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Marcello Musto

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History and political legacy of the international working men's association

Marcello Musto

Department of Sociology, York University, Toronto, Canada

ABSTRACT

The International Working Men's Association was the prototype of all organizations of the Labor movement. It helped workers to grasp that the emancipation of labour could not be won in a single country but was a global objective. The International 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 it also promoted the idea that it was essential to overcome the capitalist system itself, since improvements within it, though necessary to pursue, would not eliminate exploitation and social injustice.

This article reconsiders the main issues broached or advanced by the International – such as internationalism, labor rights, and the critique of capitalism – in light of present-day concerns. It also includes relevant information about structure and membership of the International, and presents an overview of the main theoretical debates, and discussions about political organization, that have agitated this organization throughout its intense history. With the recent crisis of capitalism, the political legacy of the organization founded in London in 1864 has regained profound relevance, and its lessons are today more timely than ever.

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The birth of internationalism

On 28 September 1864, St. Martin's Hall, in the heart of London, was packed to overflowing with some two thousand workers. They had come to attend a meeting called by English trade union leaders and a small group of companions from the Continent.¹ This meeting gave birth to the prototype of all the main organizations of the workers' movement: the International Working Men's Association.² Quickly, the International aroused passions all over Europe. It made class solidarity a shared ideal and inspired large numbers of women and men to struggle for the most radical of goals: changing the world. 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, more advanced forms of struggle for their rights.

When it was founded, the central driving force of the International was British trade unionism, the leaders of which were mainly interested in economic questions. They fought to improve the workers' conditions, but without calling capitalism into question. Hence, they conceived the International primarily as an instrument to prevent the import of manpower from abroad in the event of strikes. Then, there were the mutualists, long dominant in France. In keeping with the theories of Pierre-Joseph Proudhon (1809–1865), they opposed any working-class involvement in politics, and the strike as a weapon of struggle. The third group in importance were the communists, opposing the

existing system of production and espousing the necessity of political action to overthrow it. At its founding, the ranks of the International also included numbers of workers inspired by utopian theories, and exiles having vaguely democratic ideas and cross-class conception who considered the International as an instrument for the issuing of general appeals for the liberation of oppressed peoples.³

Securing the cohabitation of all these currents in the International, around a programme so distant from the approaches with which each had started out, was Karl Marx's (1818–1883) great political accomplishment. His political talents enabled him to reconcile the seemingly irreconcilable (Collins & Abramsky, 1965, p. 34). It was Marx who gave a clear purpose to the International, and who achieved a non-exclusionary, yet firmly working class-based, political programme that won it mass support beyond sectarianism. The political soul of its General Council was always Marx: he drafted all its main resolutions and prepared almost all its congress reports.

Nevertheless, despite the impression created by the Soviet Union's propaganda and by the majority of the ideologically driven scholars who wrote on the International, this organization was much more than a single individual, even one as brilliant as Marx. The International was a vast social and political movement for the emancipation of the working classes; not, as it has often been written, the 'creation of Marx'. It was made possible first of all by the labour movement's struggles in the 1860s. One of its basic rules – and the fundamental distinction from previous labor organizations – was 'that the emancipation of the working classes must be conquered by the working classes themselves' (Engels & Marx, 2014, p. 265). The orthodox, dogmatic view of Marx's role in the International, according to which he mechanically applied to the stage of history a political theory already forged in the confines of his study, is totally divorced from the historical reality.⁴

Considering several recent publications on this subject appeared after the 150th anniversary (1864–2014) of the first transnational organization of the labor movement (see Bensimon et al., 2018; Musto, 2014), this article reconstructs the formation of the political program of the International in relation to the main issues it broached or advanced – such as internationalism, labor rights, and the critique of capitalism. Moreover, it includes relevant information about structure and membership of the International and offers an overview of the main theoretical debates, and discussions about political organization, that have agitated this organization throughout its intense short but very history. Together with other volumes published in the last decade,⁵ it contributes to renew the image of the International and to demonstrate that, differently how it has been often presented, this organization was constituted by a wide range of working-class groups and socialist theorists. Finally, in connection with recent secondary literature (see Comninel et al., 2015), this article argues why the political legacy of the International might regained profound relevance for the labor movement today and why its lessons are today more timely than ever.

