

## **An Open Letter to Supporters of Direct Action from the Spartacus Youth Club**

# **The Road to Revolution: Not by Militancy Alone**

To the advocates of direct action,

The end of the war on Iraq and the onset of colonial occupation have spiked the momentum of the reformist-organized liberal peace movement, while driving into inaction many of those who wanted to “Stop the War.” In contrast to the dominant “loyal opposition” politics, the Spartacus Youth Club built Revolutionary Internationalist Contingents at anti-war demonstrations based on the fight to defend Iraq against the U. S. imperialist attack and the struggle to win workers to a program of class struggle against the capitalist rulers. Also repulsed by the servile liberalism of much of the left, a substantial number of activists have been impelled towards the strategy of direct action. In conversations at breakaway marches it’s become apparent that we have agreement with some supporters of direct action that the task at hand is not merely to end this war, but to end the system behind all wars. Our substantial differences center on the questions of what that system is and how to get rid of it.

Many of those who participate in direct actions argue that the big, docile demonstrations failed unequivocally because one cannot politely ask the government to stop waging war. Instead they assert that anti-war activists must directly challenge the machine that directs the war and occupation. As Direct Action to Stop the War (DASW) states as its goal, “If the government and corporations won’t stop the war, we’ll shut down the warmakers!” Similarly, the anarchist zine *Slingshot* (Spring 2003) argues to “create increasing levels of chaos and disruption” to force the government to “fight on two fronts at once—one of them

right here at home.” Some participants in recent direct actions have taken to wearing badges emblazoned with “Uproot the system behind war.”

Protests and direct actions have been ongoing since the war started, and, whether in San Francisco intersections, at Chevron headquarters, or at Lockheed Martin, the pattern has been the same: protesters sit down, police cut through their lock boxes and cart them away to be cited and released. But the demonstration at the Oakland port on April 7, called to protest APL, a shipping company that transports military cargo, fell victim to an egregiously violent response from the Oakland police, who injured nine dockworkers and dozens of protesters, including two Spartacist supporters. So what was decisively different about this rally? It did not immediately threaten the transport of war material, since APL was not scheduled to move any cargo that day. Nor does the matter reduce to the particular brutality of the Oakland police, who at a rally in Oakland two days earlier had refrained from a single violent confrontation.

What makes the Port of Oakland fundamentally different from any corporate headquarters is its role as a vital link in the chain of capitalist production, where capitalist exploitation occurs in its rawest form, and thus where profit is generated. The capitalists harbor an ultimate fear that this chain might be broken by organized workers stopping work as a political act; the cops’ deliberate targeting of this protest had the character of a pre-emptive strike against any potential union action. The power to

shut down production and bring the whole economic system to a grinding halt invests workers with inordinate social power vastly out of proportion to their numbers. This is effectively ignored by direct action activists blockading and otherwise disrupting corporate headquarters—inasmuch as such actions do not stop the flow of profits (there is no production in suburban corporate offices) it can only be a mere annoyance to the capitalist bosses.

The police attack of April 7 underscores the role of the state in enforcing the capitalist order, thus illustrating in high resolution the inner workings of the capitalist system behind this and all imperialist wars. The shipping companies, the Oakland city government and the police all colluded well before April 7 to premeditate the cop riot, going so far as to reserve space in a port railyard to serve as a temporary cop command center, where company officials worked alongside police. Far from being an extreme incident, this collusion reflects the normal functioning of capitalist class society, where the state exists not as some neutral institution too often occupied by administrations with sundry corporate connections, but as the executive committee of the ruling class. Although governments can be venal and bloodthirsty to different degrees, they nevertheless exist to administer the capitalist state, whose sole function is to ensure the political dictatorship of the capitalist class and to safeguard the system of class exploitation.

The present international imperialist order—where advanced capitalist nation-states vie for mutually advantageous positions of economic and political hegemony in a conflict militarily dominated by the U. S.—is a product of the development of capitalist society in an era when capitalists, having thoroughly plundered their own countries,

turn to the rest of the world for profit. It's vital to understand that the deadly military ventures in the service of profits, the impoverishment of working people in favor of military spending and corporate payoffs, the subordination of the so-called "third world" to the industrialized world, are not the result of some imperialist policy, but inalienable features of modern capitalism itself—the imperialist system. While this may seem evident, it is implicitly denied by the direct action strategy of targeting "corporate and government power" (in the words of DASW), a perspective rooted in anti-globalization ideology. In this view, poverty and war do not result from the capitalist system itself, but from malfeasant, overgrown corporations and an "undemocratic" clique in Washington that simply refuses to listen to reason. This opens the door to all kinds of "solutions," from seeking to rid the world of the IMF or WTO to blockading corporate headquarters, that are based on the illusion that imperialism is a policy that can be reformed rather than a system that must be smashed.

