

Global Solidarity
By Peter Bohmer
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Welcome! I will speak for about 30 minutes and then let us have a lively discussion for an hour.

I love the name of this conference, United In Radical Solidarity. Solidarity to me is an action of putting into practice, the Wobbly, IWW slogan, "An Injury to one is an Injury to All." Solidarity, if meaningful, is active, not just a stance. Solidarity means the willingness to take risks as those in power will oppose and repress active solidarity. Without this willingness, solidarity is limited.

In this talk, I share my global solidarity activism, going back to the 1960's, not for virtue signaling but rather to use concrete historical examples to demonstrate who we should show solidarity with, to develop the idea of critical support and critical solidarity, and examine different forms and tactics of solidarity. I will differentiate between cases where solidarity with governments and movements that are being attacked by the United States is appropriate versus cases where only an anti-interventionist practice is appropriate. In this case, solidarity and support is with the people and progressive movements of the country challenging imperialism and defending themselves. My analysis is from the perspective of a resident of the United States although I also consider myself a global citizen; my conclusions are relevant, especially for those living in the global north.

Global solidarity is of strategic importance for overthrowing global capitalism and creating a world where poverty, exploitation, oppression and alienation are ended, where domination and hierarchy are overcome, the second part of the title of this conference. Global solidarity makes it more difficult to isolate and defeat social movements. We live in a global capitalist world, obscenely unequal between and within countries. Transnational corporations cross boundaries with their goods and capital in search for maximum profits. Communities and workers are pitted against each other in a race to the bottom. A common response today by workers, political parties and governments is ethnonationalism, that blames immigrants and other societies for a decline in living conditions. Global solidarity is an antidote to this reactionary politics. Moreover, supporting revolutionary struggles can weaken global capital by reducing their ability to exploit others. It raises the possibility of transformative change in the country of those acting in solidarity who learn about inspiring challenges. Global solidarity is also a moral imperative. A foundational pillar for the left should be the equal value of all human life. This implies a particular responsibility for those in the global north. Movements are more likely to remain principled and radical when strategic and moral concerns are synthesized.

1960's and the Vietnam War!

My growing and deepening opposition to the Vietnam war is a major cause of my lifetime of activism and global solidarity. At first, I thought the US aggression against Vietnam was a mistake and that a few protests, writing letters to the editor, would end the war by a country that I thought, for the most part supported democracy. I got more involved in student and city-wide groups organizing the war in 1967, and learned more about the history of U.S. interventions, and that anti-communism was used by those in power to maintain support for U.S. imperialism, a new and important concept to me. I developed an ongoing systemic anti-capitalist analysis. It is one reason why I have maintained a lifetime of organizing. I went from guilt for what my country was doing to Vietnam to solidarity with Vietnam and the Vietnamese people. Guilt is sometimes a first step towards activism, but it is important to go beyond it. Similarly, in this period, I went from being guilty for being white to solidarity with the Black Freedom Movement in the U.S.

An effective tactic I learned while participating in an organization, Vietnam Summer in 1967 was reaching out to people and building on existing networks. We went door to door in different neighborhoods in Boston and if people were sympathetic or open to an anti-Vietnam war perspective, most weren't at that time, we asked them to invite their neighbors to their apartment and we would return with a slide show showing the lies of those in power and the destruction caused by the U.S. in Vietnam. We would discuss with these small groups, usually about 10 people, what they could concretely do, e.g., visiting their local congressperson and demanding the U.S. withdraw from Vietnam. They, not us, proposed the action.

A demonstration that particularly sticks out was the October 1967 march from Washington, DC to the Pentagon. Over 100,000 marched to the Pentagon; we had a permit until 5 PM. Just before five, civil and human rights leader, Dick Gregory, urged us to stay beyond five., stating that justice and stopping the war were more important than being legal. About 10,000 of us stayed. It was the demonstration where protesters--mainly women--put flowers on the bayonets of the military police. I remember after the last news media camera left, around 9 PM, the military police attacked us. I learned from this action not to trust the New York Times as objective, as they claimed on their front page, the following Monday, that the demonstrators had turned violent when I knew that was a lie. It is important to read and view the mainstream media, but read it critically.

