

# Resources

150 years since the foundation of the First International: the working class needs a revolutionary International



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On 28th September 1864, delegates from different countries gathered in St. Martin's Hall in London. This was the most serious attempt yet to unite the advanced layers of the working class on an international scale. The meeting was convened a consequence of the international solidarity in response to the Polish uprising of 1863.

The meeting unanimously decided to set up the International Workingmen's Association, which became known as the First International. The centre was to be in London, directed by a committee of 21, which was instructed to draft a programme and constitution. This task was entrusted to Karl Marx who, from that time onwards played a decisive leading role in the International.

In retrospect, we can say that the historical task of the First International was to establish the main principles, programme, strategy and tactics of revolutionary Marxism on a world scale. However, the new International did not spring completely formed and armed, like Athena from the head of Zeus. At its inception, it was not a Marxist International, but an extremely heterogeneous organization composed of different tendencies.

However, the founders of scientific socialism were very far removed from that brand of sectarianism that tries to find a chemically pure working class organization, something that has never existed and will never exist. Marx and Engels understood the importance of working in a broad arena with mass roots in the working class. In this sense, the participation of the British trade unions was particularly important.



From the beginning Marx and Engels waged a stubborn struggle for ideological clarification within the International. But they understood very well that in order to conquer the masses for the ideas of scientific socialism, it was necessary to conduct patient work within the historically determined organizations of the proletariat with deep roots in the class. For the first time the IWA provided them with a common framework within which to test and debate their ideas beyond the scope of the small revolutionary circles that had existed hitherto.

In the beginning Marx and Engels faced formidable difficulties. In most countries the workers' movement was in its early beginnings. It was still in its formative stages and was often influenced by bourgeois liberal and democratic ideas. In most countries the working-class movement had not yet broken away from the bourgeois parties.

In Marx and Engels' day, the overwhelming majority in Europe were peasants or else small artisans, not wage workers. Only in Britain did the working class make up the majority of society, but the British trade union leaders were under the influence of the Liberals. In France the Proudhonists were opposed to strikes, counterposing their utopian ideas of "mutualism". They were also opposed to the workers' participating in the political struggle.

In the end, by combining firmness on principles with great tactical flexibility, Marx and Engels gradually won over the majority. Under the guidance of the General Council led by Marx and Engels, the International laid the framework for the development of the labour movement in Europe, Britain and America. It established deep roots in the main European countries.

### **Socialism and internationalism**

Socialism is internationalist, or it is nothing. Already at the dawn of our movement, in the pages of *The Communist Manifesto*, Marx and Engels wrote the famous words: "The workers have no country." The internationalism of Marx and Engels was not a caprice, or the result of sentimental considerations. It flowed from the fact that capitalism develops as a world system—out of the different national economies and markets there arises one single, indivisible and interdependent whole—the world market.

Today this prediction of the founders of Marxism has been brilliantly demonstrated, in almost laboratory fashion. The crushing domination of the world market is the most decisive fact of our epoch. Not a single country, no matter how big and powerful—not the USA, not China, not Russia—can stand apart from the mighty pull of the world market.

There is no more modern book than Marx and Engels' Manifesto. It explains the division of society into classes; it explains the phenomenon of globalization, global crises of overproduction, the nature of the state and the fundamental motor forces of historical development.

However, even the most correct ideas can achieve nothing unless they find an organizational and practical expression. That is why the founders of scientific socialism always fought for the creation of an international organization of the working class. Marx and Engels had already been active in the Communist League, which was, from the beginning, an international organisation, but the formation of the IWA represented a qualitative step forward.

The International developed and grew in the period preceding the Paris Commune. It did not stand apart from the everyday problems of the working class. On the contrary, it was constantly engaged in practical work in the workers' movement. The International inscribed on its banner the struggle for equality and fought for the improvement of the conditions of women and young people that suffered the greatest oppression under capitalism. At first the IWA had mostly male membership, but in April 1865 membership was opened to women and the International developed a series of demands for women workers.