The organizational structure of the international

During its lifetime and in subsequent decades, the International was depicted as a vast, financially powerful organization. The size of its membership was always overestimated, whether because of imperfect knowledge or because some of its leaders exaggerated the real situation or because opponents were looking for a pretext to justify a brutal crackdown.⁶

In reality, the membership figures were much lower. It has always been difficult to arrive at even approximate estimates, and that was true for its own leaders and those who studied it most closely.⁷ But the present state of research allows the hypothesis that, at its peak in 1871–1872, the tally reached more than 150,000:50,000 in Britain, more than 30,000 in both France and Belgium, 6,000 in Switzerland, about 30,000 in Spain, 25,000 in Italy, more than 10,000 in Germany (but mostly members of the Social Democratic Workers' Party), plus a few thousand each in a number of other European countries, 4,000 in the United States,⁸ and a few hundred in both Russia and Argentina.

In those times, when there was a dearth of effective working-class organizations apart from the English trade unions and the General Association of German Workers, such figures were certainly sizeable. It should also be borne in mind that, throughout its existence, the International was recognized as a legal organization only in Britain, Switzerland, Belgium, and the United States. In other countries where it had a solid presence (France, Spain, Italy), it was on the margins of legality for a number of years, and its members were subject to persecution. To join the International meant breaking the law in the 39 states of the German Confederation, and the few members in the Austro-Hungarian Empire were forced to operate in clandestine forms. On the other hand, the Association had a remarkable capacity to weld its components into a cohesive whole. Within a couple of years from its birth, it had succeeded in federating hundreds of workers' societies. From the end of 1868, thanks to propaganda conducted by followers of Mikhail Bakunin (1814–1876), other societies were added in Spain, and after the Paris Commune sections sprang up also in Italy, Holland, Denmark, and Portugal. The development of the International was doubtless uneven: while it was growing in some countries, it was elsewhere remaining level or falling back under the blows of repression. Yet a strong sense of belonging prevailed among those who joined the International for even a short time. When the cycle of struggles in which they had taken part came to an end, and adversity and personal hardship forced them to take a distance, they retained the bonds of class solidarity and responded as best they could to the call for a rally, the words of a poster or the unfurling of the red flag of struggle, in the name of an organization that had sustained them in their hour of need (see Braunthal, 1966, p. 116).

Members of the International, however, comprised only a small part of the total workforce. In Paris, they never numbered more than 10,000, and in other capital cities such as Rome, Vienna, or Berlin they were rare birds indeed. Another aspect is the character of the workers who joined the International: it was supposed to be the organization of wage-labourers, but very few actually became members. The main influx came from construction workers in England, textile workers in Belgium, and various types of artisans in France and Switzerland.

In Britain, with the sole exception of steelworkers, the International always had a sparse presence among the industrial proletariat (see Collins & Abramsky, 1965, p. 70; D'Hondt, 1968, p. 475) and nowhere did the latter ever form a majority. The other great limitation was the failure to draw in unskilled labour (see Collins & Abramsky, 1965, p. 289). The great majority of members of the International came from tailoring, clothing, shoemaking and cabinet-making – that is, from sectors of the working class that were then the best organized and the most class-conscious. Moreover, the International remained an organization of employed workers; the jobless never became part of it.

From an organizational point of view, despite the considerable autonomy granted to federations and local sections, the International always retained a locus of political leadership. Its General Council was the body that worked out a unifying synthesis of the various tendencies and issued guidelines for the organization as a whole. From October 1864 until August 1872, it met with great regularity, as many as 385 times. Its members debated a wide range of issues, such as: working conditions, the effects of new machinery, support for strikes, the role and importance of trade unions, the Irish question, various foreign policy matters, and, of course, how to build the society of the future. The General Council was also responsible for drafting the documents of the International: circulars, letters, and resolutions for current purposes; special manifestos, addresses, and appeals in particular circumstances (see Haupt, 1978, p. 78).

The politics of the international

The lack of synchrony between the key organizational junctures and the main political events in the life of the International makes it difficult to reconstruct its history in chronological sequence. In terms of organization, the principal stages were: 1) the birth of the International (1864–1866), from its foundation to the First Congress; 2) the period of expansion (1866–1870); 3) the revolutionary surge and the repression following the Paris Commune (1871–1872); and 4) the split and crisis (1872–1877).

In terms of its theoretical development, however, the principal stages were: 1) the initial debate among its various components and the laying of its own foundations (1864–1865); 2) the struggle for hegemony between collectivists and mutualists (1866–1869); and 3) the clash between centralists and autonomists (1870–1877).

