

Enduring war and popular mobilisation

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Many activists seem to think nationalism always defeats movements from below. At the first waving of the flag, apparently, the left scuttles for cover; as soon as bombs fall in Afghanistan, the movement against capitalist globalisation was hopeless.

Historically, though, the reality is different. Most of the revolutionary waves of the 20th century have been associated with major wars: the period 1916 – 1923 which saw revolutions in Russia and Ireland, as well as failed attempts in Italy, Hungary, Germany and elsewhere; the European Resistance movements of the mid-1940s which defeated fascism in Yugoslavia and had to be put down by Allied troops in Greece; and the movements of 1968, fuelled by opposition to imperial war in Vietnam.

Patriotism is certainly ‘the last refuge of the scoundrel’. It is not surprising that the Bush administration should have clutched at the events of September 11th: in the face of recession, a growing anti-capitalist alliance at home and the legacy of the Florida count, dead Afghanis mean strong poll ratings. Anarchists will not be surprised that the ‘middle-of-the-road left’ has rolled over and lined up behind the flag in the name of the nation.

But long wars are dangerous for states. The problem with mobilising people – interrupting their everyday routines and giving them a part to play on a world stage – is that they soon start to set their own goals. The First World War was brought to an end in a European wave of mutinies and desertions which led to revolution in Russia and Germany and the end of four empires. The Resistance movements supported by the Allies had a distressing tendency to set their own agendas, to which European welfare states are an indirect response. The long war in Vietnam (1945 – 1975) inspired resistance movements around the world, produced draft-dodging and ‘fragging’ in the US Army and an international network of movements.

What are the implications of this analysis for the peace movement and the ‘movement of movements’ against global capitalism? Firstly, we should hold our nerve. ‘Enduring war’ has not sent us home – it produced an anti-war movement which has been faster to develop and more international than any peace movement since the 1980s. Governments want us to believe that we can do nothing; we shouldn’t agree.

Secondly, we should organise seriously. We are promised a series of wars, to carry on past this generation, against one enemy after another, mobilising the American population (though it isn’t clear what this will mean). In this situation, popular resistance will grow over time, and we should think in terms of fostering this process.

We need to keep on the streets and keep up criticism of the war, but without burning out. This war gives us a chance to build good links internationally, across ethnic barriers, and with other movements (anti-racist, solidarity, human rights). Above all, we need sustainable campaigning geared to helping ordinary people to start taking action — and to encourage them to go further!

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