

BUILDING THE INTERNATIONAL

Sunday 9.30 - 1

The world is witnessing social turmoil on an unprecedented scale. While the revolutions of 1848 were confined to Europe, and most of those of 1917-20 likewise, today we see on every continent uprisings of tens, sometimes hundreds of thousands on the streets. It is a process which has been gathering pace over more than two decades. Hardly a day now passes without news of fresh outbreaks. This universal unrest is a direct outcome of the multiple crises of capitalism: economic, political, diplomatic, environmental.

This is the first truly global outbreak in history; an outcome of the unprecedented internationalisation of the proletariat – a class in Marx's time largely confined to England, and not much more than half a century ago to Europe, North America and Japan, but now straddling every continent, including men and women alike, and comprising for the first time a majority of the world population.

The missing link in this situation is glaringly obvious: an organization capable of linking these struggles and giving them a common political edge. Brushing aside for the moment various abortive attempts made in the meantime by handfuls of well-intentioned activists, it is now eighty years since the terminal dissolution of the last mass workers' international. To understand the reasons for the fragmentation of the working class and build a new one, we need first to review the history of its precursors.

By its very nature, the working class strains instinctively towards solidarity, a quality implicit both in its function in the collective production process and as an indispensable feature of its capacity to struggle. At its highest political expression this is manifested in conscious internationalism.

History has seen many times the rise and fall of international organisations of the working class, in harmony with the ebb and flow of the class struggle itself. On the eve of every past social explosion, as the workers have flexed their muscles for a renewed challenge to capitalist rule, new political formations have materialised. As the tide ebbed, as the revolution receded and reaction set in, these have been dashed against the rocks of counter-revolution and shattered. But not even the most terrible defeats or the most disorientating pauses in the struggle have yet succeeded in obliterating socialist traditions. A thin line of cadres, sometimes just a handful isolated to a single country, have always survived, around whom mass parties came to coalesce once the tide turned and the old society fell prey to crisis.

The ideas of socialism and internationalism were not foisted artificially on the workers from outside: they sprang organically out of the struggles of the working class, thrown together without property and dependent for their sheer survival on solidarity in struggle.

The Communist League

The first embryonic international association of workers, the "**Federation of the Just**", drew its inspiration from the first stirrings not even of the industrial working class, but of craftsmen about to fall into the proletariat, articulating in anticipation the social needs of their future class. It was formed by militant refugees from reaction in Germany, the most radical wing of the English Chartists, and even left Jacobin veterans from the French Revolution. Its formation was a historic milestone, and an inspiration to Marx and Engels as they applied in practice the dialectical method they had adopted from radical philosophy to living human material foundations.

As Europe teetered on the brink of the revolutions of 1848, that organisation measured up for the challenge and, under their guidance, renamed itself the Communist League, proclaiming as its aim "**the overthrow of the bourgeoisie, rule of the proletariat, abolition of the old bourgeois society based on class antagonisms and the foundation of a new society without classes and without private property**". It changed its motto from "**All men are brothers**" to "**Workers of all countries, unite**". With the influx of refugees from reaction into London, fleeing from counter-revolution in Germany, France, Poland, Italy, Hungary, etc., it became a truly cosmopolitan organisation: in all but name, a "pre-International".

It also adopted a genuinely democratic centralist constitution (far from the abusive caricature practised by some later organisations), including the election and right of recall over all officers, common adherence to all League decisions after democratic discussion, and the requirement of "**revolutionary energy and zeal**" on the part of every member. If any proof were needed that this form of organisation was not an arbitrary invention imposed on it from above, but the highest expression of working-class morality, we need only remember that Marx and Engels themselves fell under its strictures, when they had to be warned of disciplinary action if they delayed any further in writing the **Communist Manifesto**, which they had been commissioned to finish by December 1847; and which, to do them justice, did in fact see the light of day just in time for the outbreak of revolution throughout Europe in February 1848.

The Communist League had been created by the pioneers and forerunners of the world working class, mobilised by the great events of 1848 around the most prominent theoretical cadres of the time. And yet already in 1852, following the Cologne Communist Trial and the triumph of continental-wide reaction, that organisation collapsed, destroyed by the counter-revolution. It was twelve years before a new international organisation of the working class again emerged. Only a handful of adherents of Marx's ideas kept alive the scientific tradition: the brain and the memory of the class, absorbing the lessons of the defeat and theoretically preparing the way for future battles. And when the International Working Men's Association was created in 1864 – the First International – it was to wield an influence incomparably greater than its precursor.

The First International

Contrary to conventional myth, the initiative to found the International Working Men's Association came not from Marx and Engels but from working-class activists in England and France. Marx was "**respectfully requested**" by members of the London Trades Council to attend the meeting which established it; and he attended, in his own words, simply as "**a mute figure on the platform**". Its function was simply "**to discuss questions of interest to the working class**".

Its General Council brought together an assortment of very disparate elements: English trade unionists, French Proudhonists, Polish and Italian nationalists, later East European anarchists. Comparing it to the International's forerunner the Communist League, Marx concluded: "**It will take time before the revival of the movement allows the old boldness of language to be used. We must be fortiter in re, suaviter in modo (firm in principle, mild in manner).**" And Engels too explained that the aim of the IWMA was "**to weld together into one huge army the whole militant working class of Europe and America; therefore it could not set out from the principles laid down in the (Communist) Manifesto.**" As he put it, it was necessary to be "**bold in matter, mild in manner**".

In the words of the International's historian Braunthal, "**for Marx... the importance of the International lay not so much in ideology or even policy but in its very existence as an international centre of the labour movement, and he took good care not to endanger it by allowing ideological differences to obtrude.**"

The Communist League prior to 1848 had been a small clandestine cadre organisation. The First International arrived on the crest of a mass movement, and rival ideas were being vigorously debated across a broad spectrum. Marx and Engels operated not as a secret organised "entrism" faction but as an open tendency, patiently explaining their ideas with a tact and restraint far from the caricature often painted by their critics.

In the workshop of the First International, Marx and Engels applied the simple precepts of the "Communist Manifesto": "**The Communists do not form a separate party opposed to other working class parties... They do not set up any sectarian principles of their own, by which to shape and mould the proletarian movement...**" What then marked them out? Simply that they were "**on the one hand, practically, the most advanced and resolute section of the working-class parties of any country... on the other hand, theoretically, they have over the great mass of the proletariat the advantage of clearly understanding the line of march, the conditions, and the ultimate general results of the proletarian movement**".

Their task, therefore, was very different from those imposed upon Lenin in 1921 or Trotsky in 1938, whose avowed goal was, by necessity, to set up alternative new parties to challenge the existing failed parties of the Second and Third Internationals respectively. At that time there was no crystallised labour bureaucracy entrenched at the head of the workers' movement, no caste with a material stake in the status quo, no bureaucracy with a stake in the conscious betrayal of the workers' cause. That is why there was no perspective of establishing separate alternative revolutionary parties. However crass the blunders of the

workers' leaders, however criminal and unpardonable even the mistakes of Lassalle, Blanqui, Bakunin, etc., nevertheless they remained mistakes, not to be compared with the later outright betrayals by the leaders of the Second and Third Internationals.

The IWMA comprised all the nascent working-class parties in the world. The objective of Marx and Engels was to participate in the fusing of all these disparate organisations, extending even to groups outside the parameters of the working class: to embrace all genuine movements of protest against the existing order; to unite all the potential centres of resistance to capitalism into a single worldwide movement. That at last provided them with a framework within which to pit their scientific ideas against those of the assorted sectarians peddling their quack panaceas.

As Braunthal put it (in the Introduction to the volume *Marx on the First International*): ***“With the First International... socialism stepped on to the stage of history as a world movement.”***

And yet at its inception it was not even socialist! It embraced English craft unions, French workers' co-operatives, scattered groups of German exiles, even Italian nationalists and Russian bomb-throwing anarchists. Quite apart from all manner of charlatans, heretics, and adventurers, even its most heroic groups of pioneer workers were confused. The Proudhonists of France, Spain and Belgium were opposed on principle to strikes. The Lassalleans of Germany (who resisted persistent approaches to join the International) were secretly collaborating with the dictator Bismarck. The flamboyant intrigues of the anarchist Bakunin were eventually to come near to wrecking the organisation. And the British trade unionists were frankly terrified by all manifestations of what they called “continental socialism”. As Braunthal put it: it consisted of ***“English Owenites and Chartists, French Proudhonists and Blanquists, Irish nationalists, Polish patriots, Italian Mazzinists, and German socialists... The English were against special privilege, the French against Bonapartism, the Irish against Britain, the Poles against Russia, the Italians against Austria, and the Germans against capitalism.”***

Solidarity

Nevertheless, at its core stood the working class – and above all, at that time, the British working class, which time and again had shown exemplary internationalist solidarity. The International sprang out of the instinctive tendency of the young working class to recognise its common identity on a world scale. It was rooted in the elemental movement of solidarity with the fight against slavery in the USA, with the Polish fight for independence, with the revolutionary nationalist movements under Austro-Hungarian rule, with the French workers languishing under the Bonapartist jackboot, etc. It had protested against prime minister Palmerston's conspiracy bill, which threatened the rights of political refugees; demonstrated against the brutality of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, against Napoleon III's coup in France and against the crushing of the Polish uprising by the Russian Tsar; and celebrated the victories of Garibaldi's Redshirts in Italy. Above all, British textile workers starved rather than break the blockade on the southern slave-owning cotton states during the American

Civil War. Marx celebrated "***the heroic resistance... by the working classes of England***", and Abraham Lincoln himself praised the nobility of the Lancashire cotton workers, calling their actions "***an exalted example of Christian heroism***".

The workers' parties organised in the only way they could, along the lines of the fraternal self-organisation of workers anywhere when free from bureaucratic interference: in accord with the principles of workers' democracy, free debate and united action. The International became the single world movement of organised labour, embracing the British trade unions, French Proudhonists and Blanquists, German Lassalleans, and anarchists from Spain, Italy and Switzerland. Later on, Bakunin's anarchist "International Social Democratic Association" was forced to fuse with the mass movement. No more convincing proof could be required of the patience, humility and tact of Marx, so grossly libelled in the academic textbooks as a "mad fanatic" who dreamed up abstruse theories in the British Museum.

Sure, the International was not free of human weaknesses. Along with its heroism, solidarity and comradeship, there were manifestations aplenty of vanity, pomposity, sectarianism, cowardice, petty corruption, honest mistakes, even personal crimes... but by nothing more sinister than that. Marx and Engels had to pit their scientific ideas against the quack remedies of a range of cheap snake-oil salesmen, challenging the charlatanism of Duhring, the opportunism of Lassalle, the adventurism of Blanqui, the flamboyant posturing of Bakunin, etc. However, there was no trace of a privileged officialdom hell-bent on systematic betrayal of the working class. That was to come later.

In this laboratory, Marx and Engels pitted their scientific socialist ideas against all the cranks with their charlatan potions. Marx called these eight years – the most creative years of his life, when he also brought forth the monumental work "***Capital***" – a "***continual struggle against the sects and amateur experiments which sought to assert themselves... against the real movement of the working class***". Striking workers affiliated en bloc after the General Council had expressed support or launched collections for them. The ruling class was thrown into panic as it grew day by day.

Marx and Engels hammered the General Council into an authoritative political leadership, a vanguard of the world movement, which gave a lead and a direction to the rank and file. Predictably, then as now, in whimpers later echoed by succeeding generations of frustrated rivals, this provoked accusations of "***arrogance, dictatorship, hierarchy, orthodoxy, authoritarianism***", etc. But their ideas prevailed and stood the test of time.

The First International lasted just eight years. Its active membership was limited. Its funds were pitiful. And yet it became such a formidable force that, in the grossly exaggerated estimates of a terrified ruling class, it had grown in their nightmares to anywhere between five and eight million members!

According to Braunthal, "***to millions of workers it seemed a legendary power on which they placed boundless hopes... Governments saw it as a gigantic, menacing, mysterious power. European cabinets concocted plans for its extermination. In France and Spain it was persecuted under special laws. In the Austro-Hungarian monarchy and in the German***

Empire it was outlawed as a danger to the state. The Pope condemned it as ‘the enemy of God and man’.

In the US House of Representatives, a future Republican Attorney-General spoke of “***the great IWMA, an organisation which extends over the whole of Europe, makes its voice heard everywhere and its power felt in all circles***”.

The Times – at that time the authoritative voice of the world capitalist class – expressed used even more extravagant language in looking for an adequate precedent: “***One has to go back to the time of the birth of Christianity... to find anything analogous to this workers’ movement... The aim of the International is nothing short of the rebirth of humanity, surely the most comprehensive aim to which any institution apart from the Christian church has ever aspired.***”

The foundation of the IWMA was a historical turning-point. And it soon became a practical workshop in which the tools of analysis were forged and sharpened; an arena of debate against the background of the world’s first workers’ uprising.

The crucial test came with the Franco-Prussian war – a precursor to the First World War and the new era of imperialist slaughter. Not for the last time, a conflict between rival capitalist powers threatened to fatally divide the workers’ parties.

The 1870 Brussels Congress called on the working class to initiate a general strike in the event of the outbreak of war. The Paris federation agreed that “***a war waged on account of dynastic interests is in the eyes of the workers nothing but criminal folly... Our split would only bring in its wake the complete triumph of despotism on both sides of the Rhine.***” The Berlin section agreed: “***We solemnly pledge that neither the sound of bugles nor the thunder of cannon will turn us from our task of making common cause with the workers of all nations... We grasp with joy the hand of brotherhood extended to us by the workers of France***”.

