

The Fifth Newsletter (2018): Democracy and Tariffs



Dear Friends,

Lula, the former President of Brazil, has been traveling across the country as he fights to be re-elected in October of this year. His ‘Caravan for Brazil’ is part of the election campaign of the Workers’ Party (PT). Lula leads in the polls. The oligarchy has tried to deny him the right to stand for election by judicial action. But the ruling bloc has not succeeded. He remains in the fray. This week, as Lula’s Caravan went through Paraná, gunshots were fired at the buses. This is not the first time that Lula’s followers have been attacked. If the oligarchy cannot stop Lula through the Courts, they are trying to stop him by intimidation. But the old trade unionist is unfazed. In fact, he is motivated to fight even harder. At *Alternet*, I have a report on the current situation in Brazil, including a short note on the attempt to intimidate Lula into silence. You can read it [here](#).

The attack on Lula is a much broader problem. Democracy is now under serious threat, but not from dictatorships or coups necessarily but by feint. Duke University Professor Nancy Maclean’s fabulous book *Democracy in Chains* catalogues how the American oligarchy has used its money and its ingenuity to narrow democratic action by using the law to undermine unions and to deny people the right to vote. At the same time, this oligarchy has driven an agenda to privatise a great deal of social life (from education to health care) and make individuals responsible for social goods through debt and despair. It has become clearer and clearer that the contradiction between democracy and capitalism cannot be sustained.

In August 2016, Martin Wolf wrote in the *Financial Times*, ‘Democracy is egalitarian. Capitalism is

inegalitarian, at least in terms of outcomes'. Wolf, chief economic commentator for the *Financial Times*, wrote that 'if the legitimacy of our democratic political systems is to be maintained, economic policy must be oriented towards promoting the interests of the many not the few'. This is precisely the opposite direction of economic trends. Policy benefits the few, not the many. It is what has opened up the sore between democracy and capitalism.

Lula represents the heart of the Brazilian poor. It is because of the policies of the PT that hunger began to drift away from Brazil. It is now back. A hungry people want Lula's policies to return. That is what democracy demands. But the oligarchy does not want him back. They want to enjoy their gains. They would prefer to put democracy in chains than surrender their fortunes. Martin Wolf wants it both ways. He won't be able to simultaneously keep his cake and eat it. A choice is before us.



Policy from the powerful is bewildering. Trump has decided to push for new tariffs on steel and aluminium and most likely on Chinese products. Chinese products? Are there any such things? Aren't most Chinese products imported into the United States manufactured along a global commodity chain, including within the United States? If so, Trump's tariff policy will impact upon manufacturers within the United States. It will also hurt US monopoly retail firms such as Wal-Mart, which have attempted to block the tariffs. The policy world is a mess. The powerful have no easy way to respond to the general distress amongst the millions. Income inequality and social bitterness are the conditions of our time. Tariffs by the United States will not solve the basic problems posed by globalisation. In the current issue of *Frontline*, I have a brief note on the contradictions of Trump's policy. You can read it [here](#).

The general outline of the report on Trump and his tariffs draws from Tricontinental's first Working Document, *In the Ruins of the Present*. I hope you have been able to download it and read it. You can do so [here](#). (We are grateful to *Monthly Review* for republishing the entire Working Document on the MR website).

The image above is from the Chinese artist Liu Bolin who has developed an ingenious technique to depict the disappearance of people. The piece above from 2006 is called 'Laid Off Workers', which features six factory workers from the 798 Art Zone, Suoijia Village, Beijing. They are painted with the colours of the backdrop. They are standing there, a shadow of the buildings. This installation captures the social reality of so many hundreds of millions of people – in plain sight, but disappeared.



There's that old Bob Marley song about the 'real situation,' about how 'nation war against nation'. Futility is the atmosphere of this Marley song. 'Nobody can stop them now'.

Seems like it. The wars in Syria and Yemen continue. Arms dealers continue to sell their weapons and make enormous profits. The world has taken on an air of unkindness.

More evidence of this is apparent as Trump assembles his war cabinet, led by John Bolton who sees war as the solution to every problem. Will Bolton be able to engineer the war on Iran that he has desired for decades? The Iranians do not think. They understand war. The painting above is by the Iranian painter Khosrow Hassanzadeh. He fought in the brutal Iran-Iraq War (1980-88). Hassanzadeh was a teenager when he went to the battlefield. His art captures the horridness of conflict. Bolton has never been to a battlefield. His war means the bombardment of Iran from the air. The Iranians will suffer Bolton's whims. He will never even need to smell the acrid smell of bombs.

It is important to pay attention to what happens when the full force of US airpower is used against a city. During the war against ISIS in Mosul, the United States dropped an immense amount of ordinance onto that city. The United Nations now estimates that the bombing left conflict debris of about eight million tons – three times the Great Pyramid of Giza. It is not known how much of this debris is toxic. It should be borne in mind that when the US attacked Fallujah in 2004-05, it used depleted uranium. Studies show that the impact of radiation on the population was worse than that in Hiroshima, where the US dropped a nuclear bomb in 1945. This is what it means for a city to be bombed by the United States in our time.

It is what Bolton and the rest of Trump's cabinet wish to do with Iran. At Newslick, my Radical Journeys column is on the ascent of Bolton, how the Europeans want to appease the Trump White House and what this means for Iran. You can read it [here](#).

Europe is poised to surrender to Trump. It brings to mind a recent letter in *The Economist*, in which a correspondent writes, 'I suggest that Western Europe should be the subject of your next Obituary page'.



I've been thinking a lot about the photographs taken by our Tricontinental Senior Fellow P. Sainath some years ago of women working in the fields of India. This was part of Sainath's extensive project of documenting rural labour, the work that went into the magnificent People's Archive of Rural India (**PARI**). Over the past few months, the All-India Kisan Sabha has led some important struggles in Rajasthan and in Maharashtra. Other struggles are germinating. The countryside continues to fight for human freedom. It has not allowed itself to be engaged by neoliberal policy and aspirations. Other dreams motivate these farmers and agricultural workers. Small farmers produce 70% of the world's food. Their production is essential to the sustainability of the planet. They have put a marker down for their dignity.

In the current issue of *Economic and Political Weekly*, there is a long report on the status of the peasant struggles across the world. Rémy Herrera (France) and Lau Kin Chi (China) have written this worthwhile read, which you can find **here**. It is strongly recommended.

Please visit our Tricontinental **website**. Our team is preparing a series of dossiers. We have dossiers already available on the crisis on the Korean peninsula and on cities without water. Coming up you will find dossiers on Syria and on the agrarian crisis. These come out each month. They are easy to read, well designed and made for you to share with your friends and students, with militants and neighbours.