In September 1866, the city of Geneva hosted the first congress of the International, with 60 delegates from Britain, France, Germany, and Switzerland. By then the Association could point to a very favourable balance-sheet of the two years since its foundation, having rallied to its banner more than 100 trade unions and political organizations. Those taking part in the congress essentially divided into two blocs. The first, consisting of the British delegates, the few Germans and a majority of the Swiss, followed the directives of the General Council drawn up by Marx (who was not present in Geneva). The second, comprising the French delegates and some of the French-speaking Swiss, was made up of mutualists. At that time, in fact, moderate positions were prevalent in the International, and the mutualists, led by the Parisian Henri Tolain (1828–1897), envisaged a society in which the worker would be at once producer, capitalist, and consumer. They regarded the granting of free credit as a decisive measure for the transformation of society; considered women's labour to be objectionable from both an ethical and a social point of view; and opposed any interference by the state in work relations (including legislation to reduce the working day to eight hours) on the grounds that it would threaten the private relationship between workers and employers and strengthen the system currently in force. Basing themselves on resolutions prepared by Marx, the General Council leaders succeeded in marginalizing the numerically strong contingent of mutualists at the congress, and obtained votes in favour of state intervention.

From late 1866 on, strikes intensified in many countries and formed the core of a new and important wave of mobilizations. The first major struggle to be won with the International's support was the Parisian bronze workers' strike of the winter of 1867. Also successful in their outcome were the ironworkers' strike of Marchienne, in Belgium, the long dispute in the Provençal mineral basin, and Geneva building workers' strike. The scenario was the same in each of these events: workers in other countries raised funds in support of the strikers and agreed not to accept work that would have turned them into industrial mercenaries; as a result, the bosses were forced to compromise on many of the strikers' demands. These advances were greatly favoured by the diffusion of newspapers that either sympathized with the ideas of the International, or were veritable organs of the General Council. They contributed to the development of class consciousness and the rapid circulation of news concerning the activity of the International.

Thus, for all the difficulties bound up with the 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 absolute need for class solidarity and international cooperation, moving decisively beyond the partial character of the initial objectives and strategies.

From 1867 on, strengthened by success in achieving these goals, by increased membership and by a more efficient organization, the International made advances all over Continental Europe. It was its breakthrough year in France in particular, where the bronze workers' strike had the same knock-on effect that the London tailors' strike had produced in England. But Britain was still the country where the International had its greatest presence. In the course of 1867, the affiliation of another dozen organizations took the membership to a good 50,000 – an impressive figure if we bear in mind that it was reached in just two years, and that the total unionized workforce was then roughly 800,000 (see Collins, 1968, p. 34).

This was the backdrop to the Lausanne congress of September 1867, where the International assembled with a new strength that had come from continuing broad-based expansion. There were 64 delegates⁹ from 6 countries (with one each from Belgium and Italy) attending this event and many of its most relevant debates were focused on Proudhonian themes (such as the cooperative movement and alternative uses of credit) dear to the strongly represented mutualists.

Right from the earliest days of the International, Proudhon's ideas were hegemonic in France, French-speaking Switzerland, Wallonia, and the city of Brussels. His disciples, particularly Tolain and Ernest Édouard Fribourg (1834–1903), succeeded in making a mark with their positions on the founding meeting in 1864, the London Conference of 1865, and the Geneva and Lausanne Congresses. For four years, the mutualists were the most moderate wing of the International. The British trade unions, which constituted the majority, did not share Marx's anticapitalism, but nor did they have the same pull on the policies of the organization that the followers of Proudhon were able to exercise. Basing themselves on the theories of the French anarchist, the mutualists argued that the economic emancipation of the workers would be achieved through the founding of producer cooperatives and a central People's Bank. Resolutely hostile to state intervention in any field, they opposed socialization of the land and the means of production as well as any use of the strike weapon. In 1868, for example, there were still many sections of the International that attached a negative, anti-economic value to this method of struggle. The *Report of the Liège Section on Strikes* was emblematic in this regard: 'The strike is a struggle. It therefore increases the bubbling of hatred between the people and the bourgeoisie, separating ever further two classes that should merge and unite with each other' (Maréchal, 1962, p. 268). The distance from the positions and theses of the General Council could scarcely have been greater.

The Brussels Congress, held in September 1868, with the participation of 99 delegates from France, Britain, Switzerland, Germany, Spain (one delegate), and Belgium (55 in total),¹⁰ finally clipped the wings of the mutualists. The highpoint came when the assembly approved César De Paepe's (1841–1890) proposal on the socialization of the means of production – a decisive step forward in defining the economic basis of socialism, no longer simply in the writings of particular intellectuals but in the programme of a great transnational organization. As regards the mines and transport, the congress declared:

- (1) That the quarries, collieries, and other mines, as well as the railways, ought in a normal state of society to belong to the community represented by the state, a state itself subject to the laws of justice.
- (2) That the quarries, collieries, and other mines, and Railways, be let by the state, not to companies of capitalists as at present, but to companies of working men bound by contract to guarantee to society the rational and scientific working of the railways, and so on, at a price as nearly as possible approximate to the working expense. The same contract ought to reserve to the state the right to verify the accounts of the companies, so as to present the possibility of any reconstitution of monopolies. A second contract ought to guarantee the mutual right of each member of the companies in respect to his fellow workmen.