However, this was not a unanimous position. Many German workers, including the Lassalleans, supported a defensive war. Even Bebel and Wilhelm Liebknecht abstained, though they later regretted their mistake.

The Paris Commune

The workers of Paris were armed and mobilised in a popular militia, the National Guard. When Thiers sent regular troops to Paris to disarm them, they were repulsed. The stage was set for the Paris Commune.

The shock of the Paris Commune shook the ruling class to its core. The Pall Mall Gazette called the International “***a vast conspiracy... to create political communism***”, and the Catholic magazine “***a society whose behests are obeyed by countless thousands from Moscow to Madrid, and in the New World as in the Old, whose disciples have already waged desperate war against one government, and whose proclamations pledge it to wage war against every government: the ominous, ubiquitous IWMA.***” Fraser’s Magazine

called it ***“the real motive force whose hidden hand guided with a mysterious and dreaded power the whole machine of the revolution”***. And Thiers declared that the French state should treat the followers of the International as the Spanish Inquisition had treated heretics.

When Thiers capitulated and signed a peace treaty, ceding Alsace-Lorraine, paying a vast war indemnity, and accepting the occupation of Paris by the Prussian army, Bismarck placed 10,000 French prisoners of war at the disposal of the Versailles government to crush their common enemy: the Commune. 14, 000 Communards were slaughtered in the streets or summarily executed, over 10,000 incarcerated, and overall, some 110,000 Communards were killed, wounded or deported.

In his work around the Paris Commune, Marx had previously warned against the ***“desperate folly”*** of taking power, knowing that the attempt was doomed; but he showed the real quality of leadership: not primarily to teach but first to learn. He recognised in the spontaneous improvisation of the workers of Paris ***“the political form, at last discovered, under which to work out the economic emancipation of labour”***. All public posts, administrative, judicial and teaching, were elected by universal suffrage, with right of recall. Marx’s final tribute was: ***“Working men’s Paris, with its Commune, will be forever celebrated as the glorious harbinger of a new society. Its martyrs are enshrined in the great heart of the working class.”***

The defeat of the Commune did nothing to diminish the prestige of the International; its mark on history was indelible. At its 1872 Hague congress ***“an immense crowd blocked the street outside”***; more countries were represented there than ever before. But the International was by now in decline: a consequence not only of events in France, but also of the standstill of the movement in Germany and Austria, and in Britain an ebbing of revolutionary consciousness – due, paradoxically, to the very concessions successfully wrung from the ruling class by the Chartist movement: the Reform Act, the growth of the trade unions, and for some decades thereafter a link of the trade unions to the Liberal Party.

The defeat of the Commune was the final blow, and the time had come for the International to be dissolved. With the demoralisation of its proletarian core, it was falling prey to the confusion of its weaker elements; better to dissolve the International and keep its banner clean for future generations. Its headquarters was transferred to the USA in 1872 and it was formally wound up in 1876.

In the aftermath of defeat, Bakunin plotted to undermine Marx, and manipulated the dislocation of the International by forming an “International Alliance of Socialist Democracy”. He soon exposed his reactionary side by denouncing Marx ***“as a German and a Jew and an authoritarian from top to toe... This whole Jewish world which constitutes a single exploiting sect, a sort of bloodsucker people, a collective parasite, voracious, organised in itself, not only across the frontiers of states but even across all the***

differences of political opinion. This world is presently... at the disposal of Marx on the one hand and of the Rothschilds on the other.

Marx was well aware of what was at stake. ***"It will be a matter of life or death for the international,"*** he said. ***"Before I retire I want at least to protect it from disintegrating elements."*** At the congress, he argued that ***"it would be better to abolish the General Council than to degrade its status to that of a letter box"***. Engels' proposal that the seat of the Council be moved to New York was received with shock; it was called ***"a coup d'état"***; the General Council had after all been ***"the dread of kings and emperors"***. But to allow the demoralisation, adventurism, and incipient reformism that were an inevitable outcome of the ebb in the revolution to fester would have been fatal. The International, said Marx, was ***"weighing on him like an incubus"***.

The IWMA had been a political foundry in which the workers' political tools were sharpened. Who today has heard of the "social quacks" with their "universal panaceas": the Proudhons and Lassalles, the Bakunins and Blanquis? How many have ever come across the surname Dühring without the prefix "Anti-", in the title of Engels' polemic? And a century and a half later, how many millions around the world have at least dimly heard the name of Karl Marx? It took the defeat of the Paris Commune, but his brilliant analysis of its lessons was written in the collective name of the General Council. And once the tide had turned and the newly emergent mass parties and trade unions had established the Socialist International in 1889, it was under the banner of the ideas of the Communist Manifesto.

The Socialist International

At the time of the collapse of the IWMA, Engels had predicted: ***"I believe the next International... will be directly Communist and will proclaim precisely our principles."***

And sure enough, when the Founding Congress of the Second International was held in July 1889 – a symbolic date deliberately chosen as it marked the centenary of the French Revolution – just as Engels had predicted, it stood at least formally on the basis of Marxism. 467 delegates representing fledgling workers' parties in 24 countries gathered in Paris under a massive red banner carrying the slogan "Workers of the World, Unite!", to hear its chair announce ***"one of the greatest events in the history of the peoples"***.

Marx's son-in-law Paul Lafargue welcomed them with the words: ***"We gather here not under the banner of the tricolor or any other national colours, we gather here under the banner of the red flag, the flag of the international proletariat."***

The new International's first act was to stage an event which shocked the ruling class: the first worldwide general strike. May 1st 1890 opened a new era in world history. The ruling class was alarmed; in many countries it met the strike with brutality. On that momentous May Day, Engels celebrated with pride the triumphant consummation of the historic life work of Marx and Engels. He wrote with pride:

"True, the International itself lived only nine years. But that the eternal union of the proletarians of all countries created by it is still alive and lives stronger than ever, there is

no better witness than this day. Because today, as I write these lines, the European and American proletariat is reviewing its fighting forces, mobilised for the first time, mobilised as one army, under one flag, for one immediate aim... And today's spectacle will open the eyes of the capitalists and landlords of all countries to the fact that today the working men of all countries are united indeed. If only Marx were still by my side to see this with his own eyes!"

Engels could not have foreseen the crisis that was still to come, as the storms approached of the impending twentieth century and the epoch of world wars, revolutions and counter-revolutions.

With the feverish organic growth of capitalism and of the proletariat, workers' parties had sprung up throughout Europe: in the 1870s, in Germany, Austria, Denmark, France, Holland, Hungary, Spain, Switzerland, and the USA; and in the 1880s, in Belgium, Britain, Norway, Russia and Sweden. To distinguish themselves from the bourgeois parties, which claimed to stand for political democracy as opposed to feudal monarchy, most of them called themselves ***social*** democrats.

These new workers' parties gained rapid influence, especially in Germany. By 1905 the German Social-Democratic Party already had 384,327 members; by 1914 party membership had swelled to 1,085,905. By 1912 it was winning 4.3 million votes out of a total electorate of 12.2 million, and had over a million members, with 2.5 million in affiliated trade unions. It offered workers not only a political voice, but also welfare and cultural services, legal aid, social security advice, employment exchanges, drama productions, libraries, peripatetic teachers, choral societies, sports clubs, welfare clinics, holiday packages, rallies, festivals, training courses, a central school for workers' education, and a famous Party School. It ran its own press agency and published several weekly and monthly periodicals: a total of 91 newspapers with a readership of 1.5 million. It also conducted successful Marxist education classes at party schools and trade union colleges, becoming a model for socialist parties throughout Europe.

Even from the start, however, a hidden cancer was growing deep within it. It was ominous that at the Founding Conference the German section announced that it would only observe the May Day demonstration in the evening, after working hours; and the British, that it would hold its march on the first Sunday in May, rather than strike on a working day.

More serious still a few years later was the dishonest treatment of Engels' famous Introduction to Marx's "***Class Struggles in France***", where he had made a brilliant analysis of the changed military and political tasks facing the proletariat since the days of barricade fighting in 1848. It was published by the International with a key passage excluded, thus distorting the whole meaning of the article to justify the diluted policies of the architect of revisionism Bernstein. From his deathbed, Engels protested that "***I am made to appear a pacific worshipper of legality at any price***", and demanded a correction "***in order that this shameful impression be wiped out***". But it was not until 1924 that the excluded passage was rediscovered, and it was to the credit of revolutionaries like Lenin and Rosa Luxemburg that they were not disorientated or blown off course by the attempt to use against them such a gigantic authority as Engels. This fabrication, though a thousand times exceeded since then

by the Stalinists (in comparison with whom Bernstein looks like a clumsy amateur), was not the first of its kind. Marx's "***Critique of the Gotha Programme***", which corrected the mistakes in the draft programme around which Germany's two workers' parties were uniting in 1875, had itself been suppressed for 16 years, to see the light only in 1891.

Downfall

Throughout a protracted period of economic upswing, reformist tendencies developed around the labour bureaucracy that was crystallising in the new imperialist epoch. It was a period similar in its corrosive effects on the politics of the Labour Movement to the decades following the Second World War in western Europe. The reformist ideas of Bernstein, of the British Fabians, and of Millerand in France – the first Socialist to enter a bourgeois Cabinet – were eventually to culminate in the great betrayal of 1914, though such a nightmare outcome had seemed utterly unthinkable at the time.

The first prophet of reformism, Bernstein, pioneered the term "revisionism", contesting the idea that the plight of workers under capitalism would deteriorate and that capitalism was heading for a collapse, and arguing that the party should style itself "***a democratic socialist party of reform***". Bernstein's ideas expressed the outlook of a rising generation of party careerists. He claimed that he was trying to "***make Marxism conform to reality***", arguing that Marx's description of the impoverishment of the working class had been undermined by the continuing rise in their standard of living, and that his prediction of capitalist crisis was falsified by its continuing expansion and strength. "***What is generally referred to as the ultimate aim of socialism means nothing to me; it is the movement itself which means everything.***"

This ideology was officially shunned as a heretical sacrilege... but in reality it was only a more explicit and transparent manifestation of the actual day-to-day practice of the orthodox leadership. Kautsky, Bebel and the so-called "party centre" dutifully held up their hands in horror, formally upholding the banner of "orthodox Marxism"... but in practice they adopted a benign posture of "holiday speechifying". They continued to defend Marxism in words; but in practice they paid it only perfunctory lip service, meanwhile pursuing day-by-day moderate politics. It was an early manifestation of "centrism" – a stance midway between reform and revolution.

By the time of the outbreak of the war, the Socialist International constituted a formidable force. Its membership in the four main belligerent countries alone amounted to a figure not far short of three million: Germany 1 million plus, Britain 1.5 million plus, Austria 150,000, France 90,000. The total votes for these four parties alone in recent elections had amounted to over seven million. It might have taken a single united call for millions of workers to have rallied to the cause of peace.

But the socialist party leaders had largely discounted any serious threat of world war. As they put it: it would be insanity! The Austrian socialist leader Adler, for instance, commented: "***If such a crime were committed it would be the beginning of the end for the criminals' own power.***" The French leader Jaures – soon to be assassinated on the very eve of the war – reminded the governments that "***in conjuring up the danger of war they invite***

the peoples to make a simple calculation: how much smaller a sacrifice a revolution would involve when compared with the war they are preparing."

As late as November 1912, as the storm clouds of the coming world war were gathering, 550 delegates from 23 countries had assembled at an Extraordinary International Socialist Congress at Basel, where the International unanimously warned the ruling classes of Europe:

"Let the governments remember that... they cannot unleash a war without danger to themselves. Let them remember that the Franco-German War was followed by the revolutionary outbreak of the Commune, that the Russo-Japanese War set into motion the revolutionary energies of the peoples of the Russian Empire, that the competition in military and naval armaments gave the class conflicts in England and on the Continent an unheard-of sharpness, and unleashed an enormous wave of strikes. It would be insanity for the governments not to realize that the very idea of the monstrosity of a world war would inevitably call forth the indignation and the revolt of the working class. The proletarians consider it a crime to fire at each other for the profits of the capitalists, the ambitions of dynasties, or the greater glory of secret diplomatic treaties."

Less than two years later, its ringing promises of a Europe-wide general strike against the impending war were betrayed. The social-democrats of the belligerent countries tamely swung into support behind their kings, generals and ministers. The International was dead. Tens of millions of workers were to die in the ensuing bloodbath. Out of a clear blue sky, the terrible twentieth century had suddenly exploded all around them... and the International had collapsed.

