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No to imperialist war! Reclaim the revolutionary traditions of May Day!

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On Sunday, May 4, the International Committee of the Fourth International will hold an international online rally to celebrate May Day 2014. The purpose of this rally, which will be open to listeners from all over the world, is to reclaim the revolutionary socialist traditions of this historic day of international working class solidarity.

The working class must learn from the experiences through which it has passed, and this year's May Day resonates with history. The celebration of May Day 100 years ago, in 1914, occurred barely three months before the outbreak of World War I, the seminal catastrophe of the twentieth century. The thousands of workers, in all the major capitals of Europe, who participated in rallies on that fateful holiday in 1914 proclaimed their opposition to imperialism and capitalist militarism. The mass working class organizations of the day—above all, the Social Democratic Party in Germany and the Socialist Party in France—had been warning for years that the relentless struggle of the major capitalist powers over colonies and spheres of influence, accompanied by ever-greater expenditures on armaments, would lead to war.

Just 18 months earlier, in November 1912, the Second International—at a congress in Basel, Switzerland attended by delegates from socialist parties from all over the world—passed a resolution that called upon the parties and organizations of the working class to do everything in their power to prevent the outbreak of war. But if war could not be stopped, the delegates of the Second International pledged “to utilize the economic and political crisis created by war to arouse the people and thereby to hasten the downfall of capitalist class rule.”

It was not long before that pledge was put to the test. In the summer of 1914, a minor political incident in the Bosnian city of Sarajevo—the assassination of the Austrian Archduke Franz Ferdinand—triggered a European-wide crisis that escalated within a matter of weeks into a war between Germany and Austria-Hungary on the one side, and France, Great Britain and Russia on the other.

Confronted with the reality of war, the leaders of the largest mass socialist parties in Germany, France, Britain and Austria repudiated their programs and declared their support for the military actions of their national ruling classes. On Tuesday, August 4, 1914, in an unprecedented political betrayal of the working class, the Social Democratic delegates in the German Reichstag voted unanimously in support of financial credits needed to fund the war.

The consequence of this betrayal was the death of tens of millions during the next four years of imperialist war. The flower of working class youth from all over the world perished in the bloodbath of the struggle of powerful national capitalist interests—particularly those of Germany, France, Britain and the United States (which entered the war in 1917)—for world domination. During the four years of war, the names of rivers, towns and even a peninsula—*Somme, Marne, Ypres, Verdun* and *Gallipoli*—became synonyms for mass killing.

Not all socialists abandoned their principles. Opposing the betrayal of the Second International, the greatest Marxists of that epoch not only condemned the war but explained its essential causes. Vladimir Lenin, the leader of the Russian Bolshevik Party, explained that the war arose inevitably out of the contradictions of the world imperialist system, dominated by finance capital and massive corporate monopolies. Leon Trotsky, who had come to prominence as a major leader of the 1905 Revolution in Russia, explained that the war was the explosive manifestation of the contradiction between the development of world economy and the archaic system of national states.

Lenin and Trotsky foresaw that the objective contradictions that led to the outbreak of a global imperialist war would lead to world socialist revolution. It was on the basis of this perspective that they called for the creation of a new revolutionary international and laid the political foundations for the victory of the first socialist revolution—in Russia in October 1917.

The victory of the October Revolution triggered a massive movement of the European and international working class that forced an end to the imperialist war. But in the absence of a

Marxist leadership comparable to the Bolshevik Party in Russia, the post-war revolutionary wave was pushed back and European capitalism, with the assistance of a now dominant American capitalism, survived.

Within the Soviet Union, isolated by the defeats suffered by the European working class, the conservative bureaucracy led by Stalin gradually usurped political power from the working class. The revolutionary internationalist principles upon which the October Revolution had been based were replaced with Stalin's reactionary nationalist program of "socialism in one country." This rejection of Marxist internationalism divorced the fate of the Soviet Union as a workers' state from the victory of the socialist revolution beyond its borders.

In practice, Stalin's program meant the subordination of the international working class to the parochial nationalist interests of the Soviet bureaucracy, which was concerned, above all, with defending its privileges within the USSR. Exercising immense political influence through the Communist parties of the Third International, Stalinism disoriented and misled the working class, resulting in a series of major defeats, the most catastrophic of which was the coming to power of Hitler's Nazi party in Germany in January 1933.

Leon Trotsky, who had been expelled from the Russian Communist Party in 1927 and deported from the USSR in 1929, recognized that the victory of fascism in Germany would lead to a second world war, far more terrible than the first. Nothing could prevent this war except the overthrow of capitalism. But the achievement of this task required building, once again, a new international—the Fourth International.

In the founding document of the Fourth International, published just one year before the outbreak of World War II, Trotsky provided a concise and devastatingly accurate picture of the state of world capitalism:

Mankind's productive forces stagnate. Already new inventions and improvements fail to raise the level of material wealth. Conjunctural crises under the conditions of the social crisis of the whole capitalist system inflict ever heavier deprivations and sufferings upon the masses. Growing unemployment, in its turn, deepens the financial crisis of the state and undermines the unstable monetary systems. Democratic regimes, as well as fascist, stagger on from one bankruptcy to another.

The bourgeoisie itself sees no way out. In countries where it has already been forced to stake its last upon the card of fascism, it now toboggans with closed eyes toward an economic and military catastrophe. In the historically privileged countries, i.e., in those where the bourgeoisie can still for a certain period permit itself the luxury of democracy at the expense of national accumulations (Great Britain, France, United States, etc.) all of capital's traditional parties are in a state of perplexity bordering on paralysis of will...

