

# Introduction

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## I Opening steps

On 28 September 1864, St Martin's Hall in the very heart of London was packed to overflowing with some 2,000 workmen. They had come to attend a meeting called by English trade union leaders and a small group of workers from the Continent: the advance notices had spoken of a 'deputation organized by the workmen of Paris', which would 'deliver their reply to the Address of their English brethren, and submit a plan for a better understanding between the peoples'.<sup>1</sup> In fact, when a number of French and English workers' organizations had met in London a year earlier, in July 1863, to express solidarity with the Polish people against Tsarist occupation, they had also declared what they saw as the key objectives for the working-class movement. The preparatory *Address of English to French Workmen*, drafted by the prominent union leader George Odger (1813–77) and published in the bi-weekly *The Bee-Hive*, stated:

A fraternity of peoples is highly necessary for the cause of labour, for we find that whenever we attempt to better our social condition by reducing the hours of toil, or by raising the price of labour, our employers threaten us with bringing over Frenchmen, Germans, Belgians and others to do our work at a reduced rate of wages; and we are sorry to say that this has been done, though not from any desire on the part of our continental brethren to injure us, but through a want of regular and systematic communication between the industrial classes of all countries. Our aim is to bring up the

<sup>1</sup> David Ryazanov, 'Zur Geschichte der Ersten Internationale.' *Marx-Engels Archiv I* (1925): 171.

wages of the ill-paid to as near a level as possible with that of those who are better remunerated, and not to allow our employers to play us off one against the other, and so drag us down to the lowest possible condition, suitable to their avaricious bargaining.<sup>2</sup>

The organizers of this initiative did not imagine – nor could they have foreseen – what it would lead to shortly afterwards. Their idea was to build an international forum where the main problems affecting workers could be examined and discussed, but this did not include the actual founding of an organization to coordinate the trade union and political action of the working class. Similarly, their ideology was initially permeated with general ethical-humanitarian elements, such as the importance of fraternity among peoples and world peace, rather than class conflict and clearly defined political objectives. Because of these limitations, the meeting at St Martin's Hall might have been just another of those vaguely democratic initiatives of the period with no real follow-through. But in reality it gave birth to the prototype of all organizations of the workers' movement, which both reformists and revolutionaries would subsequently take as their point of reference: the International Working Men's Association.<sup>3</sup>

It was soon arousing passions all over Europe. It made class solidarity a shared ideal and inspired large numbers of men and women to struggle for the most radical of goals: changing the world. Thus, on the occasion of the Third Congress of the International, held in Brussels in 1868, the leader writer of *The Times* accurately identified the scope of the project:

It is not ... a mere improvement that is contemplated, but nothing less than a regeneration, and that not of one nation only, but of mankind. This is certainly the most extensive aim ever contemplated by any institution, with the exception, perhaps, of the Christian Church. To be brief, this is the programme of the International Workingmen's Association.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 172.

<sup>3</sup> Near the end of the life of the International when considering for approval the revised Statute of the organization, members of the GC raised the question of whether 'persons' should be substituted for 'men'. Friedrich Engels (1820–95) 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, GC, V, p. 256.

<sup>4</sup> Quoted in G. M. Stekloff, *History of the First International*. New York: Russell & Russell, 1968 [1928], p. ii.

Thanks to the International, the workers' movement was able to gain a clearer understanding of the mechanisms of the capitalist mode of production, to become more aware of its own strength, and to develop new and more advanced forms of struggle. The organization resonated far beyond the frontiers of Europe, generating hope that a different world was possible among the artisans of Buenos Aires, the early workers' associations in Calcutta, and even the labour groups in Australia and New Zealand that applied to join it.

Conversely, news of its founding inspired horror in the ruling classes. The idea that the workers too wanted to play an active role in history sent shivers down their spine, and many a government set its sights on eradicating the International and harried it with all the means at its disposal.

## II The right man in the right place

The workers' organizations that founded the International were something of a motley. The central driving force was British trade unionism, whose leaders – nearly all reformist in their worldview – were mainly interested in economic questions; they fought to improve the workers' conditions, but without calling capitalism into question. Hence they conceived of the International as an instrument that might favour their objectives, by preventing the import of manpower from abroad in the event of strikes.

Another significant force in the organization was the mutualists, long dominant in France but strong also in Belgium and French-speaking Switzerland. In keeping with the theories of Pierre-Joseph Proudhon (1809–65), they were opposed to any working-class involvement in politics and to the strike as a weapon of struggle, as well as holding conservative positions on women's emancipation. Advocating a cooperative system along federalist lines, they maintained that it was possible to change capitalism by means of equal access to credit. In the end, therefore, they may be said to have constituted the right wing of the International.

Alongside these two components, which formed the numerical majority, there were others of a different hue again. The third in importance were the

communists, grouped around the figure of Karl Marx (1818–83) and active in small circles with very limited influence – above all in a number of German and Swiss cities, and in London. They were anticapitalist: that is, they opposed the existing system of production and espoused the necessity of political action to overthrow it.

At the time of its founding, the ranks of the International also included elements that had nothing to do with the socialist tradition, such as certain groups of East European exiles inspired by vaguely democratic ideas. Among these were followers of Giuseppe Mazzini (1805–72), whose cross-class conception, mainly geared to national demands, considered the International useful for the issuing of general appeals for the liberation of oppressed peoples.<sup>5</sup>

The picture is further complicated by the fact that some groups of French, Belgian and Swiss workers who joined the International brought with them a variety of confused theories, some of a utopian inspiration; while the General Association of German Workers – the party led by followers of Ferdinand Lassalle (1825–64), which never affiliated to the International but orbited around it – was hostile to trade unionism and conceived of political action in rigidly national terms.

All these groups, with their complex web of cultures and political/trade union experiences, made their mark on the nascent International. It was an arduous task indeed to build a general framework and to keep such a broad organization together, if only on a federal basis. Besides, even after a common programme had been agreed upon, each tendency continued to exert a (sometimes centrifugal) influence in the local sections where it was in the majority.

To secure peaceful coexistence of all these currents in the same organization, around a programme so distant from the approaches with which each had started out, was Marx's great accomplishment. His political talents enabled

<sup>5</sup> There were even members of secret societies favouring republicanism and/or socialism, such as the Lodge of Philadelphia, among the early members. See Boris Nicolaevsky, *Secret Societies and the First International*, in Milorad Drachkovitch (ed.), *The Revolutionary Internationals, 1864-1943*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1966, pp. 36–56; Julian P. W. Archer, *The First International in France, 1864–1872*. Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1997, pp. 33–5.

him to reconcile the seemingly irreconcilable, ensuring that the International did not swiftly follow the many previous workers' associations down the path to oblivion.<sup>6</sup> It was Marx who gave a clear purpose to the International, and Marx too who achieved a non-exclusionary, yet firmly class-based, political programme 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 (except the one for the Lausanne Congress in 1867, when he was totally occupied with the proofs for *Capital*). He was 'the right man in the right place',<sup>7</sup> as the German workers' leader Johann Georg Eccarius (1818–89) once put it.

Contrary to later fantasies that pictured Marx as the founder of the International, he was not even among the organizers of the meeting at St Martin's Hall. He sat 'in a non-speaking capacity on the platform',<sup>8</sup> he recalled in a letter to his friend Engels. Yet he immediately grasped the potential in the event and worked hard to ensure that the new organization successfully carried out its mission. Thanks to the prestige attaching to his name, at least in restricted circles, he was appointed to the 34-member standing committee,<sup>9</sup> 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.<sup>10</sup>

It was mainly thanks to Marx's capacities that the International developed its function of political synthesis, unifying the various national contexts in

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Henry Collins and Chimen Abramsky, *Karl Marx and the British Labour Movement*. London: MacMillan, 1965, p. 34.

<sup>7</sup> Johann Georg Eccarius to Karl Marx, 12 October 1864, in *Marx-Engels-Gesamtausgabe*, vol. III/13. Berlin: Akademie, 2002, p. 11.

<sup>8</sup> Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, 4 November 1864, in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Collected Works*, 50 vol., 1975–2005. Moscow: Progress Publishers [henceforth MECW], vol. 42, 1987, p. 16.

<sup>9</sup> At the founding meeting of the International, a Standing Committee was struck to organize the association. This became its Central Council, which subsequently became known as the General Council. Henceforth, these committees are identified simply as the General Council.

<sup>10</sup> See Gian Mario Bravo, *Marx e la Prima Internazionale*. Bari: Laterza, 1979, pp. 18–19.

a project of common struggle that recognized their significant autonomy, but not total independence, from the directive centre. The maintenance of unity was gruelling at times,<sup>11</sup> especially as Marx's anticapitalism was never the dominant political position within the organization. Over time, however, partly through his own tenacity, partly through occasional splits, Marx's thought became the hegemonic doctrine.<sup>12</sup> It was hard going, but the effort of political elaboration benefited considerably from the struggles of those years. The character of workers' mobilizations, the antisystemic challenge of the Paris Commune, the unprecedented task of holding together such a large and complex organization, the successive polemics with other tendencies in the workers' movement on various theoretical and political issues: all these impelled Marx to go beyond the limits of political economy alone, which had absorbed so much of his attention since the defeat of the 1848 revolution and the ebbing of the most progressive forces. He was also 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.<sup>13</sup>

### III Membership and structure

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

<sup>11</sup> See Karl Marx to Friedrich Bolte, 23 November 1871, in MECW, vol. 44, p. 252, where he explained: 'the history of the International was a continual struggle on the part of the General Council against the sects and amateur experiments which attempted to assert themselves within the International itself against the genuine movement of the working class. This struggle was conducted at the Congresses, but far more in the private dealings of the General Council with the individual sections.'

<sup>12</sup> See Bravo, *op. cit.*, p. 165.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Maximilien Rubel, *Marx critique du marxisme*. Paris: Payot, 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.'

some of its leaders exaggerated the real situation or because opponents were looking for a pretext to justify a brutal crackdown. 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<sup>14</sup>; a year later, after the defeat of the Paris Commune, *The Times* put the total at 2½ million; and Oscar Testut (1840–unk.), the main person to study it in the conservative camp, predicted this would rise above 5 million.<sup>15</sup>

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.<sup>16</sup> But the present state of research allows the hypothesis that, at its peak in 1871–72, 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, about 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 and 4,000 in the United States.<sup>17</sup>

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 subjected 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. However, 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

<sup>14</sup> See Oscar Testut, *L'Association internationale des travailleurs*. Lyon: Aime Vingtrinier, 1870, p. 310.

<sup>15</sup> *The Times*, 5 June 1871; Oscar Testut, *Le livre bleu de l'Internationale*. Paris: Lachaud, 1871.

<sup>16</sup> 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', in GC, IV, p. 96.

<sup>17</sup> For more information, see the table on International membership in the Appendix.

conducted by followers of Mikhail Bakunin (1814–76), 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, elsewhere it was 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.<sup>18</sup>

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.<sup>19</sup> Nowhere did the latter ever form a majority, at least after the expansion of the organization in Southern Europe. The other great limitation was the failure to draw in unskilled labour,<sup>20</sup> despite efforts in that direction beginning with the run-up to the first congress. The *Instructions for Delegates of the Provisional General Council. The Different Questions* are clear on this:

Apart from their original purposes, they [trade unions] must now learn to act deliberately as organizing centres of the working class in the broad interest of its *complete emancipation*. They must aid every social and political

<sup>18</sup> See Julius Braunthal, *History of the International*. New York: Nelson, 1966 [1961], p. 116.

<sup>19</sup> See Collins and Abramsky, op. cit., p. 70; Jacques D'Hondt, 'Rapport de synthèse', in Colloque International sur La première Internationale, *La Première Internationale: l'institute, l'implantation, le rayonnement*. Paris: Éditions du Centre national de la recherche scientifique, 1968, p. 475.

<sup>20</sup> See Collins – Abramsky, op. cit., p. 289.



movement tending in that direction. Considering themselves and acting as the champions and representatives of the whole working class, they cannot fail to enlist the non-society men into their ranks. They must look carefully after the interests of the worst paid trades, such as the agricultural labourers, rendered powerless by exceptional circumstances. They must convince the world at large that their efforts, far from being narrow and selfish, aim at the emancipation of the downtrodden millions.<sup>21</sup>

In Britain too, however, unskilled workers did not stream into the International, the one exception being the diggers. The great majority of members there 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. In the end, the International remained an organization of employed workers; the jobless never became part of it. The provenance of its leaders reflected this, since all but a few had a background as artisans or brainworkers.

The resources of the International are similarly complicated. There was talk of fabulous wealth at its disposal,<sup>22</sup> but the truth is that its finances were chronically unstable. The membership fee for individuals was one shilling, while trade unions were supposed to contribute three pence for each of their members. In many countries, however, individual subscriptions were few and far between, and in Britain the contributions from trade unions were so unreliable and so often scaled down that the General Council had to face facts and leave them free to pay what they could. The sums collected were never higher than a few score pounds per annum,<sup>23</sup> barely enough to pay the general secretary's wage of four shillings a week and the rent for an office from which the organization was often threatened with eviction for arrears.

<sup>21</sup> From document 2, p. 87.