Practically every one of the leaders of the socialist parties had crumbled, capitulating miserably to their kings and generals. Victor Adler of Austria wrung his hands: ***"The war is already with us... There is nothing further we can do"***. The German party spokesperson justified supporting the Kaiser's war credits in the Reichstag on 4th August 1914, with this excuse: ***"We are faced now with the iron fact of war. We are threatened with the horrors of hostile invasions. We do not decide today for or against war; we have merely to decide on the necessary means for the defence of the country. Much if not everything is at stake for our people and their freedom, in view of the possibility of a victory of Russian despotism which has soiled itself with the blood of the best of its own people. It is for us to ward off this danger... In the hour of danger we shall not desert our fatherland. We feel ourselves in agreement with the International which has always recognized the right of every nation to national independence and self-defence... As soon as the aim of security has been achieved and the opponents show themselves ready for peace, this war should be ended by a peace which makes it possible to live in friendship with neighbouring countries. Guided by these principles, we shall vote for the war credits."***

So, with the ink hardly dry on their declaration that ***"the proletarians consider it a crime to fire at each other"***, when it came to the issue the British Labour Party entered the war Government, the Belgian and French Socialists joined coalition governments, the Australian Labour Government supported the war and the German, Austrian and South African Socialists supported their governments. The International was shattered. Only a handful –

the ILP, some Russian Mensheviks and SRs, and Kautsky – gave half-hearted opposition to the war, and it was left to the Bolsheviks, the Spartacists, and a handful of Eastern European allies to raise the banner of revolutionary opposition to the war.

Almost to the last, the social-democrats of the belligerent countries had swallowed their promises and swung into support behind their kings, generals and ministers. The news of this capitulation came as an utter shock even to those who had been most critical of the socialist leaders. Lenin, for one, in exile in Switzerland, was literally incredulous. When he saw the front page of the issue of the SPD newspaper ***Vorwärts*** reporting on that party's vote in the Reichstag for the Kaiser's war credits, he assumed that it must be a forgery perpetrated by the German general staff.

It is hard to find words that do justice to the effects of this betrayal, which directly plunged two successive generations into the horrors of what became in effect a new thirty years' war, blighting and overshadowing all subsequent history.

The war effectively split the international into three factions: the pro-war parties in the Central Powers, the pro-war parties of the Triple Entente; and a few scattered anti-war parties, including both pacifist and revolutionary currents.

It had been the very successes of the International over a period of social peace that had blunted its sharp edge. Lenin aptly summed up its legacy: "***The Second International was an international organisation of the proletarian movement whose growth was in breadth, at the cost of a temporary fall in the revolutionary level, a temporary increase in the strength of opportunism, which in the end led to the disgraceful collapse of this International***".

The members of the international soon found themselves facing one another not in debates at international congresses, but in the blood-soaked battlefields of Europe, and not in the language of resolutions but in that of bullets, bombs and poison gas. Amid the blood and horror of world war, the International existed once again only in the outlook of a handful of cadres. At the critical hour, the workers were left politically disarmed. Where were the sources from which an alternative political leadership could arise?

Luxemburg, Lenin and Trotsky

The militant left wing of the German Social Democracy had included such giants as Rosa Luxemburg, Mehring, Jogiches, Karski, Radek and Clara Zetkin, and Wilhelm Liebknecht's son Karl.

Rosa Luxemburg's life personifies a perfect combination of theory and practice. She wrote classic Marxist literature, while throwing herself body and soul into the struggles of working people; a towering presence in the labour movements of Poland, Russia and Germany.

Closer to the fray of the intimate inner-party debates, it was Rosa Luxemburg who proved more alert to the coming danger of degeneration. And yet, together with her comrade Karl Liebknecht, she too had underestimated the hidden threat posed by Kautsky and the leadership to conciliate the reformist wing.

As a creative thinker, she expressed constructive differences with aspects of Marx's economic theories, and later, practical objections to aspects of the Bolsheviks' practice; but

her contributions to the debate were products of that fertile pioneering spirit which is common to all genuine revolutionaries. And, like them, in her lifetime she was reviled, slandered, exiled, jailed, and ultimately murdered, only to be transformed after her death into a harmless icon, her role grossly misrepresented as a supposed enemy of the Russian revolution.

Above all, Rosa Luxemburg honourably upheld the spirit of party democracy. She wrote:

“Marxism does not consist of a dozen persons who have granted each other the right to be the 'experts', before whom the masses are supposed to prostrate themselves in blind obedience, like loyal followers of the true faith of Islam. Marxism is a revolutionary outlook on the world that must always strive toward new knowledge and new discoveries... Its living force is best preserved in the intellectual clash of self-criticism and in the midst of history's thunder and lightning”.

She was to see plenty of thunder and lightning before falling victim as an early martyr to the murderers in the pre-fascist Freikorps.

Where did the Bolsheviks stand along this spectrum? Had they represented an alien force? Far from the commonly accepted caricature, painting them as fanatics hell-bent on civil war, they had considered themselves orthodox mainstream socialists, representing the traditions of Marx and Engels against what was generally accepted as a deviant rebel strand of reformism. The name Bolsheviks simply meant the “majority” faction within the Russian Social-Democratic Labour Party; and that party was the Russian counterpart to the social-democratic parties of western Europe. As its leading figure, Lenin considered himself part of the mainstream of the International, nothing more than the local counterpart of Kautsky, and his ally in resistance to Bernstein’s revisionist heresies.

As Trotsky explains: ***“Kautsky at the time was to be found fighting against Bernstein. Lenin considered Kautsky as his teacher and stressed this everywhere he could. In Lenin’s work of that period and for a number of years following, one does not find even a trace of criticism in principle directed against the Bebel-Kautsky tendency. Instead one finds a series of declarations to the effect that Bolshevism is not some sort of an independent tendency but is only a translation into the language of Russian conditions of the tendency of Bebel-Kautsky... Lenin wrote in his famous pamphlet, Two Tactics, in the middle of 1905: ‘When and where did I ever call the revolutionism of Bebel and Kautsky ‘opportunism’? ... When and where have there been brought to light differences between me, on the one hand, and Bebel and Kautsky on the other? ... The complete unanimity of international revolutionary Social Democracy on all major questions of program and tactics is a most incontrovertible fact.’ Lenin’s words are so clear, precise, and categorical as to entirely exhaust the question.”***

In December 1906 Lenin insisted: ***“...We are not creating a special ‘Bolshevik’ tendency; always and everywhere we merely uphold the point of view of revolutionary Social Democracy.”*** As Trotsky put it: ***“Lenin compared the Mensheviks not with Kautskyism but with revisionism. Moreover he looked upon Bolshevism as the Russian form of Kautskyism, which in his eyes was in that period identical with Marxism.”***

Lenin had implicitly trusted the leadership of the International, and was shocked to the core by their betrayal in 1914. That explains the especially intense outrage with which he later denounced "**the renegade Kautsky**" in his brilliant pamphlet ***State and Revolution***.

Lenin had prepared the way for the tasks of the future by building a disciplined structure capable of withstanding the coming shocks. This was indispensable in the conditions of Tsarist repression and the demands of underground work. Yet even the Bolsheviks' alleged "iron discipline" is often overstated; it was by no means infallible. Their faction almost fell to pieces after the defeat of the 1905 revolution, many of them explicitly turning away from Marxism; and in 1917, their local leaders were thrown into disarray by the fall of Tsarism. It took Lenin immense effort, and even an outright threat to split the party, to prevail. Even on the eve of the insurrection the Bolshevik leaders were divided.

Without the Bolsheviks' tradition of revolutionary discipline, Lenin could not have wielded the authority to win over the party; yet complete freedom of debate was always an integral part of that discipline. It required flexibility to review and where necessary discard the outworn formulae of the past. There was a free flow of debate, often heated, both between the contending factions of the RSDLP and within each of them, including the Bolsheviks. Democratic discussion is the lifeblood of any workers' party' without it, mistakes are inevitable.

There is some confusion about the real nature of "Bolshevism". The idea of a "vanguard party" has become distorted both by the crimes of Stalinism and the false practices of the left groups. The fact is that the October revolution was led by what was in effect a "united front". Even its two undisputed leaders, Lenin and Trotsky, had until only months previously been in separate political tendencies. And the first Soviet government was actually a coalition of two parties: the Bolsheviks and the Left Social Revolutionaries.

How was it that the Russian labour movement, so much weaker and more isolated than its central European counterparts, proved so much more effective? It was its ingenuity and adaptability that equipped it for the tasks ahead. Far from the rigid, top-down command structure often attributed to them, the Bolsheviks showed a creative flair for improvisation and flexibility. Lenin later described in detail the kaleidoscopic variety of tactics they deployed within the fourteen years between their inception as a tendency within the RSDLP and the outbreak of the revolution:

"Bolshevism, which had arisen on this granite foundation of theory, went through fifteen years of practical history (1903-17) unequalled anywhere in the world in its wealth of experience. During those fifteen years, no other country knew anything even approximating to that revolutionary experience, that rapid and varied succession of different forms of the movement — legal and illegal, peaceful and stormy, underground and open, local circles and mass movements, and parliamentary and terrorist forms. In no other country has there been concentrated, in so brief a period, such a wealth of forms, shades, and methods of struggle of all classes of modern society, a struggle which... matured with exceptional rapidity, and assimilated most eagerly and successfully the appropriate 'last word' of American and European political experience."

A pedantic approach can work quite smoothly over a period of stability; in more turbulent times, it can only lead to sectarianism. That is what Lenin meant when he remarked that a mistake when uncorrected becomes a tendency.

Tasks of the revolution

Prior to 1917, the Mensheviks had claimed to be defending orthodox Marxism in arguing that, since Russia was still at a pre-capitalist feudal stage, it was the task of the capitalists to lead a bourgeois-democratic revolution, since the material basis for socialism did not exist in Russia. But it was rigidly mechanistic to suppose that each country would simply repeat in isolation the same formal schema. It was pedantic to ignore the laws of “uneven and combined development”: i.e. the interaction of world history.

Lenin and Trotsky were united in opposing them. They each came to the conclusion that the bourgeoisie was incapable of breaking free either from the ruling aristocracy (with which it was by now thoroughly fused) or from imperialism (which had established its rule worldwide). Lenin insisted that it would be the workers and peasants who alone could challenge and overthrow Tsarism. This meant a bloc of the proletariat and the petty bourgeoisie (which constituted a majority in Russian society) against the aristocracy and the bourgeoisie, to establish a “democratic dictatorship” – a revolutionary government which, like the French revolution, would rock the world and precipitate socialist revolutions in the more developed countries.

Trotsky did not reject this formula outright; but he considered it “algebraic”: it did not quantify the relative weight of the two classes. Moreover, it did not distinguish between the different layers of the peasantry – a vague umbrella word which extended from a minority of kulaks (rural capitalist employers of wage labour), through a mass of poor small landholders (the counterpart of small tradesmen in the cities), to a large rural proletariat who owned no property and lived solely by selling their labour power. Trotsky too did **not** put forward the slogan of socialist revolution (he had been slanderously distorted and ridiculed before 1905 as calling for “No Tsar but a Workers' Government”); he used the term “permanent revolution”. This meant that there could be no artificial constraints on the workers' revolutionary impetus; society would bounce and lurch along uninterruptedly from crisis to crisis; the revolution would constantly strain and over-reach its limits, bursting ahead from democratic tasks to socialist demands, transcending national boundaries and reverberating throughout the world, throwing society into turmoil until at last equilibrium would finally be reached only with the victory of the world socialist revolution.

Trotsky argued prophetically that while the reactionary nature of Menshevism was obvious from the start (because it left the initiative to a counter-revolutionary bourgeoisie), the “reactionary side of Bolshevism” would be revealed only once the Tsarist regime had fallen (because it would arbitrarily seek to restrict the programme of the proletariat and poor peasantry to democratic tasks). He correctly anticipated the events of early 1917, when the local Bolshevik leaders on the spot (most prominent of whom were Molotov and Stalin)

initially supported the Provisional Government and the imperialist war, and even wanted fusion with the Mensheviks, until Lenin returned in April and launched a crusade to radically change Party policy. Lenin was thereupon widely accused of "Trotskyism", and it was only then that Trotsky's small group felt able to fuse with the Bolsheviks.

The revolution in 1917 was in fact carried through by the workers and the poor peasantry, and it did begin with a revolutionary democratic programme. Lenin's formula was not refuted. But Trotsky had more correctly anticipated that there would immediately be posed a sharp differentiation within the peasantry, and that the proletariat would be forced by the logic of events to move swiftly on towards socialist tasks, in spite of the fact that the material basis for socialism was lacking.

This is just what happened. The revolution leapt beyond the limits of Russia's current stage of social development; and it leapt across Russia's borders too. Everything depended on its spread to the West. However, the leading revolutionaries in Germany and other key European countries proved incapable of overcoming the betrayals by the old reformist leaders. There was nothing comparable to what can only be called a "Bolshevik tradition" in the other European countries, and the opportunity was lost, with the most tragic historical consequences. The counter-revolution in Germany had recognised Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht as key revolutionary leaders, and been quick to murder them; if only they had been able to leave a more lasting tradition behind them in the form of a tendency, as Lenin had in Russia, then events might perhaps have taken a different course.

This is where the two questions of the nature of the Russian revolution and the need for a disciplined tendency converge. As we have seen, Trotsky readily acknowledged that on the question of organisation over the years, Lenin had been right, and he had been wrong to keep his group separate, regardless of the nuances of difference between Lenin and Trotsky.

No one is immune from mistakes: they play an indispensable role in scientific progress, if anything even more so in revolutionary politics. On the nature of the coming Russian revolution, up to 1917 Lenin's description was still incomplete: "**algebraic**", as Trotsky put it. His own formulation – permanent revolution – was to prove more accurate, and it was adopted in practice by the Bolsheviks. And yet Trotsky recognised without hesitation his mistake in having remained until then detached from the Bolshevik wing of the party. Like Luxemburg, he had not fully anticipated the historic consequences that were to blight future generations of what still then remained mere inner-party theoretical debates. Without the authority that Lenin had built up over the preceding period, then even Trotsky's clearer formulation could not have prevailed.

