400, even for a worker who is barely employed.

Although the capitalist class is unmatched in greed, greed by itself does not explain the particular tire-fire quality of the crisis we see in health care. While a dizzying array of facts and arguments are offered today, I aim to show one can most easily understand the health care crisis as an integral part of today's overall crisis of capitalist relations.

Consider the story of the Theranos Corporation, until recently headed by Elizabeth Holmes. This company tried to automate the process of drawing blood and testing it. Blood tests are naturally a big part of the health care industry and the ability to draw blood is a skill which an individual needs to be trained in. By attempting to create an automated method of drawing and testing blood, Theranos promised significant savings to the health care industry. As it turned out, that was impossible – not simply poorly done, but something that is entirely impossible with today's technology. The explanation is a bit technical: blood, in fact, is not a uniform liquid but a complex substance – the Theranos approach of drawing small amounts of blood from very small blood vessels and testing it couldn't work because the blood they wound up with simply didn't have the same properties as the larger quantities of blood taken in an ordinary blood draw.⁴

And the thing is that while the Theranos story is a bit extreme, it typifies this moment. The various elements involved; the **vast amount of money** available for investment in health care, the **hope to make a fundamental advance in automating a basic medical procedure**, the **deception** involved in the research, and the final **failure of this plan**. All of these factors have been building within the American health care system for a while (since at least 1970 and arguably 1930).

While the progress of medical knowledge has shown continuous improvement, the productivity of the health care industry has seen very little increase, despite a huge number of ventures such as Theranos which promised increased productivity (medical records automation being perhaps the largest, but it's a huge “space”, as entrepreneurs say). Still, a huge amount of investment has been “sunk” into health care enterprises and all these investors demand their payoff. In the course of the article, we investigate this process further but our summary is this: the health care crisis is inherently a crisis of capitalist relations.

Complexity

Most articles about health care jump into the complex and jargon-laden debate on solving the crisis, being willing to use completely nonsensical sentences like “*to promote health care excellence, let's recognize approaches that assure value*” with a straight face.⁵

All the details of the modern health care system are difficult to consider even for experts. The situation can leave one feeling hopeless and desperate, especially those of us who depend on care from one part of the health care system. We believe it is possible to sort out this situation by looking at the basis of the present society – wage labor, commodity production, and the dominance of capital. What we're presenting is a broad outline – with details to illustrate the situation, naturally – but anyone seriously interested can discover more details, many more details than we can list here.

The health care system generates a stream of buzzwords, euphemisms, and jargon describing

methods of care, policy, patient experiences, etc., etc. And since it is bureaucracy that millions of people operate within, a lot of people are comfortable with some of this terminology, other people might know none of it, but no one knows exactly what all of it means.⁶

We try to avoid such jargon, not because we aim for a partial or simplified description of the situation, but so we can give a clear overview of this situation as part of a process of transforming human relations.

Just defining “health care” and “system” shows the fuzziness of things and suggests that development transforms our relationship to health, to our bodies, etc., rather than just making us healthier. We could say a health care system is a way by which formal medicine arranges to treat a majority of serious ailments which a person experiences throughout life (mostly the ability to go the doctor when you are sick). But it also includes preventing epidemics; “being healthier”, “getting the attention you need when you are sick”, and “living longer” are three similar but not identical goals of a health care system – a person can live a healthy life but die younger than average through not getting care or being in an accident.

The first thing we'll aim for is a historical summary that shows where we are in this process. We will then outline the treatment and finance parts of the US health care system, filling enough details to make the reader aware of the situation.

US Health Care History: 1850-1960.

The bare beginnings of the “US health care industry” were after the US civil war when most of the first hospitals were constructed.⁷ Still, in the period from 1860 to 1920, most medical care was primitive and basic procedures like washing one's hands only evolved gradually. In the early 20th century, most doctors worked as individuals, scattered around the country, many barely qualified and until about 1920, able to prescribe opium freely.⁸ From here, a medical system involving a reasonable amount of science and covering a larger portion of the US population developed. This system, however, evolved by adding extra

pieces every ten to thirty years while each existing part expanded in the meantime. ***One thing to keep in mind: in the beginning and all along the process, the creation of a health care system dealt with both absolute needs and defining the kind of need for medical attention that a person had when they were ill or distressed.***

The real start to building a modern health care system was in the 1920s and 30s and from then to the 1960s, the US created and enlarged various semi-socialized measures to build and pay for health care. Doctors became more highly trained (and better paid). Hospitals appeared, initially focusing on being a place for people to give birth safely.⁹ With hospitals came the Blue Cross and Blue Shield system (“Blue Cross/Blue Shield” was not a single insurance company but a set of standards which various insurance companies needed to meet). This system (controlled by the American Hospital Association and the American Medical Association, the primary hospital and doctor's associations) was authorized to operate as a monopoly – charging each member the same rate and controlling a large percentage of the private health insurance market. Though having a near-monopoly health insurance, Blue Cross/Blue Shield both spread costs around to make health care affordable and operated effectively as a regulator of health care services. The association could determine what services were reasonable to cover, what prices were reasonable to charge for these services, and so forth.

Opposition to anything smacking of socialism has dominated America's political landscape for a long time – the “socialist” measure of charging everyone the same amount and limiting costs came as few patients could initially afford a hospital visit, especially in the depression era of the 1930s, and because many people had not yet learned the value of getting treatment this way. The military maintained a medical system for veterans as the US private hospital system expanded (starting with the Veterans Bureau in 1921).¹⁰ The military has long been the one place where Americans will tolerate “socialism”.

Employer-based health insurance appeared during WWII as way for employers to recruit workers without violating the wage-controls

then in effect. ***It is important to notice the way that a reliable health care system served capitalist production by creating a reliable workforce.***

Medicare was enacted in the mid-60s as a way to give health care to the retired, the disabled, and the poor generally. Medicare was modeled on the Blue Cross/Blue Shield health insurance system, paying private providers based on a list of allowed procedures and prices.

Each of these parts of the health care system, as well as others, expanded coverage in the years leading up to the 1970s, creating a broad but haphazard health care system. A large portion of this progress in health care happened through building these large organizations; foundations, the government and even large capitalists, taking steps to benefit “society” – not all hospitals were run as capitalist enterprises, etc.

And this is only “natural” in a society where the majority works for little more than their means of personal survival and don’t have the skills and expertise to manage the whole of society’s capital investment, where their ideas and opinions are taken so as ***to be managed.***

Further, as health care developed, as a “public good,” it needed to be regulated, again starting from the early 20th century to the 1930s.¹¹ Such regulation can work for or against a capitalist enterprise but naturally, the companies and industries that leveraged this regulation in their favor prospered.

It's important to consider that from the start, health care skirted the edge of addictive relief from pain via the sale of opiates. A pure capitalist who merely sells an effect and looks for satisfied customers is purposefully blind to the difference between a patient whose treatment will lead to healing and an addict whose fix also leaves them happy but quite possibly dying (“who am I to judge people's experiences?”, they might say).

The hand of the regulator forced the dope dealer out, allowing the more authentic doctor in. And here, what a health care regulator has to consider, that a pure “supplier of needs” does not, is what is necessary for the long-term survival of both the individual and society. None of this is “more socialist” than the thinking of the dope dealer. Rather, it is what's

needed to create and maintain a somewhat stable and functional ***capitalist*** society.

Regulation naturally has the drawback of preventing people from receiving plausibly beneficial alternative health care while having the benefit of preventing out and out fraud – when people need clean drugs to survive but want to avoid heroin as “medicine”.

And naturally the rise of medicine was multifaceted, of course, with dentistry, optometry, surgery, bone-setting, medical devices, out-patient care, and other practices having their own particular stories due to the specific needs of different parts of the human body. And we could speak of each separately, as they developed slightly differently. But they all ultimately have followed a similar trajectory.

All of these instances of medical progress involved tradeoffs. In the case of women giving birth, the choice of an ordinary hospital birth, a cesarean section, or a home birth facilitated by a midwife, is complex (a home birth might be best if everything goes smoothly and if you have quick access to antibiotics if things don't, etc. – if, if, if). The rise of doctors, mostly male doctors managing the birth, perhaps reinforced patriarchal and expert-based authority. The use of antibiotics as a way to treat infections was a more unambiguous good (though even that came with serious drawbacks). And you can trace ambiguities in a wide variety of treatments. Moreover, the progress of health care gave a sense of the general progress of capitalist society.

Also crucial to note is that many, even most improvements, in US health levels, could be attributed to public health measures. Agencies empowered to clear areas which tended to breed disease, the prevalence of sanitation, the addition of vitamin supplements into certain foods, and so-forth. Such measures were not simply single actions but policies carried out throughout society. For example, vaccinations may merely lower the *transmission rate* of a given disease, but this and treating those affected allowed health authorities to make what might were once common and deadly conditions very rare. Similarly, requiring that various foods contain minimum nutrients (adding vitamin or removing toxins) eliminated whole classes

formerly common conditions in the early-mid 20th century. Which is to say that the ability *or not* of public health officials to act to protect the *entirety of society* has been part of the rise of the health care system from the start.

Failed Reform: 1970 to 2009

The upshot by the mid-1970s was a hodge-podge of programs that covered the majority of America's health care needs but which "leaked like a sieve" – leaving a significant minority of people lacking a way to pay for the many expanding services offered by the system.

During this period, plans to plug the "holes" were made, areas covered by health care expanded, and the emerging "neoliberal" paradigm pushed health care finance from a role of supporting capitalist employment to a role of primary target for profitable investment.

The debate on health care reform started explicitly in 1970 with Edward Kennedy proposing what was effectively a "single-payer" system while Richard Nixon proposed a scheme for simply repairing the "holes" of the existing ad-hoc system (through various twists and turns, Nixon's proposal thus evolved from Massachusetts's Romneycare to the present Obamacare).¹²

These proposals were batted back and forth through this long period, only becoming law forty years later (but some more minor reform in the 80's – COBRA brought a half-assed portability of one's employer health insurance and other measures, and perhaps more influentially, required emergency rooms to take all patients with life-threatening conditions, turning them into doctors of last resort in the decades that followed).¹³ In 1993, Bill Clinton's Task Force on National Health Care, chaired by Hilary Clinton, proposed a "universal" health insurance plan with many similarities to Obamacare – everyone would need to buy health insurance, all large employers would have to offer health insurance and subsidies would supposedly help out those without employers. One reason that broad reform took so long was the situation only gradually became untenable as the costs of health care in the United States increased, first slowly over that period and then quickly.

Investment

Also, during the 1970 to 2000+ period, American capitalism went through various upheavals, with a key change involving the breakup and "deregulation" of a variety of industries. Many of these industries had been dominated by sleepy monopolies and semi-monopolies – trucking, finance, airlines, telephones, television, and so-forth.¹⁴

At the same time, huge chunks of private money were allocated to investment in various health care ventures. For example, to allow Hospital Corporation of America, Community Health Systems, and others to begin binges of for-profit hospital purchases and so-forth.¹⁵

Just as an example, Community Health Systems, now the largest hospital corporation in the US, was put together by the firm of "corporate raider" Ted Forstmann at this time. Moreover, in the process of intensified capital investment, which had continued to the present, companies were broken-up and rearranged in complicated mixes. Investors owned CAT scan machines and rented them to hospitals.¹⁶ Employment agencies hired emergency room physicians and contracted them out to various hospitals. Outside companies now sometimes provide "billing services" and the complete list of interlocked enterprises is likely beyond any person to understand.