<sup>22</sup> In his diary, *Tagebuchblätter aus dem Jahre 1867 bis 1869*, Leipzig: von Hirzel, 1901, vol. VIII, p. 406, General Friedrich von Bernhardt reported 'from reliable sources' that a fund of more than £ 5,000,000 was deposited in London for the use of the International. See Braunthal, op. cit., p. 107.

<sup>23</sup> See Braunthal, op. cit., p. 108, who affirms that no complete statement of the General Council's annual income has been found among its papers. But a report by the treasurer, Cowell Stepney, has been found covering the income of the General Council from individual members' subscriptions for the first six years. The figures were: 1865 – £23; 1866 – £9 13s.; 1867 – £5 17s.; 1868 – £14 14s.; 1869 – £ 30 12s.; 1870 – 14£ 14s. The last financial report submitted by Engels to the Hague Congress for the year 1870–72 showed a deficit of more than £25 owed by the General Council to members of the General Council and others. Copies of some balance sheets of the International have been also published in Collins and Abramsky, op. cit., pp. 80–1.

In one of the key political-organizational documents of the International, Marx summarized its functions as follows: 'It is the business of the International Working Men's Association to combine and generalize the spontaneous movements of the working classes, but not to dictate or impose any doctrinary system whatever.'<sup>24</sup>

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. In the room filled with pipe and cigar smoke where the General Council held its sessions on Tuesday evening, 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.<sup>25</sup>

#### IV The formation 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 (1864–66), from its foundation to the First Congress (Geneva 1866); (2) the period of expansion (1866–70); (3) the revolutionary surge and the repression following the Paris Commune (1871–72); and (4) the split and crisis (1872–77). In terms of its theoretical

<sup>24</sup> From document 2, p. 85. See Karl Marx to Paul Lafargue, 19 April 1870, in MECW, vol. 43, p. 491: 'the General Council was not the Pope, that we allowed every section to have its own theoretical views of the real movement, always supposed that nothing directly opposite to our Rules was put forward.'

<sup>25</sup> See Georges Haupt, *L'Internazionale socialista dalla Comune a Lenin*. Torino: Einaudi, 1978, p. 78.

development, however, the principal stages were: (1) the initial debate among its various components and the laying of its own foundations (1864–65); (2) the struggle for hegemony between collectivists and mutualists (1866–69); and (3) the clash between centralists and autonomists (1870–77). The following paragraphs will cover both the organizational and theoretical aspects.

Britain was the first country where applications were made to join the International; the 4,000-member Operative Society of Bricklayers affiliated in February 1865, soon to be followed by associations of construction workers and shoemakers. In the first year of its existence, the General Council began serious activity to publicize the principles of the Association. This helped to broaden its horizon beyond purely economic questions, as we can see from the fact that it was among the organizations belonging to the (electoral) Reform League founded in February 1865.

In France, the International began to take shape in January 1865, when its first section was founded in Paris. Other major centres appeared shortly afterwards in Lyons and Caen. But it remained very limited in strength, unable to increase its base in the French capital, and during this period many other workers' organizations exceeded it in size; the Association had little ideological influence, and the relationship of forces as well as its own lack of political resolve made it impossible even to establish a national federation. Nevertheless, the French supporters of the International, who were mostly followers of Proudhon's mutualist theories, established themselves as the second largest group at the first conference of the organization, held in London between 25 and 29 September and attended by 30 delegates from England, France, Switzerland and Belgium, with a few representatives from Germany, Poland and Italy. Each of these provided information about the first steps taken by the International, especially at an organizational level. This conference decided to call the first general congress for the following year and laid down the main themes to be discussed there.

In the period between these two gatherings, the International continued to expand in Europe and established its first important nuclei in Belgium and French-speaking Switzerland. The Prussian Combination Laws, which prevented German political associations from having regular contacts with organizations in other countries, meant that the International was unable

to open sections in what was then the German Confederation. The 5,000-members General Association of German Workers – the first workers’ party in history, founded in 1863 and led by Lassalle’s disciple Johann Baptist von Schweitzer (1833–75) – followed a line of ambivalent dialogue with Otto von Bismarck (1815–98) and showed little or no interest in the International during the early years of its existence; it was an indifference shared by Wilhelm Liebknecht (1826–90), despite his political proximity to Marx. Johann Philipp Becker (1809–86), one of the main leaders of the International in Switzerland, tried to find a way round these difficulties through the Geneva-based ‘Group of German-speaking Sections’, and for a long time he was the sole organizer of the early internationalist nuclei in the German Confederation.

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. Both categories contributed to the development of class consciousness and the rapid circulation of news concerning the activity of the International. Of those that appeared in the first few years of its existence, special mention should be made of the weekly *The Bee-Hive* and *The Miner and Workman’s Advocate* (later *The Workman’s Advocate* and then *The Commonwealth*), both published in London; the French-language weekly *Le Courrier International*, also published in London; *La Tribune du Peuple*, the official organ of the International in Belgium from August 1865; the *Journal de l’Association Internationale des Travailleurs*, the organ of the section in French-speaking Switzerland; *Le Courrier Français*, a Proudhonian weekly published in Paris; and Becker’s *Der Vorbote* in Geneva.<sup>26</sup>

The activity of the General Council in London was decisive for the further strengthening of the International. In spring 1866, with its support for the strikers of the London Amalgamated Tailors, it played an active role for the first time in a workers’ struggle, and following the success of the strike five societies of tailors, each numbering some 500 workers, decided to affiliate to the International. The positive outcome of other disputes attracted a number

<sup>26</sup> For a more complete appreciation of the many periodicals of the International or sympathetic see Giuseppe Del Bo (ed.), *Répertoire international des sources pour l’étude des mouvements sociaux aux XIXe et XXe siècles. La Première Internationale*, vol. I: *Periodiques 1864–1877*. Paris: Armand Colin, 1958.

of small unions, so that, by the time of its first congress, it already had 17 union affiliations with a total of more than 25,000 new members. The International was the first association to succeed in the far from simple task of enlisting trade union organizations into its ranks.<sup>27</sup>

Between 3 and 8 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 2 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 (1828–97), 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 8 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. On the latter issue, in the section of the *Instructions for Delegates of the Provisional General Council* relating to 'Juvenile and children's labour (both sexes)', Marx had spelled things out clearly:

This can only be effected by converting *social reason* into *social force*, and, under given circumstances, there exists no other method of doing so, than through *general laws*, enforced by the power of the state. In enforcing such laws, the working class do not fortify governmental power. On the contrary,

<sup>27</sup> Collins and Abramsky, *op. cit.*, p. 65.

they transform that power, now used against them, into their own agency. They effect by a general act what they would vainly attempt by a multitude of isolated individual efforts.<sup>28</sup>

Thus, far from strengthening bourgeois society (as Proudhon and his followers wrongly believed), these reformist demands were an indispensable starting point for the emancipation of the working class.

Furthermore, the 'instructions' that Marx wrote for the Geneva congress underline the basic function of trade unions against which not only the mutualists but also certain followers of Robert Owen (1771–1858) in Britain and of Lassalle in Germany<sup>29</sup> had taken a stand:

This activity of the Trades' Unions is not only legitimate, it is necessary. It cannot be dispensed with so long as the present system of production lasts. On the contrary, it must be generalized by the formation and the combination of Trades' Unions throughout all countries. On the other hand, unconsciously to themselves, the Trades' Unions were forming *centres of organization* of the working class, as the mediaeval municipalities and communes did for the middle class. If the Trades' Unions are required for the guerrilla fights between capital and labour, they are still more important as *organized agencies for superseding the very system of wages labour and capital rule*.

In the same document, Marx did not spare the existing unions his criticism. For they were

too exclusively bent upon the local and immediate struggles with capital [and had] not yet fully understood their power of acting against the system of wage slavery itself. They therefore kept too much aloof from general social and political movements.<sup>30</sup>

He had argued exactly the same a year earlier, in an address to the General Council on 20 and 27 June, which was posthumously published as *Value, Price and Profit*:

<sup>28</sup> From document 2, p. 84.

<sup>29</sup> Ferdinand Lassalle advocated the concept of an 'iron law of wages', which held that efforts to increase wages were futile and a distraction for workers from the primary task of assuming political power in the State.

<sup>30</sup> From document 2, p. 86.

[T]he working class ought not to exaggerate to themselves the ultimate working of these everyday struggles. They ought not to forget that they are fighting with effects, but not with the causes of those effects; that they are retarding the downward movement, but not changing its direction; that they are applying palliatives, not curing the malady. They ought, therefore, not to be exclusively absorbed in these unavoidable guerrilla fights incessantly springing up from the never-ceasing encroachments of capital or changes of the market. They ought to understand that, with all the miseries it imposes upon them, the present system simultaneously engenders the material conditions and the social forms necessary for an economical reconstruction of society. Instead of the conservative motto, 'A fair day's wage for a fair day's work!' they ought to inscribe on their banner the revolutionary watchword, 'Abolition of the wages system!'<sup>31</sup>

## V Growing strength

From late 1866 on, strikes intensified in many European countries. Organized by broad masses of workers, they helped to generate an awareness of their condition and formed the core of a new and important wave of struggles.

Although some governments of the time blamed the International for the unrest, most of the workers in question did not even know of its existence; the root cause of their protests was the dire working and living conditions they were forced to endure. The mobilizations did, however, usher in a period of contact and coordination with the International, which supported them with declarations and calls for solidarity, organized fund-raising for strikers, and helped to fight attempts by the bosses to weaken the workers' resistance.

It was because of its practical role in this period that workers began to recognize the International as an organization that defended their interests and, in some cases, asked to be affiliated to it.<sup>32</sup> The first major struggle to

<sup>31</sup> See document 12, p. 121. On the other hand, the need to differentiate between political and trade-union organization was always clear to Marx. In September 1869, he said in an interview with the German trade unionist Johann Hamann, published in the *Volksstaat*, n. 17 of the 27 November 1869: 'the trade unions should never be affiliated with or made dependent upon a political society if they are to fulfil the object for which they were formed. If this happens it means their death blow. The trade unions are the schools for Socialism.'

<sup>32</sup> See Jacques Freymond, 'Introduction', in PI, I, p. XI.

be won with its support was the Parisian bronze workers' strike of February–March 1867. Also successful in their outcome were the ironworkers' strike of February 1867 at Marchienne, the long dispute in the Provençal mineral basin between April 1867 and February 1868, and the Charleroi miners' strike and Geneva building workers' strike of spring 1868. 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, so that the bosses were forced to compromise on many of the strikers' demands. In the towns at the centre of the action, hundreds of new members were recruited to the International. As later observed in a report of the General Council: 'It is not the International Working Men's Association that pushes people into strikes, but strikes that push workers into the arms of the International Working Men's Association.'<sup>33</sup>

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. The number of members neared 1,000 in Paris and passed the 500 mark in Lyons and Vienne. Seven new sections were established, including one in Algiers on the southern shores of the Mediterranean (which, however, consisted only of French workers). Belgium too saw a rise in affiliations following the strikes, and as did Switzerland, where workers' leagues, cooperatives and political societies enthusiastically applied to join. The International now had 25 sections in Geneva alone, including the German-speaking one that served as a base for propaganda among the workers of the German Confederation.

<sup>33</sup> Various Authors, 'Report of the [French] General Council', 1 September 1869, in PI, II, p. 24.



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 2 years, and that the total unionized workforce was then roughly 800,000.<sup>34</sup> Nowhere else did the membership of the International ever reach that level (in absolute terms, if not as a proportion of the population). In contrast to the progression of the 1864–67 period, however, the subsequent years in Britain were marked by a kind of stagnation. There were several reasons for this, but the main one was that, as we have seen, the International did not manage to break through into factory industry or the world of unskilled labour. The only exception in the latter was the United Excavators, which affiliated after the strike of August 1866, while the Malleable Ironworkers were among the rare few that signed up from the great factories of the North and the Midlands. The voice of the International did not reach either the coal and cotton industry or the engineering workers (who, because of their technical skills, never felt threatened by foreign competition). Those who joined the International in the greatest numbers were the construction workers. The 9,000-strong Amalgamated Society of Carpenters and Joiners, whose secretary Robert Applegarth (1834–1924) sat on the General Council, represented a fifth of the total membership; they were followed by the tailors, cobblers, cabinetmakers, binders, ribbon weavers, web weavers, saddlers and cigar makers – all trades unaltered by the Industrial Revolution. In January 1867, the London Trades Council decided to cooperate with the International but voted against affiliation; the episode brought it home to the General Council that it was unable to expand beyond its existing sphere of influence.

The growing institutionalization of the labour movement further contributed to this slowdown in the life of the International. The Reform Act, resulting from the battle first joined by the Reform League, expanded the franchise to more than a million British workers. The subsequent legalization of trade unions, which ended the risk of persecution and repression, allowed the Fourth Estate to become a real presence in society, with the result that the pragmatic rulers

<sup>34</sup> See Henri Collins, 'The International and the British Labour Movement: Origin of the International in England', in *Colloque International sur La première Internationale*, op. cit., p. 34.

of the country continued along the path of reform, and the labouring classes, so unlike their French counterparts, felt a growing sense of belonging as they pinned more of their hopes for the future on peaceful change.<sup>35</sup> The situation on the Continent was very different indeed. In the German Confederation, collective wage-bargaining was still virtually non-existent. In Belgium, strikes were repressed by the government almost as if they were acts of war, while in Switzerland they were still an anomaly that the established order found it difficult to tolerate. In France, it was declared that strikes would be legal in 1864, but the first labour unions still operated under severe restrictions.