Referring to his position at the time of the 1903 split with the Mensheviks, Trotsky wrote:

"Revolutionary centralism is a harsh, imperative and exacting principle... I thought of myself as a centralist. But there is no doubt that at that time I did not fully realise what an intense and imperious centralism the revolutionary party would need to lead millions of people in a war against the old order... Independently I still could not see Lenin's centralism as the logical conclusion of a clear revolutionary concept.... In the midst of the still vague moods that were common in the group that upheld the Iskra banner, Lenin

alone, and with finality, envisaged 'tomorrow', with all its stern tasks, its cruel conflicts and countless victims."

The phoenix arises

Just as the First International had been brought to an end by the defeat of the Paris Commune; so too had the Second, this time by an even greater catastrophe. How it was that once again, even sooner than its predecessor, a new international could arise from the ashes?

At this critical hour, the workers found themselves politically disarmed. Amid the blood and horror of world war, and on the eve of revolutionary upheavals dwarfing those of 1848, they found themselves politically abandoned. The flame of socialist internationalism flickered only in the minds of a few individuals.

The new international was conceived in 1915 when a handful of socialists opposed to the war gathered together in Zimmerwald in Switzerland. The Zimmerwald Left (its revolutionary wing) amounted to a grand total of eight delegates. By the time of the Kienthal Conference the following year, it had managed to grow by half, to twelve. And yet only a year later, the workers were already in power in Russia, and a new International was being built.

The history of the Third International is inseparable from the history of the Russian revolution – from its inspiring beginning to its bitter end. Yet the International was the product of a continental-wide revolution the like of which had never been seen before.

It was not at all unrealistic for the Russian workers to see their revolution as the beginning of a new stage in human history. After all, only five years previously the Socialist International had conjured up the spectre of the Paris Commune and the 1905 Russian revolution in warning the ruling classes of Europe of the potential consequences of a world war. And this was no fringe sect, but the established voice of the organised working class throughout Europe and beyond, with a total membership numbering millions. Perhaps few of the delegates who enthusiastically endorsed this resolution had understood quite how uncannily accurate it was.

For lo and behold, in actual fact, revolution really was soon raging: not just in Russia, but throughout Germany, Austria, Hungary, Poland, Italy, France and elsewhere. The royal dynasties of Europe were toppled one by one: the Romanovs of Russia, the Hohenzollerns of Germany and the Habsburgs of Austria, all tossed into oblivion. As for the Gotha-Saxe-Coburg dynasty in Britain (which on the outbreak of war had hastily anglicized its name to Windsor): following the overthrow of his cousin Kaiser Wilhelm, it was fear of his own imminent dethronement that prompted King George V to refuse sanctuary to yet another cousin, Tsar Nicholas, and abandon him to his fate: summary execution. (All three kings of Germany, Russia and Britain were grandsons of Queen Victoria.)

George's nightmare was well-founded; revolution in Britain was no idle threat. The prime minister Lloyd George wrote in a confidential memorandum: "***The whole of Europe is filled with the spirit of revolution***". Britain was shaken by the general strike on the Clyde, the mutinies among the British forces in France, the Triple Alliance of trade unions, and the

mass Councils of Action: bodies which sprang up expressly to defend the Russian revolution and impede the intervention, which Lenin called "**Soviets, in essence if not in name**".

The mass of participants in the Russian revolution knew that they were part of a worldwide uprising. On the very day of the October revolution, the resolution of the Petrograd Soviet declared that "**the proletariat of the countries of Western Europe will aid us in conducting the cause of socialism to a real and lasting victory**". In his classic eye-witness account, the American journalist John Reed recorded the common thoughts of ordinary working-class Petrograd insurgents on the streets: "**Now there was all great Russia to win – and then the world!**"

The historic proclamation made the next day to the Congress of Soviets ended with an explicit call to the workers of Britain, France and Germany to "**help us to bring to a successful conclusion... the cause of the liberation of the exploited working masses from all slavery and exploitation**". Lenin addressed the delegates with the prediction that "**revolution will soon break out in all the belligerent countries**", and Trotsky warned that "**if Europe continues to be ruled by the imperialist bourgeoisie, revolutionary Russia will inevitably be lost... Either the Russian revolution will create a revolutionary moment in Europe, or the European powers will destroy the Russian revolution**". Reed reports that "**they greeted him with an immense crusading acclaim**".

Reed quotes a Red Guard who "**plied me with questions about America... Are the American workers ready to overthrow the capitalists?**", and a soldier fresh from the front: "**We will hold the fort with all our strength until the peoples of the world arise**". He then addresses Reed directly: "**Tell the American workers to rise and fight for the social revolution!**"

Reed continued: "**Something was kindled in these men. One spoke of 'the coming world revolution, of which we are the advance guard'; another of 'the new age of brotherhood, when all the peoples will become one great family'.**"

The new International grew out of worldwide solidarity with the Russian workers and soldiers. 21 foreign armies had poured into Russia in a concerted attempt to crush the revolution in its cradle. At one point, only a small area surrounding Moscow and extending barely to Petrograd had been in the hands of the Red Army. Russia was starved of arms. But the Bolsheviks had greeted the enemy soldiers with leaflets printed in all their languages, explaining that they had been sent by their bosses to crush a workers' republic, reporting the news of the revolution raging throughout Europe, and appealing for active help. This had an immediate effect on the foreign troops, themselves war-weary workers in uniform. It was the power of workers' internationalism that saved the Russian Revolution. There were mutinies in the French fleet stationed off Odessa and in the British, German, Czechoslovak and other armies. In Britain in September 1919, the TUC condemned the Siberian occupation – and Siberia was evacuated within days. Councils of Action had sprung up throughout Britain to defend the Russian revolution. In May 1920 the men in London's East India Docks refused to load the "Jolly George" ship with hidden caches of arms: mass demonstrations were held throughout the country, and a joint meeting of the TUC, the Labour Party NEC and the Parliamentary Labour Party threatened a General Strike. General Golovin reported on his negotiations with Winston Churchill in May 1919 as follows: "**The**

question of giving armed support was for him the most difficult one; the reason for this was the opposition of the British working class to armed intervention..."

The intervention failed, at indescribable cost, beaten back by a combination of superhuman self-sacrifice – a total of nineteen million Russian citizens having been deployed, including at least six and a half million workers and peasants mobilized in the Red Army – and international solidarity strikes, mutinies and sabotage. For the moment the revolution survived.

It is impossible to explain the creation of the Communist International in isolation from the tidal wave of revolution that brought it into life. No one studying the history of that time could doubt the global consciousness of its participants and the wave of solidarity pulsing through their veins and embodied in the words of their leaders.

If the Bolsheviks had let slip the opportunity, the alternative could only have been a bloody counter-revolution at the hands of General Kornilov, the contemporary Russian counterpart to a Franco or a Pinochet. It was taken for granted that unless the revolution were to spread westwards, the Russian revolution would inevitably be crushed. No one at the time could have conceived of the possibility that the Soviet state could survive in isolation for decades, even as a grotesquely mangled bureaucratically deformed monstrosity.

The suggestion that the Russian revolution might somehow survive, even in such a form, seemed inconceivable. Lenin emphasised that "***without aid from the international world revolution, a victory of the proletarian revolution is impossible... We did our utmost to preserve the Soviet system under any circumstances and at all costs, because we knew that we are working not only for ourselves, but also for the international revolution.***" In March 1918, he wrote that there could be "***no hope of the ultimate victory of our revolution if it were to remain alone... If the German revolution does not come, we are doomed.***" In the emergency debate in 1918 over whether or not to seek a peace treaty with Germany, Lenin had given explicit priority to the revolution in the West, even if necessary at the cost of renouncing power in Russia:

"If the German movement is capable of developing at once in the event of peace negotiations... we ought to sacrifice ourselves, since the German revolution will be far more powerful than ours... It is not open to the slightest doubt that the final victory of our revolution if it were to remain alone, if there were no revolutionary movements in other countries, would be hopeless... Our salvation from all these difficulties... is an all-European revolution."

The Communist International

The supreme task therefore was the foundation of the Communist International, the world party of socialist revolution. With workers' governments already in power in Russia, and briefly in Hungary and Bavaria too, the new international was founded in March 1919.

Why was it necessary to declare war on the parties of the old International and build a third International? Had debates not been raging within the Second International for years without anyone posing the need to split away? The answer is that the nature of the debate

had changed; as we have seen, the argument was now being conducted not in resolutions but in bullets.

It was not just on the battlefields of the Russian civil war that the old and the new internationals were fighting, but across the barricades throughout Europe. Ebert, Noske and Scheidemann, leaders of the German Social-Democratic party, were arming the Freikorps, the gangster paramilitaries and prototypes of the Nazis, who were rampaging through Germany murdering revolutionary workers, soldiers and sailors. Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht, heroes of the German proletariat, were kidnapped and murdered. James Connolly, Irish revolutionary and co-leader of the Easter Rising, was wheeled from a hospital bed, strapped to a chair and shot by firing squad on the orders of a British war cabinet which included the Labour leader Arthur Henderson. Social-Democratic leaders were cheering on the invasion of revolutionary Russia by no fewer than twenty-one foreign armies. Mensheviks – former fellow members along with Lenin and Trotsky of the Russian Social-Democratic Labour Party – were collaborating with Tsarist White Guards and foreign mercenaries in the Russian civil war. And let us not forget that, following the October revolution, when the Bolsheviks really had in fact not only offered a united front but actually handed over ministerial portfolios in a coalition government with the Left Social-Revolutionaries, it was now a Left Social-Revolutionary who fired shots at Lenin and almost succeeded in assassinating him.

This is how Lenin summed up the respective roles of the two Internationals:

“The Second International did its share of useful preparatory work in preliminarily organising the proletarian masses during the long ‘peaceful’ period of the most brutal capitalist slavery and most rapid capitalist progress in the last third of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries. To the Third International falls the task of organising the proletarian forces for a revolutionary onslaught against the capitalist governments, for civil war against the bourgeoisie of all countries for the capture of political power, for the triumph of socialism!”

There is a widespread misconception that the foundation of the Communist International was some kind of ultra-left sectarian indulgence. This myth later seemed to gain some superficial justification from subsequent developments: the rash of immature ultra-leftism that did taint some of the early communist parties; the impression of ultimatism given by the new International’s famous “21 conditions” for membership; its proclamation of a permanent ban on certain named prominent individuals; its practice and later, under Stalin, outright abuse of the principle of democratic centralism; and later, grossly and criminally, Stalin’s adoption at a critical time of a monstrously lunatic adventurism in branding the Social-Democrats “social-fascists”, and actually colluding with the Nazis to split the German working class and thus ensure its annihilation.

The truth is very different. Lenin and Trotsky could not reasonably be accused of having split the international – because there was no international to split. Since the 1912 Congress of the Socialist International, for all its ringing declarations and stern warnings to the ruling classes of the revolutionary consequences of a new imperialist war... it never met again. Not once. From 1914 to 1918, the hundreds of thousands of workers owing allegiance to this

mass international were meeting together not at international conferences, but in rival army uniforms on the battlefields of Europe; and not to debate resolutions, but to slaughter one another by the millions, on the express instructions of the leaders of the now shattered International's respective national sections.

Even formally speaking, the Socialist International was legally dissolved in 1916. Not only was there no organisation to split from; there was at that stage no splinter remaining of its constituent parts.

Not for the first time, nor the last, for a period the international survived only in the persons of scattered individuals or small groups. During the world war, it was embodied solely in the delegates to the little gatherings in Zimmerwald and Kienthal, and their handfuls of supporters at home or in exile. Should they not have held these secret meetings during the war? And if so, what for, if not to sponsor new parties capable of overthrowing the ruling classes? And once the war was over – mainly due to the flood of revolution and mutiny sweeping through the armies of the belligerent powers – should the Zimmerwald left have then quietly dissolved? Or were they right to resolve to build a new international on the ashes of the old? Could anyone seriously suggest that at this time the new international could have offered a united front with these traitors of 1914, even if they had wanted to?

Did the Bolsheviks make mistakes? Of course. Bertolt Brecht once suggested that revolutionaries should now and again publish a list of their past mistakes, so as to protect themselves against the accusation that they are always claiming infallibility. They were always the first to admit to mistakes: Lenin's ambiguous formulation of the tasks of the coming Russian revolution; Trotsky's mistake in remaining outside the Bolshevik fraction irrespective of their earlier differences; Lenin's support for the Red Army's invasion of Poland; Trotsky's mistaken position on the trade union question in 1921...

But one thing Lenin and Trotsky were definitely *not* wrong about was to rescue the tradition of workers' internationalism by founding the Communist International in 1919. Far from "*splitting the international*", what they did was to *rebuild* the international out of the rubble of the world war after its old leaders had smashed it to smithereens. It is those same criminal leaders, stained with the blood of millions of loyal workers slaughtered in the war, who were guilty of splitting the international by their betrayal.

The most important question is: who formed the Communist International? Was it a collection of misfits and malcontents? Did it grow out of fringe sects? On the contrary: it was in the same mould and tradition as the First International (an alliance of all genuine working-class organisations) and the Second International (the union of all Europe's workers' parties).