All this capital investment did not absolutely change the basic way the health care workers operate – things might be more regimented or "flexibilized" but the basic activity of taking care of patients remained the same (making a diagnosis, washing an invalid, taking a person's blood, or similar tasks require a living, breathing human to do). The overall aim of health care investment has remained private equity, or as Ted Forstmann put it: "*to find hidden value*". Buying companies or pieces of companies, finding particular schemes to allow increased billings (raised prices), and to similarly reorganize processes to cut wages. And the proceeds could be used to buy more companies.

Of course, while they preserved the basic organization of a hospital and primarily got money through increased billings, some amount of profits also came from decreased

wages and only a very small amount from actual increased productivity. And going back to the analogy of the heroin dealer – the model entrepreneur can mix together all streams of money and call the result “shareholder value”. Which is to say that whether an entrepreneur is broadly improving society by increasing the amount of health care provided or whether they are corroding society (even in the narrow sense) by reducing the quality and quantity of health care is semi-purposefully removed from any balance sheet considerations.

One of the sources of investment income was new, for-profit health insurance companies. By insuring the healthiest patients for less, these companies could pull these low-cost patients away from existing Blue Cross/Blue Shield insurers. So, in 1994, the Blue Cross/Blue Shield Network was forced to change its approach. It went from the policy of charging all customers the same fees to charging according to a person's ordinary position.¹⁷

As we describe, capitalist investors have treated health care like any other mass-market commodity produced by a concentration of workers, moving as much as possible to the factory system. But the nature of human beings and what is needed to allow them to be healthy has prevented this process from succeeding and there is every reason to expect it to continue to fail. A variety of studies have shown no increase what-so-ever in productivity from spending on, for example, electronic data records. Many other automation efforts have failed (the example of Theranos mentioned above).

Basically, unlike earlier industries like automobiles, there have not been and cannot be *fundamental* increases in productivity to offset the flood of investment coming into the field.¹⁸ And this means the health care system only parasitizes, i.e., it constantly raises prices to compensate for this increased capital investment.

We have been careful to say here, “no *fundamental* change in health care productivity”. Certainly, some organizational tweaks can be helpful but to treat a human being is different. Health care is fundamentally a product of one human being paying attention to another human being, noticing the

particular things happening with that human being, and taking action – the product of the uniqueness of human biology, see.¹⁹ The use of drugs, or machinery, or surgery certainly matters, but robots simply dispensing these can be never be adequate. Certainly, it is possible to achieve *temporarily* increased productivity if you have a “great team” at a given moment, or if the company simply cracks the whip, so to speak. Such actions ultimately seek to lengthen of the working day.²⁰ Unlike the technology of robots and factories, one-time demands for more work can't provide a *stream* of ever-increasing productivity.

A further important factor is that all of these investment-driven expansions hinged on the reorganization of labor processes to produce greater profits and reduce workers' power. This is a standard tactic of capital in factories and all large-scale production processes, but a health care worker needs significant freedom to choose in order to be able to take care of a patient. So, in the case of health care, reorganization winds-up, not increasing productivity, but having negative overall consequences. For example, by working people faster, the number of mistakes committed increases, which results in worse medical care.

Commodification

Health care is a basic need, like food, shelter, basic clothing and so-forth. It is one of the most “unexciting” commodities in the sense that nearly no one wants to go to the hospital. As multiple large private capitalists put money into all the various parts of the health care field, from hospitals to drugs to medical devices, however, they naturally engaged in an endless effort to sell health care as an “optional good” – and with that has come the bizarre modern language of hospitals and health insurance companies – fifteen euphemisms for “choice” and “healthy” within contentless advertisements that float like clouds across modern TV screens. This choice is a weird fiction, of course; when a victim of car accident is wheeled into the emergency ward, they can't consult Yelp to determine which doctor they would prefer to operate on them. Moreover, simply organizing health care as a commodity in itself reduces its effectiveness. And it should

be noted that public health as an approach bears no relation to the selling of commodities. Just for example, the massive increase in the consumption of corn syrup in soft drinks and the resulting increase in instances of diabetes and related conditions should have been a red flag for public health authorities, who are only now talking about the situation.

Racketization

As a *one-time maneuver to get profits*, the creation of Community Hospitals, buying a hospital or health care company to extract whatever “hidden value” you can see, works well. The problem has been that this also leaves you with a chunk of capital which expects a continuous stream of income. And we have seen that a stream of productivity increases is simply not available to achieve this. So, the alternative available for an investor is to increase the price of the commodity that the center produces, to reduce the pay of the workers, and to reduce the quality and amount of the product sold.

Fortunately, or unfortunately, health care lends itself very well to allowing companies to buy pieces of the process and make extra money simply by jacking up the price (See: the stream of fraud committed by Hospital Corporation of America/HCA, formerly the largest hospital owner in the 90s and beyond – though fraud is what's visible and tactics that are legal but abusive are what's most common).

The fundamental problem is that human beings and our ailments are complex and difficult to understand in the best of circumstances. Honest health care professionals may disagree about the best course of action even with all the information available. Moreover, the information needed to treat a patient often can't be reduced to digital form but instead requires interacting with the patient. Now, when money is involved, it only gets more complicated – if say, an insurance has to pay for a given patient's care, they can go from preferring the cheaper care option among equally good options to forcing inferior and cheaper options on patients and doctors. Contrariwise, if hospitals know the state will be paying for a patient's care, it can switch and prefer the most expensive options. And the

selections of these perverse incentives are huge. Just for example, a certain kind of inflated diagnosis may become so common that regulators impose a control system to look for it – but hey, those controls also cost money and those costs too can pass on to the state and the consumer.

Health care companies are now adept at profiting and expanding within this perverse environment. These sophisticated companies plan, write policy papers, contribute to politicians across the political spectrum, and help organize patient groups to speak in their interests. Their power has only grown relative to the would-be reformers inside and outside of the system.

Further, the situation is not simply increasing prices, large health companies have had a wide palette of options for extracting more money – if raising rates becomes politically unpopular, they can reduce services instead. By denying “preexisting conditions”, for example, health insurance companies found an effective way to deny individuals services. And companies in every part of the health care sector have discovered multiple means for maintaining their revenue streams (from hospitals charging extra straight-to-the-consumer fees to drug companies paying doctors to prescribe their product and way-beyond). Further, being politically sophisticated, these large companies are quite capable of holding price increases for a couple years if the political atmosphere is bad and only then making up for their losses by accelerated increases later.

And between presenting health care as commodity and bargaining over this range of “fraught choices”, a huge variety of technical terms, jargon, has arisen. With treatments, a matter of life and death sometimes, some patients have to fight for or against given diagnoses – while medicine becomes opaque to a whole other group.

The upshot is that health care regulation, the health care debate, and health care jargon is now constantly being tweaked in a multi-side tug-of-war between patient care, price hikes, and decreased health care worker autonomy. But with institutions effectively bound to win unless the struggle becomes collective.

Obamacare: 2010 to Now

As the processes described above asserted themselves from the 80's to the mid-2000s, the rate of US health care spending more or less doubled, reaching 13% of the entire GDP. As health care costs skyrocketed, America's private payment system looked more and more dysfunctional. A significant percentage of Americans had no health insurance and got medical care only by showing up at the emergency ward – this miserable process involved sitting for hours in zoo-like conditions and then being billed thousands of dollars for either short or long-term care. The one advantage of this approach has been that sometimes refusing to pay is reasonably easy – the Federal government has had a program to repay hospitals when patients don't pay in the emergency ward.²¹

Obamacare/ACA is the latest in the long line of efforts to reform US health care and the first overall fix the health care system to be actually implemented – a historical moment in bureaucratic wrangling if nothing else. The campaign to create Obamacare began at the point where the only changes that were allowed to be discussed consisted of changes to the bureaucratic framework, rather than the organization of society, not to even mention capitalist relations. The question batted back and forth was not “how can we assure each person gains adequate health care” but rather “how can one be make each person is insured”, which might indeed assure adequate health care, but might not be the only way to do so and it also might not assure adequate health care, or might result in onerous costs.

So, Obamacare tried to rationalize, or “plug the holes” in, the existing ad-hoc system. With the ACA, government regulation forces everyone to buy health insurance or pay a penalty, it provides some subsidies to the poorer section of the working class, which otherwise quite possibly could not pay for this insurance, and government makes efforts to control costs (and imposes a series of ad-hoc taxes to pay for all this).

Having government force individuals to buy a private product with no guaranteed price was naturally controversial – fueling right-wing opposition, but just as much demonstrating the

state's total commitment to the interests of the insurance companies (the bill itself having been written by Elizabeth Fowler, ex-VP of WellPoint).²²

The model of the ACA hinges on the government being able to control the costs of the insurance which it now forces everyone to buy. But the cost controls in the ACA hinge on the same fairy tale which the health care industry tells about itself – that expansion through cost-savings is the benefit which capital investment will yield. The majority of the ACA's cost-saving provisions are intended to help hospitals and doctors come up with ways to save money and then allowing them to split this saving, with the state acting for the patients. For example: “*Accountable Care Organizations*”, “*doctors, nurses and social workers band together to deliver continuous, coordinated care to patients. If they slash government spending, they get to keep a share of the savings.*”²³ The problem is when a company ultimately can **only** make money by increasing billings, giving them money when they achieve a given savings milestone means either they won't bother with the milestone or they'll lower prices one way to achieve the milestone while raising prices in another way to keep that crucial income stream.

At the start, despite these structural problems, the ACA was an improvement for quite a number of people – costs were reduced and the fear of termination for “preexisting conditions” receded. But the last seven years have seen these savings evaporate with US health care spending ultimately rising the most in 32 years in 2016 (to repeat from this article's start), now up to 17% of the GDP for the reasons described above.²⁴

Health Care and Crisis

We have sketched some reasons for the continual inflation we now see in health care prices. Now we aim to put this situation in terms of a broad political economy of this capitalist society. For us, a critical political economy is not simply about money and pricing. Rather, it encompasses the distribution of resources, especially labor-power, in a society.

This is a crisis of a capitalist society, a society in which a majority of people sell their labor to buy back the means of their survival, while a smaller minority own the means of production. At its crudest and most unvarnished, we have the labor market, where the capitalists buy the activity of workers as a uniform “substance” – labor-power. The capitalist contracts for a supply of the worker's labor-power at the lowest available rate and how much or how little the capitalist makes has no relation with that wage.

The capitalists, overall, own the means of production and purchase the labor-power of the working class and pay wages with which the workers buy their means of survival – supplemented by extra means of survival the capitalists and the state provide, with the extra-means naturally including health care.

To further illustrate the particular problem of how health care industry has expanded, it is useful to look at how, “taken in the small”, the expansion of a standard capitalist enterprise works. If we look at an automobile factory, as technology progresses and more money is invested in the factory, the factory produces more cars – at the same time as it organizes the work to increase its intensity. Now, with more cars produced, it is possible for a factory owner to pay their workers a wage that will buy a car but a wage which at the same time still represents a **smaller portion** of the total output of the factory **measured as labor**. This may seem all well and good but things become more complicated if the factory worker tries to hire someone who expects a fixed rate, say a doctor. Because the worker is getting a small portion of all social payout, the worker has less ability to buy labor themselves. (see math box below)

We've noted that wages might decrease when we measure them as labor-value equivalent, even if the wages seem to increase in terms of the amount of factory-goods they buy or the amount of money the wages are paid out as.

