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Libya/USA

US Hands off Libya!

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In late February the masses of Libya revolted against the regime of Muammar el-Qaddafi. As we go to press, the opposition controls the country's second largest city, Benghazi, and other cities in the oil-rich eastern part of the country as well as many towns in the west. Qaddafi maintains control in the capital, Tripoli, and is trying to retake other cities. Pro-Qaddafi army, militia, and mercenary units have inflicted high casualties on the civilian population—often using tanks and warplanes in their strikes.

The political character of the opposition seems to be as mixed, as in other Arab countries in revolt. But whereas in Egypt and Tunisia the military forced out the dictators before a full-scale confrontation with enraged masses could begin—a confrontation that could have meant a split in the army and defection of soldiers to the revolution—in Libya significant sections of the military (and diplomatic) hierarchy split from Qaddafi almost immediately, sensing correctly that Qaddafi would not go so quietly.

In towns liberated from Qaddafi's regime, the same kind of self-organization by the masses seen in Egypt, Tunisia, Bahrain, and elsewhere is taking place, as people's committees have taken over provision of basic services and maintenance of order, including keeping oil flowing. A layer of middle-class professionals—doctors, lawyers, academics, etc.—appear to have appointed themselves heads of these committees and of a coordinating group called the Libyan National Council. Alongside them are military committees created by defecting officers.

Smelling a chance to intervene and set up a new puppet government, world powers got the UN Security Council to vote for sanctions against the regime, arranged for the International Criminal Court to indict Qaddafi (the same Court which has repeatedly refused to indict Zionist war criminals), and began threatening use of military force.

Within the resistance, defectors from Qaddafi's regime and the middle-class forces who have appointed themselves leaders are calling for Western intervention, most commonly in the form of "no-fly zones," while claiming to be opposed to the introduction of ground troops. The rank and file of these committees, in contrast, appears willing and eager to use their mass armed power to finish the battle with Qaddafi.

It is important to stand with the workers, peasants, and youth of Libya in their fight to finish off the tyrannical, capitalist Qaddafi regime. We must also give them our political support in their fight against the quislings who would turn over Libya to imperialist intervention. Such pleas are sometimes made for "humanitarian" reasons (protecting refugees or preventing mass slaughter) and sometimes out of supposed military necessity—ignoring the ability of the armed masses to do the job.

Proof of the need to mobilize against intervention is manifold. U.S. warships are on the way, and Obama has declared that "all options are on the table." U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said Washington was "reaching out" to opposition groups and was prepared to offer "any kind of assistance." Meanwhile, the British have already sent military "advisers" to work with opposition military leaders, NATO has instructed its member countries' military leaders to prepare for "all eventualities," and several European countries have already used their militaries for "rescue missions."

Of course, there is hypocrisy in calling for a no-fly zone against Libya without asking why one is not imposed against the U.S. in Iraq and Afghanistan to prevent murderous bombings like the one that slaughtered nine children the first week of March, one of hundreds of such atrocities.

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Moreover, National Public Radio quoted a number of Benghazi residents saying they did not want foreign intervention, their correspondent reporting their desire to "get rid of Qaddafi finally themselves." Numerous similar quotes have appeared in the media.

Evidence of the masses' willingness to fight can be seen in the long lines of volunteers in Benghazi waiting to sign up, as well as the pitched battles, often victorious, fought by citizen militias to take and retake cities. Their courage and determination could be seen on March 4 when, despite the reign of terror, several hundred demonstrators gathered in Tajura, an area east of the capital still under Qaddafi's control, and braved tear gas and live ammunition.

U.S. military officials themselves note that a no-fly zone would mean shooting down Libyan planes, bombing anti-aircraft sites, and putting ships and thousands of personnel in place as support. And such a zone would, as in Iraq, likely be a prelude to the introduction of ground troops who would guard oil fields while ignoring (or even taking part in) the massacres of civilians.

While the masses have expressed a desire to march on Tripoli and residents in that city are awaiting a force that would give them the slightest window of opportunity to rise up and crush Qaddafi's murderous forces, the defecting military officers hope to postpone a final confrontation with Qaddafi. Their plea for aid from the U.S. and Europe is a signal that they are ready to collaborate in setting up a new pro-Western regime, and that they dread the kind of radical demands being put forward by the masses throughout the Arab world.

A coalition of over 200 Arab non-governmental organizations and intellectuals has called for "immediate contingency plans for international intervention ... including a no-fly zone. ... The window of opportunity to prevent further atrocities from occurring is closing fast." Some liberals in the West, such as Phyllis Bennis of the Institute for Policy Studies, are counterposing to no-fly zones calls for armed UN "humanitarian missions" despite the murderous, repressive record of just such a mission in recent years in Haiti.

In contrast, the United National Antiwar Committee issued a "Statement on U.S. Non-Intervention in Libya and Other Countries," which declared: "UNAC calls for an immediate halt to U.S. intervention in regions and countries where mass mobilizations are challenging oppressive regimes. ... We therefore oppose any form of U.S. military or economic intervention in Libya, Egypt, Bahrain, Tunisia and other countries where movements are rising in opposition to dictatorships and military rule."