Far from an exotic coven of sectarians, the new international had a truly mass base. Conference after conference voted to affiliate. What, after all, was its composition? The Russian Bolsheviks, who numbered hundreds of thousands and had constituted the majority of the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party. From Germany, the majority wing of the Independents, who had formed the proletarian backbone of the old Social-Democratic Party. The French Socialist Party at its Tours Conference in 1921, which had voted to affiliate *en bloc* to the Third International. Likewise, the Italian Socialist Party voted at its conference to affiliate. The Norwegian Labour Party also affiliated. So did the Swedish Left-

Socialists, the left wing of the Social-Democratic Party. At its own conference the Swiss Socialist Party too voted to affiliate. The Hungarian Social-Democrats amalgamated with the Communist Party. The Bulgarian Social-Democrats also affiliated, as did the majority of the Czechoslovak Social-Democrats. The Socialist Party of the USA voted in a referendum to affiliate. There were even mass trade union organisations such as the Spanish CGT, the Italian syndicalists and the South Wales Miners' Federation, which affiliated directly to the Communist International. The list of affiliates to the new International reads like a roll-call of former members of the Second International.

In some cases, there were manoeuvres by the rejected leaders of the old parties to obstruct this movement: the decision of the Swiss SP Conference was reversed after a referendum, the leaders of the American SP rejected the decision of the membership, the leaders of the Czechoslovak Social-Democrats postponed their Conference when it became clear that they would vote to affiliate, and the Hungarian Social-Democrats later split away again. But this could not stop the tidal wave of workers flooding towards the new International. Whatever the machinations of the old leaders in obstructing, reversing or derailing the process, and whatever mistakes were made by the left, the birth of a new mass revolutionary international was secured.

Russia

At indescribable cost, for the moment the Russian revolution survived. The capitalist chain around the globe had been broken; the world revolution had begun. However... it was at its weakest link that the imperialist chain had snapped. The most revolutionary working class in the world had taken power earliest in a country of age-old backwardness, with little industry, low productivity, long hours, mass illiteracy and a *per capita* income about one tenth of that of the USA. Less than 10% of the population were wage earners, and a far smaller proportion were heavy industrial workers.

Three years of savage civil war were to aggravate conditions still further. In 1921 industrial production was down to *one-ninth* of the 1913 figure, and agricultural produce had slipped below the pre-1900 level. Seven million homeless waifs roamed the country, the people were starving and the peasants, thirsting for private land and fair prices, were becoming restive once the immediate danger of Tsarist restoration had been removed. The country had been forced to the stark emergency restrictions of War Communism: "**communism in a besieged fortress**", as Trotsky described it.

These were the material conditions not of socialism, but of barbarism. Grain requisitioning at bayonet point, famine which brought in its wake outbreaks even of cannibalism, deadly diseases, rushed nationalisation, payment in kind, militarisation of labour, and a desperate scarcity of finance, technical expertise and spare parts – this was the terrible price paid to save the Soviet republic. A vast country already steeped in age-old backwardness, with only pockets of industry, low productivity, long hours, mass illiteracy and a per-capita income about one tenth of that of the USA, had barely emerged from three years of civil war and foreign armed intervention plagued with mass starvation and deadly epidemics. Years of civil war and unremitting hardship had sapped the energies of the generation of October.

It was in these stark conditions that the Communist International was born. Its first congress, which met in Moscow in March 1919 in conditions of siege and civil war, was smaller than many local discussion groups today (although, to be fair, on the other hand the workers were already in power in three countries). Only 51 delegates attended (by some accounts, only 44.) Only five delegates had actually made it from outside Russia (from Germany, Austria, Sweden, Norway and Holland). Due to the international blockade, no one made it from Italy, France, Britain or the USA, and, due to these hazards, many of those who did participate arrived late. One German delegate was arrested at the border.

A major item on the agenda was: should the International be founded at all? Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht – potentially the Lenin and Trotsky of the coming German revolution – had been assassinated only weeks beforehand. The German delegation conveyed their misgivings about the viability of an international on so unstable a foundation; only with difficulty were they persuaded to abstain rather than oppose it outright. And on one level they were right: Russia in 1919 hardly offered a safe or stable foundation for the headquarters of the world revolution. It would be hard to conceive of a more precarious base on which to rest the fate of the world working class. The Russian revolution was clinging on by its fingertips. The idea that it could survive, in any shape whatsoever, no matter how grotesquely warped or stunted, occurred to no one, least of all Lenin or Trotsky. The establishment of the headquarters of the new International in Russia was nothing more than an emergency temporary holding operation, pending the imminent victory of the working class in Germany, Europe and beyond.

By the time of the second congress, which met in Petrograd in July and August 1920 – still at the height of a raging civil war and multiple foreign invasions – there were nevertheless 218 delegates present from 37 countries. So popular was the International already becoming that its leaders had to take special precautions to avoid the risk of dilution into a mere reconstitution of the Second International. The IEC resolution stated: "***The Communist International is becoming, to some extent, fashionable... There is a danger of dilution by unstable and irresolute elements which have not yet completely discarded the ideology of the Second International.***"

All the more reason, then, for special measures to immunise the new organism against the danger of contamination. That is the explanation for the famous 21 conditions of membership laid down by the congress, and for its pre-emptive refusal of membership to any one of a list of named individuals who were ruled permanently ineligible: "***The Communist International cannot tolerate a situation where notorious opportunists, as represented by Turati, Modigliani, Kautsky, Hilferding, Hillquit, Longuet, MacDonald, etc., have the right to pass as members of the Communist International. This could only lead to the Communist International becoming something very similar to the wreck of the Second International.***"

Was this sectarianism? In the conditions of the time, it was a tribute to the principle of the leadership of the new International that they were prepared to sacrifice alluring superficial gains in order to maintain their credentials intact. Rather than accept Turati into the Communist International, they were prepared to split the Italian Socialist Party, and rather than make concessions on the principle of a central international discipline, they were

prepared to lose the affiliation of the Norwegian Labour Party in 1923. That is how they built what remained for the moment a genuine International.

At the third congress in June and July 1921 there were 509 delegates, rising to 603, from 48 countries. But already by this time the tide of history was beginning to turn against the revolution. Only with difficulty did Lenin and Trotsky succeed in curbing the adventurist exuberance of an ultra-left majority. Lenin stated openly that it was necessary to make a **“turn to the right”**.

Trotsky soon afterwards described the change in the objective situation between the first two congresses of the Communist International, and the second two. In 1919 and 1920, he wrote, it was **“considered virtually self-evident that the constantly rising and intensifying political ferment of the masses, growing out of the social paroxysms of the war, must lead directly to the conquest of power by the proletariat.”** But by the time of the third congress, **“the tempo of development proved to be different... War did not lead directly to the victory of the proletariat in Western Europe. It is all too obvious... just what was lacking for victory in 1919 and 1920: a revolutionary party was lacking. Not until the powerful postwar mass ferment had already begun to ebb did young communist parties begin to take shape, and then only in rough outline.”**

Germany was now the fulcrum for the class balance of forces. It was in the throes of wild and violent fluctuations: from the mass general strikes and military and naval mutinies that had overthrown the ruling dynasty and brought an end to the war, to the mobilization of the fascist paramilitary Freikorps and its rampage of terror, to the attempted monarchist putsch led by Kapp, to his humiliation and disarmament at the hands of the workers of Berlin, to a new wave of strikes, occupations and uprisings. The last test came in 1923. Germany was by now racked in mega-crisis. Hyperinflation had soared sky-high, so that a wheelbarrow full of banknotes would hardly buy a box of matches; French and Belgian armies had occupied the industrial heartland in the Ruhr; the Nazis made their first attempted putsch in Munich; and the working class was gearing up for insurrection. In this situation, all that was missing were the insight and strategic leadership that had saved the Russian revolution.

Retreat

This was a crucial turning point. The failure of the international reflected the ebbing revolutionary mood within Russia. In a state of retreat, isolation and hostile encirclement, bitter concessions had become unavoidable: to foreign companies, native entrepreneurs, rich peasants (kulaks), NEPmen (speculators and profiteers)... and a privileged caste of state and party bureaucrats. Vile elements were crawling out of the crevices once the harsh regime of "war communism" had been replaced by a New Economic Policy, under which painful concessions had been wrung out of the government permitting a limited licence to private entrepreneurs. Worse still, in the extreme conditions of a backward and isolated Russia, there was no alternative but to enlist the services of the administrative personnel of the old Tsarist regime, luring them back by conceding to them a relaxation on the limit to their payment, allowing – initially – a maximum wage differential of four to one, a concession already frankly admitted by Lenin to be **“a capitalist differential”**, which under Stalin soon swelled beyond control. That is what Lenin meant when he complained that **“we**

still have the same old Tsarist state machine today, with a thin veneer of socialism spread on top".

Demoralised at the isolation of their revolution, disgusted at the antics of the "NEPmen" and bullied by a resurgent bureaucracy, it is hardly surprising that those remnants of the working class who had survived the civil war fell under the darkening shadow of a new despotism. In such conditions, the party drowned in a cesspool of careerism.

The dead hand of the growing bureaucracy within Russia was already stifling the spirit of the International. By November the German revolution had been derailed. As Trotsky described it: ***"The revolution failed... not because it generally 'had not matured' but because the decisive link – the leadership – dropped out of the chain at the decisive moment."***

That was the beginning of the decay of the Communist International, whose prospects depended on the rapid spread of the revolution to more fertile territory. But progress was derailed again and again: by a paralysis of leadership in Germany in 1923; by opportunist conciliation to the trade-union bureaucracy in Britain in 1926; by disastrous capitulation to the capitalist Kuomintang in China in 1927, leading to a bloodbath of communists... The political line of each Communist Party was forcibly subordinated to the interests of Stalin's shifting alliances.

As these successive defeats accumulated, the bureaucracy became more entrenched. The foundations of internationalism were fatally undermined by the treacherous policy of "socialism in one country". It was a policy which guaranteed the material privileges of a parasitical clique, whose survival in turn was further secured by the isolation of the revolution to backward Russia and the consolidation of world reaction.

From this strategy of class collaboration, the by now thoroughly Stalinised Comintern switched to an even more treacherous policy which fatally split the working class and doomed it to yet another defeat. Trotsky strenuously opposed the ultra-left caricature of Bolshevism practised by Stalin and his puppets in their proclamation of their so-called "Third Period", when they refused to stand side by side with the German Social Democrats in a workers' united front against fascism, and instead forged a bloc with the Nazis, denouncing the Social Democrats as "social fascists" – a pantomime nickname. In Germany and worldwide, the main enemy of the working class was declared to be not the growing army of actual fascists, hell-bent on annihilation of the entire labour movement, but these so-called "social fascists".

The Stalinists openly colluded with the Nazis, for instance in the so-called "red referendum" to depose the social-democratic government of Prussia. The millions of German workers with their revolutionary traditions were fatally divided and politically disarmed, with the result that the world's strongest communist party outside Russia was soon to be annihilated without trace. In January 1933 Hitler took power and imposed a regime of terror, torture and repression, crushing the entire working class under the jackboot of fascism. The Comintern had by now become so grossly deformed by the Stalinists that the workers found themselves led like lambs to the slaughter to a defeat more catastrophic even than the betrayal of 1914.

The violent oscillations of Soviet diplomacy soon led to a dizzying succession of ever more disastrous tactics. The Comintern was now to perform yet another somersault: the establishment of broad "Popular-Front" alliances, not only with those social-democratic workers' parties it had so recently denounced as "social fascists", but with the mainstream capitalist liberal and pseudo-democratic parties of the ruling class. And soon afterwards this policy too was abandoned, when Stalin performed yet another abrupt somersault and concluded a direct military and diplomatic alliance with Hitler.

Meanwhile, inside Russia the debate had already been brutally terminated, with the slaughter of an entire generation of Bolsheviks. Millions perished in the purges and in Stalin's gulags, while outside Russia, millions more faced slavery and genocide in the hellish concentration camps of fascist Europe.

From 1924 the watchword of the Communist International had been "**socialism in one country**": the explicit antithesis of internationalism embodied in its very name. The Communist International had become nothing more than an unofficial arm of Soviet state diplomacy, its every section subservient not to the interests of its own respective working class, but to the cynical twists and turns of Soviet foreign policy. As originally conceived, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics had had no geographical definition: it was to be a voluntary union of workers' republics irrespective of their location, to be extended worldwide as the revolution spread. Lenin had assumed the future centre of this voluntary union of workers' republics to be Berlin, or Paris, or London. In the event, national frontiers were reinforced; Russia and China even at one point went to war. The Comintern was accordingly reduced from vanguard of the world revolution to frontier guard of the Soviet state.

The Comintern having lost its function and become no more than an extra arm of Soviet diplomacy, this led in 1943 to its logical conclusion: its formal dissolution, as a concessionary gesture to Stalin's latest allies Roosevelt and Churchill. Stalinist apologists used their virtuoso skills of tortuous trickery to explain this away in exemplary "dialectical" language: the struggle had, it seems, "**outgrown the old organisational forms**"; and had not even Karl Marx, after all, dissolved the First International in 1872?

It was at its weakest link that the imperialist chain had snapped. What is surprising is not that the revolution went on to suffer gross distortions, but that it was not immediately crushed underfoot. That last act of the tragedy was to come only decades later, with the theft of Russia's resources by a parvenu gangster kleptocracy.

