

# The U.N. & the Debt

## Toxic Imperialism

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Last December, Lawrence Summers the chief economist for the World Bank issued a surprisingly forthright memorandum to other senior World Bank staff in which he called for the distribution of toxic wastes and pollution away from the big industrialized nations and into relatively non-polluted areas of the world, as a means of rectifying the current toxic “imbalance.” “I’ve always thought,” Summers wrote, “that under-populated countries in Africa are vastly under-polluted; their air quality is probably vastly inefficiently low compared to Los Angeles or Mexico City.”

Summers, who edited the World Bank’s World Development Report for this year, also thinks that “the economic logic behind dumping a load of toxic waste in the lowest wage country is impeccable and we should face up to that.” He laments the fact that “so much pollution is generated by non-transportable industries (transport, electrical generation) [causing] the unit transport costs of solid waste [to be] so high to prevent world-welfare-enhancing trade in air pollution and waste.” Indeed, the new Clean Air Act stipulates that corporations in the U.S. are to be granted “pollution credits”, the idea being that those who don’t use up all their credits (by “under-polluting”) would then be able to literally sell them to those needing them, because of their “over-polluting.”

Under attack, Summers replied that his memo was an attempt to satirize capitalists’ approach to ecology in the tradition of Jonathan Swift. And, whether satirical or not, it certainly has struck a nerve. Following its publication in the London *Economist* in February and the consequent hue and cry against the bank by imperialized countries, the World Bank was driven to apologize for Summers’ memo. But, as Indian physicist and ecologist Vandana Shiva points out, “that does not alter the fact that the World Bank has, in fact, been financing the relocation of pollution-intensive industry to the Third World. As steel plants close in the North, the Bank helps the expansion of steel manufacture in India. It has financed the displacement of millions of tribals to build the Chandil and Icha dams of the Suvernakha project to support the expansion of the Tata’s steel plant at Jamshedpur. It continues to finance super thermal power plants to facilitate the relocation of energy intensive industry to the Third World. When fertilizer surpluses grew in the United States, the World Bank gave credit to push chemical fertilizers on India. The World Bank’s practice shows that Summers’ memo is not an aberration but is consistent with the vision of an environmental apartheid, a separate development of the North and South.”

Shiva correctly appraises the role of the Northern nation-states in continuing to dominate the nations of the Southern hemisphere. But at the same time, she barely avoids a trap that many United Nations’ non-governmental organizations (NGOs), wanting desperately to respond to the environment-destroying industries of the United States and Europe, all too often fall into by framing concern over the international debt, the environment and development primarily in terms of a North/ South imbalance requiring international regulation to rectify it.

That perspective, observing the disproportionate accumulation of the world’s resources by the nation-states of the Northern hemisphere, conceals an equally important (but generally ignored) assessment based on an understanding of supra-national class relationships—in other words, of relationships that go beyond the boundaries of nation-states and at the same time operate within them. U.N. agencies, like many people in the U.S., have yet to be-

gin exploring the moire-patterned intersection of nation-state and class ways of framing the issues; instead, all too often, anti-IMF and World Bank activists prioritize the nation-state developmental “solution,” seen as “progress,” over that of class and ecology. But it is only when activists break free of the capitalist parameters of the problem, with all its false developmental “choices,” that new insights needed for saving the planet, producing in non-toxic, biorenewable ways to meet people’s needs instead of for profits, and coordinating revolutionary strategies on many levels simultaneously are made possible.

A more complex analysis of the crisis would examine intertwining capitalist and governmental interests within all debtor nations themselves, including the U.S. (which is, unbeknownst to many, the largest debtor nation in the world). It would identify toxic imperialism as a “class” response to the international debt crisis, as Summers makes clear—a crisis that every debtor nation, including the most impoverished, needs in order to hammer its own working class into line and to maintain its elites in power, regardless of the loss of a healthy environment and national sovereignty.

Summers, writing for the World Bank, was undoubtedly thinking in terms of class interests within nations when he dismissed health-based complaints by the poor against the dumping of toxics in their communities. Because of their poverty, he wrote, the poor, already with shortened lifespans, would never live long enough to die from the cancers the toxics would inevitably cause anyway, so why should they raise a ruckus? Dumping toxics there not only made sound economic sense to Summers, but he tried to make it the morally principled course of action. “The concern over an agent that causes a one in a million change in the odds of prostate cancer,” he wrote, “is obviously going to be much higher in a country where people survive to get prostate cancer than in a country where under five mortality is 200 per thousand.” But even though the ruling class slices up the world in its own interest, reframing the issues in terms of class interests and not simply national ones is the last thing the architects of the U.N.’s NGO-ism want to do. Their own middle-class managerial interests compel them to devise policies to “regulate” capitalism’s abuses instead of fostering conditions in which the working class and peasants could empower themselves to overthrow that system altogether, and its middle-class apologists along with it.

