

THE GLOBAL JUSTICE MOVEMENT AND IMPERIALISM TODAY

By Rani Rasiah*

The Cold War began after the end of World War 2 with the two superpowers of the world, the US and the USSR on opposite poles, with much of the rest of the world aligned to either superpower. Ideologically they were diametrically opposed to one another, the USSR socialist, and the US, patently capitalist. For many Marxists, the USSR was hardly the epitome of a true socialist state, both in its domestic and foreign policies.

Nevertheless, for the working class of the world, it was the only countervailing force that could curb the rabid capitalism of the US and other imperialist countries. So strong and real was the challenge posed by the USSR and other socialist countries that the working class even within the capitalist countries themselves enjoyed the benefits of favourable legislation with respect to unionisation, wages, housing and basic amenities such as education, health and basic amenities. On the international scene the strong socialist presence played a major role by providing material aid to countries fighting for independence, and accelerating decolonization.

The collapse of the USSR in 1991 and the Warsaw Pact gave rise to the unipolar world we live in today. The defeat of socialism in the 20th century was celebrated by the capitalist class and its apologists. It was the moment the capitalist class was waiting for.

The excesses of imperialism after the cold war

i. Major imperialist wars

The post-cold war period saw major imperialist wars being fought in Iraq (1991 and 2003), Yugoslavia (1999) and Afghanistan (2001). These wars were linked to resources and strategic interests, and sparked off by some convenient conflict such as the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. The US Assistant Secretary of Defence during the 1991 war in Iraq tellingly and shamelessly remarked, “If Kuwait grew carrots, we wouldn’t give a damn.” The wars were mostly fought to protect and ensure an uninterrupted supply of oil from the middle-east and the Caspian Sea area to drive the wheels of capitalism in the US and member countries of NATO.

Each of these wars saw hundreds of thousands of casualties. The estimate of casualties in the current Iraq War stands at 650,000. Each so-called humanitarian war/war on terror saw more terror inflicted on the local civilian population, and in the wake of the war, puppet governments, civil war, a ruined economy and poverty for the masses.

The 2003 war on Iraq set a dangerous precedent with the US making a unilateral decision to go to war despite strong protestations by the UN based on its findings that Iraq had no weapons of mass destruction.

ii. The unraveling of the welfare state in Western Europe

With the end of the cold war, the welfare state is under serious threat with the dismantling of the social security net. Shorter working hours, a five-day week, decent wages, subsidized housing, healthcare and education, pensions and cheap basic amenities – all these are being rolled back abruptly, radically lowering the living and working standards of the working classes of Europe especially.

iii. Increased neo-liberal attacks on the poor of the Third World

In Third World countries, the cheap labour mantra of capitalism has driven workers wages down to rock bottom levels. The ensuing drop in consumer buying power coupled with overcapacity, and fall in profits, have led capital to turn to other guaranteed sources of profit, such as the privatization of state held public services.

The privatization of basic services such as water and electricity, and education and healthcare, have transformed them into commodities for sale to those who can afford them. Predictably, costs of the basic amenities have escalated while quality has suffered. In Selangor, Malaysia, upon privatization of the water supply services to a private company SYABAS, water tariffs went up, and last year for a period of time people had stinking water flowing from their taps. Post privatization, water tariffs in the Manila east zone concessionaire have increased by 700% between the years 1997 to 2003.

iv. Globalization

The end of the cold war has given free rein to imperialism to foster a model of globalization that is favourable to its development all over the world. For capitalist globalization the entire world is a source of raw materials to be freely exploited, and a world market to sell its goods for profits. And to that end, all protective tariffs, taxes and duties protecting local economies must be done away with, and free trade promoted through capitalist agencies such as the WTO, whose interest is to maximize profits for the multinationals.