Stillborn

Up to 1933, Trotsky had resisted periodic calls from impatient allies for the formation of a new International. For all the crimes of their leaders, both the Second and Third Internationals still retained the loyalty of millions of organized workers, and in the case of the Communist International the allegiance of the militant vanguard. It could not be superseded by mere intellectual debate; to replace it would require momentous events. Against all the odds, the Left Opposition had fought on relentlessly as a persecuted minority.

Now, however, with the whole of continental Europe soon to find itself trampled under the Nazi jackboot, the working class had suffered a betrayal and a defeat more devastating even

than in 1914. Comparing it to the German Social-Democrats' vote for the Kaiser's war credits, Trotsky declared that Stalinism had now had its "4th August".

The destruction of the world's strongest Labour Movement without a fight had even been celebrated by the Comintern as a victory along the road towards Socialism. So thoroughly policed and gagged had the parties of the Comintern become that not a whisper of protest could be raised from within its ranks. Policing, bullying and wholesale expulsions had turned the whole movement into a tame lapdog of the Kremlin clique. And when the Comintern's Executive Committee then outlawed any attempt even to question its policy, Trotsky declared it "***an organization which... is dead and cannot be revived.***" From that time on, any hope of restoring to the International its revolutionary traditions was gone forever.

Some last-ditch struggles were still being waged: the Popular Front in France, the sit-in strikes in the USA, above all the civil war in Spain. The need to proclaim a new programme fit for the times could not have been more urgent. Some scattered groups of expelled Communist dissidents and dissident Social-Democrats were beginning to acknowledge the truth of Trotsky's earlier warnings. The time had come to prepare not only for a political revolution in Russia to overthrow the bureaucracy, but also for a new International.

Slandered, vilified, banished, his entire family systematically hunted down and murdered, hounded from one country to another before finally gaining a brief sanctuary in Mexico, Trotsky devoted his last years to preparing the road towards a new International – until a Stalinist assassin tracked him down and smashed an ice-pick into his brain.

Just as in 1914, there was "***no question of any immediate proclamation of... the International, but only of preparatory work***". Trotsky had emphasized repeatedly that the immediate task was only to "***lay the foundations***". It is significant that when a couple of dozen of Trotsky's co-thinkers assembled in September 1938 for a one-day session in a village near Paris, they designated the event not a congress but simply a founding ***conference*** of the Fourth International: a preparatory meeting to establish a provisional structure, and above all to draft a programme around which to assemble the vanguard of the future International.

The conference's founding document ***The Death Agony of Capitalism and the Tasks of the Fourth International*** sounded a clarion call to that vanguard, a fighting programme bridging the current plight of society to the only possible practical solution: socialist revolution. It did this by posing a series of transitional demands, linking the immediate issues arising from existing conditions to the conquest of power by the proletariat, and concluding: "***Without a socialist revolution, in the next historical period at that, a catastrophe threatens the whole culture of mankind... The historical crisis of mankind is reduced to the crisis of the revolutionary leadership.***"

The document denounced the failed parties of the Second and Third International, which would "***never succeed in breaking the revolutionary will of the proletariat***" and predicted that "***their desperate efforts to hold back the wheel of history will demonstrate more clearly to the masses that the crisis of the proletarian leadership, having become the crisis in mankind's culture, can be resolved only by the Fourth International.***"

The section of the new international organization with the biggest membership was the Socialist Workers' Party in the USA. One of its members, Max Shachtman (who was soon afterwards to defect to the right) reported that ***“the delegates at the conference represented directly eleven countries: the USA, France, Britain, Germany, the USSR, Italy, ‘Latin America’, Poland, Belgium, Holland and Greece... A number of others, for a variety of legal and physical reasons, were unable to send delegates: Mexico, Cuba, Puerto Rico, Brazil, Colombia, Argentina, Uruguay, Peru, Chile, China, Indo-China, South Africa, Australia, Spain, Norway, Austria, Czechoslovakia, Denmark, Canada and Switzerland, as well as small nuclei... [in] Lithuania, Romania, Yugoslavia, Bulgaria, New Zealand, Sweden, Ireland, Palestine and India.” Tomorrow its strength will be the strength of the millions, for whom its programme offers the only way out of the abominations and sufferings of an outlived social order. And the millions, the masses, will conquer. At the head of their triumphal march will be the banner of the Fourth International, the World Party of the Socialist Revolution.*”**

Trotsky's biographer Isaac Deutscher was sceptical of the conference's prospects: ***“Trotsky decided to ‘found’ the new International at a time when... the act could make no impact. His adherents in the Soviet Union... had been exterminated. His following in Europe and Asia was dwindling. In nearly all countries east of the Rhine and south of the Alps the labour movement was crushed. No Marxist organisation could engage in systematic clandestine activity under Hitler's rule in Germany, Austria and... Czechoslovakia. In France the Popular Front was crumbling in disappointment and apathy. In Spain the civil war was drawing to an end... The whole of the European continent was politically prostrate, waiting only for Hitler's armed might to roll over it.”***

It was on these grounds that the Polish delegates at the conference objected to the foundation of the International; and Deutscher, a compatriot of theirs, posed the question: ***“Why then, despite such unpropitious auguries, did Trotsky go ahead with the proclamation of the Fourth International?”***

It was a question to which Trotsky gave a decisive answer: ***“The disproportion between our strength today and our tasks tomorrow is clearer to us than to our critics. But the severe and tragic dialectic of our epoch is working for us. The masses whom war will drive to absolute despair and indignation will find no other leadership than that which the Fourth International offers them.”***

He went on: ***“In the course of the coming ten years the programme of the Fourth International will gain the adherence of millions, and these revolutionary millions will be able to storm heaven and earth.”***

The founding conference, then, was intended not as the proclamation of a ready-made new International, but as an anticipation and a necessary preparation for the wave of revolutions that would come after the war.

Fragmentation

So what did happen after the war? Why could a new international numbering millions ***not “storm heaven and earth”***? In the belligerent armies, the prisoner-of-war camps, even in

Hitler's concentration camps and Stalin's labour camps, individual Trotskyists performed acts of sheer heroism. But the wave of radicalisation following the war swept Communist Party ministers into Popular Front governments throughout Europe, east and west, and a majority Labour government in Britain. The subsequent upswing and stabilization of capitalism in the West and the extension of Stalinism into Eastern Europe and China combined to give an unforeseen lease of life to both reformism and Stalinism. Trotsky's prewar prediction that within a decade "**not one stone would remain upon another**" of the relics of the Second and Third Internationals and that the Fourth International would become "**the decisive force on the planet**" therefore proved very premature.

Most of the surviving veterans were thrown into confusion in the 1940s and 1950s by such shocks as the organic upswing of the world capitalist economy, the extension of the frontiers of Stalinism, and especially their own unaccountable failure to become the "**decisive force on the planet**". Some refused to concede the slightest modification of Trotsky's schema; others wrote off the "bourgeoisified" working class, or turned to the ex-colonial world, or discovered implausible new agencies of revolution (students? the lumpenproletariat? the peasantry?), or pinned their hopes on false Messiahs: Tito, Khrushchev, Mao, Ben Bella, Castro, Guevara... In the ensuing confusion, the Trotskyist tradition became twisted and garbled; and this helps explain the sectarianism which has afflicted it ever since.

In 2004, looking back on the collapse and fragmentation of the Trotskyist tradition, Ted Grant explained in his inimitable style:

"After the death of the 'Old Man' [an affectionate nickname used for Trotsky at the time], the leaders of the Fourth International were completely out of their depth... They repeated what Trotsky had said in 1938 without understanding Trotsky's method. As a result they landed in a mess... The perspectives that Trotsky had outlined in 1938 had been falsified by history. It was necessary to work out a new perspective, taking into account all these developments. But the so-called leaders of the Fourth were blind to all this. They were completely ultra-left. They thought that revolution was just around the corner. They tried to deny that there was any economic recovery – when there clearly was..."

"Therefore, for a period only modest gains could be made. It was mainly a question of educating the cadres, preserving our forces and winning the ones and twos, or perhaps small groups here and there, and preparing for a change in the situation... In 1946 the leadership of the Fourth was politically ultra-left... Later they became complete opportunists. This is what happens to people who do not take a dialectical position. These people started by saying that every word of Trotsky was correct, without understanding the Old Man's method. One of them... was in Britain in 1947 and we challenged him about what Trotsky had written in 1938, when he said that within ten years not one stone upon another would be left of the old Internationals (that is, the Social Democracy and the Stalinists), and the Fourth International would become the decisive force on the planet. He replied: 'Don't worry. There is still one year to go.' That was the extent of their understanding! Later... they performed a 180-degree somersault... and took the opposite position: that Trotsky was completely wrong. They naturally ended up with a completely revisionist position..."

“The main reason why the Fourth did not take off was the objective situation itself. We would have to fight against the stream for a long time – for a whole period, in fact. But we would have preserved the cadres, kept the movement together, and prepared for new advances when the situation began to change... They were not up to the level of the tasks posed by history... Anyone can make a mistake, but if you always make the same mistake and do not correct it, then it is no longer a mistake but an organic tendency. What we have here is an organic tendency – a petty bourgeois tendency... Not a trace of the old ideas remains... Everywhere you look now on a world scale, the sects are in disarray... They have no future at all because they lack the ideas and are completely divorced from the mass organizations of the working class.”

Even the clearest Marxist leadership could not have withstood the objective turn of events. Setbacks and reverses are sometimes inevitable; but a good general knows how to retreat in good order and conserve the army’s forces, whereas a bad general can turn a defeat into a rout. It is not always possible to find all the answers in the holy book of a prophet; sometimes it is necessary to think for yourself. The Fourth International failed to materialize; it remained only a blueprint, its scattered fragments disintegrating into rival sects.

One of these fragments that did at the time succeed in maintaining its balance was a small group around Ted Grant. The Trotskyist movement had been thrown into confusion by the historical turn that had been unanticipated by Trotsky. It needed courage and insight to work out an analysis that corresponded to an entirely new situation in which the proletariat had been strengthened by the upswing, imperialism weakened in the face of the colonial revolution, and Stalinism reinforced by its spread to eastern Europe and China. Ted Grant explained that a temporary lease of life had been given to reformism and Stalinism, while laying bare their inner contradictions and predicting a coming era of ***"sharp turns and sudden changes"***. His unique contribution was to work out the dynamics of the new situation and educate a new generation in the Marxist method. At that time his role was principally a pedagogical one.

On the basis of this analysis, which remained viable up to the mid-1970s and beyond, ***Militant*** achieved spectacular successes, creating a formidable network of full-time organisers and regional headquarters, building a mass youth movement, winning control of some trade unions, and getting three of its members elected as Labour MPs. It led the entire city of Liverpool in a five-year campaign of resistance to government cuts, and inspired a massive 14 million-strong boycott of the regressive poll tax, leading to the downfall of the Thatcher government. It also founded a viable international organization, the Committee for a Workers’ International.

However, by the 1980s these perspectives, which had stood the test so well for almost three decades, were becoming brittle, ossified and increasingly at variance with reality. Inevitably, this led to stagnation and a loss of authority. It was not just a question of tempo or accidental factors; there had been a historical sea change as drastic as in 1945. Just as

Trotsky's earlier perspectives had become superseded by later events, so now those of the CWI had become overtaken by the new realities. The eventual outcome was multiple splits.

*(For a fuller analysis, see the 1996 document **Reflections on the history of the CWI.**)*

The working class

The relocation of industry through globalisation has transformed the world's working class. There has been a haemorrhage of manufacturing jobs from their traditional locations in the G7 countries (the USA, Germany, Japan, France, Britain, Italy and Canada). Of the world's three billion wage workers, for every one worker based in these countries, there are now at least five in China, India, Russia, Eastern Europe, Latin America, Africa and South-East Asia.

One third of US manufacturing jobs have been lost since 2001. In Britain, the number of manufacturing jobs has fallen from 17 million in 1960 to 2.7 million today: **its lowest since 1870**. The shift applies especially to industrial production. There are over 112 million industrial workers in China – nearly three times as many as the 47 million in all the G7 countries put together.

Already by 1980, the absolute size of the industrial work force in its traditional homelands had been overtaken by that of the previously underdeveloped "third world". By 2012, the industrial working class in its traditional locations had shrunk from around 195 million at its peak to 155 million, while in the formerly "less developed world" it had shot up to a colossal 500 million! (<https://economicsofimperialism.blogspot.com/2012/07/global-working-class.html>.)

The old centres of mass production and the old industrial communities have mostly gone, and with them the original base of the traditional workers' parties. A new proletariat is rising to its feet, whose centre of gravity has shifted from its traditional base to virgin territory. A new generation of manufacturing workers has come on to the scene, located on new terrain and extending now to both genders: hundreds of millions of men and women relatively new to working-class struggle. **For the first time in history the working class constitutes an absolute majority of the world population.**

The profile of the working class today has completely changed, due to the spread of the working class to new terrain; the large-scale participation of women in production; and the heightened awareness and integration of workers and youth worldwide through modern communications.

But has this meant a deproletarianisation of "the west"? Not at all. While the size of the industrial workforce there has shrunk, those sectors of the population previously considered "middle-class" have lost their former relatively privileged status and become irreversibly proletarianised.

