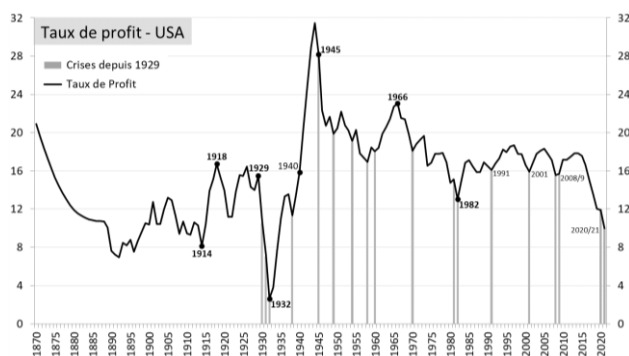


The combination of the four crises of capitalism: economic, social, imperialist, and ecological

The economic crisis

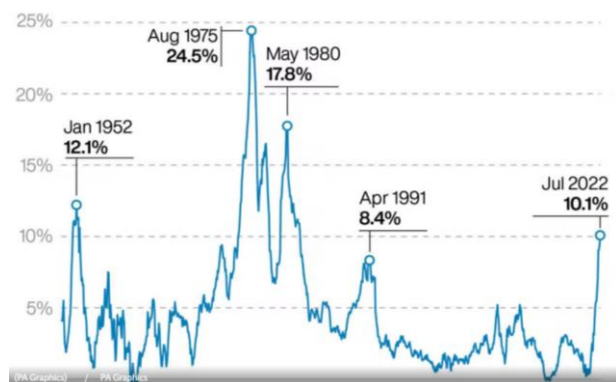
Paced by a succession of cyclical crises, capitalism has seen its rate of profit fall since 2014 in the main economies of the Western world, a fall that heralded the next recession, which the pandemic has only accelerated, as shown in graph 1 below:

Graph 1 Profit rates in the US



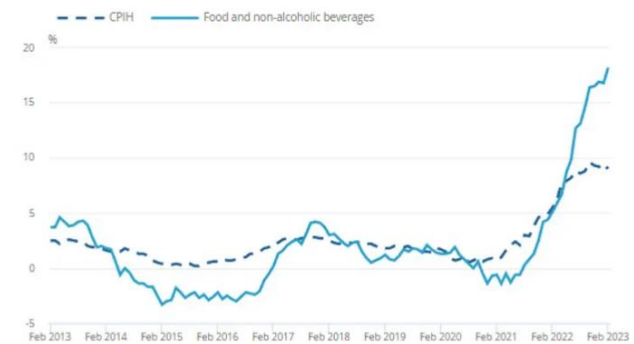
The current challenge for the ruling class is to restore the profitability of its capital. Several means are deployed, ranging from the most classic, such as austerity measures, the reduction of social budgets, multiple pension 'reforms', etc., to the most perverse, such as the use of inflation and the rise in interest rates, which constitute formidable taxes on wage earners (see the article *Inflation, interest rates and the distribution of wealth* in this review):

Graph 2 UK inflation, 11,5% in December 2022

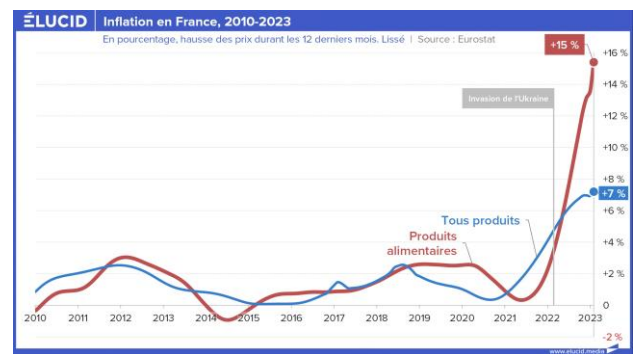


This inflation erodes the standard of living of the proletariat even more as it is much higher in basic foodstuffs as shown in graphs 3 and 4 for the UK and France, which are more important in the budget of a low-wage household:

Graph 3 UK – Total and food inflation



Graph 4 Inflation in France total and food

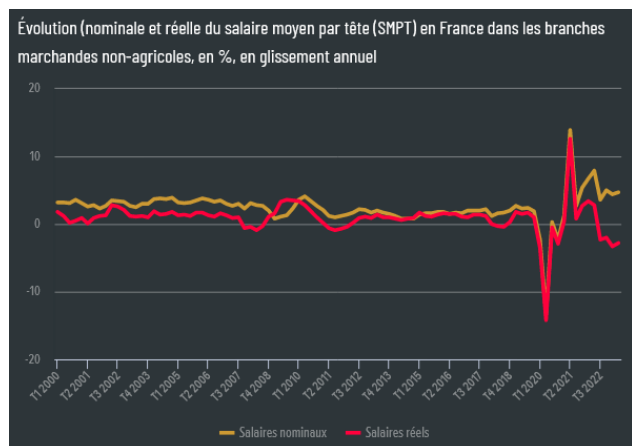


All these austerity policies are combining to drive real wages down (graphs 5 and 6) and spur a resumption of class warfare in several Western countries:

Graph 5 UK – Falling real wages when the red curve is below zero: between 2008 and 2015, in 2017 and since 2022



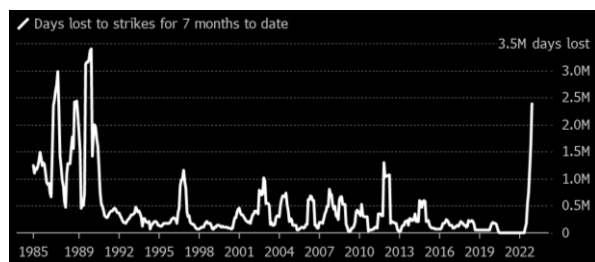
Graph 6 FR – Fall in real wages during the subprime crisis (2008), during the pandemic (2020-21) and since May 2022



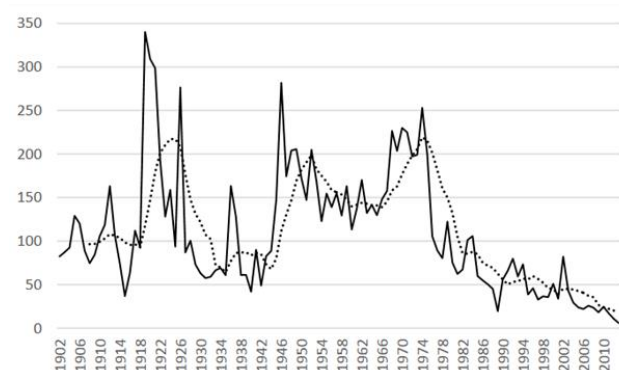
The state of the class struggle

This resurgence of social conflict in some countries (graph 7) contrasts with the decline in social conflict over the past half-century – 1974-2022, graph 8:

Graph 7 UK – Social conflict surges in 2022



Graph 8 Strike index in 16 Western developed countries¹ – 1902-2012



Why the decline in the major Western developed countries and what could potentially change today

¹ USA, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Belgium, Germany, Denmark, France, UK, Italy, Norway, Austria, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Japan.

with the resumption of struggles following the inflation boom?

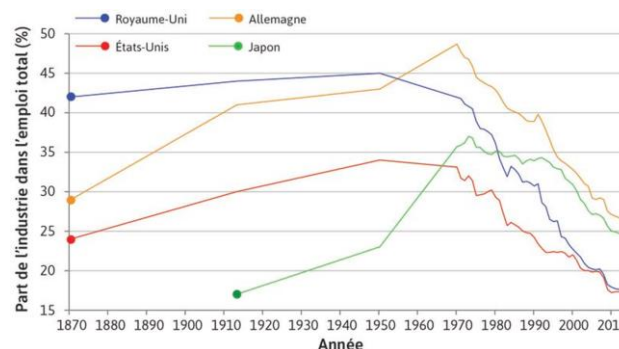
A) Half a century of declining social conflict

The dramatic decline in social conflicts since the mid-1970s is the result of the confluence of several factors that have progressively combined to disintegrate collective solidarity between workers:

1- De-industrialisation, dismantling of workers' concentrations and subcontracting