In the late 1960's and early 1970's, there were two major anti-war coalitions. The one led by the Trotskyist Socialist Worker's Party, the Mobe, took what I call an anti-interventionist position, calling for U.S. withdrawal but they did not support the National Liberation Front (NLF) or North Vietnam. The coalition I was part of, which had various names including the People's Coalition for Peace and Justice, PCPJ, supported the total withdrawal by the U.S. from Vietnam, supported the NLF and North Vietnam and in our opposition, focused on all casualties of the war, especially Vietnamese, and not just U.S. soldiers. Also, we supported the Black Liberation Struggle and made anti-racism a central part of our program. The Mobe claimed they wanted to form the broadest movement against the war by not taking a stand on other issues besides Vietnam. We argued in joint meetings that they were marginalizing Black and other third world people by not taking a principled stand. (At that time, the term Third World was used for people in the U.S. from non-European backgrounds, what today is usually called, people of color). Another difference was going beyond peaceful, legal demonstration, we also organized and mobilized for actions that disrupted business as usual such as attempting to block the entrances to a lab at MIT that provided research for weapons the US military used against Vietnam, and trying to close down Washington, DC in May 1971.

Another example of direct action was a protest of about 500 people in May 1972. We temporarily stopped a train going from LA to San Diego and then to dock in Vietnam to supply U.S. soldiers and their allies, the South Vietnamese Army with weapons. A few of us were indicted by a grand jury for obstructing a railroad. I would have served far more time in prison but there was a lot of support for me, including a petition initiated by Noam Chomsky. This caused the judge to not sentence me back to prison and give me a stiff probation instead. Organizing in support of political prisoners should be a part of our actions. It reduces the fear of imprisonment, reduces the probability of conviction and a lengthy sentence, and makes us less isolated if we are incarcerated

The strategy that often justifies direct action is "raising the social cost." By social cost, I mean that the cost, not mainly in dollars, but in loss of legitimacy of the elites that causes them to concede, at least partially. This is because the social cost of not conceding begins to threaten their rule and raises the possibility of systemic change. The growing support for revolutionary change, particularly among young people, partly because of their abhorrence of the Vietnam war raised the social cost of the war as did the growing support and

participation for actions that disrupted the functioning of the system, that meant breaking the law. Of course, if actions, including sabotage, alienate most of the population, they do not raise the social cost and give the state more power to repress us. Ironically, the Vietnam war became less and less popular over time, but the anti-war movement did not become more popular.

When the United States, withdrew all its troops from Vietnam on April 30th, 1975, we celebrated the victory of the Vietnamese people and the revolutionary forces and the total U.S. withdrawal. The main reason for this victory was the persistence of the Vietnamese people and Communist Party and their military, but we had also contributed. However, a weakness of our solidarity movement with the Vietnamese heroic struggle was that we rapidly declined and for the most part did not show solidarity after April 30th, as the U.S. continued to isolate Vietnam so that it would not be a model of a thriving socialist society. They succeeded.

When we are in solidarity with liberation movements that win, it is necessary that concrete solidarity continues after the taking of power. This would increase the ability of the revolutionary government to meet the needs of its people, to develop in a socialist direction and to defeat ongoing attempts to undermine and overthrow it.

Critical Solidarity!

In the late 1960's and 1970's, much of the New Left that I was part of was in solidarity with Vietnam and its heroic fight against the United States and the victorious Cuban Revolution. To me, this was right looking back 50 years later. There were positive alternatives for the global south—substantial land reform, free medical care and education, full employment, subsidizing basic needs, and anti-imperialist. Although many of us were critical of Cuban support of the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968, our overall support for the Cuba tended to be uncritical. We convinced ourselves that both countries were more democratic, less bureaucratic and that workers had more power in those societies than they had. This reminds me of many people today idealizing Rojava and the Zapatistas who certainly deserve solidarity and are positive alternatives to neoliberal capitalism, but these communities and regions are not as liberatory as how they are idealized.

I am advocating for a position of critical support, i.e., critical solidarity. We should respect self-determination and not require that movements we support to have exactly our positions. However, it does mean solidarity should be limited to those being oppressed but not to the organizations, political parties challenging the U.S. when their politics are not liberatory: when they are patriarchal or sectarian towards other religions, ethnicities, or when their political project is not aimed at improving the lives and power of the popular classes. It is important to investigate the real situation and accept neither the negative slanted versions of our mass media nor uncritically support a group because they challenge U.S. power. Critical does not mean finding excuses not to be in solidarity. However, the more active we are in solidarity with liberation movements and governments, resisting U.S. domination and intervention, e.g., Cuba, the more we have the right to offer some criticism also.