However, if a worker's wages, measured in terms of labor-power, decrease, that worker won't be able to pay for the services of other skilled laborers – say auto mechanics, or doctors and nurses. And since we've noted the tendency of health care to not experience great

increases in productivity, this shows that health care would become more expensive over time, especially for workers, even without any of the changes involved in the health care

Math Box

It is useful to measure this process using units of “labor-power” (units that represent the ability to purchase some amount of labor – an hour, a day, etc.). We can measure commodities, wages, and capital this way. (We will ignore for the time being the differences in the kind of labor employed). Using these units, we call the total amount society produces v , the surplus appropriated by the capitalists and the total mass of capital as C .

What does this get us? One thing we can look at is a simple equation for total profits in terms of labor-power units; $s/(C)$. Profits equal the mass of surplus-value over the “total mass of capital”. Which is say – the “total mass” of Capital. We can divide C into constant capital c (small c) and variable capital (v). So profit becomes $s/(v + c)$. The rate of exploitation is the proportion of their labor-power which capitalists fail to pay workers when workers sell that labor-power, $r = s/v$.

Now, we can divide the numerator and the denominator of the expression for profit by v , leaving us with $(s/v)/(1 + c/v)$.

Next, we note that c/v is the “organic composition of capital”, the ratio of fixed capital (equipment, raw materials, machines, buildings, etc.) to variable capital (wages). Now, we can use the equation to show the same results we talked through before.

And if we look at the way capitalist relations have developed, we can see c/v , the “total capitalization” is continually increasing – the mass, measured as labor value, of factories, mines, hospitals, warehouses and etc., is increasing relative to the number of workers employed. And to keep the rate of profit constant, i.e., make up for this, capitalists continually attempt to increase the rate of exploitation, not generally succeeding entirely (and thus the rate of profit declines).

industries in particular.

Here, we can see the health care crisis as part of the overall crisis of capital – capitalist investment has faced the problem of declining

profits for a long period and has dealt with that problem by, among other means, opening all aspects of human relations to investment (in a more indirect way, making the distinction between the doctor and the heroin dealer fuzzier). In the US, this can be seen in unlimited rent increases one place, development on unprotected flood-plains in other place (with the results visible in Houston), and the cannibalizing of health care everywhere.

The Crisis of Health

The US failed to create *socialized medicine* and gradually dismantled the socialized aspects of its health care system but we should be clear *socialized medicine* refers to health care being consigned to the whole of society – the socialized medicine of the United Kingdom or France serves to strengthen those capitalist societies rather than being anything like positive steps to socialism.

The changes that happened in the US were transformations of an already capitalist system. It was the transformation of the system into one which no longer considered its future – a system fundamentally in decay.

The expansion and racketization of health care naturally lead to the exploitation of all things on the border of health care. The expansion of institutional health care has led to a transformation of how human beings relate to their bodies, in terms of sickness and wellness, but also in multiple dimensions – how people think about pain and pleasure, how they think about “ableness” and gender, and beyond.

We're purposefully only dealing with broad strokes in describing this. We're giving a general outline not just because it's a huge subject, but because any particular example involves some gray areas where we don't want to present ourselves as authorities (even counter-authority authorities) telling a given person what part of their lives should or should not receive medical attention.

Some things are unambiguous, however. The rise of opiate prescriptions since the early 2000s has resulted in a horrific epidemic of addiction, overdoses, and death. The increase in prescriptions of psychiatric drugs to children

is troubling and arguably is a cause of many problems later in people's lives – again with the warning that just about everything has worked for some people and not for others. The quality of the American diet, of the degree of exercise, the level of ambient pollution, the amount of pain experienced in a wide variety of jobs, have all come together to produce at least two epidemics – the opioid epidemic and the diabetes epidemic, with the epidemic of unaffordable care also being a large one.

Thus, the crisis of health care today is inextricably tied to the general crisis of capitalism.

Conclusions – Such as We Can Manage

We can make few predictions about what, if anything, capital will do to solve its immediate crisis. The paradigm of Donald Trump seems to be to slash budgets first and make it work second. This kind of approach is a natural successor to the current neoliberal paradigm – first we cut health care so each person gets the minimum they can survive on and charge them the most we think they can pay. Then we just cut some more and see what happens. But capital so far doesn't seem to have the guts to take up the knife and drag us into this grim, uncharted territory – thankfully for our basic survival. And moreover, this may be because cuts to Obamacare subsidies and Medicare would be direct cuts to the health care industry's stream of profits.

As a counter-point, it is in the interests of the Democratic Party to at least pretend to want single-payer health care, though the Democrats' leadership make it clear this is a fantasy.

So, until a larger level of struggle appears, the practical fight may remain focused on fighting moves to reduce care and increase fees.

And Reform...

“There is a key role for health care workers to play in this fight by exposing the injustice we see, advocating for our patients, and leveraging our power as workers to move the discussion in a more radical direction.”²⁵

Even ordinary reform would require halting a vast variety of the profiteering which drives

health care costs currently. One more way the health care problem puts us in a bind is that everyone is invited to choose a side among the many trade-off debates which take place. The problem with variation on “choice” is it can quickly degenerate into “who’s the biggest wonk”.

But perhaps more importantly, ordinary reform will require health workers, those who actually provide health care, to gain as much autonomy from the bureaucracy above them as possible. If we can offer suggestions on reform tactics, it would be to demand results, not particular policy measures. Which is to say, if sufficient class struggle occurs that the working class can begin to demand a different course for health care, it will be useful if all of HMO-speak demands (“choice”, “quality” ...) are avoided and that basic services and empowerment for health care workers be at the center of any demands.

...and Revolution.

We communists may discuss possible reforms and things that we need now, which we may fight for. We also have to be clear that this is triage – dealing with the madness as well as we can now. We need to keep in mind that in this time of general madness, building the ability of ordinary people to fight together, as a collective defending their interests, is going to be as important an achievement as any immediate gain granted by current powers.

Only a community, ***an actively organized class***, can even achieve the simple (but now empty) slogan of “a partnership” between patients and providers. The only situation which could build “health care under the control of patients”, or anything approximating any of the market euphemisms spouted by HMOs (“thrive” ...), is for the dispossessed to build their collective power on their own.

Moreover, even though it feels terribly far away today, we have to say that in a communist society, health care would be an extension of the universal care a human community would extend to each member.

Red Hughs

- 1 Medical Bills Are the Biggest Cause of US Bankruptcies:
<https://www.cnn.com/id/100840148>
- 2 “Sick: The biggest increase in healthcare costs in 32 years”
<http://www.latimes.com/business/lazarus/la-fi-lazarus-rising-healthcare-costs-20160920-snap-story.html>
- 3 “Obamacare’s November Surprise”
<http://www.politico.com/story/2016/04/obamacare-rate-hikes-a-looming-political-headache-for-democrats-222663>
- 4 Theranos Corporation Wikipedia entry
<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Theranos>
- 5 Just to show that’s a real example – and to note that an infinite number of articles with similar opaque slogans can be found on the linked website:
<http://thehealthcareblog.com/blog/2017/08/28/to-promote-health-care-excellence-lets-recognize-approaches-that-assure-value/>
- 6 “Many new patients overwhelmed by health care jargon”
<http://www.pbs.org/newshour/rundown/many-new-patients-overwhelmed-health-care-jargon/>
- 7 “History of Public Hospitals in the U.S: 1860-1930 Emergence of Public Hospitals”
<https://essentialhospitals.org/about-americas-essential-hospitals/history-of-public-hospitals-in-the-united-states/emergence-of-public-hospitals-1860-1930/>
- 8 “Good Medicine, Bad Behavior: Drug Diversion in America”
http://www.goodmedicinebadbehavior.org/explore/history_of_prescription_drugs.html
- 9 “How did birth move from the home to the hospital, and back again?”
<http://www.newsworks.org/index.php/local/the-pulse/62906-how-did-birth-move-from-the-home-to-the-hospital-and-back-again>
- 10 “History - Department of Veterans Affairs”
https://www.va.gov/about_va/vahistory.asp
- 11 Pure Food and Drug Act, 1905:
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pure_Food_and_Drug_Act
- First nursing home regulation came with social security, 1935:
<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK217552/>
- 12 The Kennedy Plan:
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_health_care_reform_in_the_United_States
- The Nixon Plan and its resemblance to Obamacare:
<http://khn.org/news/nixon-proposal/>
<http://ihpi.umich.edu/news/nixoncare-vs-obamacare-u-m-team-compares-rhetoric-reality-two-health-plans>
- 13
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Consolidated_Omnibus_Budget_Reconciliation_Act_of_1985
- 14 See this list of deregulated industries:
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Deregulation#Deregulation_1970.E2.80.932000
- 15 See:
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hospital_Corporation_of_America
- 16 See introduction to this paper:
http://thealtagroup.com/files/2012_hospital_leasing_whit_e-paper.pdf
- 17 “Did Blue Cross’ Mission Stray When Plans Became For-Profit?”

<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=124807720>

18 See:
<https://www.forbes.com/sites/roysmythe/2015/07/17/health-cares-current-productivity-paradox/#f724aa50bfd6>
<http://www.clinical-innovation.com/topics/ehr-emr/jamia-ehr-implementation-results-increased-revenues-reduced-productivity>

19 “Human Biochemical Individuality”, book by Roger J Williams is invaluable here. See also:
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Roger_J._Williams

20 If one wishes to dig into this concept (the intensification of the working day), Marx himself is good here:
<https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1867-c1/1868-syn/ch04.htm>

21 By the Emergency Medical Treatment and Active Labor Act, see:
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Emergency_Medical_Treatment_and_Active_Labor_Act

Example in use:
http://www.pantagraph.com/news/national/trauma-in-the-er-who-pays-for-the-uninsured/article_43f6f99e-bae9-11e1-bece-001a4bcf887a.html

22 See:
<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2012/dec/05/obamacare-fowler-lobbyist-industry1>

23 Obamacare Cost Cutting measures and their ineffectiveness:
https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/storyline/wp/2014/10/06/we-know-how-to-expand-health-care-we-know-a-lot-less-on-how-to-make-it-cheaper/?utm_term=.ae340a78635b

24 See, for example:
<http://www.businessinsider.com/healthcare-spending-as-percent-of-gdp-recession-2016-12>

25 <https://itsgoingdown.org/whats-stake-health-care-debate/>

The Dead-End of Racial Identity Politics

Racial identity politics within the United States have historically assumed one of two forms: integrationism and black nationalism. The integrationist view was most eloquently espoused by Frederick Douglass. It sought to eliminate racial barriers to upward social mobility by reforming the dominant social, political, and economic institutions within capitalism to be inclusive of black business and professional elites, as opposed to just their white counterparts. The black nationalist perspective, whose best-known exponent was Marcus Garvey, was much more skeptical concerning America's ability to accommodate racial diversity within the ruling class. Its proponents argued that blacks should build their own independent political and economic enclaves within American cities, with many in the movement calling for blacks to return to Africa.¹ Both integrationist and nationalist ideologies were predicated on notions of elite spokespersonship that made black workers into the wards of 'their' capitalist class. This principle is encapsulated in the politics of "symbolic representation", in its various iterations, according to which parity between social groups can be determined by measuring the degree of elite representation within the halls of power.² Alternatively, it has been referred to as an "elite-brokerage" style of politics. Within this framework, the diverse and often conflicting interests of blacks, which are primarily dependent upon their class positioning, are subsumed under the heading of homogeneous racial interests, with black capitalists, predictably enough, speaking on behalf of an empirically non-existent black community.³ In short, in spite of their superficial differences, both integrationist and racial separatist (i.e., nationalist) perspectives share many assumptions that are apologetic to the existing capitalist social order. It shall be the aim of the present essay to prove the inadequacy of identity politics for liberating blacks within the United States from racialized oppression and to provide, in broad outline, a roadmap for their emancipation and that of all oppressed peoples.

