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Bosnia, Rwanda and UN intervention

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1994

The WSM has always said socialists should not support any intervention by the UN anywhere. What is currently happening in Bosnia and Rwanda demonstrates the reasons why we should not call on the UN to intervene.

In Europe most people have favoured intervention from an early period in ex-Yugoslavia. Initially this would have been in the support of Croatia, now it would be for Bosnia. Yet despite the popular acclaim such intervention would receive (in its early days), it has not happened. Why? Because our rulers have decided it is not in their interests to do so.

The TV coverage in Ireland of Bosnia and Rwanda has been horrific. It included footage of people being clubbed to death within about 300m of UN forces and also of an incident where a woman was dragged past UN soldiers to be hacked to death with a machete. They just stood and watched. The only role the UN has played has been to evacuate (white) Europeans. This is also an instance where UN intervention would have been very popular. Yet it has not happened.

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The UN did intervene in Somalia, to popular acclaim initially but now many would see intervention as having been a disaster. Apart from the direct killing of an estimated 10,000 Somalis by UN forces (UN figure) it would seem that intervention has further destabilised the country. The UN intervened there, not because it was popular (intervention in Yugoslavia would be more popular for racist reasons), but because the ruling class decided. Intervention was in its interests.

Basically the UN will only intervene when the various ruling blocks consider it in their interests to do so. It is not responsive to popular pressure in any real respect. Those who are calling for intervention in Bosnia are wasting their energy, it's like calling on Dick Spring to protect the working class. And like this, not only is it a waste of energy but it is also creating an illusion that the UN is a potentially neutral force rather than something owned & controlled by the ruling class.

The price for this illusion will be paid in blood later, both by working class Western troops and the populations they will be sent to slaughter. If people believe that the UN is a neutral peace-keeping force (if a bit weak willed), which is the image being projected, then winning opposition to future Desert Storms will be that bit more difficult. Another reason why we should oppose all Western military intervention.

So what is the solution? That's a fair question and it is one to which there is no simple answer. We'd like to be able to say form multi-ethnic workers militias in former Yugoslavia and Rwanda and use these to smash the genocidal ruling classes and stop ethnic cleansing. Of course we know this is not going to happen in the near future. The left (or rather those living in former Yugoslavia and Rwanda) are paying the price for charging down the dead ends of Leninism and social democracy for the last 70 years. Let's be honest, a decade ago many 'socialists' would have seen those who engineered the Yugoslav war as being 'socialist' or at least being more progressive than rulers in the West.

What we can do is give aid to the peace movements in the various republics and support the 'workers aid' initiatives that have been delivering medical goods and foodstuffs to some of the encircled towns. We can oppose all UN involvement, including the arms embargo. We can be sure that any settlement engineered by the UN would be in its interests alone. We can also counteract the racist portrayal of ordinary Serbians in the western press. In short our role is one of supporting the trade union and peace movements while opposing any intervention by our ruling class.

Hardly satisfactory, UN intervention holds up the (false) promise of ending the war while we have no such quick solutions. This underlines the urgency for the left to reconstruct itself along new lines, one that takes workers' democracy as the central point of socialism. The best of that tradition is found in Anarchism. As long as capitalism exists we can be sure to see more Yugoslavia's and Rwanda's. Right now we have to work out and win support for methods that will really deliver an alternative.