In the 1980's, a period of neoliberalism, and right-wing ascendancy and rule in many parts of the world, e.g., Latin America, there were strong solidarity movements in the U.S. and beyond with the anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa, and with the Sandinista government in Nicaragua, and with the revolutionary armed struggles in Guatemala and El Salvador. In these cases, much of the activism here went beyond intervention to include solidarity. Approximately 100,000 solidarity activists from the U.S. went to Nicaragua, between 1979 when the Sandinistas took power until 1990 when they lost the elections. Many went to experience a society that was resisting the CIA backed contras and U.S. subversion, David vs Goliath, and seemed to be developing a socialism that was also democratic, the "New

Left” coming to power. I worked for one of the Sandinista ministries in 1988. A major group in solidarity with El Salvador that formed in 1980 and still exists today is CISPES, Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador. It supported with literature, rallies and demonstrations and material aid, the FMLN, the united group fighting the U.S. backed right wing governments there and the social movements, including unions and women. CISPES also organized visits of its members to go to El Salvador to meet with courageous organizers there. It worked in coalition with religious groups who opposed U.S. intervention as did the major Nicaragua solidarity organization. The movement here prevented a U.S. invasion which was a victory although couldn’t stop the damage to these countries and the killing of many militants which is an important factor of the non-progressive development of these societies since the 1990’s.

In Nicaragua in the 1970’s and El Salvador and Guatemala in the 1980’s, there were several guerilla organizations fighting their reactionary, U.S. supported governments. The left in these three cases, united, although as separate organizations, as the FSLN, Sandinistas in Nicaragua; the FMLN in El Salvador, and the UNRG in Guatemala. Solidarity groups in the U.S. supported these three fronts rather than individual organizations in these countries. It is wrong for solidarity groups to pick one organization to support when they are more than one who are deserving support. It is us choosing who we prefer rather than the people of the country involved in a revolutionary movement. For example, In South Africa, for example, although I personally preferred the politics of the ANC for their inclusiveness and for their socialist program to the Pan African Congress, I thought we should be in solidarity with both. In retrospect, I believe we should have been in critical support of the two main liberation groups in Zimbabwe, ZAPU and ZANU. In other anti-colonial struggles in southern Africa, there were groups that espoused decolonization and liberation but were supported by and dependent on the CIA and South African intelligence, they were counterrevolutionary. We need to investigate carefully before making these important choices.

A criticism made of our global solidarity activism is that we are intervening in the politics and struggles in other countries which is similar to what the U.S. government is doing and that our interference in other countries violates their right to self-determination. My response is that our actions are totally different. The aim of U.S. intervention is U.S. capitalist domination and against the interests of most of the local population and it is our responsibility to oppose this. This is different from grass roots solidarity groups in the U.S. and other countries acting in solidarity and supporting struggles with and by local people and organizations against imperialist and capitalist domination.

Another criticism is that we only criticize U.S. imperialism and there are other imperialists, e.g., the Soviet Union or Russia today. There are others although I consider U.S. imperialism to still be the main and most destructive one. More importantly, U.S. residents are more capable of making a difference in the country where they live than in another country, and that we have a special responsibility as it is being done in our name by our government. I remember in one of my visits to Nicaragua in the 1980’s, at a rally there, a speaker said that the U.S. government was their enemy not the American people who they considered friends. They asked me to speak, and I said, thank you, and that it is our responsibility to divide further the people of the U.S. in their views and actions from that of the U.S. government and corporations.

Anti-Intervention and Solidarity with Whom?

It was right to oppose the U.S, wars in Afghanistan and Iraq but most of those fighting the United States occupation did not deserve solidarity. Solidarity should be with movements, parties, governments who are not only opposing the U.S. but whose objective is a liberated and just society. This made it difficult to build a strong anti-intervention and anti-war

movement even though anti-war activism was necessary. There was not the inspiration and energy that solidarity activists brought to the Vietnam, Central America and anti-apartheid struggles.

I have been active in supporting Palestinian self-determination and in solidarity with Palestinian Marxist groups since the 1970's, supporting an arms embargo of Israel and since 2005, the BDS (boycott, Divestment, Sanctions) movement. Solidarity with Palestine has been a major part of my activism and of many people I work with since October 2023. The Palestine solidarity movement has contributed to declining popular support for Israel in the population and increasingly by the U.S. Congress although U.S. policy has not changed—backing Israel's genocidal war against Gaza and ethnic cleansing of the West Bank continues. Opposing U.S. support of Israel should be a part of every progressive group in the United States, it is a defining moral issue of our time. Also deserving our solidarity is supporting the right of armed Palestinian resistance. To me, this means supporting Hamas, Islamic Jihad and other groups in their resisting the Israeli occupation. This does not mean solidarity with Hamas and other organizations whose vision is not liberatory. I am making a distinction between supporting Palestinian resistance in which Hamas plays the major role to specifically supporting Hamas as a revolutionary organization. Hamas has the right to fight with arms against the Israeli occupation and ongoing blockade, but their ideology and policies are pro-capitalist and patriarchal.