This was the backdrop to the congress of 1867, where the International assembled with a new strength that had come from continuing broad-based expansion. Some bourgeois newspapers, including *The Times*, sent correspondents to follow its proceedings between 2 and 8 September. Again it was a Swiss city, Lausanne, which hosted the occasion, receiving 64 delegates<sup>36</sup> from six countries (with one each from Belgium and Italy). Marx was busy working on the proofs of *Capital* and absent from the General Council when preparatory documents were drafted, as well as from the congress itself.<sup>37</sup> The effects were certainly felt, as is evident in the congress's focus on bald reports of organizational growth in various countries and Proudhonian themes (such as the cooperative movement and alternative uses of credit) dear to the strongly represented mutualists.

Also discussed there was the question of war and militarism, at the request of the League for Peace and Freedom, whose inaugural congress was due to be held immediately afterwards. In the course of the debate, the delegate from Brussels, César de Paepé (1841–90), one of the most active and brilliant theoreticians of the International, formulated what later became the classical position of the workers' movement: that wars are inevitable in a capitalist system:

If I had to express my sentiments to the Geneva [Peace] Congress, I would say: we want peace as much as you do, but we know that so long as there

<sup>35</sup> See Collins and Abramsky, *op. cit.*, pp. 290–1.

<sup>36</sup> Although the rules called for one delegate for each 500 members, actual representation depended upon the ability of delegates to attend.

<sup>37</sup> Marx in fact continued not to attend Congresses, with the exception of the crucial The Hague Congress (1872).

exists what we call the principle of nationalities or patriotism, there will be war; so long as there are distinct classes, there will be war. War is not only the product of a monarch's ambition [...] the true cause of war is the interests of some capitalists; war is the result of the lack of equilibrium in the economic world, and the lack of equilibrium in the political world.<sup>38</sup>

Finally, there was a discussion of women's emancipation,<sup>39</sup> and the congress voted in favour of a report stating that 'the efforts of nations should aim at state ownership of the means of transport and circulation.'<sup>40</sup> This was the first collectivist declaration approved at a congress of the International. However, the mutualists remained totally opposed to the socialization of land ownership, and a deeper discussion of the issue was postponed until the next congress.

## VI Defeat of the 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 (unk.), 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 4 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

<sup>38</sup> From document 49, p. 229. The position of De Paepe became later the standard view on war of the working class movement.

<sup>39</sup> See document 6, pp. 101–2.

<sup>40</sup> From document 32, p. 169.

of the land and the means of production as well as any use of the strike as a 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.’<sup>41</sup> The distance from the positions and theses of the General Council could scarcely have been greater.

Marx undoubtedly played a key role in the long struggle to reduce Proudhon’s influence in the International. His ideas were fundamental to the theoretical development of its leaders, and he showed a remarkable capacity to assert them by winning every major conflict inside the organization. With regard to the cooperation, for example, in the 1866 *Instructions for the Delegates of the Provisional General Council. The Different Questions*, he had already declared that:

To convert social production into one large and harmonious system of free and cooperative labour, *general social changes* are wanted, *changes of the general conditions of society*, never to be realized save by the transfer of the organized forces of society, viz., the state power, from capitalists and landlords to the producers themselves.

Recommending to the workers “to embark in cooperative production rather than in cooperative stores. The latter touch but the surface of the present economical system, the former attacks its groundwork.”<sup>42</sup>

The workers themselves, however, were already sidelining Proudhonian doctrines; it was above all the proliferation of strikes that convinced the mutualists of the error of their conceptions. Proletarian struggles showed both that the strike was necessary as an immediate means of improving conditions in the present and that it strengthened the class-consciousness essential for the construction of future society. It was real-life men and women who halted capitalist production to demand their rights and social justice, thereby shifting the balance of forces in the International and, more significantly, in society as

<sup>41</sup> Cassian Maréchal, ‘Report of the Liège Section’, PI, I, p. 268.

<sup>42</sup> From document 3, p. 85.

a whole. It was the Parisian bronze workers, the weavers of Rouen and Lyons, the coalminers of Saint-Étienne who – more forcefully than in any theoretical discussion – convinced the French leaders of the International of the need to socialize the land and industry. And it was the workers' movement that demonstrated, in opposition to Proudhon, that it was impossible to separate the social-economic question from the political question.<sup>43</sup>

The Brussels Congress, held between 6 and 13 September 1868 with the participation of ninety-nine delegates from France, Britain, Switzerland, Germany, Spain (1 delegate) and Belgium (fifty-five),<sup>44</sup> finally clipped the wings of the mutualists. The highpoint came when the assembly approved De Paepé's 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:

- a. 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.
- b. 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, etc., 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:

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.

<sup>43</sup> See Freymond, 'Introduction', in *PI*, I, p. XIV.

<sup>44</sup> Eugène Dupont (1831–81) represented a section from Naples, and the congress also saw the participation of Louis Auguste Blanqui (1805–81), as an observer.

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.<sup>45</sup>

In Brussels, then, the International made its first clear pronouncement on the socialization of the means of production by state authorities.<sup>46</sup> 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.<sup>47</sup>

The workers were called upon to treat every war 'as a civil war'.<sup>48</sup> De Paepe also suggested the use of the general strike<sup>49</sup> – a proposal that Marx dismissed as 'nonsense',<sup>50</sup> but which actually tended to develop a class-consciousness capable of going beyond merely economic struggles.

<sup>45</sup> From document 3, pp. 91–2.

<sup>46</sup> This was possible thanks to the change in the Belgian sections, which moved to collectivism after their federal congress of July.

<sup>47</sup> PI, I, pp. 402–3.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 403.

<sup>49</sup> See document 50.

<sup>50</sup> Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, 16 September 1868, in MECW, vol. 43, p. 101.

If the collectivist turn of the International began at the Brussels Congress, it was the Basel Congress held the next year from 5 to 12 September 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 presence of the latter, as well as of Wilhelm Liebknecht (1826–1900) on behalf of one of the first organized working-class political forces (the Social Democratic Workers' Party of Germany, founded in Eisenach a few weeks earlier), helped to make the congress more solemn and to imbue it with hope. The catchment area of the association required to challenge the rule of capital was visibly enlarged, and the record of the proceedings as well as general reports on the activity of the congress transmitted the enthusiasm of the workers gathered there.

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 (1838–71), later a prominent figure in the Paris Commune – even approved a new text which declared ‘that society has the right to abolish individual ownership of the land and to make it part of the community’<sup>51</sup>; ten abstained and four (including Tolain) voted against. After Basel, the International in France was no longer mutualist.

The Basel Congress was also of interest because Mikhail Bakunin 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’<sup>52</sup> – was

<sup>51</sup> PI, II, p. 74.

<sup>52</sup> Mikhail Bakunin, ‘Programme of the Alliance [International Alliance of Socialist Democracy]’, in Arthur Lehning (ed.), *Michael Bakunin: Selected Writings*. London: Jonathan Cape, 1973, p. 174. 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 document 75, p. 287.

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 anyway existed only in Bakunin's imagination.<sup>53</sup> On 28 July 1869, the 104-member Geneva section was accordingly admitted to the International.<sup>54</sup> 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.<sup>55</sup> 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.

## VII Development across Europe and opposition to the Franco-Prussian war

The late 1860s and early 1870s were a period 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. This was the case in March 1869, for example, when 8,000 silk dyers and ribbon weavers in Basel asked for its support. The General Council could not send them more than £4 from its own funds, but it issued a circular that resulted in the collection of another £300 from a number of workers' groups in various countries. Even more significant was the struggle of Newcastle engineering workers to reduce the working day to 9 hours, when two emissaries of the

<sup>53</sup> See Edward Hallett Carr, *Michael Bakunin*. New York: Vintage, 1961 [1937], p. 392.

<sup>54</sup> According to Carr, *op. cit.*, p. 374: 'the wooden horse had entered the Trojan citadel'.

<sup>55</sup> From document 31, p. 163.



General Council, James Cohn [Cohen] (unk.) and Eccarius, played a key role in stymying the bosses' attempt to introduce blackleg labour from the Continent. The success of this strike, a nationwide cause célèbre, served as a warning for the English capitalists, who from that time on gave up recruiting workers from across the Channel.<sup>56</sup>

The year 1869 witnessed significant expansion of the International all over Europe. Britain was an exception in this respect, however. The Trades Union Congress, meeting in Birmingham in August, recommended that all its member organizations should become part of the International. But the appeal fell on deaf ears, and the level of affiliation remained more or less the same as in 1867. While the union leaders fully backed Marx against the mutualists, they had little time for theoretical issues<sup>57</sup> and did not exactly glow with revolutionary ardour. This was the reason why Marx for a long time opposed the founding of a British federation of the International independent of the General Council.

In every European country where the International was reasonably strong, its members gave birth to new organizations completely autonomous from those already in existence, forming local sections and/or national federations as their number warranted. In Britain, however, the unions that made up the main force of the International naturally did not disband their own structures; besides, the London-based General Council fulfilled two functions at once, as world headquarters and as the leadership for Britain. In any case, the trade union affiliations kept some 50,000 workers in its orbit of influence, at a time when the International was making headway all across the Continent.

In France, the repressive policies of the Second Empire made 1868 a year of serious crisis for the International: all its sections disappeared, with the single exception of Rouen. The following year, however, saw a revival of the organization. Tolain ceased to be its figurehead in the aftermath of the Basel Congress, and new leaders such as Varlin, who had abandoned mutualist positions, came to the fore. The peak of expansion for the International came in 1870, but the real membership figures fell far short of the fantasies that some writers concocted and spread among the public. It should also be remembered that, despite its considerable growth, the organization never took root in 38

<sup>56</sup> See Braunthal, *op. cit.*, p. 173.

<sup>57</sup> See Freymond, 'Introduction', in *PI*, I, p. XIX.

of the 90 *départements* that existed at the time in France. It is possible that the membership in Paris rose as high as 10,000, much of it affiliated to the International through cooperative societies, trade associations and resistance societies. Rigorous estimates would point to a figure of 3,000 each in Rouen and Lyons (where an uprising led to the proclamation of a People's Commune in September 1870 that was later drowned in blood) and to a little more than 4,000 in Marseilles. The national total can be estimated as more than 30,000.<sup>58</sup> Thus, although the International did not become a true mass organization in France, it certainly grew to a respectable size and aroused widespread interest, as we may gauge from the membership application that the Positivist Proletarians of Paris submitted to the General Council.<sup>59</sup> From 1870, even some disciples of Blanqui overcame their early reservations about an organization inspired by Proudhonian moderation and, witnessing the enthusiasm for it among workers, began to join it in their turn. Certainly much water had passed under the bridge since 1865, when the French sections of the International founded by Tolain and Fribourg<sup>60</sup> had been little more than glorified "study societies."<sup>61</sup> The guidelines for the organization in France now centred on the promotion of social conflict and political activity.

In Belgium, the period following the Brussels Congress of 1868 had been marked by the rise of syndicalism, a series of victorious strikes, and the affiliation of numerous workers' societies to the International. Membership peaked in the early 1870s at several tens of thousands, probably exceeding the number in the whole of France. It was here that the International achieved

<sup>58</sup> See Jacques Rougerie, 'Les sections française de l'Association Internationale des Travailleurs', in *Colloque International sur La première Internationale*, op. cit., p. 111, who spoke of 'some dozens of thousands'.

<sup>59</sup> See GC, III, p. 218. This request was declined because groups defined by their political tendency as such could not join the International. The decision became an official resolution the following year, at the London Conference of 1871, and it was approved by the delegates: 'the existing organizations of the International Working Men's Association will henceforth, in accordance with the letter and spirit of the general statutes, be obliged to be known and constituted simply and exclusively as branches, sections, etc. of the International Working Men's Association, with names of their respective localities attached; it will be forbidden for existing branches and societies to continue to be designated by the names of sects, that is, as mutualist, positivist, collectivist, or communist groups, etc.' in PI, II, p. 238.

<sup>60</sup> See Jacques Rougerie, 'L'A.I.T. et le mouvement ouvrier a Paris pendant les evenements de 1870-1871', *International Review of Social History* XVII (1972) n. 1: 11-12. Both men subsequently abandoned the International and its ideas and Tolain was expelled from the organization, see document 25, footnote 23.

<sup>61</sup> Ernest Édouard Fribourg, *L'Association internationale des travailleurs*. Paris, 1871, p. 26.

both its highest numerical density in the general population and its greatest influence in society.