At the time of the general strike in Britain in 1926, the ruling class could still rally a mass force of jolly jingoistic volunteers to wave the flag and "keep Britannia afloat", by recruiting strikebreakers from an inexhaustible pool of professionals, small business people and students. Today the incomes and status of these strata have been relentlessly squeezed by

the monopolies and the state. There are nowadays prolonged strikes by teachers, university lecturers, doctors, lawyers, civil servants, etc. And at the other end of the spectrum too, new unions are springing up of what were previously considered a super-exploited “underclass”: the millions of casualised fast-food workers, couriers, warehouse workers, taxi drivers, catering staff and office cleaners who now make up a majority of the work force in Britain and the USA.

But isn't the working class weaker now, given the decay of heavy industry? A survey in Britain in 1983 – that is, before Thatcher's shutdown of the mines, car plants, steel works and shipyards and the collapse of heavy industry – found that 60% of the population classified themselves as working-class. Today, forty years later... the figure is **exactly the same!** A majority – 60% – still identify themselves as working class, including just under half of those people in jobs officially classified as “managerial and professional”. Thatcher had demolished the bulk of an already dilapidated British industry with the explicit purpose of undermining working-class consciousness and trade-union militancy; she failed. The social reserves of the ruling class are dwindling; the proportion of the population who consider themselves working class has not changed since 1983. Society is becoming not less but more proletarianised.

One of the most significant changes in the world balance of forces is the role of women workers in fighting back. Women now constitute a majority of the working class. They are doubly exploited. As workers, they suffer the lowest rates of pay and job security, in addition to sexual abuse, exploitation, and harassment. And in their traditional role as custodians of the family, it is women who bear the brunt of cutbacks in health care, child care, youth services, education, employment prospects, etc.

For millennia, the traditional role of women has been to protect the family and the community; and, as cuts are inflicted relentlessly on hard-won welfare rights, the pressure and workload on women intensifies. The assault by the ruling class on the welfare state and the social gains made since the Second World War is having a redoubled impact on women, both as users of these services and as those employed within them. Under both feudalism and capitalism, women have played a role of defending the population from the robbery and primitive accumulation of the ruling class, and the persecution that follows. Violence against women is used to repress mass resistance. The same process is happening now in the destruction of the welfare state and of all the gains that women have won in the last few decades.

The growth of the global working class has created a formidable workforce of young women, and worldwide they are at the forefront of struggle, both as militant trade unionists and at the cutting edge of resistance to austerity.

Above all, the youth are overwhelmingly in revolt against the establishment. In 1926, college kids were flocking to rally round the flag as strikebreakers and volunteer to drive buses and trucks. Today's younger generation are facing an utterly bleak future, whether in terms of recreational facilities, training and education, career prospects, income, housing or any other indicator. No wonder that reputable opinion polls in Britain consistently show up to 70% of under-40s explicitly favouring “socialism”. According to the very conservative

Institute of Economic Affairs, ***“younger people really do quite consistently express hostility to capitalism, and positive views of socialist alternatives... These attitudes may be a preview of mainstream opinion in Britain tomorrow.”***

In the USA too, according to reputable opinion polls, among the youngest sector (ages 16-23) support for “socialism” has surged by nearly ten percentage points since 2019, from 40 to 49%.

The workers’ parties

With the displacement of the industrial proletariat from its traditional homeland and the failure of the social-democratic parties to effect significant reforms has come a collapse in support for the traditional workers’ parties in the West.

The French Socialist Party – which was in power only five years ago – won just 1.7% in the recent presidential and parliamentary elections. The Social-Democrats’ vote in Sweden – formerly the reformist Mecca – shrank from 45% in 1994 to 28.5% in 2018, their lowest vote for a century. Votes in elections for the Danish Social-Democrats and the Norwegian Labour Party too have halved compared to their heyday half a century ago. PASOK in Greece has been all but wiped out. Support for the German SPD has plunged from around 50% to little more than 20% and has even fallen behind the far-right AfD. In Spain, PSOE has lost 3.5 million votes and thirteen percentage points since 2008. The “eurocommunist” Italian PCI, once the world’s biggest communist party outside the Stalinist bloc, is completely liquidated. In Britain, under the leadership of the right-wing establishment plant Sir Keir Starmer, the Labour Party has lost hundreds of thousands of members since the left’s last fling under Jeremy Corbyn; and, although due to revulsion at the record of the ruling Tory government it is likely to win the next general election by default, it is likely to collapse and split soon afterwards.

Throughout Europe new alternative left parties have sprung up over the last few years in response to a thirst among the youth for radical policies: Refondazione in Italy, SYRIZA in Greece, Podemos in Spain, Die Linke in Germany, La France Insoumise in France, the Corbyn upsurge in Britain... Once put to the test, all these parties have temporised, vacillated or capitulated outright. In Greece, SYRIZA even won a general election and, finding itself trapped in a head-on confrontation with the European banks, called a referendum in the hope that it might give them an alibi for surrender; in the event, having received an overwhelming two-to-one mandate to defy the banks, it took fright and miserably capitulated.

*(For more details, see the book **DEFIANCE: Greece and Europe**).*

Sectarianism

Small isolated left groups tend to proliferate in inverse ratio to the real movement of the working class.

Marx commented in his day that ***“the International was founded in order to replace the socialist or semi-socialist sects by a real organization of the working class for struggle... The development of the system of the socialist sects and that of the real workers’***

movement always stand in inverse ratio to each other. So long as the sects are historically justified, the working class is not yet ripe for an independent historic movement. As soon as it has attained this maturity, all sects are essentially reactionary.

And Trotsky added: ***“The sectarian looks upon life in society as a great school with himself as a teacher there... Sectarianism is hostile to dialectics not in words, but in deeds, in action, in the sense that it turns its back upon the actual development of the working class.”***

Most left activists are sincere campaigners, sacrificing money, time and energy to the cause. Their perfectly creditable loyalty to those organisations to which they have given their allegiance nevertheless carries with it the risk of cliquism: a sectarian unwillingness to put the needs of the wider movement above the petty advantages of their own organisation. They still sincerely believe that the future depends on their winning leadership of the workers' movement, and this leads them to give priority to the need to build their own organisations over the objective needs of the class. They present themselves as an exclusive “vanguard”; but none of them have assumed their long-coveted leadership of a resurgent working class. Bypassed, they are left stranded, like generals in search of an army. And, like all demobbed generals, they wargame their fantasy battles of the next war based on the strategic principles of the last.

The failure of these groups to mesh with the movement towards revolution worldwide has come as a shock to them. They had been preparing for decades for precisely such events. When workers are on the move like never before in three generations, why are they still so marginalised?

Today's left groups all have their origins in a period when there were in most metropolitan and many colonial countries too, mass socialist or communist parties. Generations of workers lived, fought and died defending their political heritage. All that was holding them back from victory were the material interests of the cliques at their head. The mission of the left opposition groups was to expose their crimes and betrayals and prove themselves a worthier alternative.

The tasks facing socialists today are no longer to lay claim to rightful leadership of a working class that is already politically mobilised, but to rebuild a worldwide movement of the working class in the new conditions of the age. The main obstacle standing in the way of revolution is not just the treachery of a corrupt bureaucracy, but the lack of political confidence of the working class itself.

While some of these groups have clung to the name of the Fourth International while explicitly renouncing any pretensions to political leadership and just operate as a meeting-place and support group, others have mistakenly clung to familiar routines inherited from a bygone era. This misconception has led them to a predisposition towards messianic pretensions and a tendency, with the best of intentions, to put their own sectarian interests before those of the class as a whole. Their mistakes come from an adherence to outdated formulae. The petty abuses that have scarred them could never have been tolerated if they had had an active mass membership. Their real curse has been decades of isolation. In the end, there is no guarantee of a healthy democratic culture other than the full-blooded participation of a thriving membership. However, their isolation should not be ascribed exclusively to their mistakes; their mistakes can equally be understood as a by-product of

their isolation, as they lash around in a futile search for a short cut to the role that they claim as their birthright.

Their failure has historical roots; they trace their birthright to a bygone epoch. In Trotsky's day the call for a Fourth International had an immediate resonance, because millions of organised workers were already actively mobilized in mass parties owing allegiance to either the Second (Socialist) or the Third (Communist) Internationals. That being so, the call for a Fourth International struck an immediate chord; it appealed to the best traditions of that generation and showed up leaders' shortcomings. But the Fourth International never materialized as a living force; it remained a programme and a blueprint. The name is meaningless to worker militants today. (Even more so, the call for a "Fifth International"; if we are to count all the failed attempts, why just a 5th, rather than a 17th or a 99th?)

In addition, many of them have drawn wrong conclusions from the exceptional circumstances of the Bolshevik party in the Tsarist underground and of the Russian revolution in the aftermath of civil war, which have helped foster a top-down culture by which leaders enjoy lifelong mandates and dissent is discouraged, leading to inevitable splits. Some of them insist upon a rigid display of unanimity, in the name of a grotesque parody of Bolshevism.

They maintain the discipline of their shrinking memberships by an almost religious reference to the principle of democratic centralism; but this is a distortion of the original meaning of the term. Centralism is the principle of unity in action, and its necessary corollary is democratic participation in the formulation of decisions. It is the law of the picket line projected on to the political plane. However, a free exchange of ideas is indispensable throughout the course of the struggle. Open discussion enriches the movement and is ultimately the only guarantee of a correct policy. Internal democracy and political clarity are two sides of the same coin.

The task facing socialists now is different. Historical, economic and demographic factors have changed the political landscape. Today it is a question of rebuilding the movement itself rather than simply providing an alternative programme and leadership for it and presenting the case for a new social order, using an inspired and imaginative approach to agitation and propaganda. The working class needs once again to be won to socialism.

With the worldwide upsurge against capitalism has come a renewed questioning within the established left organisations. The democratic effects of the new technology have swept through society, enabling horizontal communications, undercutting old hierarchical structures and empowering the ranks. Against this background, breakaway dissident groups have sprung up, creating a healthier environment.

Uprising

It is now eighty years since the shutdown of the last workers' international. That makes the project of a single party of the world working class today look far-fetched; but that's not how it always seemed. If *The Times* could compare the foundation of the IWMA to the birth of Christianity; if Engels considered the Socialist International the final consummation of his

and Marx's life work; if to the workers and soldiers of Petrograd the Communist International was the most inspiring cause in their lives... then it is no lost cause today.

Internationalism is central to the outlook of the organized working-class. By their nature workers produce collectively and struggle collectively. They strain instinctively towards solidarity, a condition which is implicit in their daily working lives and indispensable to their capacity to struggle. At its highest political expression this is manifested in conscious internationalism.

The immediate impetus for the creation of the First International was the practical need to build links between the London Trades Council and French workers' organisations, to counter the employers' default use of foreign strikebreakers. The Lancashire textile workers starved during the American civil war rather than touch the slave-owners' cotton. In 1920 the London dockers refused to load the Jolly George with munitions for the Russian counter-revolution. Tens of thousands of young workers volunteered to join the international brigades fighting the fascists in the Spanish civil war, and 15,000 of them gave their lives. During the anti-apartheid struggle there was a worldwide boycott of South African exports and sporting fixtures, and today there is widespread support for the Boycott Divestment and Sanctions campaign in solidarity with Palestinians. All the major unions have international links.

Every day, on every continent, we see new evidence that a worldwide party is straining at every nerve to be born: in the uprisings shaking every continent and the mass assemblies reclaiming the public squares. From the multinational demonstrations at successive global summits at the turn of the millennium, to the simultaneously co-ordinated protests at the Iraq war by 36 million people in 2003, to the occupy movement which spread across the planet in 2011, to the one-day international general strike across Southern Europe in 2014, to the tidal wave of marches, strikes and occupations that have since then swept across North America, Europe, Latin America, the Middle East, Asia, Africa and beyond; from the *gilets jaunes* protests and the youth uprising in France to the Sri Lankan *aragalaya* to the uprisings in Colombia, Lebanon, Belarus, to take a few random examples... society worldwide has never before been so disturbed. The *Washington Post* reported that **"between 2006 and 2020... the number of protest movements around the world had more than tripled in less than 15 years"**. In the words of the *Centre for Strategic and International Studies*, **"We are living in an age of global mass protests that are historically unprecedented in frequency, scope, and size"**.

*(For more details, see the WIN document **2020 Vision: world perspectives 2020**).*

The worldwide phenomenon of street protests and mass occupations is a natural expression of resistance, and reclaiming the streets is an assertion of universal democratic rights in the era of globalisation and the internet, drawing into a common front workers, students, women, youth, professionals, the self-employed, the unemployed, migrants. Today we are witnessing the first manifestation of an entirely new phenomenon: the beginnings of a truly global uprising. Every engagement has drawn lessons from experiences across the oceans, spontaneously improvising new tactics – rallies, roadblocks, sit-ins, occupation of public

squares – and learning from contemporary protests across the globe, paying them tribute by consciously adapting their tactics. These outbreaks are a further manifestation of the popular upsurge that has been a special feature of the new millennium.

In the conversations among the crowds in the occupied workplaces, public squares, street corners, avenues and squares, in the shanty towns across the world, who can say that the seeds of a revolutionary international are not germinating right now? When tens of millions mobilise on the same issues, with the same slogans, often on the same day in a chain reaction or deliberately synchronised action, that means that the world party of the future is waiting to be born. But it will not materialise out of thin air; it is the task of socialist activists to give conscious expression to this process. Building the International simply means embodying this process in a permanent form.