Summers’ memorandum makes clear a point which “progressives” refuse to get through their heads: toxic imperialism and the world debt crisis are part of an explicit strategy of capitalist world development. This is not the result of poor management by the Northern states “insensitive” to the needs of the South, but a mechanism used by capitalism to batter down all the walls that had locked it out by financing a local, if tiny, emerging capitalist class. Not surprisingly, the kinds of resistance that emerge when the debt crisis is seen as a fundamental strategy of capitalism are far different from, and often clash with, resistance that expresses itself in the form of overcoming North/South Trade imbalances and creating a cleaner developmentalism. Indeed, along with the IMF/World Bank, the United Nation’s NGOs are increasingly becoming an integral part of capital’s one-two punch. They serve to channel class rebellion into manageable forums over the form national capitalist development should take, and away from socialist and ecological revolutions based on class.

Nor is the World Bank—whose previous president, Robert McNamara, was the main architect of the U.S.’s “automated battlefield” in the Vietnam war (in which two million Vietnamese were slaughtered)—acting primarily within a nation-state perspective, regardless of its professed concerns. As Silvia Federici points out in “The Debt Crisis: Africa and the New Enclosures” (printed in the Winter/Spring 1992 issue of *Red Balloon Magazine*), increased working class resistance to the International Monetary Fund-imposed austerity programs forced capital to shift gears into an alternative World Bank program that would provide “soft loans” to many governments to begin the course of “developing”—as part of a larger strategy. Once underway, the door would be opened for all sorts of foreign investment and ecological destruction of the type described by Summers, with the goal of furthering the integration of the world’s working class into the world labor market.

By integrating a class perspective into our analysis, every issue we face takes on crucial added dimensions. Consequently, what we need to do about it also changes. The Gulf War, for instance, becomes not only a slaughter to control a large share of the world’s oil resources and test out new weapons-systems, but part of a plan to reconfigure the oil producing working class itself, the better to control it and extract additional wealth from it. In Iraq the U.S. government and the U.N.’s “allied forces” accomplished this goal by wiping out the most advanced health care, sanitation, and education infrastructure in the region while allowing the Iraqi government’s Revolutionary Guard not only to survive intact, but to completely crush the leftist-led working class uprising around Basra (portrayed

in the U.S. media solely as a religious Shi'ite rebellion); in Kuwait the Emirocracy forcibly busted up the largely Palestinian and Arab working class, with its increasing level of organization and ability to wrest concessions from capital, and replaced it with Philippine, Sri Lankan, Malaysian and other workers who, because of even worse conditions at home and the inability to fight for a higher living standard in the name of "Arab unity," work for less money and are far from being able to organize effectively, at least for the time being, in their own class interest.

When the hidden dimension of class suddenly erupts, it shatters the facile framing of North/South power relations. It is hardly coincidental that, following the April rebellions in Los Angeles and in cities across the U.S., Jesse Jackson teamed up with banker and "urban planner" Felix Rohatyn to "rebuild America" by calling for the creation of "enterprise zones" precisely in those rebellious areas, which would bypass existing environmental and worker-safety regulations and allow the installation of bio-tech genetic-engineering factories there. Enterprise zones, as they exist in Southeast Asia (and, soon, in inner-cities near us) entail a suspension of most government regulations regarding minimum wages, working conditions, and toxic waste. Indeed, the Bush administration used the Gulf war as an excuse (for reasons of "national security") to further gut existing regulations (already gutted under the previous administration) on the production and storage of nuclear materials.

But the "left" in the U.S. sees none of this. Jobs—not quality of life (which would include meaningful jobs) or social/ economic relations—has become the primary question put forth by the allegedly "organized" left, and its corporate union bureaucrats. Even those who oppose the shipment of toxic wastes to the poorest and least defensible areas of the world all-too-often forget that those wastes also end up bombarding working class communities within the borders of the U.S. with carcinogens. Suddenly, the "privileges" derived from U.S. capital's imperialist plunder of the so-called Third World (seen from a nation-state perspective) become devastating toxic scourges from the vantage of class, with the "privileged" workers of the North among its victims. Imperialism is an equal opportunity destroyer. The poisons spewed by the "industrial North" become examples not just of an unequal power dynamic between North and South, but between the North and the South within the North, part of an international capitalist strategy best explicated in Summers' "free market in toxics" memo to the "Brave New World" Bank, for keeping the working classes within every country in their place.

In this way, the debt crisis becomes part of the elaborate mechanism installed by capital to manage and control production and impose an ecologically horrendous form of development; toxic imperialism and the debt, along with the "rebuild America" strategy of enterprise zones and genetic engineering factories, are used to whip the working classes of every country, including the U.S., into the capitalist world economy, to the advantage not only of the transnational corporations based in the "North" but to capitalist interests and their nation-state lackeys everywhere. "Development" and national self-determination, separated from working class revolution, is becoming more and more a "devil's choice" between syphilis and gonorrhea, Democrats or Republicans, or being broiled alive instead of fried. You can be gored with Clinton or battered with Bush, and there is no "nice" way out. Meanwhile, the alternatives much of what passes for a "left" is offering (jobs, enterprise zones, etc.) are simply the recycled schemes of the most advanced sector of the capitalist class. Dare the system speak its name? We'd better, for there is precious little time to put an end to imperialism, before it puts an end to us.

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