The headquarters of the General Council were in London and several unions affiliated to it. It was present in many strikes and other labour disputes. The International aimed to prevent the import of foreign strikebreakers and collected money to give direct aid to strikers and their families. This made the new organisation immensely popular with the workers, who began to realise that the International was the champion of the proletariat, and was fighting to defend its interests.

Despite these successes, or rather because of them, the reformist trade unionists were increasingly alarmed at the growing influence of the International in Britain. They accepted its help but had no sympathy with its socialist and revolutionary ideas. Nevertheless, the International was popular with the British working class movement. The Trade Union Conference at Sheffield adopted a resolution thanking the international Workingmen's Association for its attempts to unite the workers of all lands in a fraternal league, and recommending the unions represented at the Conference join the International.

## The struggle against sectarianism

Marx and Engels were obliged to fight on two fronts: on the one hand, they had to combat the reformist ideas of the opportunist trade union leaders who were always inclined towards class collaboration and conciliation with the bourgeois Liberals. On the other hand, they were obliged to wage a constant battle against ultraleft and sectarian tendencies. This situation has not changed very much today. The Marxist tendency is faced with exactly the same problems and has to fight against the same enemies. The names may have changed but the content is just the same.

The history of the First International is characterised above all by the struggle between two incompatible trends: on the one hand that of the sectarian and utopian systems which were initially dominant in the working-class movement and, on the other, that of scientific socialism, the foremost representative of which was Karl Marx.

In the First International, apart from British Owenites and reformist trade unionists, there were French Proudhonists and Blanquists, Italian followers of the moderate nationalist Mazzini, Russian anarchists, and other trends. In a letter to Engels, Marx wrote: “It was very difficult to frame the thing so that our view should appear in a form acceptable from the present standpoint of the workers' movement. [...] It will take time before the re-awakened movement allows the old boldness of speech. It will be necessary to be fortiter in re, suaviter in modo [mild in manner and bold in content].”

The anarchists, both of the Proudhonist and of the Bakuninist trends, were opposed to the participation of the working class in the political struggle, though from different points of view. The Proudhonists advised the workers to achieve their emancipation through petty economic measures, especially by the organisation of free credit and of equitable exchange among the producers.

On the other extreme the Bakuninists advocated the “propaganda of the deed”, which boiled down to individual terrorism and petty insurrections, which were supposed to prepare the ground for the general uprising which was to achieve the social revolution at one blow. While Proudhon represented in an idealised form the petty bourgeois outlook of small-holders and independent artisans, Bakunin gave expression to the outlook of the lumpenproletarian and insurrectionary peasant.

These false ideas were a serious problem at a time when the working masses were awakening to a new life. Recovering from the terrible defeat they had sustained after the revolution of 1848, the French workers instinctively expressed their revolt against economic slavery in strikes, while politically they

were preparing the struggle for the overthrow of the Bonapartist regime. But the Proudhonists were opposing strikes and offering petty palliatives of a utopian character.

Instead of basing themselves on the real movement of the working class and raising the masses to a higher level, the sectarians were endeavouring to impose upon it their particular doctrines. A sharp and stubborn ideological struggle was necessary to purge the International of sectarianism and provide it with a firm ideological basis. Marx had to devote an enormous amount of time and effort to the struggle against sectarianism in all its different forms.

## **The Paris Commune**

In its day, the bourgeoisie trembled before the menace of communism in the form of the International. But great events were being prepared that would cut across its development. While the ideological struggle was thus being fought out within the International, a dramatic situation was unfolding on the European Continent.

In July 1870 war broke out between Bonapartist France and Bismarck's Germany. The IWA adopted an internationalist position on the War. The General Council issued a manifesto protesting against the war, and laying the blame for it jointly on Napoleon and the Prussian Government. While pointing out that for Germany the war had a defensive character, the manifesto warned the German workers that if they allowed it to become a war of conquest, this would prove disastrous to the proletariat whether it ended in victory or in defeat.

