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Campism

Against Campism, for International Working-Class Solidarity

- Features -

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As socialists we must espouse a truly internationalist politics, one that supports democratic and working-class movements around the world. We support such movements in their struggles against tyrannical governments and the ruling classes of all countries, just as we welcome their solidarity with us. As U.S. socialists we oppose the imperialism of the United States, but as internationalists we must also oppose the authoritarianism and imperialism of other states, regardless of what those who run those states call themselves. That is, we must oppose “campism.”

Campism is a longstanding tendency in the international and U.S. left. It approaches world politics from the standpoint that the main axis of conflict is between two hostile geopolitical camps: the “imperialist camp,” today made up of the United States, Western Europe, Saudi Arabia, and Israel (or some such combination) on one hand and the “anti-imperialist camp” of Russia, China, North Korea, Syria, Iran, Venezuela, Cuba, and other less-industrialized nations on the other. The anti-imperialist camp is generally defined as all formerly colonized nations and especially all avowedly anti-imperialist governments in the Global South. This ideology has been a hallmark of political currents defining themselves as Marxist-Leninist, though others who don’t identify with that term also embrace it. Campism, somewhat surprisingly, considering the organization’s political lineage, now exists even within parts of DSA. We hope that our brief account and critique of campism will convince those in DSA who are attracted to it to reject it, for it distorts the very meaning of democratic socialism and leads socialists away from “an injury to one is an injury to all” and “workers of the world unite!” to the inverted nationalism of “the enemy of my enemy is my friend.”

In this framework, the division of the world between rival geopolitical blocs overrides other questions and provides the dominant political explanation for world events. It seldom addresses the internal class character of the nations of the “anti-imperialist camp,” and, regardless of the nature of their governments and economies, attribute to those nations a progressive character. It almost never criticizes the “anti-imperialist nations” and tends to ignore, denigrate, or outright oppose movements for democracy or economic and social justice that arise among the working classes of such states.

Contemporary campism, as described above, runs counter to the Marxist and broader democratic socialist tradition insofar as it stresses solidarity with states rather than international working-class solidarity. This tendency generally supports clearly capitalist states (such as Iran and Syria) or states that claim to be socialist (like China or North Korea), which have authoritarian or totalitarian governments. In the past, socialists from Karl Marx to Eugene Debs, from Rosa Luxemburg to C.L.R. James, always emphasized that workers in each country should support those in another in their struggles for democracy and social justice. But when it comes to states in geopolitical conflict with the U.S., campism often opposes support for democratic movements, even ones clearly led by the working class, on the grounds that such movements jeopardize ostensibly progressive governments, and that supporting them would thus make U.S. socialists allies of our own ruling class. For example, this typically entails support for the Chinese state and the ruling Communist Party, even though it promotes a highly repressive form of capitalism and opposes workers’ self-organization and workers’ power. This viewpoint distorts the Marxist political tradition with its roots in humanism, the Enlightenment, and the nineteenth century workers’ movement, and which is first and foremost about the fight for working-class political power.

The Origins of Campism in the Russian Revolution

There was a time when identification with an anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist camp made a certain amount of sense. The Russian Revolution was supported by millions of workers around the world, and it led to a split in the international labor movement between those who remained in Social Democratic parties and those who joined the newly-organized Communist parties and the Communist International (Comintern). So, for a decade after the 1917 revolution one could say that there were two camps: one defending a workers' revolution and striving for socialism, versus a capitalist camp that promoted counterrevolution around the world.

However, international Communism was transformed by developments in the Soviet Union in the period after 1927. A faction led by Joseph Stalin rose to dominance in the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) and the Comintern, with its affiliated parties throughout the world. Stalin carried out a counter-revolution within the movement, imprisoning, exiling, and executing nearly all of the Bolsheviks who had led the transformation of the former tsarist empire through its first ten years. Under his leadership, the CPSU also subordinated the soviets, labor unions, and all other institutions to Stalin and his cronies. He used the state to transform the Soviet economy—through nationalization of all industry and the forced collectivization of agriculture—into a bureaucratically centralized and defectively “planned” system under the total control of the Party.

By the 1930s, “Communism” had little to do with communism as Marx and Engels used the term. To highlight its departure from fundamental Marxist and democratic socialist principles, critical currents on the left began to label it “Stalinism.” Even so, Communist parties around the globe continued to support the “socialist camp,” and because of their influence millions of workers looked to the Soviet Union as the motherland of socialism. Many still saw the Soviet Union as a positive alternative to a capitalist system mired in the Great Depression, and as a model for a non-capitalist path to development and prosperity in what was later called the Third World.

During the lead-up to World War II, Stalin first aligned the USSR with the British and French empires, then with Nazi Germany in the Hitler-Stalin Pact of 1939, and finally again with Britain, France, and the United States. Consequently, in the fight against the Axis Powers the Soviet Union portrayed itself and was seen by millions as being in the progressive, democratic, anti-fascist camp. When at the war's end the Soviet Union defeated Nazism in Eastern Europe and then conquered those same countries, the notion of the socialist camp was expanded to include not only the Soviet Union but also the states that now formed part of the Warsaw Pact.