As to landed property, it was agreed that:

the economical development of modern society will create the social necessity of converting arable land into the common property of society, and of letting the soil on behalf of the state to agricultural companies under conditions analogous to those stated in regard to mines and railways.

And similar considerations were applied to the canals, roads and telegraphs: 'Considering that the roads and other means of communication require a common social direction, the Congress thinks they ought to remain the common property of society'. Finally, some interesting points were made about the environment:

Considering that the abandonment of forests to private individuals causes the destruction of woods necessary for the conservation of springs, and, as a matter of course, of the good qualities of the soil, as well as the health and lives of the population, the Congress thinks that the forests ought to remain the property of society (see Marx, 2014c, p. 92)

In Brussels, then, the International made its first clear pronouncement on the socialization of the means of production by state authorities.¹¹ This marked an important victory for the General Council and the first appearance of socialist principles in the political programme of a major workers' organization.

In addition, the congress again discussed the question of war. A motion presented by Becker, which Marx later summarized in the published resolutions of the congress, stated:

The workers alone have an evident logical interest in finally abolishing all war, both economic and political, individual and national, because in the end they always have to pay with their blood and their labour for the settling of accounts between the belligerents, regardless of whether they are on the winning or losing side. (Burgelin et al., 1962a, p. 403)

The workers were called upon to treat every war 'as a civil war' (Burgelin et al., 1962a, p. 403). De Paepe also suggested the use of the general strike (see De Paepe, 2014, pp. 230–231) – a proposal that Marx dismissed as 'nonsense' (Marx & Engels, 1988, p. 101), but which actually tended to develop a class consciousness capable of going beyond merely economic struggles.

If the collectivist turn of the International began at the Brussels Congress, it was the Basel Congress held the next year that consolidated it and eradicated Proudhonism even in its French homeland. This time there were 78 delegates at the congress, drawn not only from France, Switzerland, Germany, Britain and Belgium, but also, a clear sign of expansion, from Spain, Italy, and Austria, plus a representative from the National Labor Union in the United States.

The resolutions of the Brussels Congress on landed property were reaffirmed, with 54 votes in favour, 4 against, and 13 abstentions. Eleven of the French delegates – including Eugène Varlin (1838–1871), later a prominent figure in the Paris Commune¹² – even approved a new text that declared 'that society has the right to abolish individual ownership of the land and to make it part of the community' (Burgelin et al., 1962b, p. 74); 10 abstained and 4 (including Tolain) voted against. After Basel, the International in France was no longer mutualist.

The Basel Congress was also of interest because Mikhail Bakunin (1814–1876) took part in the proceedings as a delegate. Having failed to win the leadership of the League for Peace and Freedom, he had founded the International Alliance for Socialist Democracy in September 1868 in Geneva, and in December this had applied to join the International. The General Council initially turned down the request, on the grounds that the International Alliance for Socialist Democracy continued to be affiliated to another, parallel transnational structure, and that one of its objectives – 'the equalization of classes' (Bakunin, 1973, p. 174)¹³ – was radically different from a central pillar of the International, the abolition of classes. Shortly afterwards, however, the Alliance modified its programme and agreed to wind up its network of sections, many of which existed only in Bakunin's imagination anyway (see Carr, 1961, p. 392). On 28 July 1869, the 104-member Geneva section was accordingly admitted to the International.¹⁴ Marx knew Bakunin well enough, but he had underestimated the consequences of this step. For the influence of the famous Russian revolutionary rapidly increased in a number of Swiss, Spanish, and French sections (as it did in Italian ones after the Paris Commune), and at the Basel Congress, thanks to his charisma and forceful style of argument, he already managed to affect the outcome of its deliberations. The vote on the right of inheritance, for example, was the first occasion on which the delegates rejected a proposal of the General Council (Marx, 2014b, pp. 163–165). Having finally defeated the mutualists and laid the spectre of Proudhon to rest, Marx now had to confront a much tougher rival, who formed a new tendency – collectivist anarchism – and sought to win control of the organization.

The international and the Paris commune

The period from late Sixties to early Seventies was rich in social conflicts. Many workers who took part in protest actions decided to make contact with the International, whose reputation was spreading ever wider, and despite its limited resources the General Council never failed to respond with appeals for solidarity to its European sections and the organization of fund-raising.