The de-industrialisation of the developed West predates globalisation, which only became significant in the 1990s. Indeed, faced with competition from the emerging countries of the time (Japan and Germany – Graph 9), the old powers, the United Kingdom in the 19th century and the United States in the 20th, began a slow process of deindustrialisation in the 1950s. However, it was not until the 1970s that there was a clear decline in all industrialised countries:

Graph 9 Industry's share of total employment



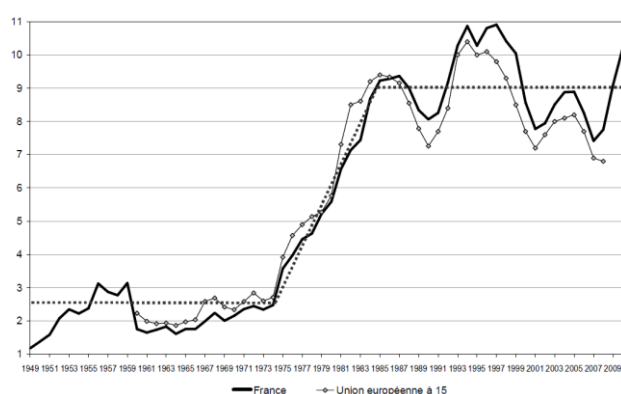
This decline is the result of a dual dynamic, both economic and social. Economic dynamics because the slowdown in growth from the 1970s onwards and the resulting difficulties in the developed countries pushed industrialists to set up their new production units in large middle-income countries in order to have easier access to their domestic markets (such as Brazil or Mexico for the car industry, for example). But it was also a social dynamic because the explosion of strikes in 1966-74 – often wildcat strikes – encouraged the employers to dismantle the large concentrations of workers and develop subcontracting, including from abroad.

This relative de-industrialisation, coupled with the dismantling of the large concentrations of workers and the recourse to subcontracting, considerably weakened the working class, its cohesion, its internal solidarity, its numerical strength, its social impact in case of conflicts and, consequently, degraded its social and working conditions.

2- Rise of structural unemployment since 1974

A second factor that has profoundly contributed to the decline of social conflicts since 1974 is the explosion of unemployment that started at the same date (Graph 10). With the fear of losing one's job and not being able to pay back one's loans, the development of unemployment gradually paralysed the social body and anaesthetised the struggles. This inexorable rise in unemployment in Europe from 1974 onwards and the beginning of the fall in the strike index at the same date (graph 8) are perfectly correlated, to such an extent that the peak in the rise of the unemployment curve also corresponds exactly to the lowest point in the fall in social conflicts!

Graph 10 Unemployment rate – EU-15 and France



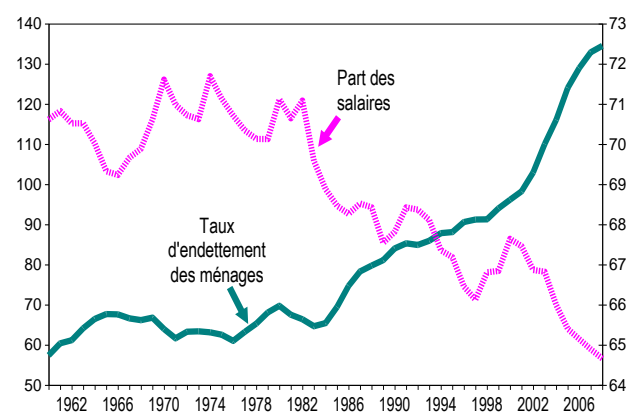
3- The strategy of the left in power

To cope with the surge of social conflicts between 1966 and 1974 – many of which were beyond the control of the trade union and left-wing apparatuses - the ruling class developed a strategy to transfer social revolt from the streets to parliament. This was the heyday of the hopes generated by the coming to power of left-wing teams: the 'Common Programme' in France (signed in 1972 between the *Socialist Party*, the *Communist Party* and the *Movement of Left Radicals*) with the coming to power of Mitterrand in 1981; the hope of a 'Historic Compromise' in Italy between the *Christian Democracy* and the *Communist Party* in the mid-1970s which led to 'national solidarity' governments between 1976 and 1979, governments supported by the PCI which remained in opposition; the democratisation of the dictatorial regimes in Portugal (April 1974), Greece (July 1974) and Spain (November 1975) and the accession of left-wing teams to government: Mário Soares' in Portugal (1976-78 and 1983-85), Andréas Papandreu's in Greece (1981-89) and Felipe González' in Spain (1982-96). This transfer of protest from the factories to parliamentary hopes will powerfully anaesthetise the intensity of social conflicts.

