

On the Legacy of the International Working Men's Association after 150 Years

MARCELLO MUSTO INTERVIEWED BY
VESA OITTINEN

The International Working Men's Association (IWMA), nowadays better known as the First International, was founded in London in September 1864. Despite the importance of the event, there has not been much attention to its 150th anniversary. To an extent, this reflects the situation of the present day, with the hegemony of neoliberal politics and, conversely, the weakness of the left, that does not seem to be interested in its own history and the lessons that might be extracted from past experiences.

*Luckily, there are exceptions. Marcello Musto, an assistant professor of sociology at York University in Toronto, has contributed to two important presentations of the experience of the First International. Besides the book *The International after 150 Years: Labour Versus Capital, Then and Now* (Routledge, 2015), which has also been published as a special issue of *Socialism and Democracy*, he has also edited the first English-language anthology on the IWMA, *Workers Unite! The International 150 Years Later* (Bloomsbury, 2014), which was published simultaneously in Portuguese and Italian. It contains eighty documents and resolutions from the period of the two decades the International was active. Many of these texts are drafted by workers themselves collectively. Less than half of them are written by Marx or Engels, but they, too, are based on discussions of the General Council of the International. By presenting these original documents, the book provides a fascinating introduction to the first steps of the autonomous organization of the workers: what it was like and what kind of learning processes they went through. The experiences of the First International are again relevant in the present epoch of globalization, which resembles the last decades of the nineteenth century, also characterized by hectic growth of the world market.*

VESA OITTINEN (VO): You are known as a Marx scholar. But now you have published, on the occasion of the 150th anniversary, a book about the International, where Marx seems to play, if not a walk-on, only minor role. The book you have edited consists of documents, addresses,

VESA OITTINEN is Research Chief at the Aleksanteri Institute, University of Helsinki, Finland. His latest publications are *Dialectics of the Ideal: Evald Ilyenkov and Creative Soviet Marxism*, edited with Alex Levant (Brill, 2014) and “‘Marx ohne Bart?’ Spinoza in der sowjetischen Philosophie,” *Das Argument* 307 (2014).

and resolutions that have been drawn up collectively and published in the name of the entire body of the International or by different worker's organizations. So the International was not a "creation of Marx," as is often said?

MARCELLO MUSTO (MM): No, contrary to one of the myths of Marxism-Leninism, the International Working Men's Association (from now on, the "International") was not a "creation of Marx." Contrary to later fantasies that pictured Marx as the founder of the International, he was not even among the organizers of the meeting that took place at St. Martin's Hall on September 28, 1864. On that occasion, he sat "in a non-speaking capacity on the platform," as he recalled in a letter to his friend Engels.

The International was much more than a "creation" of a single individual—even though this individual was Karl Marx. It was a vast social and political movement for the emancipation of the working classes. And a movement whose fundamental rule (and distinction with previous organizations) was—and we should never forget this point—"that the emancipation of the working classes must be conquered by the working classes themselves."

But I have argued that Marx played a minor role only with the foundation of the International, not for the whole life of the organization! Marx immediately grasped the potential in the now famous event of St. Martin's Hall and worked hard to ensure that the new organization successfully carried out its mission. Thanks to the prestige attached to his name—but, again, at the time only in restricted circles (the representation of Marx as a god is something that was created decades later)—he was appointed to the thirty-four-member standing committee, where he soon gained sufficient trust to be given the task of writing the *Inaugural Address and the Provisional Statutes of the International*. In these fundamental texts, as in many others that followed, Marx drew on the best ideas of the various components of the International, while at the same time eliminating corporate inclinations and sectarian tones. He firmly linked economic and political struggle to each other, and made international thinking and international action an irreversible choice.

VO: To uphold a unity between so different elements must have been quite a task?

MM: Yes, I want to be clear on this issue. The maintenance of unity was grueling at times, especially as Marx's anti-capitalism was never the dominant political position within the organization (until 1868—once again despite the myth that has surrounded this organization for

decades); the majority of the components of the International were quite moderate.

To secure cohabitation of all the ideological tendencies and political currents that existed in the organization at the time, around a program so distant from the approaches with which each had started out, was Marx's great accomplishment. His political 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 Marx too who achieved a non-exclusionary, yet firmly class-based, political program that won it a mass character beyond all sectarianism.

The political soul of its General Council was always Marx: he drafted all its main resolutions and prepared all its congress reports. He was "the right man in the right place," as the German member of the IWMA's General Council, Johann Georg Eccarius, once put it.