The implications of capitalist globalization are:

- the decrease in workers wages, worsening working conditions, job insecurity, casualisation of labour and weakened unions
- weakening of domestic economies and destruction of the agricultural sector in the third world
- erosion and ultimate destruction of industrial and technological capacity of Third World Countries through WTO and FTA deals
- dependency of Third World countries for basics such as food on the US

iv. Planet in crisis

Rampant forest destruction, burning of fossil fuels, greenhouse gas emissions from industry, transportation and agriculture, and rapid urbanization, all in the pursuit of profits have resulted in global warming leading to the melting of the ice caps and ecological damage.

Weather conditions have become extreme and unpredictable and coupled with capitalist development, can create havoc. The recent floods in Southern Peninsular Malaysia submerged entire towns, driving over a hundred thousand people from their homes.

v. Poverty versus wealth accumulation

The richest 8 countries of the world, the G8 own 65% of World GDP. The gap between the poor and the rich is not only between countries but also within. In the USA, the wealthiest 1% own more than the assets of the poorest 90% of Americans combined. The truth about globalization is that it has concentrated wealth in the hands of the richest in the richest countries and globalized poverty.

The global justice movement – civil society's response to imperialism

Such is human nature that the barbarism of the post cold war period has produced a massive spontaneous global reaction among civil society. The global justice movements have mobilized millions of people who share a common revulsion to the injustices of imperialism. The global justice movement is a multi-faceted phenomenon, a movement of movements, confronting and campaigning against every major adventure of the imperialists. Some of these initiatives include:

i. The anti war movement – the Stop the War Coalition

This coalition is best known for its synchronized day of protest against the 2003 Iraq war and military aggression. Millions have taken to the streets all over the world in protest, fostering a kind of solidarity unheard of before. In Malaysia, the PSM takes part in this international protest by organizing annual demonstrations in mid-March.

ii. The anti-poverty movement - Make Poverty History

The key demands of this coalition are 'trade justice' and the cancellation of third world debt. The Global Call to Action against Poverty movement is said to be the world's largest ever anti-poverty movement with organizations representing 150 million people in over 80 countries.

iii. World Social Forums

These annual open meetings are a platform for civil society groups opposed to neo-liberalism and imperialism to meet, discuss and coordinate campaigns. The second WSF

held in Brazil, saw the participation of 72,000 people including delegates, from 123 countries. Similar regional forums are also held, such as the European Social Forum, the Asian Social Forum etc, which are more focused on the region.

Significance of the global justice movement

i. Another world is possible

In the hopelessness following the collapse of the USSR and the crowing that history had ended, the global justice movement's slogan of 'Another world is possible' was like the light of a candle in the darkness, challenging Margaret Thatcher's 'There is no alternative (to capitalism).'

Through its many campaigns and forums, the movement has attracted and sustained millions of people who are unhappy and disgusted with imperialism. Importantly, the movement has provided people who are angry with the system, an organized avenue to voice their opposition. Imagine a scenario without such movements – what would ordinary people resort to? Prayer? Terrorism?

ii. Impact of global mobilization and solidarity

In opposing capitalist globalization, the global justice movement has succeeded in globalizing protest. Never before has civil society mobilized across the globe on such a massive scale to confront and protest the horrors of imperialism. Often originating in the G8 countries themselves, the protests have reached the farthest reaches of the earth, involving workers, farmers, students and other layers of society.

The global resistance has created networks across the globe, building solidarity and linking local with global struggles. The regional social forums are spin-offs from the world social forum, with a focus on the regions concerned.

There is no doubt that imperialist governments have been unable to ignore the global justice movement, and have been forced to make concessions. High-powered meetings, such as the WTO ministerial conference in Seattle in 1999 and Cancun, Mexico have been successfully thwarted by intense opposition from anti-wto protestors. The anti-war campaign played a major role in the defeat of Bush's Republican Party in the congressional elections.