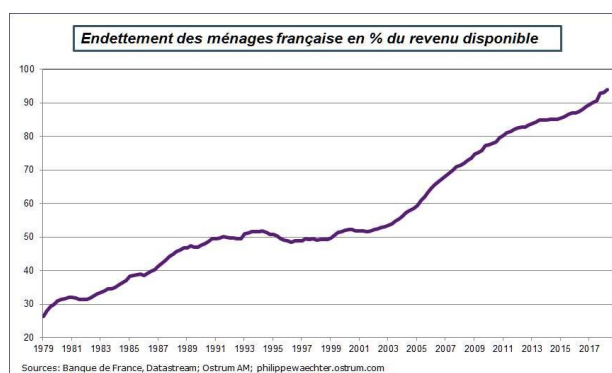
4- Growing household debt to compensate for the sharp fall in the wage share

Although household debt was not an explanatory factor in the decline of social conflicts as were the three previous ones, it nevertheless significantly reinforced them. Indeed, a person in debt is much less likely to protest when he or she fears losing his or her job. This factor played an increasingly important role from the 1980s onwards following neo-liberal policies to reduce the wage share (see Graph 22 of our article on *The obsolescence of capitalism* in this issue), as households saw their incomes slow down or decrease and compensated for this by taking on debt, as shown below in Graphs 11 for the United States and 12 for France.

Graph 11 Wage share (right) and household debt (left) as % of US GDP



Graph 12 French household debt as % of income



5- Individualisation and uberisation of the wage relationship breaking down solidarity between employees

The application of neo-liberal logics, which began in the 1970s and 80s, has progressively dismembered previous conventional policies and contributed to the individualisation of the wage relationship, thus making proletarians increasingly competitive with each other and powerless in the face of the bosses. The transformation of wage earners into false independents and the uberisation of work via computer platforms are the ultimate outcome.

6- The repression of the workers' avant-garde

To all these objective causes can be added a first, more subjective factor underlined by Henri Simon in **one of his testimonies**: *“the bosses cleaned up by firing all those who had put themselves forward in 1968 and in the immediate post-68 period; several hundred factory militants paid the price of this bosses' counter-offensive (I was one of them in 1971)”*. We should also note that the left-wing apparatuses and the unions also proceeded to clean up their most radical elements.

7- The loss of class identity and doubts

Finally, a second subjective factor gradually demoralized the proletariat and its avant-garde, namely the loss of the class identity of wage earners and the discrediting of all that was presented as alternatives to capitalism. Indeed, even if totally institutionalised and mystified in organisations integrated into bourgeois legality as are the trade unions and left-wing political apparatuses, the proletariat after the second world war was still numerically numerous and concentrated and recognised itself as a social force carrying an alternative. However, the role played by the unions as guardians of capitalist legality, or even as saboteurs of massive and/or radical struggles led by wage earners; the anti-worker and repressive policies of left-wing governments, or even downright neo-liberal for some; the obvious failure of all the nationalist-bourgeois governments or movements that claimed to be 'socialist' in the Third World (Algeria, Vietnam, Cambodia, North Korea, Cuba, Venezuela, etc.), as well as the collapse of the Eastern countries, that is to say of what seemed to represent an alternative to capitalism but which were in reality only totalitarian state capitalisms, all this came to deeply demoralise the wage earners (and even the militants of its vanguard political organisations) from leading the struggle and from continuing to fight to get out of capitalism.