Direct action supporters offer a range of explanations of how direct action can "unplug the war machine at its roots." DASW states that its goal is partly to "raise the economic, social and political costs of waging this war, and continue to stop business as usual until the war stops." Street occupations are considered as "clogging the arteries" of the system, forcing change. Some argue that only an effort to "take democracy to the streets" can reverse the trend against civil liberties and for war. Others paint the problem as a system of hegemony that must be answered with an assertion of freedom involving personal sacrifice—as stated by Joshua Clover, a participant in the April 7 action, "It's about stating, in terms that cannot be ignored, that

one's freedom is not assigned by the guys with the guns" (Village Voice, April 16-22).

A seemingly more radical, but fundamentally equivalent perspective, raised by some anarchists at breakaway marches and direct actions, is the slogan "No War but the Class War." But what is meant by "class struggle" is something akin to what has transpired thus far on the streets of San Francisco and the driveways of corporations, reducing the term to mean the rebellion of the disenfranchised and discontented against the privileged, the powerful, and the cops. This is not class war. In fact, these explanations are all different variants of a strategy of putting pressure, militant pressure, on the corporations (the "war profiteers") and the government (the "warmakers") to stop the war. DASW makes this explicit in a rather sad appeal to SF mayor Willie Brown, asking that "instead of castigating the demonstrators ... [he] join us in opposing the war profiteers who do business in San Francisco." A similar thrust is evident in more recent efforts to redress the April 7 attack by way of an "independent investigation" and a sufficiently diverse Citizens Police Review Board. But this operates on the illusion that the cops, an integral part of the capitalist state, can be reformed away from their mission of enforcing capitalist law and order. While the idea of reforming the police may not be pushed by all direct action supporters, the fact remains that direct action reduces to the idea that if only the system's everyday functioning could be disrupted and destabilized enough, the rulers would have no choice but to accede to our demands.

Thus, in a fundamental way, there is a congruence between the strategy of the liberal peace movement—pushed by the craven reformists of the ISO,

ANSWER/WWP, RCP/NION, etc.—which begs the capitalists to be nicer to the people of the world, and the program of direct action advocates. They each seek in their own way to pressure the rulers to cease their imperialist aggression. A break from liberal docility does not in itself represent a break from the liberal program of capitalist reform. A strategy looking to the ruling class itself as the instrumentality for change (in this case, through militant pressure) is incapable of overthrowing the ruling class. And the political consequence of looking to the rulers, however indirectly, is to deflect focus from the system of capitalism itself, therefore standing as an obstacle to effective struggle against American imperialism. The problem, of course, is that as long as capitalism is around, we'll continue to suffer through imperialist wars.

Workers, in a position where what they produce is appropriated by the capitalists for their own individual profit, have a unique historic interest in eliminating capitalist exploitation by overthrowing capitalist property relations. This renders the working class the only force with the potential power to smash capitalism. The real meaning of class war lies precisely in the mobilization of workers to that end. The only means to mobilizing such power is to fight against the false consciousness perpetuated by their present misleadership and win workers to a revolutionary program.

Protesters are to be commended for bringing an anti-war message to the ports, but the fact remains that nothing was shut down as a result of the protest. An instance of real class struggle would have come about if the dockworkers had taken the elementary step of shutting down the port in response to the cop attack. This did not happen. Why? Because their union, the ILWU, is misled by a bureaucracy whose allegiance is to the

capitalist order. An illustration of this was the union leaders' determination to load military cargo last fall, thus facilitating the war drive against Iraq, even as the union was locked out by the shippers and under threat of government attack.

Any talk of class war or revolutionary struggle is utterly empty outside of a perspective that seeks to mobilize the social power of labor in a revolutionary direction. In the context of imperialist war, a central aspect in the struggle for revolutionary consciousness is the fight to rally the working class actively against the capitalist warmakers. That was the content of our fight for workers to take up the defense of Iraq against U. S. imperialist attack without offering the slightest bit of political support to Saddam Hussein, a position rejected by many anarchists. The most favorable outcome for the working and oppressed masses of the world in the recent conflict (and those looming ahead) would have been the defeat of U. S. imperialism. American workers could contribute to such a defeat only insofar as they employ class struggle tactics against American imperialism at home in siding with those in Iraq fighting against the invaders. Any refusal to fight for the defense of Iraq is nothing other than a capitulation to those whose "opposition" to war is subordinate to allegiance to the American ruling class—for example, those who preach that "peace is patriotic" or those who hail the "anti-war" Democrats that fight for American imperialist interests every bit as much as the Republicans.

To win workers to a class struggle perspective it is necessary to draw the direct connection between the rulers' war on Iraq, their "war on terror" and the bipartisan attack on labor, blacks and immigrants. A concrete example is our recent campaign for union defense, in the Bay Area and

elsewhere, of those activists arrested protesting the war. In advancing this campaign, we sought to win labor to take a side in the war. It is incumbent upon revolutionaries to tell the truth, to illuminate to the workers all of the malignancies of American capitalism—its inherent need for war, unemployment, poverty; its dependence upon women's subordination to the patriarchal family; its natural interest in restricting the level of mass education and culture. Our task is to organize workers to fight these malignancies.