Dominated by the USSR, the Eastern European countries were re-molded in the Russian model, with ruling Communist parties nationalizing every enterprise and suppressing all political freedom. When workers rebelled against the ruling Socialist Unity Party in East Germany in 1953, rose up in revolution in Hungary in 1956, organized and struck in Poland from the late 1960s through the 1980s, those governments, with the support of the Red Army, put them down. Despite this, many leftists continued to believe that there existed a progressive socialist camp and a reactionary capitalist camp. In fact, since the 1930s there had been two clearly reactionary camps, both opposed to working-class political power.

China Complicates Campism

The binary logic of campism was complicated by the conflict between Mao's China and the Soviet Union, the Sino-Soviet split. The Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) victory over the Kuomintang (KMT, Chinese Nationalist Party) in 1949 expanded the “socialist” camp, but with a new twist. The CCP had led a peasant army to victory, surrounding and conquering the Chinese cities. Moreover, it was a revolution by formerly colonized people of color. Still, in most respects, Stalin's USSR provided the model for the CCP under Mao: a one-party state that owned and managed the entire economy and controlled all political and social organizations. Mao's industrial development plan, the Great Leap Forward, led to mass starvation and the deaths of tens of millions, surpassing even the toll of Stalin's forced collectivization of agriculture in the 1930s.

The years of the Cold War saw the marginalization of independent revolutionary socialist organizations opposed to both the “Western” and “Eastern” social systems. The gigantic atrocities of the United States and other capitalist powers—from the dropping of atomic bombs on Japan in August 1945 to the U.S. and West European role in coups and support for military dictatorships in Latin America, the Middle East and Africa—often led U.S. and other leftists to either support the Communist camp or at least to see it as progressive. Such leftists, appalled by the horrors committed by their own government, and ignorant of or disbelieving in Communist atrocities, slid easily into campism.

In 1962 Mao broke with the Soviet Union, arguing that Russian premier Nikita Khrushchev was pursuing a “capitalist road” and had capitulated to the imperialists during the Cuban Missile Crisis. The result was a split in the “socialist camp.” China now put itself forward as the leader of the oppressed peoples of the Third World, the majority of whom were peasants and people of color. In the mid-1960s, Mao launched what he called the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, in reality a faction fight within the CCP that took hundreds of thousands and perhaps millions of lives. At the time, however, most in the West really knew little about China, Mao, or Chinese people’s lives, and many mistakenly believed that Mao was leading China to become a genuine socialist democracy.

With the U.S. carrying out a genocidal war against Vietnam, many in the anti-war movement came to believe that China was the vanguard country of international socialist revolution. In the U.S., white racism and the rise of the civil rights movement led many young white people to identify with the movement against Jim Crow and then with the call for Black Power. Sympathy for oppressed people of color often led to uncritical support for North Korea’s Kim Il-Sung, Mao and the Vietnamese National Liberation Front (NLF). Maoism became a prominent trend on the U.S. left, with its own variant of campism: China was now the leader of the socialist camp, seen as supporting all anti-U.S. movements in the Third World (all believed to be automatically progressive), while the Soviet Union was deemed “social-imperialist.”

Given Mao’s fear of and antipathy to the USSR, it isn’t surprising that in 1972 he met with Richard Nixon and reached an agreement that made the two countries *de facto* allies. The death of Mao, the rise of Deng Xiaoping, and the gradual introduction of capitalism in China led to a crisis in Maoism (or “Marxism-Leninism-Mao Zedong Thought”) and to its eventual collapse as a movement in the “First World.” Yet for years a vaguely-defined Chinese-Third Worldist campism lived on because it seemed to be the only alternative to Western capitalism, racism and imperialism.

The Fall of the USSR and the Persistence of Campism

The CPSU collapsed along with the Soviet Union in 1991. Former Communist Party leaders, KGB secret police officials, and the managers of large state firms made power grabs in the various former Soviet Socialist Republics and for state resources that were being denationalized. Russia held elections between 1991 and 2000, when former KGB agent Vladimir Putin became prime minister and then president. Over the next twenty years Putin emerged as a central figure for a type of campism that considers Russia an anti-imperialist power.

That Putin should be seen as somehow anti-imperialist is odd, given that he won Russia’s 1999 election on a law-and-order platform promising to suppress the rebellion of the Chechen-Ingush people, long oppressed by the Soviet Union. With the collapse of the USSR, the mostly Muslim Chechen-Ingush fought for independence, like many oppressed peoples, through a combination of political movements and armed resistance. Putin won the election and then crushed the Chechen-Ingush Republic in an extraordinarily violent manner. Under Putin’s leadership Russia acted in the most traditional way as an imperial power against a small, oppressed Islamic people. If ever there was an imperialist atrocity, Putin’s bloody suppression of the Chechens was one.

As the so-called color revolutions for democracy in Eastern Europe and the Balkans unfolded—some more progressive than others—Putin perceived a threat to his plans to reimpose Russian dominance over that region, as in the days of the tsarist empire and the Warsaw Pact. He aspired to make Russia a great Eurasian empire that could resist the influence of Western Europe. In the “Munich speech” of 2007 he spoke out violently against the United States and the European Union for attempting to create a unipolar world that threatened Russian culture and morality. What was needed, Putin argued, was a political and philosophical defense against the West.