Across Europe, the Association continued to increase the number of its members and to develop an efficient organizational structure. During this period, Bakunin's ideas began to spread in a number of cities, especially in Southern Europe. More symbolically significant still, at least for the hopes it initially awakened, was its new mooring on the other side of the Atlantic, where immigrants who had arrived in recent years began to establish the first sections of the International in the United States. However, the organization suffered from two handicaps at birth that it would never overcome. Despite repeated exhortations from the General Council in London, it was unable either to cut across the nationalist character of its various affiliated groups or to draw in workers born in the 'New World'. When the German, French, and Czech sections founded the Central Committee of the International for North America, in December 1870, it was unique in the history of the International in having only 'foreign-born' members. The most striking aspect of this anomaly was that the International in the United States never disposed of an English-language press organ. At the beginning of the 1870s, the International reached a total of 50 sections with a combined membership of 4,000, but this was still only a tiny proportion of the American industrial workforce of more than two million.

With this general background, the International made provisions for its fifth congress in September 1870. This was originally scheduled to be held in Paris, but repressive operations by the French government made the General Council opt instead for Mainz. Marx probably also thought that the greater number of German delegates close to his positions would help to stem the advance of the Bakuninists. But then the outbreak of the Franco-Prussian war, on 19 July 1870, left no choice but to call off the congress.

The conflict at the heart of Europe meant that the top priority now was to help the workers' movement express an independent position, far from the nationalist rhetoric of the time. In his *First Address on the Franco-Prussian War*, Marx called upon the French workers to drive out Charles Louis Bonaparte (1808–1873) and to obliterate the empire he had established eighteen years earlier. The German workers, for their part, were supposed to prevent the defeat of Bonaparte from turning into an attack on the French people:

in contrast to old society, with its economical miseries and its political delirium, a new society is springing up, whose international rule will be *Peace*, because its national ruler will be everywhere the same – Labour! The pioneer of that new society is the International Working Men's Association. (Marx, 2014a, p. 239)

Although Bakunin had urged the workers to turn patriotic war into revolutionary war (see Lehning, 1977, p. xvi.), the General Council of the International Working Men's Association in London initially opted for silence (see Musto, 2014, pp. 30–36). It charged Marx with the task of writing a text in the name of the International, but he delayed its publication for complicated, deeply held reasons. Well aware of the real relationship of forces on the ground as well as the weaknesses of the Paris Commune, born in March 1871, he knew that it was doomed to defeat. He had even tried to warn the French working class back in September 1870, in his *Second Address on the Franco-Prussian War*:

Any attempt at upsetting the new government in the present crisis, when the enemy is almost knocking at the doors of Paris, would be a desperate folly. The French workmen [...] must not allow themselves to be swayed by the national *souvenirs* of 1792 [...]. They have not to recapitulate the past, but to build up the future. Let them calmly and resolutely improve the opportunities of republican liberty, for the work of their own class organization. It will gift them with fresh herculean powers for the regeneration of France, and our common task – the emancipation of labour. Upon their energies and wisdom hinges the fate of the republic. (Marx, 1986, p. 269)

A fervid declaration hailing the victory of the Paris Commune would have risked creating false expectations among workers throughout Europe, eventually becoming a source of demoralization and distrust. Marx therefore decided to postpone delivery and stayed away from meetings of the General Council for several weeks. His grim forebodings soon proved all too well founded, and on 28 May, little more than two months after its proclamation, the Paris Commune was drowned in blood (see Cordillot, 2021). Two days later, he reappeared at the General Council with a manuscript

entitled *The Civil War in France* (Musto, 2021a). It was read and unanimously approved, then published over the names of all the Council members. The document had a huge impact over the next few weeks, greater than any other document of the workers' movement in the nineteenth century.

Despite Marx's passionate defense, and despite the claims both of reactionary opponents and of dogmatic Marxists eager to glorify the International,¹⁵ it is out of the question that the General Council actually pushed for the Parisian insurrection.¹⁶

After the defeat of the Paris Commune, the International was at the eye of the storm, held to blame for every act against the established order. 'When the great conflagration took place at Chicago', Marx mused with bitter irony, 'the telegraph round the world announced it as the infernal deed of the International; and it is really wonderful that to its demoniacal agency has not been attributed the hurricane ravaging the West Indies' (Institute of Marxism-Leninism, 1967, p. 461). Governments all over Europe sharpened their instruments of repression, fearing that other uprisings might follow the one in Paris. Adolphe Thiers (1797–1877) immediately outlawed the International and asked the British prime minister, William Ewart Gladstone (1809–1898), to follow his example; it was the first diplomatic exchange relating to a workers' organization. Pope Pius IX (1792–1878) exerted similar pressure on the Swiss government, arguing that it would be a serious mistake to continue tolerating 'that International sect which would like to treat the whole of Europe as it treated Paris. Those gentlemen [. . .] are to be feared, because they work on behalf of the eternal enemies of God and mankind' (Institute of Marxism-Leninism, 1968, p. 460). Giuseppe Mazzini (1805–1872) – who for a time had looked to the International with hope – had similar views and considered that principles of the International had become those of 'denial of God, [. . .] the fatherland, [. . .] and all individual property' (Mazzini, 1978, pp. 499–501).