The positive evolution during this period was also apparent in Switzerland. In 1870 the total membership stood at 6,000 (out of a working population of roughly 700,000), including 2,000 in the 34 Geneva sections and another 800 in the Jura region. Not long afterwards, however, Bakunin's activity divided the organization into two groups of equal size. These confronted each other at the congress of the Romande Federation in April 1870, precisely on the question of whether the International Alliance for Socialist Democracy should be admitted to the Federation.<sup>62</sup> When it proved impossible to reconcile their positions, the proceedings continued in two parallel congresses, and a truce was agreed only after an intervention by the General Council. The group aligned with London was slightly smaller, yet retained the name Romande Federation, whereas the one linked to Bakunin had to adopt the name Jura Federation, even though its affiliation to the International was again recognized.

The leading lights in the former were Nikolai Utin (1845–83), who had founded in Geneva the first Russian section of the International,<sup>63</sup> and Johann Philipp Becker, who, despite his collaboration with Bakunin between summer 1868 and February 1870, had managed to prevent the Swiss organization from falling entirely into his hands. Anyway, the consolidation of the Jura Federation represented an important stage in the building of an anarcho-federalist current within the International. Its most prominent figure was the young James Guillaume (1844–1916), who played a key role in the dispute with London.

During this period, Bakunin's ideas began to spread in a number of cities, especially in Southern Europe, but the country where they took hold most rapidly was Spain. In fact, the International first developed in the Iberian peninsula through the activity of the Neapolitan anarchist Giuseppe Fanelli, who, at Bakunin's request, travelled to Barcelona and Madrid between October 1868 and spring 1869 to help found sections of the International and groups of the Alliance for Socialist Democracy (of which he was a member). His trip

<sup>62</sup> See Jacques Freymond (ed.), *Études et documents sur la Première Internationale en Suisse*. Genève: Droz, 1964, p. 295.

<sup>63</sup> See Woodford McLellan, *Revolutionary Exiles*. London: Frank Cass, 1979, pp. 83–107.

achieved its purpose. But his distribution of documents of both international organizations, often to the same people, was a prime example of the Bakuninite confusion and theoretical eclecticism of the time; the Spanish workers founded the International with the principles of the Alliance for Socialist Democracy. Still, Fanelli won over important cadres such as Anselmo Lorenzo (1841–1914), who had previously been exposed to Proudhon's texts translated into Spanish by the future Spanish president Francisco Pi y Margall (1824–1901). And adulterated though they were in various ways, the ideas of the International got through to a fledgling workers' movement eager to organize and engage in struggle. At the Basel Congress, the Spanish delegate Rafael Farga Pellicer (1840–90) could already point to the existence of several dozen sections.

In the North German Confederation, despite the existence of two political organizations of the workers' movement – the Lassallean General Association of German Workers and the Marxist Social Democratic Workers' Party of Germany – there was little enthusiasm for the International and few requests to affiliate to it. During its first 3 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 – whose leader, Johann Baptist von Schweitzer (1833–75), never applied to affiliate their General Association – 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',<sup>64</sup> as Engels put it) than real, with a minimal material and ideological commitment. Of its 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).<sup>65</sup> The weak internationalism of the Germans therefore weighed more heavily than

<sup>64</sup> Friedrich Engels to Theodor Cuno, 7–8 May 1872, in MECW, vol. 44, p. 371.

<sup>65</sup> See Roger Morgan, *The German Social Democrats and the First International, 1864–1872*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1965, p. 180, citing an assertion by Becker in the last issue of the *Verbote* that by the end of 1871 '58 [German-speaking] sections [of the International] had been founded (nearly half of them in Germany, the rest mainly in Switzerland), ten societies had joined in affiliated membership, and 385 individual members had been paying subscriptions'.

any legal aspects, and it declined still further in the second half of 1870 as the movement became more preoccupied with internal matters.<sup>66</sup>

There were two pieces of good news to make up for the German limitations. In May 1869, the first sections of the International were founded in the Netherlands, and they began to grow slowly in Amsterdam and Friesland. Soon afterwards, the International also began to pick up in Italy, where it had previously been present only in a handful of centres that had little or no relation with one another.

More significant still, at least symbolically and for the hopes it awakened, was the 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 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 IWA 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.

Against this general background, marked by evident contradictions and uneven development between countries, 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 Louis Bonaparte (1808–73)

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., p. x.

and to obliterate the empire he had established 18 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:

[I]n 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.<sup>67</sup>

This text, in 30,000 copies (15,000 for Germany and 15,000 for France, printed in Geneva), was the first major foreign policy declaration of the International. One of the many who spoke enthusiastically in support of it was John Stuart Mill (1806–73): ‘there was not one word in it that ought not to be there,’ he wrote, and ‘it could not have been done with fewer words.’<sup>68</sup>

The leaders of the Social Democratic Workers’ Party, Wilhelm Liebknecht and August Bebel (1840–1913), were the only two members of parliament in the North German Confederation who refused to vote for the special war budget,<sup>69</sup> and sections of the International in France also sent messages of friendship and solidarity to the German workers. Yet the French defeat sealed the birth of a new and more potent age of nation-states in Europe, with all its accompanying chauvinism.

## VIII The International and Paris Commune

After the German victory at Sedan and the capture of Bonaparte, a Third Republic was proclaimed in France on 4 September 1870. In January of the following year, a 4-month siege of Paris ended in the French acceptance of Bismarck’s conditions; an ensuing armistice allowed the holding of elections and the appointment of Adolphe Thiers (1797–1877) as president of the republic, with the support of a huge Legitimist and Orleanist majority. In the capital, however, Progressive-Republican forces swept the board and there was

<sup>67</sup> From document 54, p. 239.

<sup>68</sup> John Stuart Mill, *The Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, vol. XXXII. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991, p. 244.

<sup>69</sup> The representatives of the Lassallean General Association of German Workers voted in favour.

widespread popular discontent. Faced with the prospect of a government that wanted to disarm the city and withhold any social reform, the Parisians turned against Thiers and on 18 March initiated the first great political event in the life of the workers' movement: the Paris Commune.

Although Bakunin had urged the workers to turn patriotic war into revolutionary war,<sup>70</sup> the General Council in London initially opted for silence. 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, 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.<sup>71</sup>

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 2 months after its proclamation, the Paris Commune was drowned in blood. Two days later, he reappeared at the General Council with a manuscript entitled *The Civil War in France*; it was read and unanimously approved, then published over the names of all the General Council members. The document had a huge impact over the next few weeks,

<sup>70</sup> See Arthur Lehning, 'Introduction', in Idem. (ed.), *Bakunin – Archiv*, vol. VI: *Michel Bakounine sur la Guerre Franco-Allemande et la Révolution Sociale en France (1870–1871)*. Leiden: Brill, 1977, p. xvi.

<sup>71</sup> From document 57, p. 241.

greater than any other document of the workers' movement in the nineteenth century. Three English editions in quick succession won acclaim among the workers and caused uproar in bourgeois circles. It was also translated fully or partly into a dozen other languages, appearing in newspapers, magazines and booklets in various European countries and the United States.

Despite Marx's passionate defence, and despite the claims both of reactionary opponents and of dogmatic Marxists eager to glorify the International,<sup>72</sup> it is out of the question that the General Council actually pushed for the Parisian insurrection. Prominent figures in the organization did play a role – Leo Frankel (1844–96), for example, though Hungarian by origin, was placed in charge of work, industry and trade – but the leadership of the Paris Commune was in the hands of its radical Jacobin wing. Of the 85 representatives elected at the municipal elections of 26 March,<sup>73</sup> there were 15 moderates (the so-called '*parti des maires*', a group of former mayors of the arrondissements) and four Radicals, who immediately resigned and never formed part of the Council of the Commune. Of the 66 remaining, 11 were without a clear political tendency, 14 came from the Committee of the National Guard, and 15 were radical-republicans and socialists; in addition there were 9 Blanquists and 17 members of the International.<sup>74</sup> Among the latter were Édouard Vaillant (1840–1915), Benoît Malon (1841–93), Auguste Serrailier (1840–72), Jean-Louis Pindy (1840–1917), Albert Theisz (1839–81), Charles Longuet (1839–1903) and the previously mentioned Varlin and Frankel. However, coming as they did from various political backgrounds and cultures, they did not constitute a monolithic group and often voted in different ways. This too favoured the hegemony of the Jacobin perspective of radical republicanism, which was reflected in the Montagnard-inspired decision in May (approved by two-thirds of the General Council, including the Blanquists) to create a Committee of Public Safety. Marx himself pointed out that 'the majority of the Commune was in no sense socialist, nor could it have been.'<sup>75</sup>

<sup>72</sup> See Georges Haupt, *Aspect of International Socialism 1871–1914*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 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.

<sup>73</sup> The seats were 92, but due to the multiple elections of some individuals the number of council members was reduced to 85.

<sup>74</sup> See Jacques Rougerie, *Paris libre 1871*. Paris: Seuil, 1971, p. 146; Pierre Milza, *L'année terrible*. Paris: Perrin 2009, p. 78.

<sup>75</sup> Karl Marx to Domela Nieuwenhuis, 22 February 1881, MECW, vol. 46, p. 66.



During the 'bloody week' (21–28 May) that followed the irruption of the horde from Versailles into Paris, some 10,000 Communards were killed in fighting or summarily executed; it was the bloodiest massacre in French history. Another 43,000 or more were taken prisoner, 13,500 of whom were subsequently sentenced to death, imprisonment, forced labour or deportation (many to the remote colony of New Caledonia). Another 7,000 managed to escape and take refuge in England, Belgium or Switzerland. The European conservative and liberal press completed the work of Thiers's soldiers, accusing the Communards of hideous crimes and trumpeting the victory of 'civilization' over the insolent workers' rebellion. From now on, 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.'<sup>76</sup>

Marx had to spend whole days answering press slanders about the International and himself: 'at this moment,' he wrote, [he was] 'the best calumniated and the most menaced man of London.'<sup>77</sup> Meanwhile, governments all over Europe sharpened their instruments of repression, fearing that other uprisings might follow the one in Paris. Thiers immediately outlawed the International and asked the British prime minister William Ewart Gladstone (1809–98), 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.'<sup>78</sup> Such language resulted in an agreement between France and Spain to extradite refugees from beyond the Pyrenees, and in repressive measures against the International in Belgium and Denmark. While London dragged its feet, unwilling to violate its principles of asylum, representatives of the German

<sup>76</sup> Karl Marx, *Report of the General Council to the Fifth Annual Congress of the International*, in GC, V, p. 461.

<sup>77</sup> Karl Marx to Ludwig Kugelmann, 18 June 1871, in MECW, vol. 44, p. 157.

<sup>78</sup> GC, V, p. 460.

and Austro-Hungarian governments met in Berlin in November 1872 and issued a joint statement on the 'social question':

1. that the tendencies of the International are in complete contrast with, and antagonistic to, the principles of the bourgeois society; they must therefore be vigorously repelled;
2. that the International constitutes a dangerous abuse of the freedom of assembly and, following its own practice and principle, state action against it must be international in scope and must therefore be based on the solidarity of all governments;
3. that even if some governments do not intend to pass a special law [against the International], as France has done, the ground should be cut from beneath the feet of the International Working Men's Association and its harmful activities.<sup>79</sup>

Lastly, Italy was not spared the onslaught. Most notably, Mazzini – who for a time had looked to the International with hope – considered that its principles had become those of 'denial of God, [...] the fatherland, [...] and all individual property'.<sup>80</sup>

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 and the old Chartist Benjamin Lucraft (1809–97) 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.<sup>81</sup>

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 Paris Commune. For the capitalists and the middle classes it represented a threat to the established order, but for the workers it fuelled hopes in a world without exploitation and injustice.<sup>82</sup>

<sup>79</sup> See Braunthal, *op. cit.*, pp. 160–1.

<sup>80</sup> Giuseppe Mazzini, *L'Internazionale*, in Gian Mario Bravo, *La Prima Internazionale*, vol. II. Roma: Editori Riuniti, 1978, pp. 499–501.

<sup>81</sup> See Collins and Abramsky, *op. cit.*, p. 222.

<sup>82</sup> See Haupt, *L'Internazionale socialista dalla Comune a Lenin*, *op. cit.*, p. 28.

Insurrectionary Paris fortified the workers' movement, impelling it to adopt more radical positions and to intensify its militancy. The experience showed that revolution was possible, that the goal could and should be to build a society utterly different from the capitalist order, but also that, in order to achieve this, the workers would have to create durable and well-organized forms of political association.<sup>83</sup>

This enormous vitality was apparent everywhere. Attendance at General Council meetings doubled, while newspapers linked to the International increased in both number and overall sales. Among those which made a serious contribution to the spread of socialist principles were: *L'Égalité* in Geneva, at first a Bakuninist paper, then – after a change of editor in 1870 – the main organ of the International in Switzerland; *Der Volksstaat* in Leipzig, the organ of the Social Democratic Workers' Party; *La Emancipación* in Madrid, the official paper of the Spanish Federation; *Il Gazzettino Rosa* in Milan, which went over to the International following the events in Paris; *Socialisten*, the first Danish workers' newsheet; and, probably the best of them all, *La Réforme Sociale* in Rouen.<sup>84</sup>

Finally, and most significantly, the International continued to expand in Belgium and Spain – where the level of workers' involvement had already been considerable before the Paris Commune – and experienced a real breakthrough in Italy. Many Mazzinians, disappointed with the positions taken by their erstwhile leader, joined forces with the organization and were soon among its principal local leaders. Even more important was the support of Giuseppe Garibaldi. Although he had only a vague idea of the Association whose headquarters were in London,<sup>85</sup> the 'hero of the two worlds' decided to throw his weight behind it and wrote a membership application that contained the famous sentence: 'The International is the sun of the future!'<sup>86</sup> Printed in dozens of workers' newsheets and papers, the letter was instrumental in persuading many of those who were wavering to join the organization.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 93–5.