The catastrophic defeat of the French army on September 4, 1870 unleashed a chain of events that led to an insurrection by the proletariat and the establishment of the first workers' state in history: the Paris Commune. In the words of Marx, the workers of Paris "stormed Heaven." The Commune was not a parliament of the old type, but was a working body with executive as well as legislative functions. The officialdom, which had hitherto been a mere tool of the Government and a pliable instrument in the hands of the ruling class, was replaced by a representative body composed of persons elected by universal suffrage, and subject to recall at any moment.

This is not the place for a detailed history of the Paris Commune. Suffice it to say that the weakness of the Commune was a weakness of leadership. The Commune had neither a definite programme nor a clearly worked out tactic for defence or for attack. In the Commune itself, the Internationalists were in a minority. There were only seventeen of them in a total membership of ninety-two. In the absence of a conscious leadership, the Commune was unable to present wide perspectives to the workers and peasants that could have ended the isolation of the Paris workers.

Despite its great achievements, the Commune made mistakes. In particular, Marx pointed to the failure to nationalise the Bank of France and march against the centre of the counterrevolution in Versailles. The working class paid a terrible price for these mistakes. The government in Versailles was given time to organize a counterrevolutionary army that marched on Paris and crushed the Commune with the utmost savagery.

Having drowned the Commune in blood, the bourgeois press organised a foul campaign of slanders against it. Marx defended the Commune vehemently. In the name of the General Council he wrote a manifesto that later became known as 'The Civil War in France', in which he explained the real historical significance of this great proletarian revolution. The Commune was a form of political rule by the working class, a dictatorship established by the oppressed class over the oppressing class. It was a transitional regime that stood for the complete economic transformation of society. This was what Marx meant when he spoke of the dictatorship of the proletariat.

### **The collapse of the International**

The defeat of the Paris Commune dealt a mortal blow to the IWA. The orgy of reaction that ensued made it impossible to function in France, and everywhere the International was persecuted. But the real reason for its difficulties is to be found in the upswing of capitalism on a world scale that followed the defeat of the Commune. This in turn had a negative effect on the International.

Under these conditions, the pressures of capitalism on the labour movement resulted in internal quarrels and factionalism. Feeding off the general atmosphere of disillusionment and despair, the intrigues of Bakunin and his followers intensified. For these reasons, Marx and Engels first proposed moving the headquarters of the International to New York, and finally decided that it would be better to dissolve the International, at least for the time being. The IWA was formally wound up in 1876.

The IWA succeeded in laying the theoretical foundations for a genuine revolutionary International. But it never was a real mass workers' International. It was really an anticipation of the future. The Socialist International (Second International), launched in 1889, began where the First International had left off. Unlike the latter, the Second International began as a mass International which organised millions of workers. It had mass parties and trade unions in Germany, France, Britain, Belgium, etc. Moreover, it stood, at least in words, on the basis of revolutionary Marxism. The future of world socialism appeared to be guaranteed.

However, the misfortune of the Second International was to be formed during a long period of capitalist upswing. This set its stamp on the mentality of the leading layer of the Social Democratic

parties and trade unions. The period of 1871-1914 was the classical period of Social Democracy. On the basis of a long period of economic growth, it was possible for capitalism to give concessions to the working class, or, more correctly, to its upper layer. This was the material basis for the national-reformist degeneration of the Second (Socialist) International, which was cruelly exposed in 1914, when the leaders of the International voted for the war credits and supported “their” bourgeoisie in the imperialist slaughter of the First World War.

### **The 3<sup>rd</sup> International**



The terrible catastrophes of the First World War provided an impetus to the Russian Revolution, which in 1917 brought the workers to power under the leadership of the Bolshevik Party led by Lenin and Trotsky. But the Bolsheviks never saw the Russian Revolution as a purely national act but rather the first act of the world socialist revolution. That is why in 1919 they established a new revolutionary International.

The Third (Communist) International, generally known as the Comintern, stood on a qualitatively higher level than either of its two predecessors. Like the IWA the Third International, at the high-point of its development, stood for a clear revolutionary, internationalist programme. Like the Second International, it had a mass base of millions. Once again, it appeared that the fate of the world revolution was in good hands.