Criticism of the Paris Commune even spread to sections of the workers' movement. Following the publication of *The Civil War in France*, both the trade union leader George Odger (1813–1877) and the old Chartist Benjamin Lucraft (1809–1897) resigned from the International, bending under the pressure of the hostile press campaign. However, no trade union withdrew its support for the organization – which suggests once again that the failure of the International to grow in Britain was due mainly to political apathy in the working class (Collins & Abramsky, 1965, p. 222).

Despite the bloody denouement in Paris and the wave of calumny and government repression elsewhere in Europe, the International grew stronger and more widely known in the wake of the Commune. For capitalists and the middle classes it represented a great threat to the established order, whereas for workers it fuelled hopes for a world without injustice, exploitation and alienation.¹⁷ The labour movement had an enormous vitality and that was apparent everywhere. Newspapers linked to the International increased in both number and overall sales. The insurrection of Paris fortified the workers' movement, impelling it to adopt more radical positions and to intensify its militancy. Once again, France showed that revolution was possible, clarifying its goal to be building a society different from that of capitalism, but also that, to achieve this, the workers would have to create durable and well-organized forms of political association. The next step to take then, as stated by Marx, was understanding that 'the economic movement [of the working class] and its political action are indissolubly united' (Marx & Engels, 2014b, p. 285). That led the International to push – at the London Conference of 1871 – for the foundation of a key instrument of the modern workers' movement: the political party.

The most important decision taken at the conference, for which it would be remembered later, was the approval of Édouard Vaillant's (1840–1915) Resolution IX. The leader of the Blanquists – whose residual forces had joined the International after the end of the Commune – proposed that the organization should be transformed into a centralized, disciplined party, under the leadership of the General Council. Despite some differences, particularly over the Blanquist position that a tightly organized nucleus of militants was sufficient for the revolution, Marx did not hesitate to form an

alliance with Vaillant's group: not only to strengthen the opposition to Bakuninite anarchism within the International, but above all to create a broader consensus for the changes deemed necessary in the new phase of the class struggle. The resolution passed in London therefore stated

that against this collective power of the propertied classes the working class cannot act, as a class, except by constituting itself into a political party, distinct from, and opposed to, all old parties formed by the propertied classes; that this constitution of the working class into a political party is indispensable in order to ensure the triumph of the social revolution and its ultimate end – the abolition of classes; and that the combination of forces which the working class has already effected by its economic struggles ought at the same time to serve as a lever for its struggles against the political power of landlords and capitalists. (Marx & Engels, 2014b, p. 285)

Centralists vs. Autonomists: the crisis of the international

Whereas the Geneva Congress of 1866 established the importance of trade unions, the London Conference of 1871 shifted the focus to the political party. For Marx, the self-emancipation of the working class required a long and arduous process – the polar opposite of the theories and practices in Sergei Nechaev's (1847–1882) *Catechism of a Revolutionary*, whose advocacy of secret societies was condemned by the delegates in London (see Burgelin et al., 1962b, p. 237; Marx, 1988, p. 23) but enthusiastically supported by Bakunin.

Marx was probably surprised when signs of restlessness and even rebellion against the political line of the General Council began to appear in many countries. In a number of federations, the decisions taken in London were judged an unacceptable encroachment on local political autonomy. The opposition to the General Council was varied in character and sometimes had mainly personal motives; a strange alchemy held it together and made leadership of the International very difficult.

The final battle came at the Fifth Congress of the International that took place in The Hague, in September 1872, and that was attended by 65 delegates from a total of 14 countries. The most important decision taken at The Hague was to incorporate Resolution IX of the 1871 London Conference into the statutes of the Association, as a new article 7a. Whereas the *Provisional Statutes* of 1864 had stated that 'the economic emancipation of the working class is the great end to which every political movement ought to be subordinate as a means' (Engels & Marx, 2014, p. 265), this insertion mirrored the new relationship of forces within the organization. Political struggle was now the necessary instrument for the transformation of society since: 'the lords of land and the lords of capital will always use their political privileges for the defence and perpetuation of their economic monopolies, and for the enslavement of labour. The conquest of political power has therefore become the great duty of the working class' (Engels & Marx, 2014, p. 268).