The idea of the right of nations to self-determination entered public discourse in earnest when then-US president Woodrow Wilson issued his Fourteen Points towards the end of the first world war. Long before that, though, the 'national question' had been a subject of fervent discussion, not only among the most ardent defenders of capitalism, but also the international socialist movement. Rooted partly in the experience of the American and French revolutions, but also the major social upheavals that took place between the mid-19th to early 20th centuries, this theory holds that a nation, or group of people sharing a cultural identity, has the right to detach itself from an alien political body and decide for itself the manner in which it is to be governed. Naturally, this postulate appealed to the weak among the capitalists. Subordinated economically with respect to the dominant factions and effectively excluded from political power, they saw in it the opportunity to advance their position within capitalism by capturing the state apparatus. However, it also found a great deal of support among socialists, who feared that their mass movements would collapse from under them and workers would flock to the capitalist parties if they did not prostrate themselves before the delusions of the masses. Only a few within the Socialist International took a principled stance against the shameless opportunism of its leadership concerning the question of nationalities. The left-wing of the socialist movement, whose foremost representative was Rosa Luxemburg, rejected the right of nations to self-determination as a bourgeois myth and reasserted the validity of the core Marxian concept of class struggle.

Nations, according to Luxemburg, are abstractions whose existence cannot be asserted through factual means. They do not exist as internally homogeneous political entities because of the contradictory interests and antagonistic relations between the social classes that comprise them. Hence, as Luxemburg explains, "*there is literally not one social area, from the coarsest material relationships to the subtle moral ones, in which the possessing class and the class-conscious proletariat hold the same attitude, and in which they appear as a consolidated 'national' entity.*"⁴ But nationalism is not simply an artificial thought-system propagated by the ruling class to keep the exploited masses subjugated under their

rule. Rather, like all other ideologies and political theories, it is rooted in socioeconomic realities and historical processes. To be more specific, nationalism was the ideological implement through which the ascendant European bourgeoisie rallied the poor peasantry and the proletariat in its struggle to overthrow (and replace!) the feudal nobility. It was likewise with race, a category with no scientific basis whatsoever, since the current extent of our species' biological diversity is far too superficial to merit differentiation into distinct racial categories, but which served nevertheless as an *ad hoc* justification for the transatlantic slave trade and colonialism, both of which were vital to capitalist primitive accumulation.⁵ Therefore, the function of race in the American context is rather comparable to nationalism in 18th century Europe. As Adolph Reed explains, these ideologies, "*help to stabilize a social order by legitimizing its hierarchies of wealth, power, and privilege, including its social division of labor, as the natural order of things.*"⁶

The institutionalization of the racialized division of labor in the United States, which was quite profound historically and has assumed the form of slavery, racial segregation, and 'post-racial' structural racism successively, makes the American context unique in a few significant ways. For instance, whereas in other countries, racially and ethnically delineated labor pools have historically been incorporated into capitalism as a particularly vulnerable segment of the working class that can be subjected to intensified forms of exploitation, i.e., surplus-value extraction, black workers in the United States are disproportionately impacted by the structural unemployment that capitalism naturally produces. Their status as a surplus or excess population – 'excess' only in the sense that they cannot be profitably employed by capital – can be attributed in large part to their historical exclusion from the formal economy, and particularly those sectors experiencing the highest growth, which some have identified as the source of their relative underdevelopment.⁷ Instead, the majority of black workers live in a chronic state of unemployment or under-employment and have been affected more than any other subsection of the US working class by the tendency towards the casualization of employment that has flourished under neoliberalism. It is precisely this dismal state of affairs which racism seeks to rationalize. Hence, racist thought plays a dual function in

modern-day capitalism: 1) it helps channel groups of people into certain occupations and allows for the maintenance of a reserve army of labor that can be deployed during periods of heightened capital-expansion; and 2) it sows divisions within the ranks of the workers and ideologically binds them to 'their' exploiting class.⁸

Since racism is grounded on the economic substructure of society, it logically follows that its abolition will not be brought about by the exploiting class or political movements led by it. The self-anointed leaders of the so-called 'black community', who purport to be mediators between this idealized collectivity and the majority-white political establishment, are deeply embedded in capitalist production relations and therefore complicit in the reproduction of racism. These 'black brahmins', as Manning Marable famously referred to the professional-managerial stratum (a layer of society that includes clergy, politicians, and middle-class professionals), are little more than professional poverty pimps, opportunistically riding the wave of black proletarian discontent to achieve political prominence and riches for themselves.⁹ The most recent manifestation of this phenomenon is an activist network in the United States that calls itself 'Black Lives Matter', which has become synonymous with the movement against racialized police violence, a clear-cut example of capitalists and their lackeys co-opting the authentic resistance of black workers. This organization, whose ties to the Democratic Party-NGO complex are fairly well-established at this point, attempts to harness the explosive spontaneity of the proletarian element within these social movements, which often takes the form of riots and looting, into forms of engagement with the capitalist system that do not interfere in any way with profit-making.¹⁰ It is unsurprising, therefore, that their manifesto reads like the DNC platform, but with demands for reparations and investment into black-owned businesses, which effectively amounts to income redistribution for black capitalists, thrown in for good measure. Black Lives Matter are modern-day Garveyites, only they have traded in the overt homophobia and misogyny of the latter for hollow social justice rhetoric that throws a veneer of radicalism over their essentially capitalist politics.

For reasons that we have already explored here, the capitalist class and its allied strata, all of whom are materially invested in the preservation

of the existing social order, are incapable of putting forward a suitable response to anti-black racism in the United States, much less to the generalized barbarism of this society. Therefore, a solution to the profound social, economic, and moral crisis that capitalism presents at this juncture rests with the large segment of humanity dependent on the sale of its labor-power. In the American context, the creation of a multi-gendered, national, racial, etc., working-class front uniting all those who, while not equally disempowered, share a fundamental relationship to the economy, will be instrumental to abolishing capitalism and its attendant hierarchies. To this end, all forms of identity politics, which espouse collaboration between exploited and exploiting classes, and thereby compromise the success of workers' struggle for emancipation, must be firmly opposed. It is not, however, enough to oppose identity politics; socialists must actively address non-class forms of oppression, detailing their foundations in capitalism and explaining how a socialist society will do away with them.

It is true, for example, that within the United States blacks are murdered by police at a rate that is more than twice their percentage within the general population, while whites and Latinos are killed at a rate that is roughly proportional to their share of the population. However, it is important to note that more than half of all those killed by police are white. Moreover, in states with very small black populations, the percentage of blacks killed by police is many times smaller than the national average, which suggests that although anti-black racism is an important factor in police killings, it is clearly not the principal one. In fact, empirically speaking, the most reliable predictor of whether a person is likely to be murdered by police is not their race, but their class. More than 95% of all police killings are concentrated within neighborhoods where the median annual household income is just under \$100,000, while the median annual household income in most neighborhoods where police killings occur in general is just over \$52,000.¹¹ Police killings are not, then, a mechanism for establishing and reproducing white supremacy, but rather white supremacy is a system for maintaining the domination of capitalists over workers, regardless of the race of either one. Or as Adolph Reed succinctly explains, "*the pattern in those states with high rates of police killings suggests [...] that it is*

the product of an approach to policing that emerges from an imperative to contain and suppress the pockets of economically marginal and sub-employed working-class populations produced by revanchist capitalism."¹²

Recent developments in the class struggle within the United States are cause for careful optimism, since they reveal a willingness on the part of some workers to organize themselves in order to press their demands collectively against the bosses, independently of institutional (Democratic Party) and institutionalized (labor unions) organizations that actively discourage such behavior and openly stifle these attempts. The recent wave of illegal and non-union (i.e., wildcat) strikes by workers in the logistical and service industries, many of which have been multiracial due to the displacement of a large segment of the general working population into low-waged and low-skill labor over the last few decades, is a sign that something is potentially brewing beneath the surface.¹³ With each successive struggle, workers in the United States learn for themselves that they have more in common with one another than not. Sadly, this emergent wave of militancy has been confined to a handful of industries and it has not yet spread to the whole class. Although still in its infancy, these experiences have greater transformative potential than all the consciousness-raising and leftist proselytizing in the world. The material imperatives of the class struggle impose themselves on the consciousness of social actors as an objective barrier impeding any further progress. Thus, for example, if white and male workers believe that they are inherently superior to black workers or to women, then they will make no attempt to organize with them, and their resistance will be crushed by the bosses all the same. For it is the class struggle itself that challenges people's most deeply-held beliefs about the world and each other, and which draws the lines of battle within the workplace between workers and capitalists. In other words, the very process of putting together a solidaristic movement – that is, a social movement that unites all those who are exploited under capitalism – also works to actively undermine the various ideologies employed by the system to fortify and stabilize itself.

E.S.

¹ John Henryk Clarke, *Marcus Garvey and the Vision of Africa* (Baltimore: Black Classic Press, 2011), 207.

² Manning Marable, *Beyond Black and White: Transforming African-American Politics* (Brooklyn: Verso, 2009), 188.

³ Adolph Reed, "Why Is There No Black Political Movement?", in *Class Notes: Posing as Politics and Other Thoughts on the American Scene*, (New York City: The New Press, 2000), 4-5.

⁴ Rosa Luxemburg, "The National Question and Autonomy," in *The National Question: Selected Writings* (New York City: Monthly Review Press, 1976), 135-136.

⁵ Karl Marx, *Capital vol. 1* (London: Penguin Classics, 1990), 915.

⁶ Adolph Reed. "Marx, Race, Neoliberalism," *New Labor Forum* 22 (2013): 49.

⁷ Manning Marable, *How Capitalism Underdeveloped Black America* (Boston: South End Press, 1983), 48-49.

⁸ Marx, *op. cit.*, 781-782.

⁹ Marable, *op. cit.*, 170-171.

¹⁰ Janell Ross, "DeRay Mckesson is Running for Mayor. What Does That Mean for Black Lives Matter?", *Washington Post*, February 4, 2016.

https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2016/02/04/black-lives-matter-runs-for-mayor/?utm_term=.a86f31b8178f

¹¹ While it is not a great indicator of class positioning, understood by Marxists as a person's relationship to the economy, we can make useful generalizations from data that looks at income.

¹² Adolph Reed, "How Racial Disparity Does Not Help Make Sense of Patterns of Police Violence", *Nonsite*, September 16, 2016.

<http://nonsite.org/editorial/how-racial-disparity-does-not-help-make-sense-of-patterns-of-police-violence>

¹³ See, for example, the [walkout by 4,000 dockworkers in Newark, New Jersey](#), which the International Longshoremen's Association did not approve of, the latter issuing a call later that very day for its members to return to work. Or the [truck drivers' protest in Hialeah, Florida](#), which blocked traffic on Okeechobee Road, one of the main arteries through which goods and people move in and out of the city, until they were forced to disperse violently by police.