Under the leadership of Lenin and Trotsky, the Communist International maintained a correct revolutionary line. However, the isolation of the Russian Revolution under conditions of frightful material and cultural backwardness caused the bureaucratic degeneration of the Revolution. The bureaucratic faction led by Stalin gained the upper hand, especially after Lenin’s death in 1924.

Leon Trotsky and the Left Opposition attempted to defend the spotless traditions of October against Stalinist reaction—the Leninist traditions of workers’ democracy and proletarian internationalism. But they were fighting against the tide. The Russian workers were exhausted by years of war, revolution and Civil War. On the other hand, the bureaucracy felt increasingly confident, pushed the workers to one side and took over the Party.

The rise of Stalinism in Russia stifled the tremendous potential of the Third International. The Stalinist degeneration of the Soviet Union played havoc with the still immature leaderships of the Communist Parties abroad. Whereas Lenin and Trotsky looked to the international workers' revolution as the only safeguard for the future of the Russian revolution and the Soviet state, Stalin and his supporters were indifferent to the world revolution. The "theory" of socialism in one country expressed the national limitedness of the outlook of the bureaucracy, which looked on the Communist International merely as an instrument of the foreign policy of Moscow. Having used the Comintern for his own cynical purposes, Stalin dissolved it in 1943 without even the pretence of a congress.

### **The 4<sup>th</sup> International**



Expelled and exiled, Trotsky attempted to re-group the small forces that remained loyal to the traditions of Bolshevism and the October revolution. Under the most difficult conditions, slandered by the Stalinists and persecuted by the GPU, he held aloft the banner of October, of Leninism, workers' democracy and proletarian internationalism.

Unfortunately, in addition to the smallness of their forces, many of the adherents of the Opposition were confused and disoriented, and many mistakes were made, particularly of a sectarian character. This reflected in part the isolation of the Trotskyists from the mass movement. This sectarianism is present today in most of the groups that claim to represent Trotskyism, but have failed to grasp the most elementary ideas that Trotsky defended.

Trotsky launched the Fourth International in 1938 on the basis of a definite perspective. However, this perspective was falsified by history. The murder of Trotsky by one of Stalin's assassins in 1940 struck a mortal blow against the movement. The other leaders of the Fourth International proved to be completely unequal to the tasks posed by history. They repeated the words of Trotsky without understanding Trotsky's method. As a result, they made serious errors which led to the shipwreck of the Fourth. The leadership of the Fourth International was totally incapable of understanding the new

situation that arose after 1945. The break-up and splintering of the Trotskyist movement is rooted in that period.

It is not possible here to go into more detail about the mistakes of the then leadership of the Fourth International, but it is sufficient to say that Mandel, Cannon and co., lost their bearings after the Second World War and this led to a complete abandonment of genuine Marxism. The so-called Fourth International degenerated after the death of Trotsky into an organically petit-bourgeois sect. It has nothing in common with the ideas of its founder or with the genuine tendency of Bolshevism-Leninism.

### **The movement has been thrown back**

The Second and Third Internationals degenerated into reformist organisations, but at least they had the masses. Trotsky, in exile, did not have a mass organization, but he had a correct programme and policy and a clean banner. He was respected by workers all over the world and his ideas were listened to. Today the so-called Fourth International does not exist as an organisation. Those who speak in its name (and there are a few of them) have neither the masses, nor the correct ideas, nor even a clean banner. They have degenerated into the kind of sterile sectarianism that Marx combated in the First International. All talk of resurrecting the IV International on this basis is absolutely excluded.

We must face facts. Today, 150 years after the founding of the First International, for a combination of circumstances, objective and subjective, the revolutionary movement has been thrown back, and the forces of genuine Marxism reduced to a small minority. That is the truth, and whoever denies it is merely deceiving himself and deceiving others. The reasons for this are to be found partly in the mistakes committed in the past. But the decisive factor for the isolation and weakness of the forces of revolutionary Marxism are to be found in the objective situation.