In addition to this decline in social conflicts and the demoralisation that followed, a deep doubt developed about the revolutionary potential of the proletariat and about communism as a possible alternative. This doubt is all the more important as this retreat of almost half a century has left room for the expression of discontent among the middle classes, significant parts of which are also subject to a regressive dynamic. The radical nature of some of these expressions has led some to believe that the 'classic' workers' struggles have had their day and that it is now necessary to turn to 'new forms of struggle'.

The recent protest movements of wage earners against the explosion of inflation, as in recent months in the UK and France with the struggles

against pension reform as well as in other countries, although in a minor mode, do not sweep away, but seriously question these doubts and reaffirm that the working class has not disappeared and that it still has a significant potential of combativity!

B) An effective awakening of class struggles?

For lack of hindsight, it is still premature to answer this question positively, despite an undeniable resumption of class struggles in several countries, a resumption that contrasts sharply with the social calm of the previous four or five decades (see Graphs 7 and 8 above).

However, whatever the extent and the duration of this reawakening of class struggles in certain countries, others will inevitably be forced to emerge given the increasingly strong conjunction between the four crises of capitalism, struggles in the course of which the links between the social, warlike and ecological disasters and the responsibility of capitalism will appear with ever greater evidence.

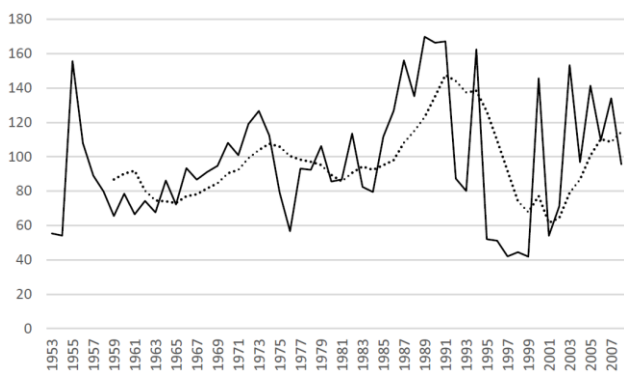
However, the length and depth of the half-century of retreat from social conflict and the ideological disorientation that has been induced mean that we are starting from a lower base than ever before and have fewer points of support than ever before: little awareness of a common collective interest in perspective beyond immediate demands; no or very little tendency to take charge and self-organise struggles; no clear and shared awareness of the situation and the forces at play; a profound loss of past experiences; no programme or project, however vague; lilliputian and fragmented revolutionary organisations that are content to rehash old, obsolete software... Worse, a lot of accumulated illusions and disorientations, the result of decades of capitalist ideology bludgeoning, and no form of pre-existing organisational mediation whatsoever. Everything will have to be built on the spot, in the movement, with very weak and theoretically unprepared political forces.

One aspect of this theoretical unpreparedness is the cruel lack of analysis of the Asian area within the *Communist Left*. Indeed, a revolutionary analysis must adopt an international point of view, and even more so at the level of the appreciation of the state of the relation of force between the classes. Now, today, nearly two-thirds of the industrial proletariat is concentrated in the Asian area, very often in gigantic units made up of tens of thousands of workers and whose social dynamics are very different from those in the developed (but highly deindustrialised) Western countries, as shown in graphs 13, 14 and 15 below. The synthetic index of strikes in the rest of the world (i.e. excluding China and developed Western countries) shown in graph 13 does not indicate any clear downward trend as in developed

countries, but an overall maintenance from 1953 to 2010. As for China, strikes increase from the beginning of its economic emergence phase until 2015 (Graph 14). Thereafter, they have been declining over the last ten years (Graph 15).

However, it is difficult to find an analysis that would allow us to understand this difference in dynamics and its implications. And for good reason, the phenomenon of the emerging countries was first totally denied, since it was declared theoretically and practically impossible², then ignored for a long time, and finally acknowledged, but without any coherent explanation and without drawing all the implications on the economic, imperialist and social levels. We proposed a first analysis in 2007 but it remained a dead letter. We have significantly amended and extended it in several texts published on the *Controversies* website but without addressing this social dimension which we propose to return to.

