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Obama's Imperial War: An Anarchist Response

Wayne Price

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The expansion of the US attack on Afghanistan and Pakistan is not due to the personal qualities of Obama but to the social system he serves: the national state and the capitalist economy. The nature of the situation guarantees that the system will act irrationally. Anarchists should participate in building a broad movement against the war, while raising our political program.

In discussing President Obama's expansion of the US attack on Afghanistan and Pakistan, it is important not to focus on Obama as a personality but on the social system to which he is committed, specifically to the war-waging capitalist national state. "War is the health of the state," as Randolph Bourne declared during World War I. It is what the national state is for, what it does, and why it still exists, despite the real trends toward international unity and worldwide coordination. In an age of nuclear bombs, the human race will not be safe until we abolish these states (especially the big, imperial, ones such as those of North America, Western Europe, and Japan) and replace them with a federation of self-managing associations of working people.

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After 3 months of consultations and deliberation, President Obama has announced that he is going to do what he had promised to do during his campaign for president – namely to expand the US attack on Afghanistan and Pakistan. This may not have been inevitable (since he broke many of his campaign promises already, such as ending overseas prisons, openness in government, ending “don’t ask, don’t tell,” a health care plan which covers everyone, an economic plan for working people, etc.). But it was probable.

As has been pointed out, his stated reasons for the war do not make much sense: in order to get out of Afghanistan, the US will send more troops into Afghanistan. The US needs to fight Al Qaeda, even though there are now only about 100 Qaeda militants left in Afghanistan; the Qaeda base is mostly in Pakistan (which Obama slurred over by speaking of “the border”) but the US will not be sending troops there (just secret attacks by drone missiles and CIA operatives). More generally, the US supposedly has to strengthen the resolve of the government of Pakistan...by sending more troops to Afghanistan. The US hopes to win over the people of Afghanistan and Pakistan by sending more non-Muslim, only-English-speaking, troops, which is sure to antagonize the people of the region. In 18 months, the US forces are supposed to transform the Karzai regime from one of the most corrupt, incompetent, and illegitimate states on earth, to a stable government (never mind a democracy). The effects of the mistaken US policies of 8 years can be reversed in 18 months (on the assumption that US forces will really “start” to withdraw in 18 months; promises are cheap; the US is still in Iraq). All of this is simply unbelievable and it is hard to think that an intelligent man such as Obama believes any of it.

Why then, really, is the US sending more troops into the region? Closer to Obama’s thinking are the expressions in his December 1, West Point, address, when he announced his program, where he spoke about the US as a global power with

oppose any use of the war as an excuse for union-busting or wage-lowering.

The force most directly opposing US imperialism in these regions are the people. We should make clear our solidarity with the nationally oppressed people (who are mostly workers, peasants, and small businesspeople). We should defend their right to resist US aggression. We should not be “neutral” between the mightiest imperial power and the oppressed people of Afghanistan. But this does not require any support or endorsement for any particular organization or leadership. We are certainly not “for” the Taliban, which is viciously misogynist, anti-labor, and statist. We do not want them to get their state again. However, that is a matter for the Afghan people to decide, not for the US state nor for Western anarchists.

We should be willing to work with anyone who will oppose the wars, while openly expressing our own program: the end of the state, of international capitalism (imperialism), and of all forms of oppression.

an economy which competes on the world market. Thus he remarked that “competition within the global economy has grown more fierce...Our prosperity...will allow us to compete in this century as successfully as we did in the past.” Implicit in these statements is an awareness that the US is no longer the economic power it was “in the past.” While still having the largest national economy, the US is now a de-industrializing debtor nation, losing out in world competition to Europe and Asia. This has been made worse by the global Great Recession, which has exposed the decay of the whole international capitalist system. The US ruling class, its layer of rich people, is not happy about this.