Impossibility of Capitalist Development

Before anything, we must affirm, once more, the radical difference that exists in our time between the development of capitalist society and its economic growth. During the long epoch of its formation and apogee they were paired together, although with oscillations. Moreover, by observing closely, not only the modern experience, but also that of previous social forms, from the dawn of the Neolithic period, the dissociation between development and growth appears clear, until it becomes a rupture, and as it continues the economic growth corrodes the acquired social development in proportion to itself. It is not an abrupt cut, which can be traced back to a certain date, but something that is clearly perceptible in the course of a few decades. A society or type of civilization is developing so long as the structural and superstructural factors contained in its original impulse, those that have constituted its reason to be, its historical necessity, its human justification, are being developed and propagated. For a type of civilization — or, suffice to say, a class — has never been formed and elevated to the rank of dominant, except as a positive, even if incomplete, representation of all classes, even those bearing the worst luck. Its system ought to provide for everyone a superior material, cultural, and moral wellbeing, or at least a bit of freedom in comparison with the previous situation. That content is the only thing that may be called social development.

We have seen it with great clarity during the rise of capitalist society. More than any other civilization since the emergence of classes and the State, it has increased the general culture, political freedom, nutritional possibilities, and everything related to the production and reproduction of human life, not to mention all of the positive consequences brought about by those three factors. The greater mastery over nature characteristic of capitalist civilization, even though it was by and for the bourgeoisie mainly, impacted more or less the poor and exploited classes.

The same cannot be said of capitalism today. Its mastery over nature, from physics and chemistry to genetics and psychoanalysis, continues to increase. But, in general, it is no longer just worse for the great mass of poor classes. Such sturdy metals are now being produced which enable space cabins to penetrate the dense layers of the atmosphere, but, from the frying pan to the car, the products offered on the market are of a poor quality which is deliberately calculated to force people to rebuy them soon after; we know how to manufacture fabrics that last more than a lifetime, but the suits or stockings sold for tens or hundreds of millions are made to soon become rags; we know how to produce foods of high quality and purity, but they have become hard to obtain, a dish for potentates; for the great masses, from the simple bread, there are only adulterated products, which when not toxic, are wrapped in plastics that modify their chemical compositions; we know how to select animal species from butcher shops and stables of the greatest supply, but the steak, the chicken, the pig, etc., contain the hormones with which the animals have been artificially primed, while milk is an aquaculture depleted of the substances most indispensable to infant nutrition; we can build living quarters that are more enduring than a cathedral, but the houses or apartments of the common men fall into ruin before they have even finished paying.

As an inseparable complement to the above, radio and television, which are powerful instruments of information and cultural training, deceive and idiotize billions of people in a premeditated fashion and on all continents, always followed on by the daily press; in the centers of technical and university education, the youth is channeled and molded according to state-capitalist projects, while the quality of education deteriorates year after year; psychoanalysis itself serves in factories, vocational orientation, advertising, and policing repugnant operations that degrade the individual and collective mind.

It would prove impossible to enumerate all the aspects in which capitalism (or more precisely, so that the reader does not exclude any country, society based on waged-labor) is perverting daily life, corrupting what it has also created. However, it is necessary to complete the previous brief outline, pointing out two even more serious aspects. The first is the present condition of the

working class, the slave of work and lack of sleep, without time to itself in this era of automation, without any freedom in the factory, regularly disciplined and monitored by the trio of capital, labor unions, and State, which additionally subject it to piece-work, the most vile form of exploitation; obliged, in order to avoid misery, to subject to the dust-storm of that same exploitation the wife as well as the husband; deprived of its skill by intermittent work; always at the mercy of state planning; increasingly dispossessed in relation to what it produces and to the total amount of wealth usurped by capital. The instruments of labor and its products have never been so alien and oppressing. The very cars in which many workers travel only strengthen the bonds that imprison them, which have turned the whole of society into a concentration camp plundered daily by those responsible for organizing it through trade and taxation.

The second and most decisive of the two aspects mentioned is political totalitarianism, simultaneously police-based and militaristic, which has been invading the entire world, including the countries wherein bourgeois democracy endures, worm-eaten. On its own, the increasingly overwhelming weight of armies, production for war, and police, represents a major degenerative factor in modern-day civilization. It is not just a matter of the waste to absolute losses that their existence entails, much larger than the official budgets, which are already enormous; nor of the wasteful, parasitic, harmful, or criminal work entrusted to tens of millions of people; worst of all is the role of war industries, military and police activities, regardless of blocs or political regimes. In effect, if the industrialization induced by capitalism had never been for consumption, but rather through the sale of goods and the enrichment of the bourgeoisie, with the enormous volume of war production – without forgetting the production of waste – it would become an industrialization for industrialization's sake, whose relationship with necessary consumption is increasingly tenuous and false. For their part, the police and the armies are the incarnation of the power for power's sake of an anonymous capital, surpassed by technology and the needs of mankind, that survives to itself as a form of social organization. In ancient Egypt, there came a time when the cult of death consumed more than half of the work of the population. In modern-day

capitalism, it is not a matter of cults, but of an industrial and physical practice of death that is approaching the same balance and which is already capable of killing in a few minutes the entirety of the human species.

How do we explain these facts and such a situation, being thus that the production of wealth is increasing and has seen an important acceleration in recent decades?

Save for any unknown exception, all the reputed Marxist or anarchist tendencies, the “councilists” included, have been unable to overcome that stumbling block.

In their conception, which is a bastardized form of vulgar materialism, the growth of production and development are inseparable. It is strictly forbidden to speak of the decadence of the present civilization so long as the sum of gross national products does not inevitably decline, apart from any temporary crisis, nor capitalization become a systematic and generalized decapitalization. They do not realize that before this ever happened, the present social destructiveness of capitalism would have to continue for fifty, a hundred years, two centuries, it is impossible to know, and that then the social revolution would be a thousand times more difficult or even impossible. Indeed, these tendencies are self-deprecating, they deny their own revolutionary volitions implicitly from the moment they adopt as an economic criterion of positivity that which is characteristic of capitalism: the expanded reproduction of capital.

It's true, Marx has said nothing conclusive about it, much less Bakunin. Therefore, whatever we or others say will be looked at with disdain by those who are confined to more or less erudite exercises of materialist theology. This is one of the forms of religious thought we must combat within the revolutionary ranks. I say thus that the expanded reproduction of capital becomes grotesque, harmful to society and to humanity without distinction, stemming from a certain correlation between it and Man.

I do not allude to the toxicity created by industrial and automobile pollution, nor to the agricultural toxicity of insecticides, chemical fertilizers, and animal fattening, as capitalism itself will be forced to limit them, since it will not suppress them. Neither do I mean the supposed disproportion between the number of inhabitants in our planet and its resources in consumable

products and raw materials, a new heavenly curse that threatens us with a revival of Malthusianism. Soil fertility is far from being well-used in quantity and quality, while the subsoil has barely begun to be utilized. At the same time, the plethora of population of a social system is not only measured by nature, but by the dialectical interaction between it and that other natural force endowed with subjectivity, which is Man. And since the form of association between men themselves constitutes a very important part of this interaction, it is not at all unrealistic to contemplate, in a society without classes, an absolute abundance founded on its dominion, the key to the greatest mastery over nature. The transmutation of matter from hydrogen or any other element, entirely scientific farming and herding, which presuppose the end of commerce as a medium, will open up unsuspected horizons.

Having made these qualifications, the reader will be able to understand unequivocally that the toxic relationship between the expanded reproduction of capital and society does not come from an external cause, nor from any fatalism, but from something which is intrinsic to it today. To put it as briefly as possible, it comes precisely from the level reached by capitalist accumulation, an excessive concentration of instruments of labor in the hands of the State or a few international companies, which is dislocating and degrading – when it is not corrupting – the material and spiritual conditions of life for men. In its earlier stage, the accumulation of capital by the bourgeoisie implied a numerical, technical, and cultural development of the proletariat and of the population in general, which in itself allowed for greater freedom for individuals, independently of bourgeois democracy, and likewise of free competition between private capitalists. The process, the relationship between the type of civilization and society, has been reversed. From the great international trusts and the state, who is both industrialist and banker, what is imperative to the same demands of accumulation, which is now planned, is to lower the technical and cultural level of the proletariat, to model its mind in consonance with the accelerated circulation of rubbish commodities, baptized the "society of abundance", cracking down on freedom at work and outside of it, to create a type of man and woman without personality, normalized, bland, and manageable, at the whim of economic,

political, and trade-union leaders, all interchangeable categories. Undeniable fact: the working class is today much more dominated by the owners of capital than fifty years ago. Even its numerical growth, subject to discussion, is counterbalanced by an enormous extension of work that is useless or otherwise harmful to society. In the previous period, an important feature to note, the capitalists responded to wage gains that reduced surplus-value through technological introductions that increased the quantity, quality, and cheapness of products. Today wage increases are usually associated with a much greater progression of surplus-value, always with a calculated limitation on the quality of products and uninterrupted price increases. Technology is therefore used in contradiction with and to the detriment of the majority.

Its use in depth, in accordance with the material and moral conveniences of the human whole, has become impossible in the form of capital. It requires, in effect, that technical knowledge and culture in all its aspects stop being exclusive to a minority and become accessible to all. And this, in turn, requires a very significant reduction in the work-hours per person, the abolition of superfluous work, the operation of the instruments of production according to a distribution of use-values, not exchange-values or commodities. In summation, it is necessary to suppress the expanded reproduction of capital, the waged-labor which is its precondition, and whatever social relations they have engendered, in short, all that has been capitalist civilization.

Hence, the distinction between the development and growth of capitalism is now a notion of primordial importance, pregnant with content. Without it, any project of revolutionary struggle is suspended in a vacuum, while the immediate possibilities of education and subversive intervention of the proletariat or of any other social stratum are squandered. On the other hand, industrial growth is idealized as a factor of stabilization and, what is even worse, the crisis of overproduction is mythologized, conferring on it the magical and exclusive power of pushing the proletariat to revolution.

Cyclical crises of overproduction have accompanied the entire period of development of capitalism. They represented a failure of its functioning whose repair gave it greater flight. But the system has learned to bypass them. What

one might call a disruption remains in a lower percentage of growth. But even if there were an economic misalignment as intense as or worse than 1929, a revolutionary situation would not appear as a forced consequence – it must be reiterated – nor would capitalism lose the possibility of resuming its growth.

The dialectic of historical development does not put the social revolution on the agenda because balances of payment and investments are out of order, nor because unsold goods pile up in enormous quantities and throw millions upon millions of workers into unemployment. On the contrary, such a situation would threaten us with serious reactionary consequences. The last and most intense of these crises established Hitler, consolidated Stalin, liquidated what was left of the world revolutionary movement, and unleashed the war.

No, no; what creates the possibility and need for communist revolution is much deeper than that, it is essential, not accidental. It resides in the very functioning of capitalist civilization, whatever the state of its affairs. It is not a question of any particular aspect of the system, but of all of it, structures and superstructures, the economic, the political, the cultural in its many facets, the customs and relations between men, which are their own. All this has become a restrictive, inadequate obstacle to individual and collective flourishing. Unemployment is one of the consequences of capitalism, yet it is not what generates the need for revolution, but rather the conditions of labor, consumption, and life imposed upon the world proletariat, waged-labor, whatever the wage. Likewise, the aforementioned crisis of overproduction is or has been a bump in the path of industrial development, but it is not its appearance, but rather the persistence of capitalist industrialism which calls forth the suppression of the system, since the instruments of production have more than acquired the capacity to free themselves from their mercantile frugality. And so on.