In my Introduction to the volume, I stressed that it was mainly thanks to Marx's capacities that the International developed its function of political synthesis, unifying the various national contexts in a project of common struggle. But the International was, first of all, the workers' mobilizations in that period, not the "creation of a philosopher."

Beside the fundamental contribution of Marx, who changed the initial moderate political strategy of the organization into a coherent anti-capitalist platform, the achievements of the IWMA mirrored those of the labor movement of the time. The IWMA should not be considered as the arithmetic sum of the various sectarian groups, fighting each other to impose their ideas in the organization (although this was sometimes true, if we look at the story of the congresses). Workers' struggles played a big role in the definition of the political program of the IWMA, the basic condition of which was to preserve its internal *equilibrium*.

I'll give some examples. Some significant components of the IWMA (the majority of the French and the founders of the German Social Democratic Party) were, at the beginning, against the strike as a weapon of struggle. But, from late 1866 on, strikes intensified in many European countries, and their proliferation and positive results for workers convinced all the tendencies of the IWMA of the fact that strikes were a fundamental instrument of struggle. The contribution of real-life men and women, who brought capitalist production to a halt to demand their rights and social justice, shifted the balance of forces in the International and, more significantly, in society as a whole. A

similar example could be made regarding the participation of the labor movement in politics. Many tendencies of the IWMA were opposed to that possibility, arguing that workers should only fight for socio-economic improvements (and not in the political arena). Surely Marx contributed to that big step, but it was thanks to the Paris Commune that the IWMA, first, and the labor movement, more generally, realized that they had to create durable and well-organized forms of political association, in order to better fight against capitalism.

From these two examples, it can be seen that some of the important political turning points of the IWMA were the result of concrete mobilizations of workers, more than purely ideological battles among the various tendencies of the organization.

VO: So Marx had, after all, a strong impact on the International? And do you see any influence of Marx's practical work in the International and amongst the workers in his theoretical work? He was, after all, simultaneously putting his hand on *Capital*, whose first volume was published in 1867.

MM: Absolutely! But I believe we can say that also the International had a very positive impact on Marx, not only Marx on the International. Between 1864 and 1872, being completely and directly involved in workers' struggles, Marx was stimulated to develop and sometimes revise his ideas, to put old certainties up for discussion and ask himself new questions, and in particular to sharpen his critique of capitalism by drawing the broad outlines of a communist society. The orthodox Soviet view of Marx's role in the International, according to which he mechanically applied to the stage of history a political theory he had already forged in the confines of his study, is thus totally divorced from reality.

This is my position. I don't see any contradictions between considering the International for what it was (a big organization to which more than 150,000 workers were affiliated) and giving credit to Marx. On the contrary, in my opinion, among other things, this is the position that also gives more justice to Marx's intelligence.

VO: Might one thus say that the International was a "collective intellectual" in the sense of Gramsci?

MM: We can definitely use this expression. Gramsci's conception of "collective intellectual" is strictly related to the twentieth-century political party. But the International is an excellent example of the bond and political connection between masses and leading members (in its case, the General Council), or, in Gramsci's terms, of *compartecipazione attiva e consapevole* (active and conscious sharing). We must, however,

remain clear that this link was weak much of the time, for the instable and volatile organization that workers had at the time.

VO: However, the First International existed for a relatively short span of time, from 1864 to 1877. Was it thus a failure? The prevalent view is that the IWMA broke down because of insoluble contradictions between different currents and nationalities.

MM: The end of the International was surely accelerated by political conflicts and also some personal issues among its leaders. But it would be a very idealistic way of writing history, if one would argue that the crisis of the International was due to the clash between Marx and Bakunin. Rather, it was the changes taking place in the world around it that rendered the International obsolete. The growth and transformation of the organizations of the workers' movement, the strengthening of the nation-state as a result of Italian and German unification, the expansion of the International in countries like Spain and Italy (where the economic and social conditions were very different from those in Britain or France), the repression following the Paris Commune: all these factors together made the original configuration of the International inappropriate to the new times.

Moreover, to respond to the first part of your question, it was not at all a failure. On the contrary, even though the International lasted for only few years, thanks to its activity workers were able to: (1) gain a clearer understanding of the mechanisms of the capitalist mode of production; (2) become more aware of their own strength; and (3) develop new and more advanced forms of struggle for their rights and interests. I think that its revolutionary message proved extraordinarily fertile, producing results over time much greater than those achieved during its existence—that's why the actual length of its life does not really matter.