Decades of economic growth in the advanced capitalist countries have given rise to an unprecedented degeneration of the mass organizations of the working class. It has isolated the revolutionary current, which everywhere has been reduced to a small minority. The collapse of the Soviet Union has served to sow confusion and disorientation in the movement, and set the final seal on the degeneration of the former Stalinist leaders, many of whom have passed over to the camp of capitalist reaction.

Many have drawn pessimistic conclusions from this. To those people we say: it is not the first time we have faced difficulties, and we are not in the least frightened by such difficulties. We retain unshakable confidence in the correctness of Marxism, in the revolutionary potential of the working class and in the final victory of socialism. The present crisis exposes the reactionary role of capitalism,

and places on the order of the day the revival of international socialism. There are the beginnings of a regroupment of forces internationally. What is required is to give that regroupment an organized expression and a clear programme, perspective and policy.

### **The only way out**

The task we are confronted with is roughly analogous to that which confronted Marx and Engels at the time of the founding of the First International. As we explained above, that organization was not homogeneous but composed of many different tendencies. However, Marx and Engels were not deterred by this. They joined the general movement for a working class International and worked patiently to provide it with a scientific ideology and programme. They faced many difficulties. At the end of his life Engels wrote: “Marx and I were in a minority all our lives, and we were proud to be in a minority.”

Like Marx and Engels, for decades we were obliged to swim against the current. But now the tide of history has begun to turn. The global economic crisis of 2008-9 marked a turning point in the world situation and the strategists of capital see no way out. They are predicting 10 to 20 years of cuts and austerity. This has been the slowest “recovery” in the history of capitalism and any recovery that exists is definitely not benefitting the majority of the population.

Elementary mechanics tells us that every action has an equal and opposite reaction. The crisis of capitalism is provoking a reaction by the workers and youth. Everywhere, beneath the superficial veneer of calm and tranquillity, there is a seething undercurrent of rage, indignation, discontent and above all frustration at the existing state of affairs in society and politics. In one country after another the masses have erupted onto the scene with elemental force: Tunisia, Egypt, Turkey, Brazil, Greece, Spain and Portugal. Even in the United States there is a widespread discontent and a questioning of the existing state of affairs, which was not present before.

Today the ideas of Marx are more valid and necessary than ever. After six years of deep economic crisis, there is mass unemployment, falling living standards, constant attacks on the welfare state and democratic rights. We have the scandal of bankers, who have destroyed the world’s financial system through greed, speculation and swindling, walking away with huge bonuses. Oxfam released a statistic that showed the world’s richest 66 people are worth more than the poorest 3.5 billion, half of all humanity. Marx predicted all of this in the pages of *Capital* and *The Communist Manifesto*.

The economists and politicians have no solution to the crisis, the causes of which they cannot comprehend. They refer to a crisis of global overcapacity, but in reality they use such terms because

they are afraid to call things by their real names. What they mean is overproduction, which Marx had already explained in 1848. This is the fundamental contradiction in capitalism, one that was unheard of in previous societies. And the only way to eliminate this contradiction is to free the productive forces from the straitjacket of private ownership and the nation state.

Working-class and young people do not need to be told there is an economic crisis; all they need to do is turn on the television. While insecurity is increasing at one pole, wealth is amassing at the other. Productivity, the amount of wealth produced per hour of work, has risen more than 50 per cent since the 1970s in most Western countries, and yet real wages have stagnated over the same period. The colossal surplus value produced by the working class is appropriated by the richest in society, what the Occupy movement called the 1%.

The only way to put an end to capitalist anarchy is for the working class to take power into its own hands, expropriate the banks and big corporations and begin to plan the economy on democratic socialist lines. When the majority of society – those who really create its wealth – are able to decide the priorities, they will ensure that the resources of society are used for the satisfaction of real human needs not private gain. It will be possible to provide decent housing and healthcare, free education at all levels, and at the same time enormously enhance the productivity of labour.

