

COMMENTARY / WORLD

## Labor's battle against exploitation by capital, 150 years ago and today

BY MARCELLO MUSTO  
SPECIAL TO THE JAPAN TIMES

Sep 29, 2014

**TORONTO** – On Sept. 28, 1864, the International Working Men's Association was founded in London. It became the prototype of all organizations of the Labor movement, which both reformists and revolutionaries subsequently took to be their point of reference.

Very quickly, the International aroused passions all over Europe. Thanks to its activity, workers were able to gain a clearer understanding of the mechanisms of the capitalist mode of production, to become more aware of their own strength and to develop new and more advanced forms of struggle for their rights and interests.

The 150th anniversary of the International, on contrary, takes place in a very different context. The world of labor has suffered an epochal defeat and is in the midst of a deep crisis.

After a long period of neoliberal policies almost everywhere in the world, the system against which workers fought, and won important victories, has returned to become more exploitative.

Decades of assault on the rights of workers have compelled labor organizations to seek new ways forward — to discover avenues of collaboration and solidarity that can again make gains against the enormous power of globalized capital.

As before, workers must discover how to turn the power of their numbers and commitment into a force that will realize for them substantial social and economic benefits. The lessons of the International can help to reverse the trend.

The workers' organizations that founded the International were something of a motley grouping. The central driving force was British trade unionism, whose leaders largely conceived the International as an instrument to block the importation of manpower from abroad in the event of strikes.

Another significant force in the organization were “mutualists,” a moderate tendency — long dominant in France — inspired by the theories of Pierre-Joseph Proudhon.

The third group in importance were the communists surrounding the figure of Karl Marx.

The ranks of the International included many workers inspired by utopian theories and exiles having vaguely democratic ideas.

Securing the cohabitation of all these currents in the same organization was Marx's great political accomplishment. His talents enabled him to reconcile the seemingly irreconcilable, ensuring that the International did not swiftly follow the many previous workers' associations down the path to oblivion.

It was Marx who gave a clear purpose to the International and who achieved a nonexclusionary, yet firmly working class-based, political program that won it mass support beyond sectarianism. The political soul of its General Council was always Marx: He drafted all its main resolutions.

The late 1860s and early 1870s were a period rife with social conflicts. Many workers who took part in protest actions decided to make contact with the International, whose reputation quickly spread widely.

Across Europe, the Association increased the number of its members and developed an efficient organizational structure. It reached, moreover, the other side of the Atlantic through the efforts of immigrants to the United States.

Thus, for all the difficulties bound up with a diversity of nationalities, languages and political cultures, the International managed to achieve unity and coordination across a wide range of organizations and spontaneous struggles. Its greatest merit was to demonstrate the crucial importance of class solidarity and international cooperation.

When the International dissolved itself in 1872, it was a very different organization from what it had been at the time of its foundation: Reformists no longer constituted the bulk of the organization, and anti-capitalism had become the political line of the whole Association (including recently formed tendencies such as the anarchism led by Mikhail Bakunin).

The wider picture, too, was radically different. The unification of Germany in 1871 confirmed the onset of a new age — evident also in the Italian unification and the Meiji Restoration in Japan — where the nation-state would become the central form of political, legal and territorial identity.

This placed a question mark over any supranational body that called for members to surrender a sizable share of political leadership.

In later decades, the workers' movement adopted a consistent socialist program, which expanded throughout Europe and then the rest of the world, and built new structures of supranational coordination.

Apart from the continuity of names (the Second International of Kautsky, from 1889-1916, the Third International of Lenin, from 1919 to 1943; or the Socialist International of the German Chancellor Willy Brandt, from 1951 to today), the various "Internationals" of socialist politics have referred — although in very different ways — to the legacy of the First International.

Thus, its revolutionary message proved extraordinarily fertile, producing results over time much greater than those achieved during its existence.

The International helped workers to grasp that the emancipation of labor could not be won in a single country but was a global objective.

It also spread an awareness in their ranks that they had to achieve the goal themselves through their own capacity for organization, rather than by delegating it to some other force, and that — here Marx's theoretical contribution was fundamental: It was essential to overcome the limits of the capitalist system itself, since improvements within it, although necessary to pursue, would not eliminate the exploitation of and social injustice toward workers.

Major political and economic shifts have succeeded one another over the past 25 years: the collapse of the Soviet bloc, the rise to prominence of ecological issues, social changes generated by globalization, and one of the biggest economic crises of capitalism in history that, according to International Labour Organization figures, has added another 27 million unemployed since 2008 to bring the total to more than 200 million.

Moreover, labor market “reforms” (a term that, with time, has changed its original progressive meaning) that have introduced, year after year, more “flexibility” and easier termination of workers have created deeper inequalities rather than supposed improvements in jobs. The current situation in many European countries, with alarming rates of unemployment, is paradigmatic of this failure.

Nevertheless, the global protest movements that have been recently active in most parts of the world have distinguished themselves so far by the very general character of their demand for social equality without giving sufficient thought to the new problems and radical changes in the world of work.

Indeed, in a slightly earlier period, a number of authors had put forward the thesis that the “end of work” was in sight. In this way, labor, having been a key protagonist throughout the 20th century, increasingly has become a weak and secondary player, with unions finding it more difficult to represent and organize younger or migrant workers, in an ever more flexible labor market, where jobs are insecure and increasingly stripped of rights.

Yet, if capitalist globalization has weakened the labor movement, it has also, in many ways, opened new avenues, through increased capacity for communication, that may facilitate workers’ international cooperation and solidarity.

With the recent crisis of capitalism — that has sharpened more than before the division between capital and labor — the political legacy of the organization founded in London in 1864 has regained profound relevance. Its lessons today are more timely than ever.

---

*Marcello Musto teaches sociological theory at York University, Toronto. He is a specialist in the thought of Karl Marx and the history of the labor movement. His latest book is titled “Workers Unite! The International 150 Years Later” (New York/London: Bloomsbury, 2014).*

---

In a time of both misinformation and too much information,  
quality journalism is more crucial than ever.  
By subscribing, you can help us get the story right.

**SUBSCRIBE** (/subscribe/?  
utm\_source=jto&utm\_medium=general-  
box&utm\_campaign=sub)  
**NOW**

---

[\(https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2022/02/26/business/japanese-companies-ukraine-russia-sanctions/\)](https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2022/02/26/business/japanese-companies-ukraine-russia-sanctions/)

## Sanctions war over Ukraine invasion triggers concern for some Japanese companies

[\(https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2022/02/26/business/japanese-companies-ukraine-russia-sanctions/\)](https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2022/02/26/business/japanese-companies-ukraine-russia-sanctions/)

---

[\(https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2022/02/26/world/russia-sanctions-elites-putin-ukraine/\)](https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2022/02/26/world/russia-sanctions-elites-putin-ukraine/)

## Russian billionaire jets and superyachts roam free as Ukraine attack rages

[\(https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2022/02/26/world/russia-sanctions-elites-putin-ukraine/\)](https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2022/02/26/world/russia-sanctions-elites-putin-ukraine/)