<sup>84</sup> See Georges Bourgin, Georges Duveau, Domenico De Marco, 'Préface', in Del Bo (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. xv.

<sup>85</sup> See Nello Rosselli, *Mazzini e Bakunin*. Torino: Einaudi, 1927, pp. 323–4.

<sup>86</sup> Giuseppe Garibaldi to Giorgio Pallavicino, 14 November 1871, in Enrico Emilio Ximenes, *Epistolario di Giuseppe Garibaldi*, vol. I. Milano: Brigola 1885, p. 350.

The International also opened new sections in Portugal, where it was founded in October 1871, and in Denmark, in the same month, it began to link up most of the newly born trade unions in Copenhagen and Jutland. Another important development was the founding of Irish workers' sections in Britain, and the workers' leader John MacDonnell was appointed the General Council's corresponding secretary for Ireland. Unexpected requests for affiliation came from various other parts of the world: some English workers in Calcutta, labour groups in Victoria, Australia and Christchurch, New Zealand, and a number of artisans in Buenos Aires.

## IX The London Conference of 1871

Two years had passed since the last congress of the International, but a new one could not be held under the prevailing circumstances. The General Council therefore decided to organize a conference in London; it took place between 17 and 23 September 1871, in the presence of 22 delegates<sup>87</sup> from Britain (Ireland too being represented for the first time), Belgium, Switzerland and Spain, plus the French exiles. Despite the efforts to make the event as representative as possible, it was in fact more in the way of an enlarged General Council meeting.

Marx had announced beforehand that the conference would be devoted 'exclusively to questions of organization and policy,'<sup>88</sup> with theoretical discussions left to one side. He spelled this out at its first session:

The General Council has convened a conference to agree with delegates from various countries the measures that need to be taken against the dangers facing the Association in a large number of countries, and to move towards a new organization corresponding to the needs of the situation. In the second place, to work out a response to the governments that are ceaselessly working to destroy the Association with every means at their disposal. And lastly to settle the Swiss dispute once and for all.<sup>89</sup>

<sup>87</sup> Actually the delegates who participated in the conference were only 19, since Cohen could not attend, while Eugène Dupont (1831–81) and Mac Donnell participated only in the first two sessions.

<sup>88</sup> Karl Marx, 15 August 1871, in GC, IV, p. 259.

<sup>89</sup> Karl Marx, 17 September 1871, in PI, II, p. 152.

Marx summoned all his energies for these priorities: to reorganize the International, to defend it from the offensive of hostile forces, and to check Bakunin's growing influence. By far the most active delegate at the conference, Marx took the floor as many as 102 times, blocked proposals that did not fit in with his plans, and won over those not yet convinced.<sup>90</sup> The gathering in London confirmed his stature within the organization, not only as the brains shaping its political line, but also as one of its most combative and capable militants.

The most important decision taken at the conference, for which it would be remembered later, was the approval of Vaillant's Resolution IX. The leader of the Blanquists – whose residual forces had joined the International after the end of the Paris 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.

The conclusion was clear: 'the economic movement [of the working class] and its political action are indissolubly united.'<sup>91</sup>

<sup>90</sup> See Miklós Molnár, *Le déclin de la première internationale*. Genève: Droz, 1963, p. 127.

<sup>91</sup> From document 74, p. 285.

Whereas the Geneva Congress of 1866 established the importance of trade unions, the London Conference of 1871 shifted the focus to the other key instrument of the modern workers' movement: the political party. It should be stressed, however, that the understanding of this was much broader than that which developed in the twentieth century. Marx's conception should therefore be differentiated both from the Blanquists' – the two would openly clash later on – and from Lenin's, as adopted by communist organizations after the October Revolution.<sup>92</sup>

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 (1847–82) *Catechism of a Revolutionary*, whose advocacy of secret societies was condemned by the delegates in London<sup>93</sup> but enthusiastically supported by Bakunin.

Only four delegates opposed Resolution IX at the London Conference, arguing for the need of having an 'abstensionist' position of not engaging in politics, but Marx's victory soon proved to be ephemeral. For the call to establish what amounted to political parties in every country and to confer broader powers on the General Council had grave repercussions in the internal life of the International; it was not ready to move so rapidly from a flexible to a politically uniform model of organization.<sup>94</sup>

The last decision taken in London was to set up a British Federal Council. Since, in Marx's view, the conditions for a revolution on the Continent had diminished with the defeat of the Paris Commune, it was no longer necessary to exercise close supervision over British initiatives.<sup>95</sup>

<sup>92</sup> In the early 1870s the working-class movement was organized as a political party only in Germany. Usage of the term 'party' whether by the followers of Marx or of Bakunin, was therefore very confused. Even Marx used the term in a vague manner. For him, according to Rubel, *op. cit.*, p. 183, 'the concept of party [...] corresponds to the concept of class.' It is useful to emphasize, finally, that the conflict which took place in the International between 1871 and 1872 did not focus on the construction of a political party (an expression uttered only twice at the London Conference and five times at the Congress of the Hague), but rather on the 'use [...] of the adjective "political"' (Haupt, *L'Internazionale socialista dalla Comune a Lenin*, *op. cit.*, p. 84).

<sup>93</sup> See PI, II, p. 237, and Karl Marx, 'Declaration of the General Council on Nechaev's Misuse of the Name of the International Working Men's Association', in MECW, vol. 23, p. 23.

<sup>94</sup> See Jacques Freymond and Miklós Molnár, 'The Rise and Fall of the First International', in Milorad M. Drachkovitch (ed.), *The Revolutionary Internationals, 1864–1943*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1966, p. 27.

<sup>95</sup> See Collins and Abramsky, *op. cit.*, p. 231. For a different opinion cf. Miklós Molnár, *op. cit.*, p. 135.

Marx was convinced that virtually all the main federations and local sections would back the resolutions of the conference, but he soon had to think again. On 12 November, the Jura Federation called a congress of its own in the small commune of Sonvilier, and, although Bakunin was unable to attend, it officially launched the opposition within the International. In the *Circular to All Federations of the International Working Men's Association* issued at the end of the proceedings, Guillaume and the other participants accused the General Council of having introduced the 'authority principle' into the International and transformed its original structure into 'a hierarchical organization directed and governed by a committee.' The Swiss declared themselves 'against all directing authority, even should that authority be elected and endorsed by the workers', and insisted on 'retention of the principle of autonomy of the Sections', so that the General Council would become 'a simple correspondence and statistical bureau'.<sup>96</sup> Lastly, they called for a congress to be held as soon as possible.

Although the position of the Jura Federation was not unexpected, Marx was probably surprised when signs of restlessness and even rebellion against the political line of the General Council began to appear elsewhere. In a number of countries, the decisions taken in London were judged an unacceptable encroachment on local political autonomy. The Belgian Federation, which at the conference had aimed at mediation between the different sides, began to adopt a much more critical stance towards London, and the Dutch too later took their distance. In Southern Europe, where the reaction was even stronger, the opposition soon won considerable support. Indeed, the great majority of Iberian Internationalists came out against the General Council and endorsed Bakunin's ideas, partly, no doubt, because these were more in keeping with a region where the industrial proletariat had a presence only in the main cities, and where the workers' movement was still very weak and mainly concerned with economic demands. In Italy too, the results of the London Conference were seen in a negative light. Those who followed Mazzini gathered in Rome from 1 to 6 November 1871, in the General Congress of Italian Workers' Societies (the more moderate labour bloc), while most of the rest fell in with

<sup>96</sup> Various Authors, 'Circulaire du Congrès de Sonvilier', in PI, II, pp. 264–5.

Bakunin's positions. Those who met at Rimini between 4 and 6 August 1872 for the founding congress of the Italian Federation of the International took the most radical position against the General Council: they would not participate in the forthcoming congress of the International but proposed to hold an 'anti-authoritarian general congress'<sup>97</sup> in Neuchâtel, Switzerland. In fact, this would be the first act of the impending split.

The organization also saw a serious conflict explode on the other side of the Atlantic, albeit over different issues. In the course of 1871, the International had grown in a number of cities there, reaching a total of 50 sections with a combined membership of 2,700.<sup>98</sup> The figure increased further the next year (probably to around 4,000), but this was still only a tiny proportion of the American workforce of 2 million or more, and the organization was still unable to expand outside immigrant communities to draw in workers born in the United States. Internal strife also had a damaging effect, since the American Internationalists, largely based in New York, split into two in December 1871, each group claiming to be the legitimate representative of the International in the United States.

The first and initially the larger of the two, known as the Spring Street Council, proposed an alliance with the most liberal groups of American society; it could count on the support of Eccarius, the corresponding secretary for the General Council, and its most active branch was Section 12.<sup>99</sup> The second, with its headquarters at the Tenth Ward Hotel, maintained the orientation to the working class and had its most important figure in Friedrich Adolph Sorge (1828–1906). In March 1872, the General Council called for the holding of a unity congress in July, but the initiative failed and the split became official in May. The differences caused a haemorrhage of members from the International. The Tenth Ward Hotel group held its congress between 6 and 8 July 1872, giving birth to the North American Confederation with a membership of 950 spread among 22 sections (12 German, 4 French, 1 each Irish, Italian and Scandinavian, and only 3 English-speaking). Meanwhile, in

<sup>97</sup> Various Authors, *Risoluzione, programma e regolamento della federazione italiana dell'Associazione Internazionale dei Lavoratori*, in Gian Mario Bravo, *La Prima Internazionale*, op. cit., p. 787.

<sup>98</sup> A dozen of them, however, were not in touch with the Central Committee, see Samuel Bernstein, *The First International in America*. New York: Augustus M. Kelley, 1965, p. 65.

<sup>99</sup> The sections of the International in the United States were numbered.



May, some members of the Spring Street Council had attended the convention of the Equal Rights Party, which was standing Victoria Woodhull for the presidency of the United States; its lack of a class platform, with no more than general promises of regulation of working conditions and measures of job creation, persuaded some sections to abandon the Council, leaving it with only 1,500 members. After the birth of the American Confederation in July, the Council retained only 13 sections with a total of less than 500 members (mainly artisans and intellectuals), but these joined forces with the European federations challenging the line of the General Council.

The feuding across the Atlantic also harmed relations among members in London. John Hales (1839–unk), the secretary of the General Council from 1871 to 1872, took over Eccarius's position as US corresponding secretary, but followed the same policy. Very soon, both men's personal relations with Marx took a turn for the worse, and in Britain too the first internal conflicts began to emerge. Support for the General Council also came from the majority of the Swiss, from the French (now mostly Blanquists), the weak German forces, the recently constituted sections in Denmark, Ireland and Portugal, and the East European groups in Hungary and Bohemia. But they added up to much less than Marx had expected at the end of the London Conference.

The opposition to the General Council was varied in character and sometimes came from mainly personal motives; a strange alchemy held it together and made leadership of the International even more difficult. Still, beyond the fascination with Bakunin's theories in certain countries and Guillaume's capacity to unify the various oppositionists, the main factor militating against the resolution on 'Working-Class Political Action' was an environment unwilling to accept the qualitative step forward proposed by Marx. For all the accompanying claims of utility, the London turn was seen by many as crass interference; not only the group linked to Bakunin but most of the federations and local sections regarded the principle of autonomy and respect for the diverse realities making up the International as one of the cornerstones of the International. This miscalculation on Marx's part accelerated the crisis of the organization.<sup>100</sup>

<sup>100</sup> See Freymond and Molnár, *op. cit.*, pp. 27–8.

## X The Crisis of the International

The final battle came towards the end of summer 1872. After the terrible events of the previous 3 years – the Franco-Prussian war, the wave of repression following the Paris Commune, the numerous internal skirmishes – the International could at last meet again in congress. In the countries where it had recently sunk root, it was expanding through the enthusiastic efforts of union leaders and worker-activists suddenly fired by its slogans: it was in 1872 that the organization experienced its fastest growth in Italy, Denmark, Portugal and the Netherlands, at the very time when it was banned in France, Germany and the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Yet most of the membership remained unaware of the gravity of the conflicts that raged on within its leading group.<sup>101</sup>

The Fifth Congress of the International took place in The Hague between 2 and 7 September, attended by 65 delegates from a total of 14 countries. There were 18 French (including 4 Blanquists co-opted onto the General Council), 15 German, 7 Belgian, 5 British, 5 Spanish, 4 Swiss, 4 Dutch, 2 Austrian, and 1 each of Danish, Irish, Hungarian, Polish and Australian (W. E. Harcourt [unk.], from the Victoria section). The Frenchman Paul Lafargue was nominated by the Lisbon Federation (as well as the Madrid Federation). The Italian Internationalists failed to send their seven delegates, but even so it was certainly the most representative gathering in the history of the International.