International relations present no better picture. Under the increasing tension of capitalist disintegration, imperialist antagonisms reach an impasse at the height of which separate clashes and bloody local disturbances (Ethiopia, Spain, the Far East, Central Europe) must inevitably coalesce into a conflagration of world dimensions. The bourgeoisie, of course, is aware of the mortal danger to its domination represented by a new world war. But that class is now immeasurably less capable of averting war than on the eve of 1914.

Trotsky summed up his characterization of the world crisis of capitalism with a warning: “Without a socialist revolution, in the next historical period at that, a catastrophe threatens the whole culture of mankind.”

This warning was, in all its tragic dimensions, confirmed. Seventy-five years ago, in September 1939, the Second World War began. It was not a struggle between “democracy” and “fascism.” Like the First World War, the Second World War was, in essence, a struggle among the imperialist powers for geopolitical and economic dominance, in which each of the main contenders sought to effect a re-division of global resources most favorable to itself. Hitler differed from his capitalist adversaries in Britain and the United States only to the extent that he expressed, in its most brutal form, the crimes of which imperialism was capable. But by the time the war ended, with the dropping of two atomic bombs on Japan, the Democratic American president, Harry Truman, a mild-mannered haberdasher from Missouri, served notice on the world that the insane Nazi dictator had not owned the patents on all the techniques of mass murder. American imperialism had come into its own.

In the aftermath of the staggering wreckage of World War II, which had cost approximately sixty million lives, the world economy expanded. There was, after all, so much to be rebuilt. The ensuing three decades of national state reformism witnessed a significant rise in living standards, not only within the advanced capitalist countries but also in the Soviet Union. The Chinese Revolution ended direct imperialist domination of that brutally-oppressed country. A wave of mass anti-colonial struggles swept through the “Third World.”

But the basic historic problem of the twentieth century was not resolved. Capitalism had managed to survive the devastating thirty-year crisis of 1914-1945. The years of post-war prosperity witnessed the ever-escalating opportunist degeneration of the Stalinist and social democratic bureaucracies of the labor movement. As the post-war growth abated and the tendency toward crisis reasserted itself—first and foremost in the United States—the bureaucracies did not merely prove themselves unable and unwilling to fight capitalism. They deployed all the resources at their disposal to ensure the defeat of every effort by the working class to find a revolutionary response to the developing crisis of capitalism.

As always, the bureaucracies looked after themselves. But the decisive factor underlying the impotence of the old mass organizations of the working class—political parties and trade unions—was the bankruptcy of their national-reformist programs in a new period characterized

by the unprecedented global integration of the capitalist system. Utilizing the revolutionary advances in technology, with all their vast implications for the process of production, the international ruling class—led by the United States—began in the late 1970s a ruthless and unrelenting offensive against the working class. The response of the labor bureaucracies to this offensive was capitulation all down the line. The dissolution of the Stalinist regimes in Eastern Europe and of the Soviet Union itself between 1989 and 1991 was the culmination of this process. During the same period, the massacre of students in Tiananmen Square in June 1989 and the savage anti-working class repression that followed played a critical role in suppressing mass opposition to the restoration of capitalism in China.

In the late 1980s, as it prepared the ground for the dissolution of the USSR, the Soviet Stalinist bureaucracy under Gorbachev boasted of its “new thinking” in the field of international geopolitics. It mocked references to “imperialism,” which Gorbachev and his associates dismissed as a fiction invented by Lenin. With the end of the Soviet Union, a new age of universal peace would begin.

These pathetic and ignorant fantasies have been refuted by reality. The 20-plus years that have followed the dissolution of the USSR have been marked by endless and continuously escalating global conflict. Even before the Stalinist bureaucracy had completed the dissolution of the USSR, President George Herbert Walker Bush proclaimed, as he organized the first invasion of Iraq, the birth of a “New World Order.”

The “War on Terror,” unleashed in 2001, has evolved into an unrestrained global military campaign to subordinate every part of the world to the interests of US imperialism. Particularly since the Wall Street crash of 2008, this process has assumed an especially acute form. In the past year alone, the United States has escalated military operations aimed at encircling China, threatened war against Syria and Iran, and, most recently, organized a coup in Ukraine with the intention of provoking a confrontation with Russia.

The United States has not acted alone in this operation. The entire European Union, and especially Germany, has enthusiastically endorsed the confrontation with Russia. Even as the crisis in Ukraine was developing, German President Joachim Gauck declared that the time had come for Germany to play a role in world affairs commensurate with its economic power. He made it clear that this would involve the build-up and deployment of German military power. Since then, the crisis in Ukraine has been accompanied by a virulent anti-Russian campaign in the German media. A constant theme of this campaign has been embittered attacks on the deep-rooted hostility of the broad mass of the German people to militarism.

The confrontation with Russia over Ukraine marks a new and dangerous turn in the orientation of the imperialist powers. The Gods of Imperialist War are athirst! As in the years that preceded World War I and World War II, a new division of the world is being prepared.

Those who believe that war with China and Russia is an impossibility—that the major imperialist powers would not “risk war” with nuclear powers—are deluding themselves. The history of the twentieth century, with its two devastating world wars and its innumerable and very bloody “localized” conflicts, has provided sufficient evidence of the risks the imperialist ruling classes are prepared to take. Indeed, they are prepared to risk the fate of all of humanity and the planet itself.

One hundred years after the outbreak of World War I and 75 years after the start of World War II, the struggle against the danger of a third imperialist cataclysm confronts the international working class.

The International Committee of the Fourth International has called for this online celebration of May Day to sound the alarm and fight for the world-wide unity of the working class in the renewed struggle against imperialism.