

The Global Revolt of 2011: Not the Time to Make Peace with the System

In 2011 we experienced revolutionary upheavals and mass upsurges that have further deepened the crisis of global capitalism. The impact has been the deepening of the political crisis of the international capitalist system and the weakening of its ideological hold and legitimacy. The inequalities of the 'American Dream', for instance, are now almost household knowledge: that the top 1% get more than 20% of the national income. Perhaps the most telling figure is that one-tenth of the top 1% -- around 400 families -- earn as much as the bottom 120 million people.

It started with Tunisia, then Egypt and the Arab Spring, then spread to Spain and the *Indignados* movement, to Chile with the huge student mobilisation for an end to education for profit, to England with the student demonstrations followed by urban youth riots, to Athens with the wave of general strikes and massive mobilizations against the imposition of capitalist solutions to the economic crisis, or neoliberalism 'on stilts', to the Occupy Movement in the United States: from Tahrir Square to Zuccotti Park, and beyond.

The Arab revolutions, propelled by demands for greater democracy against a backdrop of massive youth unemployment and increasing poverty, have ousted dictatorships propped up for decades by imperialism, especially in the case of Egypt and Tunisia, thus creating a political

crisis in a region of great strategic importance for the survival of the international capitalist system. The dictatorship in Saudi Arabia, a bulwark for imperialist intervention in the region, has also got its head on the chopping block with open speculation amongst imperialist circles about its inevitable and imminent downfall and the search for an acceptable pro-imperialist alternative. A key lesson of the Arab revolutions is that there can be no genuine democracy without revolutions: without revolutionary upheavals that overthrow old political regimes and systems of elite rule.

In this sense these revolutions have been compared to the great democratic revolutions of a previous epoch: for liberty and equality of the French Revolution of 1789; the 1848 revolutions in Europe which attempted to oust monarchs and autocrats and during which time Marx and Engels wrote the Communist Manifesto, to the Russian Revolution of 1917, against the feudal Tsarist autocracy combined with the demands for peace, bread and land, and the youth rebellion of the 1960s, the pinnacle of which was the May-June 1968 upsurge in France. Even where they did not take power, they changed society in profound ways. The Arab revolutions demonstrate that the struggle for genuine democracy, even in our times, has to be a revolutionary struggle. The Arab masses struggles endure and continue to deepen as they come back to the streets again and again. The Egyptian masses mobilizing last November teach us an important lesson, when they explain that the November revolution is a continuation of the first revolution in January, i.e. that revolution is a process.

In Europe massive struggles have been triggered by the capitalist economic crisis and the imposition of savage capitalist austerity measures – neoliberalism on stilts – battering working class living conditions. These started in 2008 and 2009 – Iceland, Ireland, Greece, France, Spain, Portugal, Italy -- and have continued unabated, drawing in larger and larger sections of the population: new forces and new forms of struggles, such as the *Indignados* in Spain. These are more than mass movements – they have the character of mass upsurges and popular rebellions – combined with traditional working class forms of struggle, such as the general strike. The two-day general strike in Greece last October mobilized more than 90% of the working population, on par with the struggles that overthrew the dictatorship of the Generals in 1974. The situation in Greece has been described as pre-revolutionary, by some on the left.

The Occupy Movement in the US is extremely significant as it's the first popular rebellion against the system in decades from within the 'belly of the beast'. It has been described as being 'more than a movement, but less than a revolution'. Its anti-capitalist slogans – the 99% of the working people against the 1% that is the capitalist class – is an ideological challenge to the capitalist system. Its impact is to expose the system and weaken its ideological hold, not only in the US, but on a global scale. This movement was embraced around the world with so much solidarity *because* it was in the belly of the beast. And although the camps have been closed down in most US cities, there is now a big discussion taking place on how to sustain the mobilizations and what next steps to take. Calls have been made to build a broad, radical, party. The party caucuses that are now being held in the run-up to the US presidential elections have become targets for another wave of protests, with activists arguing that "It doesn't matter whether they're Republican or Democrats, they represent the corporations." The genie is out of the bottle and there's no putting it back. As the Occupiers themselves explain, "You can't evict an idea whose time has come."

