Middle East, crisis and workers

A dialogue with Joseph Choonara / Farid Saberi

In this dialogue with Joseph Choonara we have tried to focus on the current developments in the Middle East and Iran in the context of the global crisis of neoliberalism. Choonara is a lecturer in political economy at the University of Leicester. He is well-known for his scholarly work in Marxian political economy and sociology of Labour market.

Some of his books are Insecurity, Precarious Work and Labour Markets: Challenging the Orthodoxy (2019), A Reader's Guide to Marx's Capital (2019), Unravelling Capitalism: A Guide to Marxist Political Economy (2017).

Choonara is also the editor of the outstanding journal International Socialism, a position that he has succeeded after Alex Callinicos. Understanding the problems of the Middle East and Iran from the standpoint of other theoretical traditions and radical intellectuals have proven to be a valuable and rich tradition in the history of the class struggle of an increasingly more global working class against capitalism. This interview aims to act as a small contribution to this tradition.

First, let's start with a new burning issue in today's geopolitical development of the Middle East, namely, Biden's administration foreign policy regarding Iran? On what grounds can one explain the continuity between Biden and Trump's approach and possibly their divergence? How do you contextualise the tension between the US and Iran in this critical phase of global capitalism that we are experiencing?

In many ways, Joe Biden is far more representative of the long-term approach of the US ruling class to securing its interests by projecting its economic, political and military power than Donald Trump. I don't expect him to be anything other than an advocate for US imperialism.

Biden, like Trump, and Barack Obama before him, inherits two major issues. The first is the rise of China as a major capitalist power capable of challenging US interests in some areas of the globe. The second is the continued turmoil in the Middle East, which is largely a consequence of decades of imperialist intervention—not least the 2003 invasion of Iraq, which Biden voted for at the time. Those of us on the left in Britain said, when we marched against that war, that it would destabilise the region for years to come, and we were right. Ironically, this intervention has also, in some ways, given Iran greater scope to influence politics in the region, for instance by removing Saddam Hussein's regime.

Obama's approach was to try to extract the US from the chaos in the Middle East in order to focus on his "pivot" to Asia. So we had both the 2015 Iran deal and Obama's effort to encircle China economically through the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP).

Trump was a nasty and erratic racist and nationalist, who was perfectly capable of unleashing the US's military might if it suited him, but his major preoccupations internationally were to enact protectionist policies and to confront China, primarily through trade. He sought to do this through more unilateral measures than he predecessors, sidelining and criticising both Nato and the European Union, and tearing up the TPP. Urged on by the Saudi Arabian and Israeli governments, he also removed the US from the Iran nuclear deal, instead focusing on tightening economic sanctions. This was combined with periodic intensification of the conflict with Iran, as happened with the assassination of Qassem Soleimani in early 2020 by a US drone.

Biden represents a partial return to Obama's approach. He may retain some of Trump's measures against China, but it was interesting at the G7 summit in Britain in June to see him also pressuring allies to cooperate in the US project to challenge China's rise—he is doing the same with Nato and the EU. This will not automatically be entirely successful, as lots of EU countries have a much more conciliatory approach to China, seeing it as a key trading partner.

In the Middle East, it is possible Biden will restore a version of the 2015 deal with Iran—there are indirect talks taking place currently and a handful of sanctions have been lifted—but it's by no means certain, particularly if, as some in the US administration argue, a deal is linked to Iran operating differently across the region. Another factor threatening to distract the US administration from its reorientation on China is the continued brutality of Israel towards the Palestinians, which, following the heroic resistance of the latter, exploded into conflict earlier in the summer.

Biden is no ally of the Palestinians, of course, but he will steer a slightly different path to Trump, who, for instance, recognised Jerusalem as Israel's capital. The US president's main preoccupation when the conflict erupted seems to have been to avoid getting drawn too deeply into the conflict—he would much rather lean on US allies in the region to try to calm tensions so he can focus on his wider foreign policy goals. We will have to see how successful That is in the longer term.

One of the controversial issues in the Iranian intelligentsia is escalating tensions in the Middle East. Which one is escalating tensions, Iran's aspirations, or the US and Israel? Who is on the side of stability and de-escalation?

There is also a more theoretical debate:

Is it fair to consider the Middle East's ruling classes and their political representatives as an imperialist interactant in the so-called "sub-imperialist system" of the Middle East? Or they can not be conceived of as imperialist nation-states, and Imperialist is an exclusive description of the US?

The theoretical issue you raise is the key here. The US remains the world's most powerful superpower within the imperialist system and has a huge capacity to escalate conflict and do harm.

However, imperialism does not simply mean the wealthiest states attacking the poorest. Imperialism is a system of inter-state rivalries, in which the capitalist economic interests are entangled with geopolitical conflicts—leading to political, economic and, ultimately, military clashes. This system involves the uneven development of different capitalist states, so emerging powers clash with established or declining ones, and this can spill over into war as states seek to advance or defend their interests.