In mobilizing the multiracial American working class, especially the heavily black longshore union, the question of black oppression is central. This country has depended on black oppression from its inception, and the legacy of slavery, most obviously expressed today in the criminalization of the black population by the "war on drugs" and "war on crime," persists as a central characteristic of American class society. Black oppression is the bedrock of American capitalism. It is the crucial mechanism of the capitalists' divide and conquer strategy for domination over the whole of the working class. The multiracial working class cannot be mobilized in pursuit of its historic tasks unless it transcends racial and other divisions in united class struggle against black oppression and the capitalist order that sanctifies it. On the docks, given that many of the non-union port truckers are immigrants, this makes it necessary to struggle to organize port truckers and fight for full citizenship rights for all immigrants. There can be no class struggle as long as black oppression is not confronted head on—any silence on this question, which has been the rule at the recent anti-war demonstrations and direct actions, is a way of adapting to and reinforcing the existing

consciousness with which the working class is bound to capitalism.

In this country at this time, the primary obstacle to a revolutionary working class lies in illusions of a commonality of interests between the workers and their exploiters. In the unions this is fomented by the misleaders' promotion of the Democratic Party as the "friends of labor." Democrats are continually pushed as a lesser evil, and union leaders have in the recent past cozied up to liberal Oakland mayor Jerry Brown, who repaid their support with projectiles. It is necessary to drive home the point that what's wrong with the Democrats is not so much that they generally advocate anti-working class policies, but that they necessarily oppose workers' interests because they are a party of capitalism, of the class enemy. On February 9, 2002, a demonstration initiated by fraternal groups of the Spartacist League, and built in part by the Spartacus Youth Club, rallied workers, including ILWU locals 10 and 6, to take up the defense of immigrant rights and protest against the U. S. government's attacks on working people. In a real way, this demonstration was the first that pierced through the "national unity" patriotism predominant since September 11, serving to advance working class consciousness by organizing an action where workers united across racial lines against their common class enemy. It's not a small point that it took the leadership of a revolutionary party to do this.

To break the chains binding workers to their oppressors will not always be flashy work. It entails taking every opportunity to point out the nature of the Democrats as a party of capitalism, racism and war. It takes persistent arguments among rank and file workers, and especially common action in struggle, for a clean break from the

Democrats in favor of the political independence of the working class. And it will take a political fight against the bureaucratic union misleaders, the labor lieutenants of capital. Yet many on the left uncritically participated in the Democrat-sponsored anti-war rally on April 5 in Oakland, practically a get-out-the-vote rally for Barbara Lee, which was also endorsed by the ILWU. Tolerance of this class collaborationism only serves to cement labor's chains to the capitalist system! The Spartacus Youth Club (SYC) intervened at the rally noting that the only quarrel with the war on Iraq of Barbara Lee and other "anti-war" Democrats was that it lacked the fig leaf of UN participation. We also actively fought for the defense of Iraq with placards and in arguments. Spartacist supporters at the April 7 action carried a sign saying "Break with the Democrats! Build a Workers Party that Fights for Socialist Revolution!"

DASW's open letter "To the People Who Live and Work in the City of San Francisco" expresses the direct action ideal of non-hierarchical organization: "We don't all subscribe to any one philosophy, and we certainly don't all think alike, nor do we have leaders." The idea that leadership is inherently undemocratic and therefore oppressive is basic to the outlook of anarchists. In the first place, on an organizational level, nothing happens without initiative; as long as action is being taken and ideas are being fought for, then a leadership is at work. And if that leadership is not consciously revolutionary, then the net effect can only be the perpetuation of bourgeois ideology and the capitalist system itself. It is manifestly evident that the working class has a leadership, the pro-Democratic union officialdom, that ties it to the capitalist order. This is recognized by

all. Essentially, direct action, and the anarchist ideology it borrows from, offers “democracy in action” and “affinity groups” as a substitute for a concrete strategy (i. e. a program) to overthrow capitalist rule, which requires breaking the working class from its chauvinist leadership. Putting forward “no leadership” as the alternative to misleadership is nothing but a concession to the stranglehold of bourgeois ideology, mediated through the trade union leaders and the Democrats, on workers, blacks, immigrants and all the oppressed.

The point is that direct action, though avowedly radical, has no possibility of ending capitalist war because it contains no perspective of mobilizing real social power in struggle to end capitalism. What’s needed is a concerted multiracial force, democratic in decision-making but centralized and decisive in action, that fights to win the working class not just to particular positions

(e. g. “No War on Iraq” or “Defend Civil Liberties”) but to a program of revolutionary struggle against exploitation and all forms of oppression, to rally and lead the other oppressed sectors of society in an irreconcilable struggle to overturn capitalism and build a socialist society. Anarchists may bristle at the words, but this requires a revolutionary vanguard party. The fight for such a party is the task ahead of the communists of the Spartacist League and Spartacus Youth Clubs, who struggle towards a time when all revolutionaries unite on the basis of a common program to defend and extend what comrades of the past have won and to drive forward in the fight to eliminate capitalism and its imperialist wars once and for all.

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