The global justice movement as the other pole to imperialism

The global justice movement has to be recognized as an important force against imperialism in a unipolar world. It is an important vehicle to mobilize opposition to imperialism in an era where all other organs of the working class have been discredited and are on the decline. The degeneration of socialism in the USSR and finally its collapse, the liberalization of communist China, the betrayal of social democratic and labour parties – all have left a vacuum that has been filled by the global justice movement. In a

period of widespread disillusionment, it is no accident that the success of the global justice movement is due to its non-sectarian, non-ideological character. The global 'justice' movement is an 'anti-capitalist' movement fighting for a 'better world', and reaching out to everyone opposed to the evils of capitalism but disenchanted with the socialist alternative.

But the global justice movement should be seen as an important step in the process of fighting capitalism and not as the other pole challenging the imperialist hegemony. A serious challenge to imperialism can only be possible with an alternative that addresses the fundamentals of capitalism, that is, the private ownership of the means of production.

For it is the private ownership of the means of production coupled with bourgeois democracy that has created and entrenched the capitalist and working classes, concentrating wealth in the hands of the capitalist class and reducing the working class to paid slaves. Private ownership of the means of production, exploitation, production for profit, accumulation, colonization and hegemony – these are the inbuilt features of capitalism that make inevitable poverty for the majority, environmental destruction, wars and the destruction of the planet.

One of the anti-capitalist movements, the Global Justice Movement holds up as its ideology 'Global Justice' as opposed to capitalism and socialism. The table below is an excerpt from a lengthy comparison it makes.

Table: Global Justice versus Capitalism and Socialism

Capitalism	Socialism	Global Justice
Political power accessible to all; economic power concentrated in a wealthy elite	Economic and political power concentrated in a governing elite	Both economic and political power are accessible to all
Capital ownership concentrated in a wealthy elite	Capital ownership concentrated in a collective controlled by a bureaucratic elite	Capital ownership is systematically deconcentrated and made directly accessible to every person
Labor-centric, classical laissez-faire economic system (ultimately recognizes that only one factor--labor--produces wealth and creates economic value)	Labor-centric Marxist and Keynesian systems (only one factor--labor--produces wealth and creates economic value)	Kelsonian binary economic system [two interdependent and distinct factors -- human ("labor") and non-human ("capital") -- directly produce wealth and create economic value]

Wage system (jobs for the many, capital ownership for the few)	Wage system (jobs for all, capital ownership for none)	Ownership system (every worker/person a direct capital owner)
Prices and wages protected from global competition; promotes mercantilism	Prices and wages controlled by government	Prices, wages and profits set by free and open markets with profits spread among many owners
"Social safety net" for poor: Trickle-down incomes and social entitlements provided through government transfers of income, institutional charity and personal charity	"Social safety net" for poor: Trickle-down incomes and social entitlements provided through state monopolies, forced redistribution of wealth and income by government	"Social safety net" for poor: Directly connects poor individuals and families to growth dividends, supplemented by personal charity, institutional charity, and government transfers

Global Justice seems to base its notion of socialism on Stalinism, which true socialists themselves will be quick to criticize. Socialism must be objectively rated based on its humanitarian philosophy and love of mankind and the planet, and not condemned by its malpractice. ‘Bureaucratic elite’ and ‘government elite’ are not part of that humanitarian policy. Human nature is not intrinsically more capitalist than socialist as some of the right wing intellectuals would have us believe. Neither is the free market system the best guarantee of democracy.

The global justice movement as a whole, may not have the features of this particular movement. Nevertheless, without a clear socialist analysis the global justice movement, by its sheer magnitude and tenacity can at best help to reform and somewhat tame the capitalist system. However, the social democratic parties of western Europe are living proof of the failure of such experiments by the working class. The capitalist elite are versatile enough to make concessions to the working class to forestall any radical restructuring of ownership of the means of production. But once the threat of revolution recedes, they will start taking back the concessions that were granted at an earlier stage. Thus if it is to do justice, the global justice movement must ponder and debate the alternative to imperialism.

The other pole of imperialism must be democratic socialism built on public ownership of the means of production, production based on need, genuine worker democracy and the preservation of the planet. #

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