In summation: the salaried form of labor is in absolute contradiction with the capacity of the instruments of labor. The separation between one and the other has become unnecessary, and is therefore destructive, whatever the rates of growth may be.

There is the synthesis of the enormous difference between the mechanistic and

sometimes pedantic economism of so many revolutionary groups and the dialectical conception of historical becoming. Materialism serves them to convert man into a mere object, not to say a toy, of the ups and downs of the capitalist economy; the latter discovers in the process of capitalist growth itself the material factors of subversion against it, and among them gives precedence, the decisive role, to the proletariat, to Man, for being the conscious material factor.

As for the rest, the industrial growth of underdeveloped countries, like Spain, will always be subordinate to that of the leading countries, and in Spain, as in the latter, it must be the proletariat who cuts off growth in order to enter into the communist possession of human life.

To top it all, in such countries, industrial growth is first and foremost a growth in American, German, English, Russian, and Chinese capital in some cases. The same applies then. ***The proletariat has no country, and neither will the instruments of production once expropriated and at its service.***

G. Munis, September 1972.

The Electoral Trap

When crossing the street, the vast majority of us are accustomed to pressing the crosswalk button. It's the natural thing to do, of course; there's a button there, and instructions to press it in order to cross. For some, just one press often isn't enough; I myself frequently press the button at least a dozen times while I'm waiting for traffic to stop. Most of us who do this probably don't actually believe that repeatedly hitting the button will speed up the process, but it's become a persistent habit. In any case, the general idea remains the same: you press the crosswalk button, which sends a signal to the traffic lights, bringing the rush of cars to a halt in order for you to safely traverse the street. The fact of the matter, however, is that most of these buttons aren't functional. In New York City, for example, more than three-quarters of pedestrian buttons don't do anything. In reality, traffic lights follow the same patterns regardless of what you press, only being adjusted by officials in response to changing circumstances. Despite any flashing lights and sounds that may activate with touch, most of these buttons amount to little more than placebos.

The bourgeois system of representation that constitutes elected government can be said to be the political equivalent of a crosswalk button. It reflects patterns outside the control of those who fill out a ballot every few years, predisposed to obey the logic of the economy, rather than the wishes of voters. Indeed, just as with the crosswalk button, the reality of government is an inversion of what is commonly understood to be the system's functional logic. Rather than operating reactively in response to directives issuing from the participant, both systems actively regulate her behavior by setting and enforcing certain parameters for movement. She thus becomes conditioned to allow herself to be manipulated by an apparatus that cares little for her own wellbeing, entrapping her in an ideological prison. It is through this process that the state obscures the fact that the power it exercises over us is much greater than that which we exercise over the state.

The state's primary function is to ensure the reproduction of the social relations that character-

ize capitalism. These are relations of structural inequality, in which the majority of people lack direct access to the means of production, and are thus deprived of their means of subsistence. The latter are in the control of a small minority, who claim them as their *property*. In order to survive, then, most people sell their labor-power (i.e., their ability to do work) to those who own the means of production. Workers are at a distinct disadvantage with regard to capitalists (i.e., the owners of the means of production), as they are dependent on them for employment, without which they cannot obtain their means of subsistence. They are bound to them by the *wage-labor relation*, itself predicated on the existence of *private property relations*. Since the means of production are the private property of a minority, the products of labor can only circulate via exchange. In other words, *private labor* can only become *social labor* through the intermediary of the market, which coordinates these disparate spheres, ensuring the efficient allocation of resources. When production is oriented towards exchange, the products of labor become commodities, which confront each other, not as qualitatively distinct use-values, but as comparable economic values that can be interchanged on the market. Within this system, human labor, too, is commodified. The centrality of the commodity-form means that the driving force in society is profit (i.e., the extraction of surplus-value through the exploitation of labor), not the well-being of people (especially that of workers). These interconnected social relations constitute what can be referred to as the *relations of production*, whose existence is dependent on the institutions of a state designed to reproduce them.

To put it more succinctly, the state provides the medium by which capitalist interests exert power over society in order to reproduce their conditions of existence. This was essentially Marx's point when he argued that the legal and political structures of a society correspond to its mode of production.¹ All superstructural (or non-economic) practices occur within the context of the productive relations that form the basis of a given society. Thus, the political and the economic are inextricably bound together, and it is impossible to attempt an accurate treatment of capitalist politics without examining their relationship to the economic base, as the state is both the product of capital and its guardian.

In order to fulfill its function, the state applies two basic types of power: repressive and ideological. The state's repressive power is expressed via institutions of organized violence, such as the military and police. Their objective is to force people to follow established rules out of fear of reprisal. Obviously, breaking the law appears much less attractive when such an action comes with the possibility of incarceration, injury, or even death. Ideological power, on the other hand, is more subtle. It attempts to produce an internalized accommodation to these rules without applying (or threatening) direct force. Instead, ideology situates individuals within a system of imaginary relations in such a way that they perceive themselves as belonging to certain social roles or identities. These relations are generated by the material practices that constitute a given society, producing external forces that shape the consciousness of its members. Hence, an individual becomes a **subject**.² By constructing certain subjectivities that limit people's understanding of themselves and the world to the horizon of capitalism, the state's ideological apparatuses protect the status quo. Among the most complex and expansive of these apparatuses is the political system of liberal democracy.

It is important to understand that this system is one of **representation**. The institutions of capitalist democracy are grounded in, and perpetuate, the assumption that a relatively small group of individuals, often coming from similar social backgrounds, can adequately express and carry out the wishes of "the people". The delegation of decision-making tasks to this group strips those whom they claim to represent of any real power. This political division of labor results in the development of a whole class of specialists who claim to be the only group qualified to assume leadership roles. So, while democracy claims to be an extension of the autonomy of the masses, the truth is that it is built around an ideology that views them as incapable of making their own decisions. As the Dutch communist Anton Pannekoek put it, "*parliamentary activity is the paradigm of struggles in which only the leaders are actively involved and in which the masses themselves play a subordinate role. It consists in individual deputies carrying on the main battle; this is bound to arouse the illusion among the masses that others can do their fighting for them*".³

Pannekoek argued that the working class cannot come into its own as a political force if its struggles become subsumed by this matrix of representation, as it frames things in such a way that independent, self-organized action seems unnecessary. Instead, the workers become accustomed to relying on politicians to advance their interests within the government. This much is apparent in the leftist electoral campaigns recently mounted in the Anglo-American world. Resistance to neoliberalism was built around individual public figures (i.e., Sanders and Corbyn), rather than taking more direct and collective forms. With all hopes riding on these individuals, the focal points of resistance appeared to exist in a realm inaccessible to the general population, except through the limited medium of the ballot box.

The basic assumption that underlies the "pro-worker" electoral approach is that the state exists as a sort of neutral political space, which can be successfully contested by any group in society. Such a theory would hold that among these warring parties is the working class, and that the workers, given the opportunity, could capture governmental institutions and use them in their own interests. The major flaw of this approach is that it neglects the structural position of the state relative to the larger over-arching system of capitalism. If we hold to Marx's theory of the relationship between politics and the economic, then the absurdity of such a theoretical and practical approach is obvious. The task of a revolutionary movement is not to seize the existing state, but to seize power by displacing the existing apparatus with the political organs of an independent proletariat.

The falsified "Marxist theory" expounded by today's so-called socialist parties attempts to read away the basic foundations of Marx's theory of the state, in order to justify their own social democratic agendas. The proletariat cannot capture state power without first destroying the bourgeois state, and this much is quite evident from even a cursory reading of the *Communist Manifesto*. Hence the famous line: "*the executive of the modern state is but a committee for managing the common affairs of the whole bourgeoisie*".⁴ And yet it is that very state which the partisans of parliamentary communism hope to win over.

Amadeo Bordiga, in his defense of Marx, correctly pointed out that the political struggles of

the working class to free itself from the yoke of capitalism cannot take place within the halls of bourgeois power. He recognized, as Marx did, that the overthrow of capitalism will by necessity be a violent occurrence, as social change revolves around and is driven by conflict. “By *Politics we don't mean a peaceful ideological contest, or worse still, a constitutional debate; we mean "hand to hand conflict", "total revolution", and finally, as the poetess George Sand put it: "Le Combat où la mort"*.”⁵ It is only through this battle to the death that the proletariat can escape capitalist subjectivity, by transforming itself, over the course of its struggle, into a class “for itself”, in Marx’s words. Instead of being defined merely by its structural position within capitalism, the working class must forge a new revolutionary collectivity, mediated by forms of autonomous organization that emerge from various points of rupture. It is only through its direct confrontation with the tyranny of capital that the proletariat can recognize itself for what it is, the potential agent for radical change. It will not, on the other hand, be roused by the exhortations of those who raise themselves above the masses in order to broadcast to them a representation of their “own” interests. No “war of ideas” waged via the spectacular imagery of the electoral circus will produce the necessary energy to move beyond the current state of affairs.

And yet there are some who maintain that there is strategic value in the “peaceful ideological contest” that Marx and Bordiga rejected. For these groups, electoralism is a way to spread their message and bring more people over to the cause of socialism. Thus far no candidates representing any of these organizations have gotten close to winning any significant positions in government, but even if they did, what then? In the process of building and maintaining an electoral base, communism would become just a slogan, ceasing to be an actual goal, as the formerly “revolutionary” party becomes integrated into bourgeois politics.⁶ Despite the constant harping of Socialist Alternative, city councils do not provide a useful tool even for the purposes of propaganda. Becoming increasingly entangled in capitalist ideology is not a sign that one is building a revolutionary movement. Of course, many on the parliamentary left claim that they understand that elections aren’t *inherently* revolutionary, but argue that they nonetheless serve as a useful tool. As he pounds

the crosswalk button, a pedestrian turns to his friend and smiles, “I know these things don’t *really* work, but I like to press them anyway”.

If ideology is a product of material practices, then it must follow that it can only be overcome through practice. Only over the course of their struggles can the working class come to terms with the reality of state power, and the need to challenge it through direct action. Strategies that shy away from this reality, clinging to bourgeois idealism, can only prove detrimental to the revolutionary practices of the proletariat. Political power can only be built outside of the realm of what capitalist ideology defines as “politics”. The discussions necessary to engage people in a dynamic critique of our present mode of social existence will not take place in the Capitol, but in the workplace, at home, and in the streets. Instead of seeking hope in the ballot box, working class people should look to themselves as a source of emancipatory potential. As Herman Gorter proclaimed in his 1920 letter to Lenin: “*the liberation of the workers must be the work of the workers themselves*”.⁷

A.J.J.

¹ Karl Marx, *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*.

² Louis Althusser, *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*.

³ Anton Pannekoek, *World Revolution and Communist Tactics*.

⁴ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*.

⁵ Amadeo Bordiga, *The Fundamentals of Revolutionary Communism*.

⁶ Pannekoek, *op. cit.*

⁷ Herman Gorter, *Open Letter to Comrade Lenin*.

