

Workers Sanctions & Capitalist Sanctions: 'Fire and Water'

What attitude should revolutionaries take toward bourgeois "sanctions" against apartheid? This question, much debated in the international left in connection with South Africa, was similarly posed in the 1930s at the time of the Italian invasion of Ethiopia. Trotsky sharply criticized those "pragmatists" who sought to combine workers sanctions and imperialist sanctions. Ernest Mandel's United Secretariat of the Fourth International (USec), in adapting itself politically to the illusions of the masses, replicates the sanctions policy of Stalin's Comintern and the various centrist formations against which Trotsky polemicized:

United Secretariat:

"We support the calls on governments that they impose sanctions against the South African regime. By putting forward these demands, we do not encourage illusions in their capacity or their desire to take effective measures. On the contrary, we urge the workers' movement to fight to impose these sanctions. For this reason, we popularize and call on the workers to take direct action initiatives to prevent the exchange of goods and services with South Africa."

—from the motion adopted by the International Executive Committee of the USec, June 1987, reprinted in *International Viewpoint*, 13 July 1987

Trotsky:

"Most dangerous of all, however, is the Stalinist policy. The parties of the Communist International try to appeal especially to the more *revolutionary* workers by denouncing the League [League of Nations] (a denunciation that is an apology), by asking for 'workers' sanctions,' and then nevertheless saying: 'We must use the League when it is for sanctions.' They seek to hitch the revolutionary workers to the shafts so that they can draw the cart of the League."

"The truth is that if the workers begin their own sanctions against Italy, their action inevitably strikes at their own capitalists, and the League would be compelled to drop all sanctions. It proposes them now just because the workers' voices are muted in every country. Workers' action can begin only by absolute opposition to the national bourgeoisie and its international combinations. Support of the League and support of workers' actions are fire and water; they cannot be united."

—"Once Again on the ILP," November 1935

"...Erde rejects the position on sanctions taken by our Italian comrades. What position does Comrade Erde himself take toward the Stalinists and reformists? Since the proletariat is weak at present, it must...look to the bourgeoisie for support. The weakness of the proletariat is in fact a result of allowing the bourgeoisie to do as it likes. And, if this passivity toward one's own imperialist government is raised to the level of principle, this serves not

to strengthen the proletariat but only to undermine the future of its vanguard."

—"Remarks in Passing," 8 December 1935

The following exchange, between a supporter of the Canadian affiliate of the United Secretariat and a representative of the Bolshevik Tendency, occurred at Comrade Smith's 19 November 1988 Toronto forum:

Robert (Socialist Challenge): I'm a member of Socialist Challenge, which is a sympathizing organization with the Fourth International, the USec organization that the brother was talking about. I'd just like to say first off that the perspective of Socialist Challenge in South Africa is one of permanent revolution, seeing that the struggle against apartheid for democratic rights and basic civil rights that have been won in this country is combined with the struggle against capital. It is a combined struggle. We see the need for there to be a socialist revolution and expropriation of the capitalist class in South Africa by the black workers. And not simply the black workers, but all those who would take part in the struggle for socialist revolution: blacks, colored, Indian and whites, all those who want to fight for a better future in South Africa; a socialist future in South Africa.

As far as sanctions that were talked about and detailing Reagan's swiss-cheese sanctions, of course we can't rely upon Reagan or the U.S. Congress which exercises rule in the interests of the capitalist class in the United States and worldwide, the interests of the big corporations—in South Africa, in Central America, around the world—of course we can't rely on them to fight a consistent struggle against apartheid, against capitalism in South Africa. And our organization has *no* illusions whatsoever that they will do so.

But we *do* see the need to put demands on the government, not in the sense that we have faith that they are in any sense out of the goodness of their hearts acceding to these demands *willingly*, but to [put] pressure on them, to force them to respond, to some degree *against* their own interests. I mean, if we don't believe that the capitalist governments give in to a degree or make certain concessions to the working class, I mean, that's just fantasy. Of course the bourgeoisie, under the impact of the struggle against their class interest, will back up.

And of course we don't see the need just for sanctions and begging Reagan or Mulroney for sanctions, we see the need for labor action, of boycotting goods coming to and fro on the waterfront. As in, I think, the example people should read maybe, the example in the BT paper about the actions they did in San Francisco. I think that was a good action. I would agree with that kind of action and Socialist Challenge supports that kind of labor action against goods being transported, goods being traded. And I think that's the way to go—organize those in the labor movement to boycott these things and no

reliance on Reagan of course.

Tom (Bolshevik Tendency): ...our orientation toward the demand that the Canadian imperialist state act in a progressive fashion—whether it is in regard to South Africa or in regard to Nicaragua or any of the other features of what is a world imperialist system of exploitation and oppression—our attitude toward demanding that “our own” Canadian rulers and participants in this world system of exploitation act in a way which is diametrically counterposed to their own class interests and, in fact, diametrically counterposed to what we can see as the entire history of Canadian capitalism, our attitude is that for us as revolutionaries, as socialists, this can only create illusions among people who are looking for a lead from the left about how to fight imperialism.

Now there are those (and Robert makes the case about as well as it could be made), who say: well, on the one hand we’ll tell the workers in Canada the main enemy is the Canadian capitalist class, and we must fight the capitalists in South Africa and we must fight the capitalists in Canada and the United States and wherever we happen to be, and we must see this as a world system with the working class on one side and the capitalists on the other side, and we must all struggle against them; on the other hand, it can’t do any harm if we ask Joe Clark and Brian Mulroney [Canadian External Affairs Minister and Prime Minister] to be nice guys as well—at the same time as we fight them.

Well, we think that it *can* do some harm because we think that it is fundamentally necessary above all else to teach the workers and the oppressed that this is not an accident, what has happened to you, and it’s not your own fault....This is a world system. Botha is their *ally*. He is their *friend*. They are working hand-in-hand with him. They think he’s being a bit unwise, they’re putting a bit of pressure on him as a friend would....We recognize that comrades of Socialist Challenge and other socialist groups are on our side of the class line. Within that camp, we try to put pressure; we try to influence those people; we try to convince them. Mulroney, Botha, Reagan—they’re on the *other* side of the class line and that is exactly what they’re doing.

And for us to be coming up, and indeed the United Secretariat unfortunately and not uncharacteristically did come out and said well, we support workers action on the one hand, and we support begging the capitalists on the other—and that is basically what divestment and [bourgeois] sanctions amounts to. That doesn’t give the people who are listening to you a clear perception of the way things are organized and it doesn’t give them a clear road forward. In fact, it confuses them and it makes the job of Brian Mulroneys and Joe Clarks—who get on TV and say well, you know, we’re progressive capitalists and Botha is a reactionary capitalist so therefore vote Progressive Conservative—it makes their job that much easier. ■