The US emerged from the Second World War with by far the most powerful economy on the planet. In relative terms, it has, since then, declined economically. There was a period, especially around the early 1990s, after its main rival, the Soviet Union, collapsed, when the US ruling class sought to cement its hegemony through the creation of a global neoliberal order, built around free trade, the dollar, the power of Wall Street and a series of alliances with other states. However, the relative decline of the US continued. Moreover, the failure of the US in Iraq, the economic rise of China and a succession of capitalist crises have further destabilised its hegemony.

In that context, other states, lower down the hierarchy of capitalist powers, can seek to assert themselves—on a regional basis rather than globally. In that context, it makes sense to talk about sub-imperialist powers, such as Turkey or Iran or the UAE. These kinds of states seek to play on a regional level the role that the US seeks to play globally—using their geopolitical influence, trade, and sometimes their military strength, to reshape regions in their interests. You see this play out very clearly in Syria, where a whole range of imperialists and sub-imperialists powers have intervened directly or sponsored and cultivated allies on the ground, intensifying the conflict.

Of course, the existence of sub-imperialism does not mean that those of us who live in major imperialist powers such as Britain are indifferent to the conflicts taking place. If Britain were ever to join the US in invading Iran, I would unequivocally wish to see Britain and the US, the major imperialist powers in such a conflict, defeated. However, for those living in sub-imperialist countries, it is important to recognise the capitalist interests driving their own government's foreign policy and to challenge these interests.

What is a viable and practical strategy in the global South and developing countries (like Iran) against neoliberalism? How should movements and anti-capitalist forces face the challenges of today's globalised economy? Is going back to a modest and welfare and more public-run capitalism even possible? Is nationalising some sector of the economy a good slogan and political demand?

That is a very big question. It is certainly true that the attraction of what socialists in my tradition call "state capitalism" has declined. In the decades immediately after the Second World War, the model for many in the Global South was something like the Soviet Union—a nationalised economy controlled from above by a powerful state bureaucracy. The Soviet Union was, from the late 1920s, an especially pure example of state capitalism. It functioned a bit like a gigantic factory, with the bureaucracy directing resources internally.

Because it was engaged in inter-imperialist rivalry, the state was compelled to direct those resources towards capital accumulation, to build up a military and industrial base, and it had to exploit workers to achieve this. So the Soviet Union under Stalin's rule ceased to be any kind of socialist society and, in important ways, increasingly mirrored other capitalist powers in the West.

However, less pure versions of state capitalism could develop elsewhere, for instance in newly independent countries such as India. I would say that the state capitalist vision—whether in its pure or impure forms—always fell a long way short of the aspiration for genuine human liberation embodied in the revolutionary socialist tradition, including the goals of the 1917 revolution in Russia.

Today, though, most movements in the Global South do not aspire to state capitalism because, due to the extent that production, trade and so on spill over national borders, it no longer seems like a viable model. Of course, those on the left sometimes advocate nationalisation, as we often do in Britain. Of course, we should criticise neoliberal policies that make life worse for workers and other oppressed groups. However, I think it's a mistake to have illusions in a heavily nationalised economy translating to socialism without genuine workers control, exercise from below. Similarly, we shouldn't have illusions in the capitalism that pre-dated the neoliberal turn. It was also barbaric and exploitative.

We should fight to reform capitalism. However, as the great Polish-German revolutionary Rosa Luxemburg argued over a century ago, we do not fight for reforms simply because the reforms are positive in themselves, but also, crucially, to increase the confidence, militancy and organisation of the working class. The ultimate goal in doing this is the revolutionary overthrow of capitalism, which necessitates a confrontation with the capitalist state and its replacement

with a democratic workers' state that can form the framework for the development of a truly socialist society.

The potential exists for such a change. There have been impressive rebellions in the Global South in recent years—including the Arab Spring in 2011, but also the succession of protest movement in 2019 in countries such as Chile, Ecuador or Lebanon. However, the number of people in such movement who advocate for revolutionary transformation in the sense I have described, and who have the understanding and organisation to influence others, has been far too small. We need to change that.

One of the major concerns today is the rise of the ultra-right and neo-fascist popular movements among the desperate middle classes (resulting from capitalism's profitability crisis) in both advanced and developing capitalist countries. It seems that right-wing nationalism and even reactionary ideas are more prevalent among the middle class than economic and politically progressive ideas. This holds for the US and Britain, as much as Iran and India? How do you explain this rise of popular right-wing movements? Why are progressive popular movements not as strong as the far-right ones?