So they turn to the one asset they still have, which is the mighty military force of the US state — more powerful than any potential combination of opponent states. By throwing its weight around, the US hopes to re-achieve world dominance, or at least to slow its decline in world power. Obama reminded his listeners that the US has long been the dominant world power. “Our country has borne a special burden in global affairs ...More than any other nation, the United States of America has underwritten global security for six decades...” This is modified by the hypocritical words, “But unlike the great powers of old, we have not sought world domination.” He can say this because the US has not ruled through open “ownership” of colonies (leaving aside Puerto Rico and a few other places) but by economically dominating the world market, so that all must buy and sell on the US’ terms (“neocolonialism”). But whenever “necessary,” this has been backed up by military force, as shown in two imperialist world wars and a large number of invasions of smaller, weaker, nations.

Therefore it cannot accept being kicked in the teeth by small groups of terrorists living in caves, nor let petty dictatorships thumb their noses at the US. Nor can they afford to let regions which dominate the world petroleum supply fall into chaos, or at least outside of US rule, given the centrality of oil for the cap-

italist industrial economy. This includes both the Middle East and Northwest Asia (which may have important oil pipelines go through it).

Irrational behavior will result from being in situations which cannot be rationally dealt with. The US ruling class must try to dominate the world, economically and therefore politically and militarily, due to world competition. But it cannot dominate the world and is losing out in international competition. It must try to control the oppressed nations of Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan, but it cannot control them. The result is a contradictory and irrational foreign policy. This was apparent under the stupid George W. Bush, with his ideologically fanatic advisors. It is still obvious under the intelligent and reasonable Barack Obama.

The result is likely to be disastrous (as it was in the Vietnam war, also waged by moderate Democrats — in fact most US wars have been waged by Democrats, starting with World War I). In Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan, many people have been killed or wounded or their lives disrupted — mostly the nationally-oppressed people but also many US soldiers. Now very many more will be killed. Not to speak of the wealth which will be destroyed, both in the attacked countries and in the US (Obama says the war will cost \$1 trillion).

And in the background is the threat of nuclear war — not only does the US have nuclear weapons but so does Pakistan and its long-time opponent and neighbor India. Also, in the same region, the US is threatening to attack Iran, for supposedly working toward nuclear weapons, and there are similar threats by the US ally Israel, which does have nuclear weapons. Will nuclear bombs be used in the near future? I doubt it; but time marches on and sooner or later they will be used. (The Bush administration made an effort to make smaller “bunker-blasting” nuclear bombs, which could be used in small wars such as in Iraq. These would have erased the gap between nuclear and conventional weapons. I do not know where this

stands at the moment.) Liberals have called on the US to lead a world-wide crusade to abolish all nuclear weapons. Obama has given lip service to this idea, but nothing will come of it because the US state cannot give up any of its power to threaten the rest of the world.

We revolutionary anarchists must oppose these wars will all our might. While the system cannot stop making wars, it can be forced to end particular wars. This can be done by raising the price which the state must pay for that war. If the capitalist politicians feel that young people are becoming radicalized and militant, that labor is becoming restless, that soldiers are potentially mutinous, and that the local peoples will not stop resisting — then they will finally decide to end the war (as in Vietnam).

We should participate in broader “peace” movement, joining it in its mass marches and demonstrations. Often we radicals get tired of demonstrations, seeing how little they accomplish; but we should not forget how exciting they can be for newer layers of antiwar activists. However this does not mean that we cover up our program. In particular we must oppose the leaders of this movement (liberals, social democrats, and Marxist-Leninists) for their capitulation to the Democratic Party. For years now, they have held back the movement by focusing on electing and supporting liberal Democrats.

We need to point to those who have the real power to end the war: the soldiers and other military forces and the working class. There has been increasing discontent among rank-and-file military and their families about the war. We should have a positive attitude toward this, as opposed to a moralistic superiority toward ordinary soldiers, who are usually victims of the poverty draft. Similarly, there has been much discontent with the wars among working people and their families. We can at least support the idea of strikes against the war, war production, and the transportation of war material. We should