The crucial importance of the event impelled Marx to attend in person,<sup>102</sup> accompanied by Engels. In fact, it was the only congress of the organization in which he took part. Neither De Paepe (perhaps aware that he would be unable to play the same mediating role as in London the previous year) nor Bakunin made it to the Dutch capital. But the ‘autonomist’ contingent, opposed to the decisions of the General Council, was present in strength, comprising all the delegates from Belgium, Spain and the Netherlands, a half of those from Switzerland, plus others from Britain, France and the United States: a total of 25 in all.

<sup>101</sup> See Haupt, *L'Internazionale socialista dalla Comune a Lenin*, op. cit., p. 88.

<sup>102</sup> See Karl Marx to Ludwig Kugelmann, 29 July 1872, in MECW, vol. 44, p. 413, where he noted this congress would be ‘a matter of life and death for the International; and before I resign I want at least to protect it from disintegrating elements.’

By an irony of fate, the congress unfolded in Concordia Hall, although concord was little in evidence there; all the sessions were marked by irreducible antagonism between the two camps, resulting in debates that were far poorer than at the two previous congresses. This hostility was exacerbated by 3 days of sterile wrangling over the verification of credentials. The representation of the delegates was indeed completely skewed, not reflecting the true relationship of forces within the organization. In Germany, for instance, there were no sections of the International as such, while in France they had been driven underground and their mandates were highly debatable. Other representatives had been delegated as members of the General Council and did not express the will of any section.

Approval of the Hague Congress resolutions was possible only because of its distorted composition. Though spurious and, in many respects, only held together by the instrumentality of purpose, the coalition of delegates that was in the minority at the congress actually constituted the most numerous part of the International.<sup>103</sup>

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 ‘That the economical emancipation of the working classes is therefore the great end to which every political movement ought to be subordinate as a means’,<sup>104</sup> 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 economical monopolies, and for the enslavement of labour. The conquest of political power has therefore become the great duty of the working class.’<sup>105</sup>

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

<sup>103</sup> See James Guillaume, *L'Internationale, Documents et Souvenirs (1864–1878)*, vol. II. New York: Burt Franklin, 1969 [1907], pp. 333–4; cf. Freymond, ‘Introduction’, in PI, I, p. 25.

<sup>104</sup> From document 65, p. 265.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 268.

(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 on 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.

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.<sup>106</sup> For this new advance in the class struggle, Marx thought it indispensable to build working-class political parties in each country. The document *To the Federal Council of the Spanish Region of the International Working Men's Association*, written by Engels in February 1871, was one of the most explicit statement of the General Council on this matter:

Experience has shown everywhere that the best way to emancipate the workers from this domination of the old parties is to form in each country a proletarian party with a policy of its own, a policy which is manifestly different from that of the other parties, because it must express the conditions necessary for the emancipation of the working class. This policy may vary in details according to the specific circumstances of each country; but as the fundamental relations between labour and capital are the same everywhere and the political domination of the possessing classes over the exploited classes is an existing fact everywhere, the principles and aims of proletarian policy will be identical, at least in all western countries. [...] To give up fighting our adversaries in the political field would mean to abandon one of the most powerful weapons, particularly in the sphere of organization and propaganda.<sup>107</sup>

From this point on, therefore, the party was considered essential for the struggle of the proletariat: it had to be independent of all existing political forces and to be built, both programmatically and organizationally, in accordance with the national context. At the General Council session of 23 July 1872, Marx criticized not only the abstentionists (who had been attacking Resolution IX of the London Conference) but the equally dangerous position of 'the working classes of England and America,' 'who let the middle classes use

<sup>106</sup> See Freymond, 'Introduction', in PI, I, p. X.

<sup>107</sup> From document 69, pp. 274-5.

them for political purposes.<sup>108</sup> On the second point, he had already declared at the London Conference that ‘politics must be adapted to the conditions of all countries’,<sup>109</sup> and the following year, in a speech in Amsterdam immediately after the Hague Congress, he stressed:

Someday the worker must seize political power in order to build up the new organization of labour; he must overthrow the old politics which sustain the old institutions, if he is not to lose Heaven on Earth, like the old Christians who neglected and despised politics. But we have not asserted that the ways to achieve that goal are everywhere the same. [...] We do not deny that there are countries [...] where the workers can attain their goal by peaceful means. This being the case, we must also recognize the fact that in most countries on the Continent the lever of our revolution must be force; it is force to which we must some day appeal in order to erect the rule of labour.<sup>110</sup>

Thus, although the workers’ parties emerged in different forms in different countries, they should not subordinate themselves to national interests.<sup>111</sup> The struggle for socialism could not be confined in that way, and especially in the new historical context internationalism must continue to be the guiding beacon for the proletariat, as well as its vaccine against the deadly embrace of the state and the capitalist system.

During the Hague Congress, harsh polemics preceded a series of votes. Following the adoption of Article 7a, the goal of winning political power was inscribed in the statutes, and there was also an indication that a workers’ party was the essential instrument for this. The subsequent decision to confer broader powers on the General Council – with 32 votes in favour, 6 against and 12 abstentions – made the situation even more intolerable for the minority, since the General Council now had the task of ensuring ‘rigid observation of the principles and statutes and general rules of the International’, and ‘the right to suspend branches, sections, councils or federal committees and federations of the International until the next congress’.<sup>112</sup>

<sup>108</sup> Karl Marx, 23 July 1872, in GC, V, p. 263.

<sup>109</sup> Karl Marx, 20 September 1871, in PI, II, p. 195.

<sup>110</sup> Karl Marx, ‘On The Hague Congress’, in MECW, vol. 23, 1988, p. 255.

<sup>111</sup> See Haupt, *L’Internazionale socialista dalla Comune a Lenin*, op. cit., p. 100.

<sup>112</sup> PI, II, p. 374. The opposition had already advocated reducing the General Council’s power at the Sonvilier Congress (see note 96), but Marx declared at The Hague: ‘we would prefer to abolish the General Council rather than see it reduce to the role of letter box’, PI, II, p. 354.

For the first time in the history of the International, its highest congress also approved (by 47 votes in favour and 9 abstentions) the General Council's decision to expel an organization: namely, the New York Section 12. Its motivation was as follows: 'The International Working Men's Association is based on the principle of the abolition of classes and cannot admit any bourgeois section.'<sup>113</sup> The expulsions of Bakunin (25 for, 6 against, 7 abstentions) and Guillaume (25 for, 9 against, 8 abstentions) also caused quite a stir, having been proposed by a commission of enquiry that described the Alliance for Socialist Democracy as 'a secret organization with statutes completely opposite to those of the International'.<sup>114</sup> However, the call to expel Adhemar Schwitzguébel (1844–95), one of the founders and most active members of the Jura Federation, was rejected (by a vote of 15 for, 17 against and 7 abstentions).<sup>115</sup> Finally, the congress authorized publication of a long report, *The Alliance for Socialist Democracy and the International Working Men's Association*, which traced the history of the organization led by Bakunin and analysed its public and secret activity country by country. Written by Engels, Lafargue and Marx, the document was published in French in July 1873.

The opposition at the congress was not uniform in its response to these attacks, some abstaining and others voting against. On the final day, however, a joint declaration read out by the worker Victor Dave (1845–1922) from the Hague section stated:

1. We the [...] supporters of the autonomy and federation of groups of working men shall continue our administrative relations with the General Council [...].
2. The federations which we represent will establish direct and permanent relations between themselves and all regularly branches of the Association. [...].
4. We call on all the federations and sections to prepare between now and the next general congress for the triumph within the International of the principles of federative autonomy as the basis of the organization of labour.<sup>116</sup>

<sup>113</sup> PI, II, p. 376.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 377.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 378. After this vote it was decided not to proceed with the other expulsions proposed by the commission.

<sup>116</sup> Various Author, ['Statement of the Minority'], in HAGUE, pp. 199–200.

This statement was more a tactical ploy, designed to avoid responsibility for a split that by then seemed inevitable, rather than a serious political undertaking to relaunch the organization. In this sense, it was similar to the proposals of the ‘centralists’ to augment the powers of the General Council, at a time when they were already planning a far more drastic alternative.

For, what took place in the morning session on 6 September – the most dramatic of the congress – was the final act of the International as it had been conceived and constructed over the years. Engels stood up to speak and, to the astonishment of those present, proposed that ‘the seat of the General Council [should] be transferred to New York for the year 1872–1873, and that it should be formed by members of the American federal council’.<sup>117</sup> Thus, Marx and other ‘founders’ of the International would no longer be part of its central body, which would consist of people whose very names were unknown (Engels proposed 7, with the option to increase the total to a maximum of 15). The delegate Maltman Barry (1842–1909), a General Council member who supported Marx’s positions, described better than anyone the reaction from the floor:

Consternation and discomfiture stood plainly written on the faces of the party of dissension as [Engels] uttered the last words. [...] It was sometime before anyone rose to speak. It was a *coup d’état*, and each looked to his neighbour to break the spell.<sup>118</sup>

Engels argued that ‘inter-group conflicts in London had reached such a pitch that [the General Council] had to be transferred elsewhere’,<sup>119</sup> and that New York was the best choice in times of repression. But the Blanquists were violently opposed to the move, on the grounds that ‘the International should first of all be the permanent insurrectionary organization of the proletariat’<sup>120</sup> and that ‘when a party unites for struggle [...] its action is all the greater, the more its leadership committee is active, well armed and powerful’. Vaillant

<sup>117</sup> Friedrich Engels, 5 September 1872, in PI, II, p. 355.

<sup>118</sup> Maltman Barry, ‘Report of the Fifth Annual General Congress of the International Working Men’s Association, Held at The Hague, Holland, September 2–9, 1872’, in Hans Gerth, *The First International: Minutes of The Hague Congress of 1872*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1958, pp. 279–80. This report does not appear in HAGUE.

<sup>119</sup> Friedrich Engels, 5 September 1872, in PI, II, p. 356.

<sup>120</sup> Édouard Vaillant, *Internationale et Révolution. A propos du Congrès de La Haye*, in PI, vol. III, p. 140.



and other followers of Blanqui present at The Hague thus felt betrayed when they saw ‘the head’ being shipped ‘to the other side of the Atlantic [while] the armed body was fighting in [Europe]’.<sup>121</sup> Based on the assumption that ‘the International had had an initiating role of economic struggle’, they wanted it to play ‘a similar role with respect to political struggle’ and its transformation into an ‘international workers’ revolutionary party’.<sup>122</sup> Realizing that it would no longer be possible to exercise control over the General Council, they left the congress and, shortly afterwards, the International.

Many, even in the ranks of the majority, voted against the move to New York as tantamount to the end of the International as an operational structure. The decision, approved by only three votes (26 for, 23 against), eventually depended on 9 abstentions and the fact that some members of the minority were happy to see the General Council relocated far from their own centres of activity.

Another factor in the move was certainly Marx’s view that it was better to give up the International than to see it end up as a sectarian organization in the hands of his opponents. The demise of the International, which would certainly follow the transfer of the General Council to New York, was infinitely preferable to a long and wasteful succession of fratricidal struggles.

Still, it is not convincing to argue – as many have done<sup>123</sup> – that the key reason for the decline of the International was the conflict between its two currents, or even between two men, Marx and Bakunin, however great their stature. 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 drift towards even greater moderation in the British trade union movement, the repression following the Paris Commune: all these factors together made the original configuration of the International inappropriate to the new times.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 142.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 144.

<sup>123</sup> For a critical analysis of these positions see Miklós Molnár, ‘Quelques remarques a propos de la crise de l’Internationale en 1872; in Colloque International sur La première Internationale, *op. cit.*, p. 439.

Against this backdrop, with its prevalence of centrifugal trends, developments in the life of the International and its main protagonists naturally also played a role. The London Conference, for instance, was far from the saving event that Marx had hoped it would be; indeed, its rigid conduct significantly aggravated the internal crisis, by failing to take account of the prevailing moods or to display the foresight needed to avoid the strengthening of Bakunin and his group.<sup>124</sup> It proved a Pyrrhic victory for Marx – one which, in attempting to resolve internal conflicts, ended up accentuating them. It remains the case, however, that the decisions taken in London only speeded up a process that was already under way and impossible to reverse.

In addition to all these historical and organizational considerations, there were others of no lesser weight regarding the chief protagonist. As Marx had reminded delegates at a session of the London Conference in 1871, ‘the work of the Council had become immense, obliged as it was to tackle both general questions and national questions.’<sup>125</sup> It was no longer the tiny organization of 1864 walking on an English and a French leg; it was now present in all European countries, each with its particular problems and characteristics. Not only was the organization everywhere wracked by internal conflicts, but the arrival of the Communard exiles in London, with new preoccupations and a variegated baggage of ideas, made it still more arduous for the General Council to perform its task of political synthesis.

Marx was sorely tried after 8 years of intense activity for the International.<sup>126</sup> Aware that the workers’ forces were on the retreat following the defeat of the Paris Commune – the most important fact of the moment for him – he therefore resolved to devote the years ahead to the attempt to complete *Capital*. When he crossed the North Sea to the Netherlands, he must have felt that the battle awaiting him would be his last major one as a direct protagonist.