Another point to keep in mind is that, despite 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.

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, though necessary to pursue, would never eliminate exploitation and social injustice.

I wish we could have something similar today! But, of course, it is not merely a question of political organization.

VO: In writing down his *Critique of the Gotha Program*, Marx pointed to the experience of the International and could state that the program of the German Social Democrats was in some respects a step back from the level already reached by the International. The German socialists were heavily influenced by Lassalle, but his ideas do not seem to have had much influence on the International.

MM: Yes, it is true. In the end, the program of the International was coherently anti-capitalist, while the Gotha program of 1875 was a confused mix of Lassalleism and the limited Marxism of Liebknecht. But there is much more to say about the role played (or perhaps better to say “non-played”) by German social democrats in the International.

The General Association of German Workers, the first workers’ party in history, was founded in 1863 and led by Lassalle’s disciple Johann Baptist von Schweitzer; it never affiliated to the International but orbited around it, was hostile to trade unionism, and conceived of political action in rigidly national terms. It followed a line of ambivalent dialogue with Otto von Bismarck and showed little or no interest in the International during the early years of its existence; this indifference was shared by Wilhelm Liebknecht, who led the Social Democratic Workers’ Party of Germany, despite his political proximity to Marx.

Despite the existence of two political organizations of the workers’ movement, there was little enthusiasm for the International and few requests to affiliate to it. During its first three years, German militants virtually ignored its existence, fearing persecution at the hands of the authorities. But the picture changed somewhat after 1868, as the fame and successes of the International multiplied across Europe. From that point on, both of the rival parties aspired to represent its German wing. In the struggle against the Lassalleans, Liebknecht tried to play on the closeness of his organization to Marx’s positions, but the affiliation of the Social Democratic Workers’ Party of Germany to the International was more formal (or “purely platonic,” as Engels put it) than real, with a minimal material and ideological commitment. Of the 10,000 or so members registered within a year of its foundation, only a few hundred joined the International on an individual basis (a procedure allowed under the Prussian Combination Laws). The weak internationalism of the Germans therefore weighed more heavily than any legal aspects,

and it declined still further in the second half of 1870 as the movement became more preoccupied with internal matters.

VO: And what about Bakunin? It has been said that Marx and Engels tried to impose authoritarian ideas on the organization of the International. You seem, however, to evaluate Bakunin's role more positively than the received Marxist-Leninist historiography used to do.

MM: That is anarchist propaganda. If there was an authoritarian culture in the International it was that of Bakunin. Marx and Engels, or other leaders of the International (including Bakunin, of course) tried to make their ideas hegemonic. But there is nothing strange with that. After the Paris Commune, for example, Marx wanted to create durable and well-organized forms of political association in every country where the International existed because he believed that the struggle should have expanded from the economic sphere to the political sphere (the conquest of power in order to better fight capitalism), not—obviously—because he was an authoritarian!

At the same time, one cannot say that Bakunin was not a socialist. Although he had in common with Proudhon an intransigent opposition to any form of political authority, especially in the direct form of the state, it would be quite wrong to tar him with the same brush as Proudhonian mutualists. Whereas the latter had in effect abstained from all political activity, which weighed heavily on the early years of the International, the autonomists fought for “a politics of social revolution, the destruction of bourgeois politics and the state.” It should be recognized that they were among the revolutionary components of the International, and that they offered an interesting critical contribution on the questions of political power, the State, and bureaucracy.

VO: The age when the International was active, was also an era of globalization on a scale not previously experienced. Today, we live in an analogous era, with ever-accelerating globalization processes, but we do not have an International. Do you think such an organization is again needed, or are there other ways and possibilities for resistance to capital?

MM: The 150th anniversary of the International, on the 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 had 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, although the political forms of organization has to be partly reinvented, as we cannot imagine to reproduce a scheme used 150 years ago.

Major political and economic shifts have succeeded one another over the past twenty-five 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 global total to more than 200 million. Moreover, labor market “reforms” (a term that, with the time, has changed its original progressive meaning), that have introduced, year after year, more “flexibility” and easier termination of workers, have created deeper inequalities—not supposed improvements in terms of jobs. The current situation of many European countries, with alarming rates of unemployment, is paradigmatic of this failure.

Nevertheless, the global protest movements that have recently been 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 twentieth 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—which 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, and its lessons are today more timely than ever.