This new socialist society would lay the basis for the disappearance of classes. In the words of Marx: “In place of the old bourgeois society, with its classes and class antagonisms, we shall have an association, in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all.”

## **The IMT**

For the reasons we have explained, no genuine mass International exists at present. What was the IV International was destroyed by the mistakes of the leaders after Trotsky’s assassination, and in effect is only alive in the ideas, methods and programme defended by the International Marxist Tendency.

People everywhere are sick and tired of the present situation. There is a burning desire for change. Mass protest movements like Occupy were an expression of this, but at the same time it exposed the limitations of purely spontaneous movements. The bankers and capitalists maintained a firm control of the state, the protests died down and everything remained as before.

The central problem can be simply stated. It is a problem of leadership. In 1938 Leon Trotsky stated that the crisis of humanity can be reduced to the crisis of the proletarian leadership. That completely sums up the present situation. It is an irony of history that the leaders of the mass workers’ parties are clinging to decrepit capitalism and the market even when they are collapsing before our eyes. The

workers and youth have done everything in their power to change society. But they can find no organized expression for their efforts. At every step they find their path blocked by the old bureaucratic organizations and leaderships that have long ago abandoned any pretence to stand for socialism.

What sets the International Marxist Tendency (IMT) apart from all the other tendencies that claim to be Trotskyists is, on the one hand, our painstaking attitude to theory, on the other, our approach towards the mass organisations. As opposed to all the other groups we take as our starting point the fact that when the workers move into action, they will not go towards some small grouping on the fringes of the Labour movement. In the founding document of our movement Marx and Engels explained that “the Communists do not form a separate party opposed to the other working-class parties”. They explained that:

“The Communists are distinguished from the other working-class parties by this only: 1. In the national struggles of the proletarians of the different countries, they point out and bring to the front the common interests of the entire proletariat, independently of all nationality. 2. In the various stages of development which the struggle of the working class against the bourgeoisie has to pass through, they always and everywhere represent the interests of the movement as a whole.” (The Communist Manifesto, Proletarians and Communists)

These words remain as true today as when they were written. The task of Marxists is not to proclaim the revolutionary party and International in words but to build them in practice. For this, two things are necessary: the fight for revolutionary theory and the education of Marxist cadres and a firm orientation towards the working class and its mass organizations.

The International will not be built by merely proclaiming it. It will only be built on the basis of events, as the Communist International was built on the basis of the experience of the masses in the stormy period of 1914-1920. Great events are necessary to educate the masses in the necessity of a revolutionary transformation of society. But in addition to events, we need to create an organization with clear ideas and solid roots in the masses on a world scale.

Our task is to participate in the class struggle shoulder to shoulder with the rest of our class, to go through all its experiences and at every juncture to explain the need for the socialist transformation of society. Only by winning, first the most active and conscious elements of the proletarian vanguard and the youth will it be possible to reach the masses who remain under the influence of the reformist Labour bureaucracy. In 1917, when they were in a minority in the Soviets, Lenin gave the following advice to the Bolsheviks: “Patiently explain!” That is very good advice.

What is needed is something more than solidarity campaigns, demonstrations and occupations. What is needed is the building of a revolutionary International that is capable of giving an organized expression and political guidance to the struggle against imperialism and capitalism, for socialism. That is the task we have set before us.

From small beginnings the IMT is now working in more than 30 countries. Our website, [www.marxist.com](http://www.marxist.com) (In Defence of Marxism) is the most successful and widely read in the world with millions of visits each year. From Brazil to the USA and Canada, from Greece to Venezuela, from Mexico to Britain and France, the IMT is building the forces of Marxism. In Pakistan, under the most difficult conditions imaginable, we have built an organization of thousands of the best workers and youth. This is a great achievement but it is only the beginning.

We appeal to every worker and youth who agrees with this aim to help us to achieve our final goal: the victory of international socialism.

- Against capitalism and imperialism!
- For the socialist transformation of society!
- [Join Socialist Appeal and the IMT in the fight for international socialism!](#)
- Workers of the world unite!

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