From the mute figure he had cut at that first meeting in St Martin’s Hall in 1864, he had become recognized as the leader of the International not only

<sup>124</sup> Miklós Molnár, *Le Déclin de la Première Internationale*, op. cit., p. 144.

<sup>125</sup> Karl Marx, 22 September 1872, in PI, II, p. 217.

<sup>126</sup> Karl Marx to César De Paepe, 28 May 1872, MECW, vol. 44, p. 387: ‘I can hardly wait for the next Congress. It will be the end of my slavery. After that I shall become a free man again; I shall accept no administrative functions any more, either for the General Council or for the British Federal Council.’

by congress delegates and the General Council but also by the wider public. Thus, although the International certainly owed a very great deal to Marx, it had also done much to change his life. Before its foundation, he had been known only in small circles of political activists. Later, and above all after the Paris Commune – as well as the publication of his magnum opus in 1867, of course – his fame spread among revolutionaries in many European countries, to the point where the press referred to him as the ‘red terror doctor’. The responsibility deriving from his role in the International – which allowed him to experience up close so many economic and political struggles – was a further stimulus for his reflections on communism and profoundly enriched the whole of his anticapitalist theory.

## XI Marx versus Bakunin

The battle between the two camps raged in the months following the Hague Congress, but only in a few cases did it centre on their existing theoretical and ideological differences. Marx often chose to caricature Bakunin’s positions, painting him as an advocate of ‘class equalization’<sup>127</sup> (based on the principles of the 1869 programme of the Alliance for Socialist Democracy) or of political abstentionism tout court. The Russian anarchist, for his part, who lacked the theoretical capacities of his adversary, preferred the terrain of personal accusations and insults. The only exception that set forth his positive ideas was the incomplete *Letter to La Liberté* (a Brussels paper) of early October 1872 – a text which, never sent, lay forgotten and was of no use to Bakunin’s supporters in the constant round of skirmishes. The political position of the ‘autonomists’ emerges from it clearly enough:

There is only one law binding all the members [...] sections and federations of the International [...]. It is the international solidarity of workers in all jobs and all countries in their economic struggle against the exploiters of labour. It is the real organisation of that solidarity through the spontaneous action of the working classes, and the absolutely free federation [...] which

<sup>127</sup> See note 52.

constitutes the real, living unity of the International. Who can doubt that it is out of this increasingly widespread organisation of the militant solidarity of the proletariat against bourgeois exploitation that the political struggle of the proletariat against the bourgeoisie must rise and grow? The Marxists and ourselves are unanimous on this point. But now comes the question that divides us so deeply from the Marxists. We think that the policy of the proletariat must necessarily be a revolutionary one, aimed directly and solely at the destruction of States. We do not see how it is possible to talk about international solidarity and yet to intend preserving States [...] because by its very nature the State is a breach of that solidarity and therefore a permanent cause of war. Nor can we conceive how it is possible to talk about the liberty of the proletariat or the real deliverance of the masses within and by means of the State. State means dominion, and all dominion involves the subjugation of the masses and consequently their exploitation for the sake of some ruling minority. We do not accept, even in the process of revolutionary transition, either constituent assemblies, provincial government or so called revolutionary dictatorships; because we are convinced that revolution is only sincere, honest and real in the hand of the masses, and that when it is concentrated into those of a few ruling individuals it inevitably and immediately becomes reaction.<sup>128</sup>

Thus, although Bakunin 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 the mutualists. Whereas the latter had in effect abstained from all political activity, weighing heavily on the early years of the International, the autonomists – as Guillaume stressed in one of his last interventions at the Hague Congress – fought for ‘a certain politics, of social revolution, of the destruction of bourgeois politics and of the state.’<sup>129</sup> 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.

How, then, did the ‘negative politics’ that the autonomists saw as the only possible form of action differ from the ‘positive politics’ advocated by the

<sup>128</sup> Mikhail Bakunin, ‘A Letter to the Editorial Board of *La Liberté*’, in Arthur Lehning (ed.), *Michael Bakunin: Selected Writings*, op. cit., pp. 236–7.

<sup>129</sup> From document 76, p. 290.

centralists? In the resolutions of the International Congress of Saint-Imier, held between 15 and 16 September 1872 on the proposal of the Italian Federation and attended by other delegates returning from The Hague, it is stated that 'all political organization can be nothing other than the organization of domination, to the benefit of one class and the detriment of the masses, and that if the proletariat aimed to seize power, it would itself become a dominant and exploiting class.' Consequently, 'the destruction of all political power is the first task of the proletariat', and 'any organization of so-called provisional and revolutionary political power to bring about such destruction can only be a further deception, and would be as dangerous to the proletariat as all governments existing today'.<sup>130</sup> As Bakunin stressed in another incomplete text, 'The International and Karl Marx', the task of the International was to lead the proletariat 'outside the politics of the State and of the bourgeois world'; the true basis of its programme should be 'quite simple and moderate: the organization of solidarity in the economic struggle of labour against capitalism'.<sup>131</sup> In fact, while taking various changes into account, this declaration of principles was close to the original aims of the organization and pointed in a direction very different from the one taken by Marx and the General Council after the London Conference of 1871.<sup>132</sup>

This profound opposition of principles and objectives shaped the climate in The Hague. Whereas the majority looked to the 'positive' conquest of political power,<sup>133</sup> the autonomists painted the political party as an instrument necessarily subordinate to bourgeois institutions and grotesquely likened Marx's conception of communism to the Lassallean *Volksstaat* that he had always tirelessly combated.<sup>134</sup> However, in the few moments when the antagonism left some space for reason, Bakunin and Guillaume recognized

<sup>130</sup> From document 78, p. 294.

<sup>131</sup> Mikhail Bakunin, 'The International and Karl Marx', in Sam Dolgoff (ed.), *Bakunin on Anarchy*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1971, p. 303.

<sup>132</sup> On Bakunin's rejection of the conquest of the State by the working class organized in political party see Arthur Lehning, 'Introduction', in Idem. (ed.), *Bakunin - Archiv*, vol. VI: *Michel Bakounine sur la Guerre Franco-Allemande et la Révolution Sociale en France (1870-1871)*, op. cit., p. cvii.

<sup>133</sup> See Guillaume, op. cit., p. 342.

<sup>134</sup> This accusation was reiterated by Bakunin in the only major work he ever completed: 'Marx's theory provided a meeting point: a vast, unified, strongly centralized state. This was what Lassalle wanted, and Bismarck was already doing it. Why should they not join forces?' Mikhail Bakunin, *Statism and Anarchy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990, p. 184.

that the two sides shared the same aspirations.<sup>135</sup> In *The Fictitious Splits in the International*, which he wrote together with Engels, Marx had explained that one of the preconditions of socialist society was the elimination of the power of the state:

All socialists see anarchy as the following program: Once the aim of the proletarian movement – i.e., abolition of classes – is attained, the power of the state, which serves to keep the great majority of producers in bondage to a very small exploiter minority, disappears, and the functions of government become simple administrative functions.

The irreconcilable difference stemmed from the autonomist insistence that the aim must be realized immediately. Indeed, since they considered the International not as an instrument of political struggle but as an ideal model for the society of the future in which no kind of authority would exist, (in Marx's description) Bakunin and his supporters proclaim

anarchy in proletarian ranks as the most infallible means of breaking the powerful concentration of social and political forces in the hands of the exploiters. Under this pretext, [they ask to] the International, at a time when the Old World is seeking a way of crushing it, to replace its organization with anarchy.<sup>136</sup>

Thus, despite their agreement about the need to abolish classes and the political power of the state in socialist society, the two sides differed radically over the fundamental issues of the path to follow and the social forces required to bring about the change. Whereas for Marx the revolutionary subject par excellence was a particular class, the factory proletariat, Bakunin turned to the 'great rabble of the people', the so-called 'lumpenproletariat', which, being 'almost unpolluted by bourgeois civilization, carries in its inner being and in its aspirations, in all the necessities and miseries of its collective life, all the seeds of the socialism of the future.'<sup>137</sup> Marx the communist had learned that social transformation required specific historical conditions, an effective organization and a long process of the formation of class consciousness

<sup>135</sup> See, for example, Guillaume, op. cit., pp. 298–9.

<sup>136</sup> From document 75, p. 289.

<sup>137</sup> Bakunin, 'The International and Karl Marx', op. cit., p. 294.

among the masses<sup>138</sup>; Bakunin the anarchist was convinced that the instincts of the common people, the so-called ‘rabble’, were both ‘invincible as well as just’, sufficient by themselves ‘to inaugurate and bring to triumph the Social Revolution.’<sup>139</sup>

Another disagreement concerned the instruments for the achievement of socialism. Much of Bakunin’s militant activity involved building (or fantasizing about building) small ‘secret societies’, mostly of intellectuals: a ‘revolutionary general staff composed of dedicated, energetic, intelligent individuals, sincere friends of the people above all,’<sup>140</sup> who will prepare the insurrection and carry out the revolution. Marx, however, believed in the self-emancipation of the working class and was convinced that secret societies conflicted with ‘the development of the proletarian movement because, instead of instructing the workers, these societies subject them to authoritarian, mystical laws which cramp their independence and distort their powers of reason.’<sup>141</sup> The Russian exile opposed all political action by the working class that did not directly promote the revolution, whereas the stateless person with a fixed residence in London did not disdain mobilizations for social reforms and partial objectives, while remaining absolutely convinced that these should strengthen the working-class struggle to overcome the capitalist mode of production rather than integrate it into the system.

<sup>138</sup> Marx’s critique of Bakunin’s ideas is evident in his ‘Conspectus of Bakunin’s *Statism and Anarchy*’, in MECW, vol. 24, p. 518: ‘Schoolboyish rot! A radical social revolution is bound up with definite historical conditions of economic development; these are its premises. It is also only possible, therefore, where alongside capitalist production the industrial proletariat accounts for at least a significant portion of the mass of the people. [...] Mr Bakunin [...] understands absolutely nothing of social revolution, only its political rhetoric; its economic conditions simply do not exist for him. Now since all previous economic formations, whether developed or undeveloped, have entailed the enslavement of the worker (whether as wage-labourer, peasant, etc.), he imagines that radical revolution is equally possible in all these formations. What is more, he wants the European social revolution, whose economic basis is capitalist production, to be carried out on the level of the Russian or Slav[ic] agricultural and pastoral peoples, and that it should not surpass this level [...] Willpower, not economic conditions, is the basis of his social revolution.’

<sup>139</sup> Bakunin, ‘The International and Karl Marx’, op. cit., pp. 294–5.

<sup>140</sup> Mikhail Bakunin, ‘Programme and Purpose of the Revolutionary Organization of International Brothers’, in Arthur Lehning (ed.), *Michael Bakunin: Selected Writings*, op. cit., p. 155. Evidence of Bakunin’s deficient sense of reality is his claim: ‘Therefore there should be no vast number of these individuals. A hundred powerfully and seriously allied revolutionaries are enough for the international organization of the whole Europe. Two or three hundred revolutionaries are enough for the largest country’s organization’, *ibid.*

<sup>141</sup> Karl Marx, ‘Record of Marx’s speech on Secret Societies’, in MECW, vol. 22, p. 621.

The differences would not have diminished even after the revolution. For Bakunin, ‘abolition of the state [was] the precondition or necessary accompaniment of the economic emancipation of the proletariat’<sup>142</sup>; for Marx, the state neither could nor should disappear from one day to the next. In his *Political Indifferentism*, which first appeared in *Almanacco Repubblicano* in December 1873, he challenged the hegemony of the anarchists in Italy’s workers’ movement by asserting that

if the political struggle of the working class assumes violent forms and if the workers replace the dictatorship of the bourgeois class with their own revolutionary dictatorship, then [according to Bakunin] they are guilty of the terrible crime of *lèse-principe*; for, in order to satisfy their miserable profane daily needs and to crush the resistance of the bourgeois class, they, instead of laying down their arms and abolishing the state, give to the state a revolutionary and transitory form.<sup>143</sup>

It should be recognized, however, that despite Bakunin’s sometimes exasperating refusal to distinguish between bourgeois and proletarian power, he foresaw some of the dangers of the so-called ‘transitional period’ between capitalism and socialism – particularly the danger of bureaucratic degeneration after the revolution. In his unfinished *The Knouto-Germanic Empire and the Social Revolution*, on which he worked between 1870 and 1871, he wrote:

But in the People’s State of Marx, there will be, we are told, no privileged class at all. All will be equal, not only from the juridical and political point of view, but from the economic point of view. [...] There will therefore be no longer any privileged class, but there will be a government, and, note this well, an extremely complex government, which will not content itself with governing and administering the masses politically, as all governments do today, but which will also administer them economically, concentrating in its own hands the production and the just division of wealth, the cultivation of land, the establishment and development of factories, the organization and direction of commerce, finally the application of capital to production by the only banker, the State. [...] It will be the reign of scientific intelligence,

<sup>142</sup> Mikhail Bakunin, ‘Aux compagnons de la Fédération des sections internationales du Jura’, in Arthur Lehning, A. J. C. Rüter, P. Scheibert (eds), *Bakunin – Archiv*, vol. II: *Michel Bakounine et les Conflits dans l’Internationale*. Leiden: Brill, 1965, p. 75.