The period of the 1980s and 1990s was the high tide of the neoliberal consensus. This led to the creation of what the Pakistani-British Marxist Tariq Ali calls an "extreme centre"—politicians form the centre left and centre right converging on a set of common policies that were often to the detriment of those who elected them. Neoliberal policy regimes were imposed in an even harsher manner on countries in the Global South, often by enthusiastic converts to these policies in those countries encouraged by the major capitalist states and bodies such as the International Monetary Fund.

Discontent about the extreme centre and its counterparts in the Global South has now fused with the deepening inability of the system to fulfil the aspirations of workers—and we should remember the urbanised working class has grown by hundreds of millions in recent years. This has led to political polarisation.

Radical alternatives on the right and left have gained appeal, and this is reinforced by the repeated crises of the system, including that of 2008-9 and the pandemic crisis today.

On the radical right there are openly fascist forces—those committed to building street movements that can overthrow democracy and impose a Nazi-style regime. There are also fascist parties that pretend to be part of the mainstream electoral system in order to gain support, as is the case with Front National in France, for example. Then there is an array of radical right parties that may contain or encourage fascist elements, and sometimes flirt with fascism, but are not themselves tied to the fascist strategy—this is the most common expression of the re-emergence of the radical right. Examples include Trump in the US or Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil. In the absence of a solution to the ongoing tribulations of capitalism from mainstream

politicians, or mass resistance from below, these political forces will continue to gain a hearing, mobilising racism and chauvinism in an attempt to build and hold together their social base.

The radical left has also made breakthroughs, but here there is a problem. Most of the radical left consists of "reformist" socialists committed to working within the framework of the capitalist state.

It is good that left-wing reformists such as Bernie Sanders in the US and Jeremy Corbyn in Britain have become prominent. It encourages discussions about socialism and it can even raise people's confidence to hear Corbyn talk about how things could be different. However, left reformist forces, like reformist formations traditionally, eventually come up against the limits of the reforms capitalism will tolerate.

In Greece, the radical left party Syriza was elected to break from austerity imposed after the 2008-9 crisis. However, the EU, IMF, the European Central Bank, and Greek capitalists, joined forces to bring Syriza to heel—essentially by threatening to shut down the economy unless they enforced the interests of capital. Syriza was tamed, and ultimately voted out of office by a disenchanted electorate. In Spain we saw Podemos, another radical party, surge in the polls since its foundation in 2014, emerging after a powerful street movement against austerity. But, ultimately, in its efforts to gain control within the existing state, it joined a coalition with the mainstream left, and has in recent months been policing Spain's response to Covid-19. Its voters have started turning away from the party, because it no longer seems to present a radical alternative.

So these "left reformist" parties and figures break through very fast—but they are also tested very harshly. We need to offer a revolutionary alternative, but one that also understand people's aspirations for reforms, and participates in the fight to win them through struggle.

One of the classic approaches for defeating the popular far-right movements is the well-known Strategy of Trotsky, namely the united front (opposed to the Stalinist strategy of the popular front)? Do you think these concepts have any relevance for today?

This follows directly from the previous point. Leon Trotsky spoke about a tactic or policy of the united front as a means of mobilising workers in common struggle, without sacrificing the independence of the revolutionary forces. The context in which he presents the argument most clearly is in his discussion of the emergence of the Nazis in Germany in the 1920s and 1930s. These writings are worth re-reading today.

In order to confront the Nazis, it was necessary to mobilise not just the substantial minority of revolutionary workers, but also as many of the majority of reformist workers as possible. The reformist workers tended to look to reformist parties, along with the trade unions. Trotsky argued that the revolutionaries should appeal to the leaders of these parties and unions to make common cause in anti-fascist struggle. If the leaders agreed, all the better for the creation of a mass movement.

If they refused, then the revolutionaries would at least be able to explain the masses that they had tried to secure the unity of the working class, and encourage them to mobilise anyway.

So Trotsky was advocating a limited agreement for common struggle, in which reformists and revolutionaries can participate as independent forces.

In the context of the common struggles that result, revolutionaries would insist on their right to advocate the tactics and ideas they felt best suited to the confrontation of the fascists. In doing so, they would, Trotsky hoped, also win broader layers of workers to revolutionary socialism.

Sadly, Trotsky's ideas were not tested in Germany at the time, and the German working class was shattered by fascism. In other contexts, such as France or Spain, the Stalinist approach of the "Popular Front" against fascism won out. This involved the revolutionaries sacrificing their independence and blunting their politics in order to work with liberal, mainstream forces in unprincipled alliances.

Trotsky's approach remains relevant today, provided it is creatively applied. For instance, the small group of revolutionaries in Britain cannot credibly convince the whole of the Labour Party, which has hundreds of thousands of members, to help us in the fight against fascism or in support of the Palestinians. But we can certainly win sections of the left of the Labour Party to this struggle.