Hundreds of thousands have been marching, mobilising, striking... and talking in a hothouse of political debate. We can be sure that their discussions will have at least as much to teach us as whatever abstract lessons we may have gleaned from our study of the textbooks. The first duty of socialist activists is to listen, mingle, talk, interact, exchange ideas, learn and draw conclusions. We need to learn from their experience, and to find ways to engage in mutual discussion of the way forward.

Never before has there been such a widespread and generalised hatred of capitalism. At a time when not a single significant political party in the world questions the capitalist system, millions of people worldwide have been taking to the streets to protest against it.

Internationalism

The anti-capitalist slogans inscribed on the banners flying in Athens' Syntagma Square during the Greek struggle, written in English, Spanish, French, Italian and German, explicitly called upon the working people of Europe to join together with them in a continental-wide uprising...

The forces for a worldwide workers' party can be found today in workplaces, on public squares, on street corners and in shanty towns. Its first birth pangs are stirring in the debates raging in workplaces, shanty towns and occupied public spaces across the world. They have drawn in swathes of the population previously untouched by political affiliation. All these outbreaks erupted "horizontally" by spontaneous combustion from within the lower depths of the population, independent of any organized call to arms, taking established political currents left or right as much by surprise as governments. These flash outbreaks have sparked throughout the social networks and media by the minute, conjuring up new leaderships overnight as if by magic. The speed and spread of these movements have taken the authorities by surprise and often prompted instant concessions which have only emboldened the movement to press further forward.

The size and specific weight of the proletariat have grown everywhere. Mass communications and the "information revolution" have made today's youth incomparably better informed than their grandparents. The world has drawn together and a new global

consciousness has arisen. There's an instinctive straining towards unity. What is needed is a single party of working people and youth stretching across the globe. Its hour has come.

In the course of their struggles, a new generation will reflect on their goals, their temporary victories and inescapable setbacks; to digest their experiences, deepen their insight, strengthen their commitment and widen their perspective.

The actual course of revolution is always more flexible, imaginative, and daring than can be predicted by any dry theory. Revolution comes when the exploited are not prepared to live any longer in the old way, and their rulers can't carry on in the old way. What propels the masses on to the streets is a determination to fight to the end for their needs. They don't hold underground conferences first to decide the outcome of their struggle. It is the responsibility of socialists to point the way forward.

The current movement of the working class is a source of hope: the expansion of the proletariat in China, Asia, Africa and Latin America; the worldwide proletarianisation of women; the heightened awareness and integration of workers and youth worldwide through modern telecommunications.

In China above all, a sleeping giant is awakening. China has become a predominantly urban society. The impending entry of the Chinese working class could transform the face of the world Labour Movement, just as the British trade unions provided the foundation for the first international, the German Social-Democracy the second, and the Russian revolution the third. Once the giant of Chinese labour links up with the rising generation of protest throughout the world's continents, that can create the most formidable mass movement in history.

The current underground strike wave in China recalls the 1890s in Russia: a period of rapid industrialisation in which millions of young peasants are being uprooted from medieval conditions and transplanted into high-tech modern industrial factories. That economic boom in Russia ended in a general strike, the birth of Soviets, and the 1905 revolution – events that transformed the international working class and ushered in an era of world revolution. The impending entry of the Chinese working class as a political force could transform the face of the world labour movement as dramatically as did the German working class in building the Socialist International, or the Russian working class the Communist International – or indeed the British trade unions in creating the fundamental bedrock for the First International.

A dangerous threat

So workers everywhere are rising to their feet again... but their struggles are diffuse and unco-ordinated. Until they are carried through to a conclusion, danger lies ahead. The ruling class cultivates bigotry, nationalism, gender discrimination, religious sectarianism, racism, ethnic and communal antagonisms and rivalries within the working class, to “divide and rule”. The survival of the labour movement depends upon its unity. The alternative is xenophobia, fundamentalism, nihilistic terror and world war. The choice facing humanity of “**socialism or barbarism**” is now more than ever a deadly serious warning of the nightmare threatening humanity.

The danger is staring us straight in the face. The ruling class is preparing a terrible revenge, in the form of repression, starvation, terror and war. Outright racist or thinly-disguised crypto-fascist parties are already in power today throughout Europe: in Hungary and Poland, Sweden and Finland, Italy and Austria, with equally ugly threats looming in France, Spain and Germany; and outside Europe in Turkey, India, Russia and beyond. All of these are at least formally speaking parliamentary regimes; so far none of them pose an immediate danger of civil war or outright dictatorial rule; but the warning is unmistakeable and it is drawing ever closer.

Under the brutal rule of the super-corporations, capitalism has developed to its utmost extremes. All the trends outlined in the Communist Manifesto have extended to grotesque lengths. Faith in the boundless potential of technology has gone; in its place has come a conviction that society is hurtling towards environmental catastrophe. There is a widespread perception that capitalism has despoiled the planet, that civilisation itself is under threat. It is understandable that this helps create feelings of helplessness and despair at the inevitability of Armageddon.

There are fewer illusions left in capitalism than ever before. What is missing is any confidence in the capacity to break the stranglehold of corporate power. This does not mean an end to the workers' legitimate wish to seek reforms; it means a weakening of reformism by its classic Marxist definition: the existence of a privileged labour bureaucracy which justifies itself by winning occasional temporary reforms.

The political outlook of worker activists has declined over three generations since the first half of the twentieth century. First came the postwar era of economic growth and relative social peace in the West, and since then, the closure of old industries, the displacement of traditional working-class communities, the collapse of Stalinism, the failure of reformism, a series of trade-union defeats, the environmental crisis, etc. It is necessary to establish once again theoretically the rationality of socialism before it can become once again a living force; to put forward a programme of transitional solutions pointing the way towards a new society.

Each of the Internationals of the past reflected the working class of their times and had their own distinctive character. The Communist League – a “pre-International” – was an exclusive secret society. The IWMA, a broad assembly of diverse groups, even called itself an association of working *men*. The Socialist International was a loose federation of mass parties and trade unions. The Communist International created a monolithic bloc, but it too was almost entirely concentrated in Europe. And what was really a Fourth *pre*-International remained little more than a manifesto and a blueprint, though one that left a rich and enduring theoretical legacy.

The International that can emerge from the current struggles will encompass tens of millions of men, women and youth from all the continents. It will aim to unite all the movements of real struggle today, irrespective of ideology, on the basis of free discussion. That way, socialist ideas can once again become a material force.

When Marx and Engels helped to found the First International, their aim was to unite all the existing movements of protest against the existing order into a single worldwide movement, and anchor them firmly to the only force in society that could offer a way forward: the working class. They used the few years of the International's existence as a political workshop in which all the rival ideas could be tested out in practice: a nerve centre of co-ordinated workers' action.

Essentially, that is what is needed today. A new international today will not be a monolithic world party with a single ideological line. Today is not 1920, when 21 conditions were laid down for affiliation; neither is it 1938, which began with a manifesto denouncing all rival parties. These were not expressions of sectarianism; they were a measured response to the existing situation, in which mass parties built at enormous sacrifice had been betrayed and abandoned by a corrupted leadership. By contrast, a new International today will be built around freshly aroused activists with a common will to fight capitalism. It will be alive with debate in which conflicting ideas will be tested out.

In many ways a new international will look initially more like the First than the Third. It will encompass a broad spectrum of ideas. The sole criterion for affiliation will be a common sincerity in fighting capitalism, and a common recognition of the role of the working class. It will be alive with debate. In the heat of the struggle, all the competing ideas will be tested, and the best will win out.

Marx and Engels had no need to declare themselves a "vanguard" before plunging into the pioneering work of the First International. It was the clash of ideas within it which ensured that once the Second International came into life it was founded unequivocally upon their ideas. In its turn, that International became an arena of struggle between reformism and revolution; and when the Third International was formed it had amassed the authority to lay down a firmer platform. These debates had proved vital in sharpening the political programme of the working class.

A century later, any implication that a new international might start with the authority to impose the equivalent of the Third International's 21 conditions would obviously be absurd. The link with those traditions is largely broken. The fate of the revolution now lies in the hands of a new generation with limitless potential but shallow traditions. The fundamentals need to be learned afresh.

The fight for a workers' international is the fight to unite the struggles of the workers of all continents, social, gender and ethnic groups; to link with the environmentalist and anti-capitalist protest movements, and to build worldwide solidarity.

Towards a new International

There can be no more important goal today than building a new workers' International. The world is plunged into instability, turmoil, mass protest, wherever we look. There have been similar periods in history before, but never on such a universal scale. It shouldn't be beyond reach to link these separate struggles together into a single worldwide workers' party.

The first step is a free exchange of ideas and experiences between worker activists on the front line: a political workshop in which to sharpen up collectively our ideas and political

skills. That needs a network of activists across several countries learning from one another's experiences and linking their separate struggles into the foundations of a single world workers' party.

Building a network is not an academic exercise or a recreational hobby. Lenin at one time sarcastically described the Socialist International as "a post office". Discussion is a means to an end. It raises our collective level and enables us to reach a genuine and lasting consensus.

How did Marx and Engels prepare the way for the First International? First, by active involvement in the London Trades Council, at the time the world's most prominent labour organisation. Second, by building links worldwide: they worked tirelessly to maintain correspondence with socialist contacts on the European continent, studying their publications and painstakingly raising money even to cover the cost of postage. And finally, above all, in theoretical research and the publication of books and articles.

On a modest scale, using the technology of the day, we are striving to follow their example, through involvement in day-to-day trade-union struggles both locally and internationally; the use of zoom, the internet and modern telecommunications facilities to maintain a constant flow of news and ideas; and through weekly zoom meetings, print and online publications, to raise our collective understanding. Over the last three and a half years we have engaged with activists from over 35 countries based on every continent.

Democratic discussion is not a peripheral diversion but a means to an end. It has raised our collective level and enabled us to reach a genuine consensus, while retaining the flexibility to evolve our ideas.

During phases of relative inertia, when history is moving at a near-glacial tempo, it is the task of outstanding teachers to keep the flame alive against the prevailing hostile winds and prepare the next generation for the challenges which lie ahead. Today the millions are on the move, improvising, learning, furiously debating. In such a period, the predetermined formulae of the past can only take us so far. One of the qualities of the role models of the past was their ability at every turning-point to abandon outworn formulae, learn new lessons and refresh their understanding.

At the high points of history, it was always the creative energies of workers in struggle which pointed a way forward. The mark of the great revolutionaries was not their imposition of preconceived formulae, but their insight in grasping and interpreting the lessons of life as it unfolded; as much to listen and learn as to teach.

Trotsky once wrote, "**human thought is conservative, and at times that of revolutionaries most of all**". In times of revolution, workers in action show dynamic powers of improvisation. We all have a role to play in placing at the disposal of a new generation some lessons from historical experience; but what is needed too is a willingness to grasp and assimilate and recycle the living experience of the working class.

It was after all the workers of Paris in the Commune of 1871 who demonstrated to Marx, and not the other way round, the necessity of smashing and replacing the bourgeois state machine rather than simply commandeering it. Marx's genius consisted above all in his

ability to listen and learn from their experience and condense it into a theoretical conclusion. Again, in St Petersburg in 1905 it was by their own spontaneous improvisation that the workers demonstrated in action the crucial role of the Soviets as democratic organs of workers' power, to the dismay of the local Bolsheviks who were initially sceptical and distrustful at what they perceived as a threat to their precious "leading role of the party". It was the actual course of the Russian revolution which sharpened up Lenin's earlier formulation of its tasks as a "**democratic dictatorship of the workers and peasantry**", and which at the same time taught Trotsky, as he freely admitted, the "**imperious necessity**" of a centralised Bolshevik Party. There are countless more examples of the readiness of key revolutionaries to listen and learn from the workers' practical experience.

The question of how we make the transition from a "network" to a "tendency" is elastic: a sliding scale. On the one hand, we are more than just a discussion circle; on the other, we will never end up dictating a compulsory "line" from above. In the course of discussion, our collective vision will sharpen into ever clearer focus. That happened also in each of the previous Internationals, although in their cases not without conflicts and eventual splits. Our discussions don't just go round in circles; they reach conclusions. Through shared experiences and a democratic interchange of ideas we are evolving into a distinct political tendency.

As direct participants in the class struggle, we strain every nerve to offer practical solidarity. However, a sense of proportion is required. At this stage we don't have the resources to make inflated claims or overblown commitments.

That's where strategy and tactics come in: the distinction between propaganda and agitation. Lenin used to quote Plekhanov's definition: "**A propagandist presents many ideas to one or a few persons; an agitator presents only one or a few ideas, but he presents them to the mass of people...**"

Trotsky used an engineering metaphor: "**The revolutionary tendency is the cog, the cog engages the wheel... The impatient attempt to connect the party wheel directly with the gigantic wheel of the masses... would have given rise to the danger of breaking the teeth of the party wheel, and nevertheless not setting sufficiently large masses in motion... Without a guiding organization, the energy of the masses would dissipate like steam in a piston box. But nevertheless what moves things is not the piston or the box, but the steam.**"

In other words, he wrote, "**The goal is... first to understand and develop our own theoretical understanding, then develop the cadres, explain and amplify the understanding of the vanguard with revolutionary propaganda.**"

This is timely advice. To try to engage directly in mass agitation without first winning the key cadres through theoretical education and propaganda would put us in danger of "**breaking our teeth**" in a doomed adventure. There's no shortage of "steam" today. In helping lay the foundations for a future international, we are hoping to create the mechanism by which it can move the world.

Roger Silverman, September 2023