The past year also marked the breaking out of a global youth rebellion. In Egypt a majority of the population is under 25 years old. In Spain the *Indignados* were mainly young people, unemployed and in their 20s and 30s: a new generation of youth are leading the struggles. A significant radicalising factor is global mass youth unemployment: in the Middle East youth unemployment is around 50%, Spain and Greece around 45%. These are unemployed youth who have been completely marginalised from the political processes of liberal bourgeois democracy, including from the trade unions whose role has been to by and large act as mediators of workers struggles under capitalism. Unemployed youth or those in precarious employment, who have even been categorized as the 'precariat' by sociologists and who have been described by some as the 'new dangerous class', are completely alienated from the trade union movement whose leaderships have no control or influence over them. The *Indignados*

in Spain arose outside the orbit of the trade union movement. In the US, where the official youth unemployment is around 18%, students from top-notch universities, heavily indebted due to tuition fees and with only the future prospect of precarious employment, are in the informal leadership of the Occupy Movement, along with those who have fallen through the cracks in the system, or those that Karl Marx once described as the 'lumpen-proletariat'.

The imperialist response has ranged from frontal attacks, i.e. military intervention in Libya, with

Syria and Iran also on their radar, and violent dispersal, to co-optation tactics to bring the movements under the control of the traditional capitalist parties. Although the co-optation process is not that easy because the traditional parties are so badly exposed: the 'socialist' PASOK party in Greece has been the main implementer of the IMF, EU austerity measures and despite Obama's populist rhetoric the Democratic Party has started to stink badly of the decay of old politics. A majority of the mayors who violently dispersed the Occupations were Democratic Party mayors. In Egypt and Tunisia the election results have favoured the established parties, for the simple reason that the revolutionary mass movement had very little time to organize and intervene in the elections to attempt a serious bid for government and political power. In Egypt it was the Muslim Brotherhood's Freedom and Justice Party, tolerated under the Mubarak dictatorship, which while refusing to support the November movement ramped up its election campaign instead. The Muslim Brotherhood could be the prop used by the military to maintain its rule. The power of the streets, not elections, still remains the main counter-power to military rule in Egypt today.

Most importantly this global revolt is taking place in the context of the deepening struggles in Latin America, where the direction of an alternative society to capitalism is being set and the foundations of 'Socialism for the 21st Century' is being built by revolutionary governments, such as those in Venezuela and Bolivia. The recent establishment of the Community of Latin American and Caribbean states (CELAC) with 33 member nations excluding the US, at a gathering in Caracas in December 2011, is an important counterweight to the Organization of American States (which includes the US), and is a further step in strengthening the revolutionary movement and the socialist project in that region. Socialist Cuba continues to remain a beacon for many in the Third World: an example of what a socialist revolution can achieve to eradicate poverty and improve the social conditions of the people, from the provision of free and accessible, quality, universal health care, to a world class case study on effective disaster risk management systems that saves lives.

The global revolt of 2011 has potentially enormous implications for the struggles here in the Philippines, especially its ideological and political impacts, let alone the impacts on the Philippines economy. The potential ideological impact is indicated by the Inquirer carrying front page headlines about corporate greed and the widening 'rich-poor gap'. The slogan of the '99% versus the 1%' makes it easier and even popular for the left here to discuss the system of elite rule in the Philippines.

This is especially so as the Philippine capitalist class, in general, acts as an extension of the US system (although some sections of it are possibly looking to China). It missed the boat on the NIC model of development, beaten to it by South Korea, Singapore, Hongkong, Malaysia, Taiwan and now even Thailand and possibly Viet Nam. And while the elite in countries such as China and India still hope to scratch and claw their way up to some 'industrialised country super power' status, at the expense of their own people, no such project presents itself to the Philippine bourgeoisie. Their only hope is to continue to cling to the tails of a bigger power and live off its benevolence and under its shadow. For a majority of them this power is still the US.

The Spratleys dispute with China illustrated this, when the Noynoy government wanted the US to be involved in its defence. In any case, this is how the old colonial relationship has functioned and this is likely to reassert itself, with full force. The flip side of this is that the weakening of US capitalism and capitalist rule will invariably weaken the elite system in the Philippines, certainly ideologically and also politically. So for the left here, active solidarity with these global anti-capitalist revolts should be a priority.

The global revolt of 2011 is a historic turning point. We need to be guided by these international developments in charting our national course. This is not the time to make peace with the system. It's the time to challenge it.

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