In general, the revolutionary left should mobilise alongside reformist workers, in real struggles to achieve the goals of the working class. But they should also retain their independent ability to present their ideas and develop the tactics most likely to succeed, and most likely to increase the strength of the working class movement. In doing so, our goal should be not simply to win our limited demands but also to create mass revolutionary organisation that can ultimately lead a struggle for genuine revolutionary change.

One of the domains which you are known for working on is the sociology of labour and especially your empirical work on Britain's working-class (Insecurity, Precarious work and Labour Market: challenging orthodoxy). What do you think are the main characteristics of the working class of the global South in the neoliberal era? How have these characteristics manifested themselves in their struggle? And you mentioned that there are similarities between workers struggle against "extreme centre" in both global South and north? What are their differences and divergences? And how these differences make their struggle different?

One of my arguments about the discourse on "precarity" and "precarious employment" in academia today is that it's quite an insular approach. The literature emphasises the decline of a "standard model" of employment that existed in advanced capitalist economies in the post war decades. Actually, even that model is open to question. Not everyone was a white, male, relatively affluent and unionised worker in stable employment in the 1950s or 1960s. Nonetheless, in a country such as Britain, at least it is clear what is being discussed.

Across much of the Global South, nothing even approximating this standard model ever existed. We can't talk about an emergent precarity of employment. So obviously there are pronounced differences in working class conditions in different contexts. Moreover, the term "Global South" hardly captures the variety of working conditions present outside the advanced core of the capitalist system. The experience of workers in Foxconn, the Taiwanese firm which runs giant factory complexes, some with over quarter of a million workers, in mainland China is wildly different from that of tin miners in Bolivia or agricultural labourers in Zimbabwe.

What I think the working class internationally have in common is, first and foremost, a shared interest in and capacity to challenge capitalism. That arises from their position within the sphere of production. As Karl Marx wrote a long time ago, wherever capitalism goes, it is compelled to create its own gravediggers—or, at least, its potential gravediggers. Workers are dependent on capital for employment and wages, but capital remains dependent on the collective mobilisation of labour to derive its profits. Whatever restructuring has taken place within different economies, that potential power remains.

There are also commonalities in how the neoliberal model adopted by ruling classes has deepened discontent. The structural adjustment programmes imposed on countries in Africa and Latin America under the IMF have tended to be far more devastating than the austerity policies imposed in Europe, but the similarities are also clear. The austerity programme imposed on Greece in the aftermath of 2008-9, for instance, was in many ways akin to programmes previously imposed in the Global South, and the IMF was one of the bodies that policed the programme.

Interestingly, there are also some commonalities in forms of contemporary struggle—although, again, recent explosions in workers' activity have been more powerful in the Global South. Take, for instance, the role played by teachers and educators in recent labour struggles. Beverly Silver pointed out in a book a few years ago that teachers' struggles have a geographical scope and scale exceeding that of textile workers or automotive workers at the high points in their militancy. Everywhere you look in mass struggles you tend to see teaching unions. This reflects the way that occupation has been "proletarianised" in recent decades, in other words, the way it has become more like the forms of collective labour adopted in industrial capitalism generally. Even here in Britain I've been on strike within my university every year since I became an academic.

Looking more specifically at the major struggles around 2011 and 2019 in the Global South, I would say that many of these reflect the conditions in which the growth and urbanisation of the working class has taken place. For the first time in world history, the majority of the world's population are urbanised. And for the first time in world history, as far as we can tell, the majority of those who toil for a living are workers in a sense that Karl Marx would have recognised. However, the newly formed, youthful, urbanised layers of workers do not encounter a form of capitalism capable of meeting their basic aspirations. They often struggle to find acceptable work or housing, to pay for transport costs or to cover their basic expenditure. Contemporary cities pool together bitter and angry workers along with those who aspire to work. These people also confront ruling classes that have continued to enriched themselves. Because this often happens in a context of weak economic performance, that enrichment comes increasingly at the expense of the mass of ordinary people.

"Inequality" is, therefore, a major mobilising force. So too is "corruption", which is really the political counterpart of inequality. In many cases racism and chauvinism is intensified to try to

divide workers and prevent them exploding in revolt. Sometimes repression is also intensified, as we have seen in many Arab countries in recent years, or, for instance, in Belarus in the run-up to the recent revolt there.

We saw in 2019 that these methods are not always able to contain the anger. There was a powerful series of rebellions that, in many different countries and contexts. These were partially contained by the outbreak of Covid-19, but there are already signs that this will not last forever. Already there have been further protests in Lebanon, Nigeria, Thailand, and the global Black Lives Matter movement, which show that there remains deep discontent.

The challenge is not really to identify the forces that could lead a socialist transformation of society. The challenge is to ensure that these limited revolts become a systemic confrontation with capitalism and the capitalist state. That requires political clarity and organisation.

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