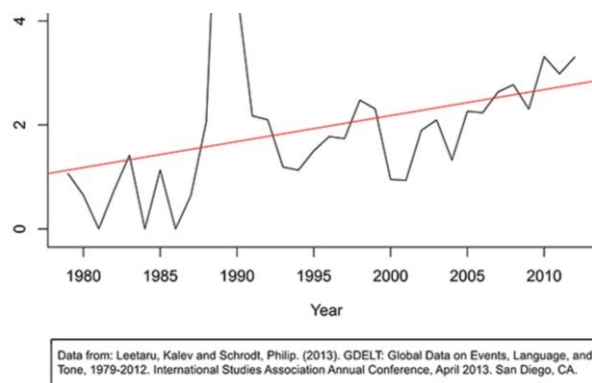
Graph 13 Index of strikes in several African, Asian and South American countries³, 1953-2010



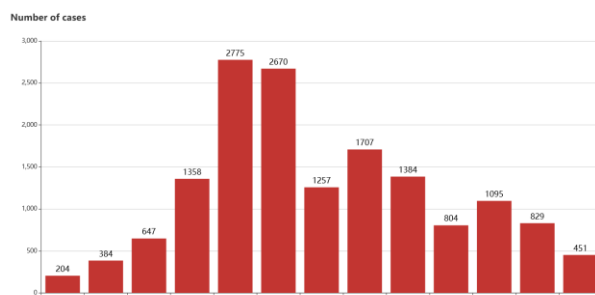
² « *The period of capitalist decadence is characterised by the impossibility of any new industrialised nations emerging. The countries which didn't make up for lost time before World War I were subsequently doomed to stagnate in a state of total underdevelopment, or to remain chronically backward in relation to the countries at the top of the sandcastle. This has been the case with big nations like India or China, whose 'national independence' or even their so-called 'revolution' (read the setting up of a draconian form of state capitalism) didn't allow them to break out of underdevelopment or destitution* » International Review n°23 (1980) of *International Communist Current (ICC)*, MC & FM.

³ Algeria, Burkina Fasso, Burundi, Cameroon, Chile, Hong Kong, Egypt, Ghana, India, Indonesia, Iraq, Malawi, Mali, Mexico, Morocco, Nigeria, Pakistan, Peru, Singapore, South Africa, Thailand, Tunisia, Turkey, Venezuela, Uganda, Zambia and Zimbabwe.

Graph 14 Strikes in China – 1978-2013



Graph 15 Strikes in China – 2011-2023



In view of these observations, claiming that the Asian proletariat is young, that it lacks historical experience, that it is more sensitive to democratic illusions... is a very poor way out of the theoretical indigence existing within the *Communist Left* in the Asian area... because this was also largely the case for the proletariat in Russia in 1917! Now, today, the working class in Asia is much more educated and concentrated and lives in a much more developed society than was the case in Russia at the beginning of the 20th century.

In other words, to be satisfied with affirming that the proletariat in the big Western countries has not suffered a historical defeat and that it still possesses a potential of combativity is clearly insufficient, because, on the one hand, one cannot leave aside its weakening as a result of deindustrialisation and ignore the two thirds of the world proletariat located in Asia. Moreover, given the characteristics of its retreat over the last half-century as described above, if struggles of scale were to arise in the Western world, they would have the enormous task of rebuilding from almost nothing.

And of all these things that are missing, the most decisive and undoubtedly the most difficult, is that the proletariat reappropriates its class identity, that a project and a programme on a par with the present historical situation are elaborated and disseminated, and that vanguards capable of analysing and carrying these perspectives emerge, which is still very far from being the case, unfortunately!

Imperialist conflicts

Thanks to its principle of proletarian internationalism, the *Communist Left* has been able to clearly denounce the imperialist war in Ukraine and firmly resist the nationalist sirens, as we have widely reported on **our website**. However, the theoretical corpus deployed in the analyses supposed to found these positions raises the same dogmatic and archaic weaknesses as we show in detail in the article of this review n°6 on *The erring of the ICC on inter-imperialist relations*.