The International was now very different from how it had been at the time of its foundation: the radical-democratic components had walked out after being increasingly marginalized; the mutualists had been defeated and many converted; reformists no longer constituted the bulk of the organization (except in Britain); and anticapitalism had become the political line of the whole Association, as well as of recently formed tendencies such as the anarcho-collectivists. Moreover, although the years of the International had witnessed a degree of economic prosperity that in some cases made conditions less parlous, the workers understood that real change would come not through such palliatives but only through the end of human exploitation. They were also basing their struggles more and more on their own material needs, rather than the initiatives of particular groups to which they belonged.

The wider picture, too, was radically different. The unification of Germany in 1871 confirmed the onset of a new age in which the nation-state would be the central form of political, legal, and territorial identity; this placed a question mark over any supranational body that financed itself from membership dues in each individual country and required its members to surrender a sizeable share of their political leadership. At the same time, the growing differences between national movements and organizations made it extremely difficult for the General Council to produce a political synthesis

capable of satisfying the demands of all. It is true that, right from the beginning, the International had been an agglomeration of trade unions and political associations far from easy to reconcile with one another, and that these had represented sensibilities and political tendencies more than organizations properly so called. By 1872, however, the various components of the Association – and workers' struggles, more generally – had become much more clearly defined and structured. The legalization of the British trade unions had officially made them part of national political life; the Belgian Federation of the International was a ramified organization, with a central leadership capable of making significant, and autonomous, contributions to theory; Germany had two workers' parties, the Social Democratic Workers' Party of Germany and the General Association of German Workers, each with representation in parliament; the French workers, from Lyons to Paris, had already tried 'storming the heavens'; and the Spanish Federation had expanded to the point where it was on the verge of becoming a mass organization. Similar changes had occurred in other countries.¹⁸

The initial configuration of the International had thus become outmoded, just as its original mission had come to an end. The task was no longer to prepare for and organize Europe-wide support for strikes, nor to call congresses on the usefulness of trade unions or the need to socialize the land and the means of production. Such themes were now part of the collective heritage of the organization as a whole. After the Paris Commune, the real challenge for the workers' movement was a revolutionary one: how to organize in such a way as to end the capitalist mode of production and to overthrow the institutions of the bourgeois world. It was no longer a question of how to reform the existing society, but how to build a new one (see Freymond, 1962, p. x). For this new advance in the class struggle, Marx thought it indispensable to build working-class political parties in each country.

It was therefore decided that the General Council of the organization had to be transferred to New York and this resolution represented the end of the International.

Internationalism after the international

In later decades, the workers' movement adopted a consistent socialist programme, 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 from 1889 to 1916, the Third International from 1919 to 1943, or the Socialist International created in 1951), the various 'Internationals' of socialist politics have referred – although in very different ways – to the legacy of the so-called 'First' International. Thus, its revolutionary message proved extraordinarily fertile, producing results over time much greater than those achieved during its existence.

The International was the locus of some of the most famous debates of labour movement, such as that on Communism and Anarchy. The congresses of the International were also the place where, for the first time, a major transnational organization came to decisions about crucial issues, which had been discussed before its foundation that subsequently became strategic points in the political program of socialist movements across the world. Among these are: the indispensable function of trade unions; the socialization of land and means of productions; the importance of participating in elections, and doing this through independent parties of the working class; and the conception of war as an inevitable product of the capitalist system.

An abyss separates the hopes of those times from the mistrust so characteristic of our own, the anti-systemic spirit and solidarity of the age of the International from the ideological subordination and individualism of a world reshaped by neoliberal competition and privatization.

The world of labor has suffered an epochal defeat, and the Left is still in the midst of deep crisis (see Musto, 2017). After decades of neoliberal policies, we have returned to an exploitative system, similar from many points of view to that of the nineteenth century. Labor market 'reforms' – a term now shed of its original progressive meaning – have introduced more and more 'flexibility' with each passing year, creating deeper inequalities. Other major political and economic shifts have succeeded one another after the collapse of the Soviet bloc. Among them, there have been the social changes

generated by globalization, the ecological disasters produced by the present mode of production, the growing gulf between the wealthy exploitative few and the huge impoverished majority, one of the biggest economic crises of capitalism in history (the one erupted in 2008), the blustery winds of war, racism and chauvinism, and, most recently, the social consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Across North America, Europe, and many other regions of the world, economic and political instability is now a persistent feature of contemporary social life. For the first time since the end of the Cold War, there is a growing global consensus about the need to rethink the dominant organizing logic of contemporary society and to develop alternatives.¹⁹ In a context such as this, class solidarity is all the more indispensable. It was Marx himself who emphasized that the confrontation between workers – including between local and migrant workers (who are moreover discriminated) – is an essential element of the domination of the ruling classes.²⁰ New ways of organizing social conflict, political parties, and trade unions must certainly be invented, as we cannot reproduce schemes used 150 years ago. But the old lesson of the International that workers are defeated if they do not organize a common front of the exploited is still valid. Without that, our only horizon is a war between the poor and unbridled competition between individuals.