Left-Nationalism: A History of the Disease

The question of nationalism on the left is rarely asked in socialist circles and even when it is asked, it's mostly, unfortunately, answered by old dogmatic phrases or populist rhetoric lacking any serious analysis. Although it should be clear from the start that socialism – as the ideology of the international working class – is inherently incompatible with any kind of nationalism, a good part of nominally socialist and communist organizations actively propagates that sort of reactionary, anti-worker rhetoric. Whether they do so consciously or not is another question altogether. For that reason, we must once again explain the roots and class foundations of nationalism and point out its harmful influence on the contemporary socialist movement, however small the latter might be.

I

The Croatian Encyclopedia defines nationalism as: “*an idea and political movement in the modern epoch which stresses the unity of the nation, its interests, rights or political goals, understanding of a common national history and the relationship towards other nations or states; that is, its collective identity.*”¹ It's clear from the above-stated definition that the concept of nationalism is inseparably linked with the concept of the **nation**, so we should start our discussion there.

Nations are a construct of the modern era. This claim might sound counterintuitive at first, but its validity becomes clear after delving just a bit deeper into the topic at hand. It is generally considered in historiography that nations (in the modern sense of the word) started coming into existence at the end of the 18th century, or rather with the French Revolution. Although it's possible that some sort of feeling of national identity existed earlier in economically developed countries like England² or the Netherlands (especially in the period of mercantilism), it remains a fact that the human race has spent most of its history without any knowledge of the

concept of nation. Let us look once again in the Encyclopedia, for its definition of “nation”: “*a community based on: a) the belief of its members in a common origin and destiny in the past; b) the particularity of language, religion, customs and an array of symbolic means of presenting affiliation to a collective (anthems, flags, coats of arms, monuments, celebrations); c) the feeling of mutual solidarity, pride and social equality; d) political organization spanning from movements for the protection of cultural particularities to those struggling for state independence.*”³ None of the above existed before the modern epoch on any scale larger than that of the family or tribe. In the past (at least until the end of the Middle Ages) the only forms of social belonging on a scale higher than that of the tribe were religious affiliation and loyalty to a certain nobleman or king. If we could even speak of “national identity” in that period, it was strictly limited to the nobility; both well-known Marxist historians like Hobsbawm and early nationalist ideologues, for instance the 19th century Croatian “pater patriae” Ante Starčević⁴, agree on that matter. Relations between the common folk and the nobility were full of contempt – they often didn't speak the same language, they (obviously) didn't have the same customs and sometimes they even belonged to different religions. If there were such a thing as “Croatian people” during the Middle Ages, it was confined to the nobility which happened to be born in, or rule over some part of Croatia.

If it used to be like that, what happened in the meantime? Nations and nationalities are an undeniable part of our reality. How and why did millions of poor commoners accept nationality as their main source of social identity? The answer lies in the great changes of the late 18th and 19th centuries, that is, in bourgeois revolutions of that time, by means of which feudalism gave way to capitalism.⁵ Citizenry – or rather, the bourgeoisie – of western and central Europe couldn't take any more autocratic rule, high taxes and other problems which the rotten feudal system imposed on their constantly growing businesses and the market on which they made money. However, getting rid of the nobility was impossible without support from the common masses, and support had to be obtained some way or other. Rulers placed by god's will were counterposed to – the will of the people. In a sense which best fitted the bourgeoisie, of course. In short, the *nation* served

the purpose of uniting European citizenry with peasants and the industrial proletariat in the making against a common enemy – the nobility. In other words, it blurred the differences in their respective class interests just enough for that sort of union to even be possible. And so, carried by the winds of change and industrial progress, the concept of nation spread around most of the world by the 20th century, closely followed by the dark shadow of nationalism.

If, then, nationalism is the ideology of the international bourgeoisie, socialism is the ideology of the international working class. Coming to existence during the French Revolution, socialism had its roots in the experiences of the young working class in the deadly factories and filthy streets of European cities. Socialism evolved with time, and so its most progressive communist branches – Marxism and some strains of anarchism – started to break the confines of bourgeois ideology and their supporters understood the need for the transboundary cooperation of the working class; in one word, the need for – internationalism.

Despite that, a lively discussion on the relation towards nationalism arose in the historic socialist movement; more precisely, a discussion about the relation towards struggles of oppressed nations for their national liberation. The earliest Marxist thinkers – including Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels themselves – supported the struggles of **some** nations (the Poles, for instance) because they considered their independence necessary for spreading capitalism, which was still in its “progressive” phase at the time, to the backward eastern regions of Europe. On the other hand, nationalist movements of some other peoples (like the Czechs or south Slavs) were considered reactionary adventures, only serving the purpose of preserving the status quo. Such a materialist analysis, as Rosa Luxemburg explained decades later in her *National Question*, was correct in principle, even though some of its practical applications were quite problematic and later proven to be wrong.⁶ But with the development of social democracy in the ethnically diverse Russian Empire, the political line of the international workers' movement slipped from analyzing every specific national movement (and its influence on socialism) on its own to declaring general support for *all* struggles of national liberation.

That sort of approach was later, under Lenin's influence, canonized in the “right of nations to self-determination“, which was used as an alibi for forming opportunist alliances with all sorts of nationalist forces during the Comintern period and afterwards. Lenin's (and the official Bolshevik) argument was at least two-pronged: on the one hand, it was considered that the independence of some nations (stress is once more on the Poles) could bring the Russian tsarist regime's downfall closer; the second argument was much more drowned in idealism – it was expected that solving the national question by means of national independence would help *weaken* the influence of nationalism on the oppressed nation's working class. While the first argument (though substituting the tsarist regime with modern imperialist powers) has experienced reincarnation in the form of various Maoist and/or Trotskyist grouplets offering “critical support“ to nationalist and often chauvinist or fundamentalist organizations – let us remember the support which groups like the PFLP, ETA or IRA, but also extremist Islamist organizations like Hamas still enjoy on the left – the other argument is still used by many “moderate“ groups in their calls for independence of new (mostly European) countries.

The first to vocally oppose that kind of argumentation was Rosa Luxemburg, a Pole who has clearly seen the influence of nationalist rhetoric on the development of Socialism in her homeland, and a similar stance was kept by members of the so-called “Communist left“ after the Comintern was founded. Luxemburg chiefly claimed that nations, as homogenous communities with clearly defined demands, do not exist in reality and that national autonomy or independence only serve the interests of the national bourgeoisie⁷, while not helping the local working class any more than simple linguistic and cultural equality inside the framework of the old state would (but she clearly understood the threat of chauvinism and racism, which is often overlooked by modern left-communists). History proved Rosa Luxemburg right in that regard; Poland, the Baltics, countries of the Balkans – all achieved independence but we're no closer to overthrowing capitalist relations than we were a hundred years ago, when the “right of nations to self-determination“ became Holy Scripture of the 'official' communist movement. However, she was

wrong in one respect: nations didn't begin to disappear with the development of a global market, as she once predicted⁸, but instead the complete opposite happened – “balkanization“ is the order of the day as seemingly independent states play their role of spreading nationalist propaganda very well. The region of what used to be Yugoslavia experienced its consequences more than most.

II

It shouldn't be necessary to waste a lot of time explaining the destructive influence of nationalism on everyday life and the worker's movement. No matter if we're discussing “traditional“ Balkan nationalism or modern anti-immigrant racism, those phenomena serve one basic purpose – dividing the working class and making its fight for improving living conditions harder; or to put it more simply, making capitalist exploitation of workers easier. The state apparatus is constantly spreading national division among the populace, either by way of active media propaganda (especially in times of war) or “passively“, through the system of education in which history is mostly presented as black-and-white, with special focus on national conflicts.⁹

National differences are constantly used for creating strife in the working class in order to obstruct organizing, both on the workplace and on the class level. This is done in several ways. First of all, by spreading “traditional“ hatred – a very common kind in the Balkans, where it's so ingrained in collective consciousness that it's only necessary to maintain it through regular celebrations (mostly of 20th century events) and galvanize it during periods of friction with neighboring states, when “flexing muscles“ seems like a good scare tactic. Apart from the Balkans, traditional ethnic hatred often (almost constantly, in fact) appears in the Middle East, especially in Israel/Palestine where discrimination against the Arabic population is rampant, as well as in Turkey in the endless Turkish-Kurdish conflicts. This sort of strife is strongest in wartime, as we have witnessed in the 1990s and earlier, and the advantage it creates for the bourgeoisie over the working class is commonly expressed by one maxim in ex-Yugoslavia: “while we slaughter each other, they become richer.“

Another form of nationalism is much younger – though not any less dangerous – and has only appeared recently in Southeast Europe: xenophobia, or rather, nativism. It is increasingly presented as a “workers“ form of nationalism because of its supposed opposition to ruling liberal ideology. Nativism mostly presents itself through anti-immigrant rhetoric, which is based on the idea that employers are using the influx of immigrant workforce for lowering or at least hindering growth of real wages, while middle class nativist ideologues add additional layers of racist pseudoscience in order to create as much hysteria as possible in the general populace. There are several issues with nativist rhetoric; first off, there's the fact that a constant flow of young workers is necessary for the normal functioning of western economies. Young workforce is ever more scarce in Europe in recent years due to expected demographic reasons, i.e., the process of demographic transition, and its lack will soon be felt even in a country as economically devastated as Croatia. This problem can only be realistically solved by allowing further immigration, although conservative political groupings – with the help of traditionally strong religious institutions and anti-immigrant hysteria – are trying to “encourage“ demographic growth through restrictive laws such as abortion bans, stricter divorce legislation and legal discrimination of the LGBT community. The fact that labor is a sought-after commodity in Europe and North America, especially in times of economic growth such as today, should play into the hands of the working class, regardless of its ethnic or geographical origin. However, anti-immigrant rhetoric is being spread in an attempt to inhibit cooperation between the immigrant and indigenous working class, creating strife within the proletariat during which the capitalist class and the system itself will remain intact.

Since replenishing the workforce is of vital importance for the (modern) economy, immigration to the West could only be stopped by creating a net positive natural population growth rate by using aforementioned restrictive laws (which would probably yield no results) or by a huge increase in work hours coupled with no increase in wages, i.e., by militarization of labor last seen in the period preceding and during World War Two. The impact of such policies on the living standard of the working class should be easy to imagine. It is thus unrealistic – and

absolutely undesirable – to wish for a complete ban on immigration, but it's quite likely that conservative political options will come to power in Europe in the following years on the platform of implementing racist legislation which will cause further ghettoization and harassment of immigrant minorities.¹⁰ Ironically for the workers who placed their hopes in the hands of nationalist politicians, such policies will result in decreasing wages (first for the immigrant workers, then for the working class as a whole) and will only benefit employers. The European Union is already implementing anti-immigrant policy by maintaining “fortress Europe”, a militarized outer frontier of the Union, with the goal of hindering movement of migrants mostly coming from war-torn parts of the world. As our Greek comrades have recently shown¹¹, the point of creating a militarized border lies partly in morbid separation of physically strong, high-quality and better-educated workforce from the rest, which is left to live in precarious conditions in refugee camps or die in the waves of the Mediterranean. Later on, the media creates a fuss over the number of “young, able-bodied men” entering Europe, in order to cause even greater panic.

Turning immigrant workers into second-grade citizens suits employers in another, more direct way – by denying access to welfare and membership in unions or any other kind of legal working-class organization, which results in lowering the price of immigrant labor and the general living standard of migrant workers. Lack of legal protection is a good way of turning immigrant workers away from active participation in workers' struggles, and this reactionary tactic can only be defeated by a working class united over all sorts of national, religious or racial barriers.