In our activism, speaking, writing about Palestine our focus should be on ending the horrific U.S. role and not on Hamas's shortcomings given the already public prejudice against Palestine armed resistance. This has meant understanding the reasons for the Hamas attack on Israel of October 7, 2023, and publicly neither condemning nor supporting it. This was the position of Palestine Action of South Sound, the group I actively participated in.

Debate on How to Oppose the Iran War!

I will conclude with a brief analysis of the current U.S. and Israeli war against Iran, the latest beginning with their murderous attack on Iran of February 28th. I will briefly present two major positions on the left, both strongly oppose the ongoing U.S. aggression. These positions have been crystallized by a letter to the *The Guardian*, August 20, 2026. ["To Iran's Political Prisoners, Trapped 'Between Two Blades of a Scissor', Open Letter"](#). It was signed by several well-known left activists and writers, some who have been political prisoners and others who have written in defense of political prisoners and towards carceral abolition, including Angela Davis, Mumia Abu-Jamal, and Walden Bello.

The first position, which I support, not only totally opposes the U.S. and Israeli war and sanctions against Iran but also calls for supporting Iranian political prisoners. The second position calls for an anti-war movement that does not make any criticism of the ruling class of Iran, or of repression there; that our position should be limited to the task of ending the war and sanctions against Iran. The debate has been very heated on social media.

For the most part, both sides agree that Iran is a repressive, misogynist, capitalist society. I believe that although our main task is ending the U.S.-Israeli war against Iran, we should also support Iran's political prisoners and demand that the government end executions, which are numerous, the highest per capita in the world. Ours is a strong anti-interventionist position with solidarity with Iranian political prisoners but not with the Iranian state. Complicating this position is that Iran is waging a heroic and brilliant defensive war against the United States which the U.S. is losing. I am arguing for reforms in Iran and support for those under attack there but against the overthrow of the Iranian government as long as the war continues. When the war ends and hopefully the U.S. is defeated it is up to the Iranian people to decide their future.

Most of those who hold the second position of no criticism of Iran do not support the Iranian State and their policies. They know it is not progressive, internally. But they believe that criticism of Iran weakens the support in the U.S. and globally of the Iranian resistance and strengthens the side of U.S. aggression and weakens support for the anti-war movement. They claim that most people cannot simultaneously hold two truths, criticism of Iran internally while supporting their defensive war against the U.S. and Israel. Often in this perspective, politics is reduced to geopolitics, and only one's international stance matters, are you on the side of the U.S. or not? This denies the subjectivity of Iranians and often claims the internal opposition is being duped by Israeli or U.S. intelligence, or are supporters of the U.S. U.S. and Israeli intelligence are involved in subversion, but it trivializes the major protests and mass participation against the Iranian government in 2023, the "Women, Life, Freedom" protests; and the massive protests in December and January 2026, against the economic situation.

In conclusion, in the 1960's and 1970's, the central revolutionary struggle was anti-U.S. imperialist, national liberation struggles and societies in the global south trying to build socialism, e.g. Chile in the 1960's and early 1970's, Cuba, post 1959. Solidarity with these struggles and societies was not problematic for those who wanted a socialist world although it should have been a critical solidarity. Today, those most actively resisting U.S. and imperialist domination are often not anti-capitalist or liberatory. In these cases, we should oppose U.S. and U.S. led interventions, not only wars of aggression and covert intervention, but also economic dominance. Economic dominance includes using U.S. power to further the interests of multinational corporations, often from the U.S. This is done by extending high interest loans and demanding privatization and low corporate taxes; the U.S. and global capital supporting neoliberal governments in the global south and the connected corporate exploitation of labor and environmentally destructive extraction of natural resources at low prices. Our solidarity should be in solidarity with social movements and organizations and people who are organizing for justice, liberation and socialism.

Savvina Chowdhury, a friend and faculty member in political economy at The Evergreen State College, will make a few comments on this talk and ask me a few questions connected to it, and then I will open the discussion for everyone, for the remaining time about the two positions on the war against Iran, on global solidarity and especially, on any points I raised in this talk.

Si se puede!
Thank you!