Thus, the paucity of analysis noted above on the Asian area is translated here too by an enormous weakness: the incapacity to clearly recognise the tendency to the reformation of two geopolitical blocs around Washington and Peking with a view to a re-division of the world. The renewed combativeness of the proletariat, the absence of its embrigment behind national flags, the still significant military unpreparedness of China, the every-man-for-himself attitude and the dissensions within the respective allies of the United States and the Middle Kingdom constitute very poor fig leaves revealing the blindness in the face of the obvious pursuit of the constitution of two imperial blocs aiming at a violent re-division of the planet.

Indeed, since the end of the 19th century, the international scene has been marked by a geopolitical bipolarisation of the world, with each side fighting for hegemony:

a) Already prevalent before its formalisation in 1882, the opposition between the *Triple Entente* (France, England, Russia) and the *Triple Alliance* (Germany, Italy, Austria-Hungary) fighting over the planet will lead to the First World War.

b) The arrival of Hitler in power in 1933 re-polarised the world between the Axis countries (Germany, Italy, Japan) and the Western bloc, leading to the Second World War.

c) From 1945 onwards, the Cold War took hold between the Soviet and American imperial blocs, which fought a veritable Third World War by interposing themselves in the Third World. Indeed, all the wars waged in this context have resulted in as many deaths as in the Second World War.

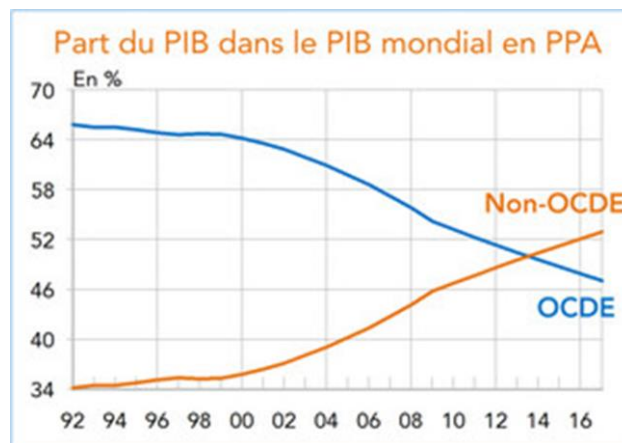
d) Finally, after a quarter of a century, a new imperialist polarisation is taking place between China and the United States, each explicitly claiming to be the hegemonic pole.

Of course, China is still a military dwarf and the US a superpower in this respect. Certainly, the proletariat in these two poles is not yet drunk with nationalism and ready to die on the battlefield for 'its' own leaders. Certainly, the alliances of these two

poles are still far from being fully constituted. Nevertheless, the dynamic is clearly present, all the more so because, unlike the Axis countries or the Soviet bloc in the two previous polarisations, this one brings together two entities whose economic importance has become almost equivalent. The two measures below largely attest to this observation:

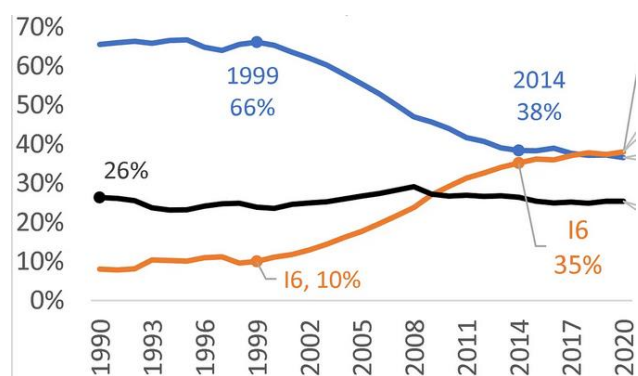
1- The OECD, which brings together 38 developed countries (including North America, Western Europe, Japan and Australia) still accounted for two-thirds of world GDP two decades ago, but less than half today!

Graph 14 Share of GDP in world GDP at PPP



2- More precisely, the G7 (USA, Germany, Japan, France, UK, Italy, Canada) accounted for two thirds of global manufacturing output in 2000, but only 37% in 2020, while the six emerging economies (China, India, South Korea, Indonesia, Thailand and Brazil), which accounted for only 10% of global manufacturing output in 2000, now account for 38%, i.e. more than the G7. With the rest of the world's share remaining constant at around 25%, the last two decades have seen a real global shift:

Graph 15 World manufacturing production



This implies a major difference: whereas the weaker bloc was the more aggressive in the past, today it is the US that takes the initiative and actively defends its still existing pre-eminence, especially in military terms.