The barbarism of today's world order imposes upon the contemporary workers' movement the urgent need to reorganize itself on the basis of two key characteristics of the International: the multiplicity of its structure and radicalism in objectives. The aims of the organization founded in London in 1864 are today more timely than ever. To rise to the challenges of the present, however, the new International cannot evade the twin requirements of pluralism and anticapitalism.

Notes

- 1.. Sections of this article are based on Musto (2014).
- 2.. Near the end of the life of the International when considering for approval the revised Statute of the organization, members of The General Council of the First International raised the question of whether 'persons' should be substituted for 'men'. Friedrich Engels (1820–1895) responded that 'it was generally understood that men was a generic term including both sexes', making the point that the association was and had been open to women and men (Institute of Marxism-Leninism, 1968, p. 256). On the debates inside the International about gender issues, see (Schrupp, 1999).
- 3.. There were even members of secret societies favouring republicanism and/or socialism, such as the Lodge of Philadelphia, among the early members. See (Archer, 1997, pp. 33–35).
- 4.. Cf. Rubel (1974), p. 41: 'only the needs of mythology – if not mystification – could prompt them to see in this [political program] the consequence of "Marxism", that is, a fully realized doctrine, imposed from outside by an omniscient brain on an amorphous and inert mass of men in search of a social panacea'. Marx was essential to the International, but also the International had a very positive impact on Marx (see Musto, 2018, pp. 171–239). Being 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.
- 5.. See for example, (Cordillot, 2010; Léonard, 2011).
- 6.. The public prosecutor who arraigned some of its French leaders in June 1870 stated that the organization had more than 800,000 members in Europe. A year later, after the defeat of the Paris Commune, *The Times* put the total at two and a half million, and Oscar Testut (1840–unk.), the main person to study it in the conservative camp, predicted this would rise above five million. Cf. Musto (2014), p. 7.
- 7.. On this issue, Marx declared at a meeting of the General Council on 20 December 1870: 'respecting the list of members, it would be not well to publish what the real strength was, as the outside public always thought the active members much more numerous than they really were' (Institute of Marxism-Leninism, 1967, p. 96).
- 8.. For more information, see (Musto, 2014, pp. 64–8).
- 9.. Although the rules called for one delegate for each 500 members, actual representation depended upon the ability of delegates to attend.
- 10.. Eugène Dupont (1831–1881) represented a section from Naples, and the congress also saw the participation of Louis Auguste Blanqui (1805–1881), as an observer.
- 11.. This was possible thanks to the change in the Belgian sections, which moved to collectivism after their federal congress of July.
- 12.. On the contribution of Varlin to the International see (Rougerie, 2019).

- 13.. The translation provided in this book is inaccurate and misleading. In *Fictitious Splits in the International*, Engels and Marx quoted directly from Bakunin's original document ('l'égalisation politique, économique et sociale des classes'), see (Marx & Engels, 2014a, pp. 287–289).
- 14.. According to (Carr, 1961, p. 374): 'the wooden horse had entered the Trojan citadel'.
- 15.. See (Haupt, 1986), who warned against 'the reshaping of the reality of the Commune in order to make it conform to an image transfigured by ideology', p. 25.
- 16.. Marx himself later pointed out that 'the majority of the Commune was in no sense socialist, nor could it have been' (Marx & Engels, 1992, p. 66).
- 17.. On Marx critique of alienation and capitalist mode of production, see (Musto, Musto, 2012, and Musto 2021b).
- 18.. On the conditions of the Italian labour movement at the time cf. Gianni, 2008. In that period, the International also started to get affiliations outside of Europe. On the development of the organization in Argentina see (Tarcus, 2007).
- 19.. Over the past decade, there has been a renewed interest among scholars of social and political thought in theorizing economic justice and alternative socio-economic ideas and Routledge has recently launched the book series *Critiques and Alternatives to Capitalism*.
- 20.. For a critical response to those who oppose migration and claim to have a left-wing political position, see (Basso, 2021).

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Notes on contributor

Marcello Musto is Professor of Sociology at York University (Toronto – Canada). Among his authored books there are *Another Marx: Early Manuscripts to the International* (Bloomsbury, 2018); and *The Last Years of Karl Marx: An Intellectual Biography* (Stanford University Press, 2020). Among his edited volumes there are *The Marx Revival: Key Concepts and New Interpretations* (Cambridge University Press, 2020); and *Karl Marx's Writings on Alienation* (Palgrave, 2021). His writings – available at www.marcellomusto.org – have been published worldwide in twenty-five languages.

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