Putin’s new ideology was extremely conservative, based on a restoration of tsarist conceptions of nationalism and a revival of the Russian Orthodox Church, at the center of which stood “family values.” Putin’s Russia thus became an international leader in fighting the evils of the Internet, pornography, and homosexuality. The leading nation of the new anti-imperialist camp was thus a reactionary and authoritarian state. Nevertheless, in the United States and Europe some leftists began to view Putin’s Russia as an alternative to U.S. and Western European imperialism. Some defended Putin when in February and March of 2014 Russia seized the Crimea from Ukraine, the first such imperialist annexation of foreign territory in Europe since World War II. When Russia intervened in the Syrian civil war on the side of dictator Bashar al-Assad it did so against all the various opposition forces, regardless of whether they were Islamist or democratic, secular, and left-wing, such as the Local Coordinating Councils inspired by Omar Aziz.

How the Left Should Respond to Campism

We on the left must recognize that support, whether active or passive, for dubiously anti-imperialist figures like Putin or Assad or authoritarian governments like that of Nicolas Maduro in Venezuela discredits the left as a whole. Our moral and political credibility is based on our commitment to democracy, to the workers’ movement in all countries, and to the struggle for international socialism. In the name of those principles we fight against U.S. imperialism throughout the world, but if we give up those principles we undermine anti-imperialism and the socialist cause itself.

Some cases are more simple than others. No democratic, internationalist socialist should have a problem “figuring out” China. China has a one-party dictatorship, with no other political parties permitted and all social movements and labor organizations controlled by the party-state. China has become an essentially capitalist country, with industries owned and run not just by the Chinese state but the Chinese army, Chinese capitalists, and foreign corporations, all thoroughly integrated into the world capitalist market. China suppresses its ethnic and religious minorities like the Tibetans and Uighurs, putting a million of the latter in forced labor camps. Chinese workers’ attempts to organize, form independent unions to bargain collectively and to strike have been suppressed by the government, and more severely in the last five years or so.

China has also embarked on a classical capitalist development path toward a global economic empire with billions of dollars invested abroad in a wide variety of industries from construction and mineral extraction to high tech. More recently, China has built new islands in the South China Sea to serve as military air bases, to the dismay of neighboring states. As in the history of all such powers, economic expansion brings with it militarism and imperial ambitions. President Xi Jinping has called upon the Chinese People’s Liberation Army to modernize by 2035 and to become a world-class military power by 2050. As socialists we can only be opponents of the Chinese government, and must be allies of the Chinese working class and oppressed groups in their struggles against it.

The case of Maduro and Venezuela is more difficult. All of us must oppose U.S. economic sanctions, which primarily harm working-class and poor Venezuelans. We must also oppose any U.S. military intervention in Venezuela, as well as U.S. efforts to bolster the Venezuelan ruling class and right wing in their attempt to impose a more reliable bourgeois government. At the same time, it has become politically impossible to even critically support the Maduro government. Maduro, when he lost an election, created a new legislature, violently suppressed some of his

opponents right and left, and presided over the collapse of the Venezuelan economy and massive emigration of three million Venezuelans to neighboring countries. So we should support those in the working class and the left in Venezuela who seek to remove Maduro through elections.

We recognize that in such elections Maduro's incumbent PSUV and the bourgeois parties there, just as here, will have an advantage over working-class democratic and socialist parties, but the alternative is both the continued political degeneration of the Venezuelan government and the worsening conditions of the Venezuelan people in the form of hunger, health problems, and generalized poverty.

And DSA should be making connections with such socialists, in Venezuela and elsewhere—especially with those of Middle Eastern and North African heritage. Alliances with groups such as the Alliance of Middle Eastern and North African Socialists are an absolute necessity if we are serious about building a social-internationalist movement against a U.S. war on Iran, a movement that supports Iranian workers' and students' revolts against that theocratic capitalist state just as much as it opposes Trump's imperialist barbarism.

Socialists should apply the same critical standards we apply to the capitalist societies of the Global North to every other country. And we should ask the same analytical questions in each case: who actually rules the country and makes the decisions? Do people have the right to form independent political parties and trade unions? Does genuine freedom of speech, assembly, and press exist? Do people have the right to assemble and to peacefully protest? Who owns the industries? Who manages them? Do workers have labor unions of their own choosing, rather than state-owned unions? Can they bargain collectively, negotiate contracts, and strike? Are ethnic or racial minorities oppressed? Do women and LGBTQ people have the same rights and freedoms as men and heterosexuals? Does everyone have adequate housing, food, clothing, health care, and education?

We do not in any way help the world's oppressed and exploited people by identifying with or placing ourselves on the side of governments like those of Russia, Syria, China, Iran, or even Venezuela. We have to recognize that instead of the supposed "two camps" of U.S. imperialism and the allegedly anti-imperialist states there is our camp: the workers of the world fighting for their rights and liberties, for political freedom, for their basic economic needs, and even for socialism.

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