Thus, for the time being, the USA's objectives are, on the one hand, to irreparably weaken Russia, i.e. the

only country currently capable of eradicating America with its nuclear arsenal (which is not yet the case with China) and, on the other hand, to avoid any consequent alliance between Russia and China allowing the latter to catch up more quickly on its military lag. However, beyond this conflict in Ukraine, there is a major issue between China and the United States, as Hillary Clinton, the former head of American diplomacy, clearly stated when she recently declared that: "*Russia is 'a short-term threat' and China is 'a long-term threat'*" and warned the West against China's expansionist ambitions, while seeing Moscow as a temporary me-face ⁴.

Ecological issues

The major ecological challenges are well known and widely accepted in the scientific community. More, very consensual academic authorities, or even Greta Thunberg in her latest book, have come to the obvious conclusion that these major issues stem from the deadly dynamics of capitalism and cannot be resolved if we remain within a logic guided by the maximisation of profit. Of course, they do not defend a revolutionary perspective, far from it, but the idea that a green capitalism is impossible is gradually gaining ground ... unless the working class is made to pay the entire cost! But it is also the working class that is already suffering the most harmful consequences and will suffer the most devastating ones tomorrow.

Unfortunately, the understanding of all these issues by the *Communist Left* is also poor. A blind spot in its analyses throughout the 20th century - with the exception of very rare writings - it is only very recently that it has begun to tackle these questions ... but only to limit itself to a double observation that is invariably repeated: (1) ecological disasters are proof of the bankruptcy of a capitalism that must urgently be abolished and (2) ecological struggles are fragmentary struggles that must be denounced because they distract the proletariat from its class terrain.

If the first observation is certainly obvious, the second is much less so and will be even less so as the 'ecological struggles' will multiply and amplify in the years to come. Going back to Marx makes it easy to understand why this second observation is badly posed and fundamentally erroneous.

Indeed, after the physiocrats, but for the Ancien Régime society, Marx is the first modern economist to integrate nature in the understanding of the

⁴ Statement made during the geopolitics programme of 11 June 2022 on **France Culture**.

foundations, dynamics and contradictions of capitalism. Unlike all the theories of mainstream economics that limit the factors of production to capital and labour, Marx includes nature: "*Labor is not the source of all wealth. Nature is just as much the source of use values (and it is surely of such that material wealth consists!) as labor, which itself is only the manifestation of a force of nature, human labor power. [...] And insofar as man from the beginning behaves toward nature, the primary source of all instruments and subjects of labor, as an owner, treats her as belonging to him, his labor becomes the source of use values, therefore also of wealth*" ⁵.

Similarly, he writes in the first volume of *Capital*: "*Labour is not therefore the only source of the use values it produces, of material wealth. It is the father, and the earth the mother...*".

Moreover, thanks to the current work on the complete publication of his work, we now know that the essential reason why he did not complete the other volumes of *Capital* is because he wanted to integrate two themes which occupied the essential part of his research during the last years of his life: nature and its ecological limits and the historical foundations of capitalism as developed in several recent books ⁶!

For all these reasons, to which we will return in greater detail in other contributions, we consider that the struggle to safeguard the living conditions of the working class includes the safeguarding of nature, since '*as labor, which itself is only the manifestation of a force of nature, human labor power. And insofar as man from the beginning behaves toward nature, the primary source of all instruments and subjects of labor*'.

In a mode of production that is now obsolete (see the next two articles in this issue), the immediate struggles of the proletariat will inevitably become multifactorial, at once economic, political, social and ecological.

C.Mcl

Original in French – Translation by DeepL

⁵ Marx *Critique of the Gotha Programme*.

⁶ In particular: *Le dernier Marx*, éd. l'Asymétrie ; *La nature contre le capital – L'écologie de Marx dans sa critique inachevée du capital*, Kohei Saito, éd. Syllepse ; *Les dernières années de Karl Marx*, Marcello Musto, éd. PUF.