Radical activist and author Arundhati Roy has noted that "those who really want to support the popular movement have to resolutely oppose sanctions (let's not forget the slow genocides in Iraq in the name of 'democracy' and in Gaza right now); of course, we also have to fight any military intervention.

Roy pointed out that "there are forces in Libya as well as in Egypt and in Tunisia who seek salvation in the West, but the main forces of the rebellion are the middle and lower classes, and they combine democratic demands with social and anti-imperialist demands. ... An alternative power seems to take shape in and around Benghazi. ... There is a chance to experiment with people's power, and we have to support that.

"The Western media are hoping for a color revolution like those staged in eastern Europe, but the Arab world has been the victim of 150 years of brutal colonialism and neo-colonialism, permanent Israeli aggression, numerous U.S.-led wars, neoliberal pillage. ... A few rabid liberal democracy criers won't be enough to turn around the legitimate hatred of the masses against the West which has been nurtured for generations."

Such clarity is not universal, however, where some still have illusions fostered by Qaddafi's anti-imperialist and anti-capitalist bombast. Numerous writers, both mainstream and alternative, have pointed to Qaddafi's turn toward

imperialism in recent years, his opening of the country's economy to foreign capital and to IMF-dictated austerity programs and privatization, and his joining in the "War on Terror," all accompanied by harsher repression to stifle dissent against this turn.

It must be noted, however, that even at the height of his supposed anti-imperialist policies, Libya remained a capitalist state. The rhetoric against imperialism, the money donated to Arab and other liberation groups, and the services granted to the masses from the country's oil revenue were all doled out under conditions decided by Qaddafi and his regime, with no input from workers and peasants. Qaddafi's nationalizations of foreign banks and oil companies no more made Libya a workers' state than did similar measures in Egypt under Nasser or Iraq under Hussein.

Unfortunately, much of the left fell for his rhetoric, as they hadâEuros"and still doâEuros"for other bourgeois populists in neocolonial countries.

Particularly disappointing is the role of Hugo Chavez, Daniel Ortega, and Fidel Castro in their one-sided, if correct, denunciation of imperialism's interests and intentions in this affair, while denying or ignoring Qaddafi's repression and murders. Chavez even offered to mediate the disputeâEuros"an offer immediately rejected by the resistance. Numerous Latin American revolutionaries reacted with horror to the stances of these three leaders, worrying that the potential for solidarity between the masses of the Arab world and Latin America was being destroyed.

But the masses of Libya, as throughout the Arab world, have shown they no longer want or need help from condescending saviors (to borrow a phrase from "The Internationale"). Beside their willingness to fight arms in hand, the other major weapon the insurgents have is the deepening of their revolution, the development of a program that would make clear to the population in Tripoli that a mass rising against Qaddafi is worth risking, as it would bring political freedom, social justice, and far better economic conditions.

Such a program would necessarily seek to replace the capitalist economic system with one that serves the needs of the working people of Libya, and is controlled by them. And it would raise the call for a pan-Arab "Socialist United States" spanning the artificial borders that the colonialists erected throughout the Middle East.

Real News Network quoted Benghazi residents celebrating "a new-found unity with Arab nations. They raised the flags of Egypt, Tunisia, and Palestine." Said one: "I'm proud to be an Arab. Lift your head up high! We are Arabs!" This is very significant for the rebels' chance of successâEuros"and for the chance of victory in all the blossoming struggles.

Egyptians and Tunisians have been assisting the uprising, ferrying food and other aid across the borders, providing health care, helping the resistance get around the internet blackout, and sharing tactical advice on confronting repression.

This pan-Arab solidarity should serve as inspiration for an even more urgently needed type of solidarityâEuros"that with the hundreds of thousands of super-exploited workers and peasants of Chad and other African countries now in Libya. Used for years by Qaddafi as cheap labor and cannon fodder, they are now reportedly the victims of harassment and even murder by backward forces within the resistance, supposedly because they are being mistaken for mercenaries imported by Qaddafi.

These tragic events too can be traced back to Qaddafi's divide-and-rule tactics, done at the behest of his new imperialist friends. Author Machetera of the Tlaxcala translation service noted that "in order to normalize relations with the European Union, Qaddafi became the guardian of concentration camps where thousands of Africans headed

for Europe are held."

Such Arab-African solidarity is especially possible given that revolts are happening right now in several sub-Saharan African countries. A revolutionary leadership must be forged in Libya that protects African workers in Libya, and at the same time fosters a unity of the Arab and African revolutions—the kind of unity demonstrated in theory and practice by the best of the Algerian revolutionaries in their struggle against French colonization.

The mass antiwar demonstrations on April 9 in New York City and April 10 in San Francisco are an opportunity to loudly raise the call against U.S. intervention in Libya and for self-determination by the Libyan people. "U.S. hands off Libya and the entire Middle East!"

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