III

Since by this point we have passed through the history of nationalism and taken into consideration the impact of nationalist ideologies on the workers' movement in the past and present, we can finally raise the question: how should we fight their negative influence? Or rather, how to achieve a unity of the contemporary working class around internationalist positions? Answering this question is very hard for obvious reasons – the

socialist workers' movement still hasn't recovered from the blows it took in the late 20th century and who knows when (or if it ever will) succeed in overcoming them. Despite that, almost all socialist organizations have an official position regarding the national question, with most of them following the traditional Leninist dogma of “the right of nations to self-determination”. We mentioned earlier what sort of reasoning historically stood behind advocating that “right” and have shown its negative role in history so that we could finally start with a critique of its use in the present day.

Some basic reasons for supporting struggles of “national liberation” have partly stayed the same – solving the national question supposedly clears the way for “pure” class struggle – and partly they got a new dimension, that of anti-imperialism. It doesn't take much to challenge the first argument, as anyone with a grain of knowledge of contemporary history can clearly see that the creation of new nation-states doesn't contribute to the extinction of nationalism among the working class of a certain nation. This (counterproductive) tactic is widely popular within the “soft”, more or less reformist European and American left; as was best shown during the campaign for Scottish secession from the United Kingdom, when large parts of the left supported Scottish independence using arguments, or rather wishful thinking which could be summed up as “Scottish workers will understand that the SNP is no different than the old Labor or Conservative parties after independence is achieved, so they will start denouncing nationalism.” Sure they will.

Another guiding principle of national liberation supporters is anti-imperialism. It comes in at least two versions: first of all, related to the paragraph above, a certain number of socialists believes that national independence predetermines a “left” economic policy of the newly established state which can, finally free of the bondage imposed upon it by the old exploiting (“imperial”) seat of power, start implementing progressive economic reforms for the good of the people. In this case, not only national liberation movements are supported but also all kinds of nationalist and isolationist parties intent on pushing their state's economies away from the western sphere of influence. It should be mentioned, though, that in some cases such movements fulfilled their promises and had, for instance, nationalized

important segments of the economy; but this raises another question – is nationalization really a measure socialists should support in and of itself?¹²

In an even worse form this tactic includes supporting parties and movements with a protectionist political platform, i.e., those in favor of larger subsidies to domestic entrepreneurs (in order for them to be more competitive on the global market) or state-sponsored rejection of foreign investment in the economy, usually under the mask of patriotism. Some good examples of this would include the national-nepotist regimes of Franjo Tuđman and Slobodan Milošević in Croatia and Serbia respectively¹³, which are still being praised by local leftists using similar rhetoric. Looking closer in time, this line of argumentation was used by the right-wing, but also by parts of the “soft left“, during the Brexit campaign. Still, the question of why socialists should care more about “home-grown“ capitalists than about “foreign“ ones (that is, why should we care about them at all) remains unanswered.

Another, more ideologically burdened version of anti-imperialism, can easily be explained by the childish maxim “the enemy of my enemy is my friend“, which is then used as basis for giving out support to all sorts of nationalist and fundamentalist movements. This tactic is mainly justified by the idea that “a blow to imperialism is a blow to capitalism“, while only western (European and American) imperialism tends to be considered the enemy and Russian and Chinese neo-imperialism are given a free pass or even considered to be a positive process. So nominally internationalist political organizations end up supporting, for example, all three or four sides in the Yugoslav Wars¹⁴, Russian neo-fascists in Ukraine and even Hamas, Hezbollah and, believe it or not, groups as reactionary as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria.¹⁵

A silver lining is that groups upholding these positions are small sects whose only purpose is preserving the “correct line“, made up and fossilized in the 1970s at the latest, without any real-life impact on the working class. Is it even worth talking about “critical support“ for some African Islamist militia when that support is being given by a grouplet of half a dozen American students with internet access? A somewhat bigger problem arises when the entire Left starts begging their own respective states for military

intervention in support of a certain nationalist gang, thus putting aside the interests of workers in a given country in exchange for vague promises of democracy and decentralization.¹⁶ Their states are more than willing to appease them – after all, it's not often that the left shares a common interest with imperialism coming from their own country. Still, a sad fact remains that most socialist organizations keep taking sides in ethnic conflicts, mostly just for the sake of conducting pathetic internet fights with other useless sects with a different stance regarding the given bloodbath.

At this moment, we should present an alternative. Most leftists will by this point start making reflexive reactions to the text above: “you are supporting imperialism“, “should people facing death just accept their fate?“, “[insert ethnic militia] is the lesser evil“, “you're a small group and you talk down to us?“ etc. We can just laugh off the accusation for supporting imperialism. If it is capable to do so, the working class should fight against their own state's imperialism (to quote German communist Karl Liebknecht – “*the main enemy is at home*“): historically, and even recently¹⁷, that was a common occurrence, but foiling the plans of your “domestic“ capitalists is not the same as supporting the invaded nation's ruling class. The task of communists is to encourage such workplace struggles instead of vainly rallying to support foreign, often autocratic regimes. When it comes to other common critiques, the size of our group(s) is precisely reason why we understand that our support for any nationalist movement is of no value either for them or for the working class as a whole. In short, while we are small in numbers, our support is meaningless; if, as communists, we become somewhat influential in the workers' movement, then our support for nationalist gangs becomes equal to treason both of socialism and of the interests of workers themselves. Syrian Kurds will defeat ISIS with or without our nominal support; equally so, they will – or maybe they will not – establish another generic ethnically cleansed (quasi-)state forced to operate by the laws of market and capital.

In conclusion, what are we socialists meant to do in this hostile nationalist environment? Let's go back to the basics – the struggle against nationalism on the workplace is one of the most important and achievable tasks we can do, even as

dispersed and few in numbers as we currently are. On a higher level, the political independence of the working class remains a distant but desirable goal. How important our influence is in achieving it and how much it is a result of the more or less spontaneous flashes of class struggle, remains open for debate. Regardless, the principle of internationalism must remain strong at least in currently existing political groups and the slogan of the socialist workers' movement must forever be “no war between nations, no peace between classes!”

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¹ <http://www.enciklopedija.hr/natuknica.aspx?id=42695>

² <http://weeklyworker.co.uk/worker/1067/nation-state-and-nationalism/>

³ <http://www.enciklopedija.hr/natuknica.aspx?id=42693>

⁴ “Do you think that, for example, count Toulouse, the duke of Burgundy and other great French noblemen knew and cared more for the kingdom of France than, say, for India? Not at all. They knew only for the king of France, they held on to him and defended him, so that he may defend them from their neighbors and vassals if need be. It was like that in all feudal lands. Nobles and priests were considered the people, for the nation in the modern sense was unknown at the time.” (See: *Iztočno pitanje*, Inačica, 1995, p. 34)

⁵ Although the process of transformation of feudal Europe into a capitalist powerhouse lasted for a longer period of time, it was marked by sparks of clear class struggle in the shape of revolutions. “Stalling” with the abolition of feudal relationships took its toll on the development of nations in Eastern Europe.

⁶ For instance, the claim that south Slavic peoples are “ahistorical” and doomed to ruin and assimilation into larger surrounding nations. But such stances were mostly remnants of Marx' and Engels' Hegelian Slavophobic approach, which disappeared with time (the change of approach is clearly visible in Engels' foreword to the Russian edition of the Communist Manifesto from 1882, in which he praises Russian revolutionaries - <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1848/communist-manifesto/preface.htm#preface-1882>)

⁷ Or even worse - Luxemburg claimed that earliest Polish nationalism was used mostly as a rallying cry of the endangered nobility and a similar pattern can be noticed in other parts of eastern and southern Europe as well. This phenomenon requires a deeper analysis in an essay of its own.

⁸ “The form that best serves the interests of exploitation in the contemporary world is not the “national” state, as Kautsky thinks, but a state bent on conquest.” - *The National Question*, R. Luxemburg (<https://www.marxists.org/archive/luxemburg/1909/national-question/>)

⁹ An obvious example would be the Yugoslav wars of the 90s; schoolbooks in Croatia, Serbia and Bosnia-Herzegovina often contain completely different accounts of the conflict, depending on the target audience's nationality. However, a similar policy was established in socialist Yugoslavia with regard to the German minority, which was usually equated with Nazis in order to justify its expulsion in the late 1940s.

¹⁰ A good example would be the German AfD (Alternative für Deutschland) party which threatens to send the army to guard state borders and introduce discriminatory laws towards the German Muslim community, such as bans on building minarets.

¹¹ “Despite the spectacle of the dysfunction and inadequacy of the borders when they are violated, the borders actually function as filters for the selection of labor power because they put obstacles (which sometimes are lethal) that sort out the younger, more vigorous and more physically and mentally healthy immigrants, that favor men much more than women and children, that give preferentiality to those who have some money and personal or family resources. For the immigrants who seek a better life in Europe the severe hardships they experience when they cross the borders constitute a harsh endurance test, a preparation for a longer or shorter period of precarious labor and “illegality”.” (See: *Vogelvrei. Migration, deportations, capital and its state* <http://antithesi.gr/?p=44>)

¹² Salvador Allende's government in Chile is often mentioned in this context, especially because it was toppled by a CIA orchestrated coup d'état in 1973. But it is all too common to forget the passivizing influence Allende's rule had on the Chilean working class, which ultimately resulted in a lack of resistance to the coup itself. (See: *Strange defeat: The Chilean revolution, 1973*; <https://libcom.org/library/strange-defeat-chilean-revolution-1973-pointblank>)

¹³ Franjo Tuđman (1922 – 1999), president of Croatia from 1990 until his death, and Slobodan Milošević (1941 – 2006), president of Serbia (1991 – 1997) and of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (a union of Serbia and Montenegro, 1997 – 2000). Together with Bosnian president Izetbegović, they represent the most important nationalist figures during the dissolution of Yugoslavia.

¹⁴ Compare: *Are the Bosnian Muslims a Nation?*, RCIT, 1994 (<http://www.thecommunists.net/theory/bosnian-muslim-nation/>) and *Chickens come home to roost over Balkans betrayal*, Workers' Hammer, 1995 (https://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/workershammer-uk/148_1995_11-12_workers-hammer.pdf)

¹⁵ See for instance: *Down With U.S. War Against ISIS!*, ICL-FI, 2014 (<http://www.icl-fi.org/english/wv/1055/isis.html>) or *Let us support the Islamic State against the imperialist holy alliance*, PMLI, 2015 (http://pml.i.it/articoli/2015/20151015_scuderiletussupporttheislamicstate.html)

¹⁶ We're mostly referring to the Syrian Kurdish rebels led by the PYD party which enjoys almost uniform support from the western leftist scene and also, unsurprisingly, from NATO air forces responsible for thousands of civilian deaths in Iraq and Syria. (See more: *The Bloodbath in Syria: class war or ethnic war?*, D. Valerian, 2014 - <https://libcom.org/blog/bloodbath-syria-class-war-or-ethnic-war-03112014>)

¹⁷ One of the better and yet mostly unknown recent examples of internationalism would be the British railroad workers strike during preparations for the 2003 invasion of Iraq. (See here: http://www.vice.com/en_uk/read/the-untold-story-of-how-scottish-train-drivers-tried-to-derail-the-iraq-war)