<sup>143</sup> Karl Marx, ‘Political Indifferentism’, MECW, vol. 23, p. 393.



the most aristocratic, despotic, arrogant and contemptuous of all regimes. There will be a new class, a new hierarchy of real and pretended scientists and scholars, and the world will be divided into a minority ruling in the name of knowledge and an immense ignorant majority. [...] Every state, even the most republican and most democratic state [...] are in their essence only machines governing the masses from above, through an intelligent and therefore privileged minority, allegedly knowing the genuine interests of the people better than the people themselves.<sup>144</sup>

Partly because of his scant knowledge of economics, the federalist path indicated by Bakunin offered no really useful guidance on how the question of the future socialist society should be approached. But his critical insights already point ahead to some of the dramas of the twentieth century.

## XII After Marx: The 'Centralist' and the 'Autonomist' International

The International would never be the same again. The great organization born in 1864, which had successfully supported strikes and struggles for 8 years, adopted an anticapitalist programme and established a presence in all European countries, finally imploded at the Hague Congress. Nevertheless, the story does not end with Marx's withdrawal, since two groupings, much reduced in size and without the old political ambition and capacity to organize projects, now occupied the same space. One was the 'centralist' majority issuing from the final congress, which favoured an organization under the political leadership of a General Council. The other was the 'autonomist' or 'federalist'<sup>145</sup> minority, who recognized an absolute autonomy of decision making for the sections.

In 1872, the strength of the International was not yet diminished. Displaying the uneven development that had characterized it in the past, its expansion in certain countries (above all, Spain and Italy) had compensated for its contraction in others (Britain, for example). The dramatic outcome at The Hague had split

<sup>144</sup> Mikhail Bakunin, *Marxism, Freedom and the State*. London: Freedom Press, 1950, p. 21.

<sup>145</sup> In the text, one has opted for the term 'autonomist' International, as utilized by Georges Haupt, *L'Internazionale socialista dalla Comune a Lenin*, op. cit., p. 70. Jacques Freymond, 'Introduction', PI, III, p. VIII, on the contrary, preferred the use of the expression 'federalist' International.

the organization, making many activists, especially in the 'centralist' camp, realize that an important chapter in the history of the workers' movement had run its course. Along with the North American Federation, limited forces in Europe aligned themselves in support of the new General Council in New York: the Romande Federation and a number of German-speaking sections in Switzerland, both shored up by Becker's unflagging initiative; the German Social Democratic Workers' Party, which gave its unreserved but barely visible support; the new Austrian sections, which, unlike the ghostly Germans, actually scraped together a little money to forward from their members' dues; and the remote federations of Portugal and Denmark. In Spain, Italy and the Netherlands, however, few followed the new directives; the organization had not made a name for itself in Ireland; and by 1873 no section of the International remained in France. There was also Britain, of course, but in November 1872 – owing to personal clashes going back to long before the Hague Congress – the British Federal Council split into two feuding groups that each claimed to represent the International in the country. Hales, acting in the name of 16 sections and with the backing of such eminent Internationalists as Hermann Jung (1830–1901) and Thomas Motterhead (1825–84), disavowed the General Council in New York and called a new congress of the British Federation for January 1873. Both Hales and Eccarius performed some astounding political somersaults, for although they were reformists by conviction and argued for participation in elections – their idea was to convert the International into a political party with trade union support that would ally itself with the liberal wing of the bourgeoisie – they officially lined up with abstentionists led by Guillaume and Bakunin. Engels responded to these developments with two circulars recognizing the decisions taken at The Hague; they were signed by important leaders in Manchester and on the 'official' British Federal Council, plus the well-known former members of the General Council Dupont and Friedrich Lessner (1825–1910). The congress of the council then took place in June, but those taking part in it had to swallow the bitter truth that, with the departure of the General Council for New York (which everyone saw as the end of the organization) the British trade unions no longer felt involved.<sup>146</sup> Thus, all that the two groups had in common was a rapid decline.

<sup>146</sup> See Collins and Abramsky, *op. cit.*, p. 275.

The general congress of the 'centralists' took place in the city that had once hosted the first congress of the International: Geneva. Thanks to Becker's efforts, it was attended by 30 delegates – including (for the first time) two women. But 15 of these were from Geneva itself, and the representation of sections from other countries was limited to a German, a Belgian, and a delegate from Austria-Hungary.<sup>147</sup> Having seen the climate of demobilization in Europe, the General Council decided not to send a representative from New York, and even Serrailier, the man appointed by the British Federation, failed to make the trip. In fact, this was the end of the centralist International.

Across the Atlantic, where Sorge was trying hard to keep the flame alight, the North American Federation was on the verge of collapse. Its financial situation, worsening with the decline in membership to less than 1,000 (few of whom paid dues), made even the buying of postage stamps a difficult proposition. Reduced to matters concerning only the United States, it found American workers alternating between attitudes of hostility and indifference, even in response to the *Manifesto to the Working People of North America*<sup>148</sup> that it issued in November 1873. Sorge eventually resigned as general secretary, and from then on the two-and-a-half remaining years of its history were little more than a chronicle of a death foretold. The final dissolution came on 15 July 1876, when ten delegates representing 635 members<sup>149</sup> met in Philadelphia, before hurrying to the founding congress of the Workingmen's Party of the United States, timed to coincide with the first US world fair, the Centennial Exhibition.

Although the 'centralist' organization only continued to operate for a short while in a couple of countries and they made no further contribution to the development of theory; the autonomists, on the other hand, had a real, active existence for some years to come. At the congress in Saint-Imier, attended by Swiss, Italians, Spanish and French, it was established that 'no one has the right to deprive the autonomous federations and sections of the incontestable right to determine for themselves and pursue the line of political conduct that they believe to be best' – an option for federalist autonomy within the International that underlay the offer of a 'pact of friendship, solidarity and mutual defence.'

<sup>147</sup> See PI, IV, note 355: 640–2.

<sup>148</sup> See Bernstein, op. cit., p. 221.

<sup>149</sup> Ibid., p. 283.

This position was the work of Guillaume. Unlike Bakunin, who would have preferred something more intransigent, the younger but more prudent Swiss activist had set his sights on expanding their support beyond the Jura, Spain and Italy, and winning over all the other federations opposed to the London line.<sup>150</sup> His tactics won the day. The birth of a new International would be carefully prepared, without forcing matters through high-sounding declarations.

New affiliations came one after another over the next few months. The autonomist stronghold remained Spain, where the persecutions launched by Práxedes Mateo Sagasta (1825–1903) failed to prevent the organization from flourishing. By the time of its federal congress in Cordoba, held between December 1872 and January 1873, it had some 50 federations comprising more than 300 sections, with a total membership of more than 25,000 (7,500 in Barcelona).<sup>151</sup> From late 1872 on, the autonomists also widened their support in new countries. In December, the Brussels congress of the Belgian Federation declared the resolutions of The Hague null and void, refused to recognize the General Council in New York, and added its signature to the Saint-Imier Pact.<sup>152</sup> In January 1873, the British rebels headed by Hales and Eccarius followed suit, and the Dutch Federation joined them the next month.<sup>153</sup>

Although the autonomists – who had also retained contacts in France, Austria and the United States – became the majority of a new International, the coalition was in reality a congeries of the most varied doctrines. It included: the Swiss anarcho-collectivists headed by Guillaume and Schwitzgébel (Bakunin withdrew from public life in 1873 and died in 1876); the Belgian federation under the leadership of De Paepe, for which the people's state (*Volksstaat*) should acquire greater powers and competences, beginning with the management of all public services; the ever more radical Italians, who eventually adopted insurrectionary positions ('propaganda of deeds') doomed to failure; and British advocates of participation in elections and an alliance

<sup>150</sup> See Lehning, 'Introduction', in Arthur Lehning, A. J. C. Rüter and P. Scheibert (eds), *Bakunin – Archiv*, vol. II: *Michel Bakounine et les Conflits dans l'Internationale*, op. cit., p. LII. Lehning also quoted a remark from Max Nettlau's manuscript, *Michael Bakunin: eine Biographie* (later printed by Milano: Feltrinelli, 1971): 'The autonomist International was the work of Guillaume', in Lehning, p. LXII.

<sup>151</sup> See Max Nettlau, *La Première Internationale en Espagne*. Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1969, pp. 163–4.

<sup>152</sup> See PI, III, p. 163.

<sup>153</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 191.

with progressive bourgeois forces. In 1874, contacts were even established with the Lassalleans of the General Association of German Workers.

The above scenario demonstrates that the prime antagonism that led to the split at the Hague Congress was neither between a group ready to stoop to deals with the state and an intransigent party more inclined to revolution, nor between proponents and opponents of political action. Rather, the chief cause of the radical and widespread opposition to the General Council was the turn rushed through at the London Conference in 1871. The Jura and Spanish federations, and later the newly formed Italian federation, would never have accepted Marx's call to build working-class political parties: above all, the socio-economic conditions in those countries made it unthinkable. A more cautious approach, however, might have kept the support of the Belgians – who for a number of years had been key to the balance within the Association – and other recently formed federations like the Dutch. A lower level of internal conflict would also have averted the split in Britain, which had more to do with personality clashes than with disagreements over policy. And, as some autonomists had foreseen, the moving of the General Council to New York left them with greater political scope and helped them to assert themselves after 1872. The fact remains, however, that in Marx's view the 'first' International had completed its historical task and the time had come to bring the curtain down.

The autonomists' 'first' congress – or, as they said, the 'sixth congress,' counting the five of the International – was attended by 32 delegates, from Belgium, Spain, France, Italy, Britain, the Netherlands and Switzerland. It met in Geneva from 1 to 6 September 1873, the week before the congress of the centralists, and declared that it opened a 'new era in the International'.<sup>154</sup> It was unanimously decided to abolish the General Council, and for the first time at a congress of the International there was a debate about anarchist society.<sup>155</sup> The theoretical-political armoury of the Internationalists was also enriched by the idea of the general strike as a weapon to achieve the social revolution.

<sup>154</sup> See PI, IV, p. 5.

<sup>155</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 54–8. Remarkable was the position taken by Hales, mirroring the contradictions present in the autonomist International from the beginning: 'I oppose anarchy [...]. Anarchy is incompatible with collectivism.'

The groundwork was thus laid for what came to be known as anarcho-syndicalism.<sup>156</sup>

The next congress, held in Brussels from 7 to 13 September 1874, brought together 16 delegates: one from Britain (Eccarius), one from Spain and the rest from Belgium. Of the latter fourteen, two had the mandate of a French (Paris) or Italian (Palermo) section, while another two were German Lassalleans resident at the time in Belgium. Guillaume stated that one of these, Karl Frohme (1850–1933), actually represented the General Association of German Workers. Yet despite the fact that anarchists and Lassalleans were poles apart on the map of socialism, Guillaume motivated their presence by referring to the new rules approved by the Geneva Congress in 1873, under which the workers of each country were free to decide the best means of achieving their emancipation.<sup>157</sup> All the same, this International had mostly become a place where an ever smaller (and ever less representative) number of leaders met to discuss *in abstracto* the workers' material conditions and the action required to change them. The debate in 1874 was between anarchism and the people's state (*Volksstaat*), and De Paepe, returning after 3 years to a congress of the International, was the main protagonist. In one of his interventions, he claimed that 'in Spain, in parts of Italy and in the Jura, they are pro-anarchist, [whereas] in Germany, the Netherlands, Britain and America, they are for a workers' state (with Belgium still fluctuating between the two)'.<sup>158</sup> Once again no collective decision was taken, and the congress agreed unanimously that it was up to 'any federation and socialist democratic party in each country to decide which political line it thought it should follow'.<sup>159</sup>

The discussion at the Eighth Congress, held in Berne between 26 and 30 October 1876, followed the same lines. There were 28 delegates, including 19 Swiss (17 from the Jura Federation), 4 from Italy, 2 each from Spain and France, and De Paepe representing Belgium and the Netherlands. The proceedings showed the total incompatibility between the positions of De Paepe and Guillaume,<sup>160</sup> but they ended in agreement on a proposal from

<sup>156</sup> See the debate among the delegates which took place during the sessions of 4 September, 1873, in PI, IV, pp. 59–63 and 75–7. Cf. also Eugène Hins (1839–1933) document 18.

<sup>157</sup> See PI, IV, p. 646.

<sup>158</sup> César De Paepe, 7 September 1874, PI, IV, p. 347.

<sup>159</sup> PI, IV, p. 350.

<sup>160</sup> From document 40, pp. 192–3, and from document 41, pp. 194–8.

the Belgian Federation to call a world socialist congress for the following year, with invitations to be sent to ‘all fractions of the socialist parties of Europe.’<sup>161</sup>

Before that could happen, however, the last congress of the International was held in Verviers, between 6 and 8 September 1877. It brought together 22 delegates: 13 from Belgium, 2 each from Spain, Italy, France and Germany, and Guillaume representing the Jura Federation. There were also three observers from socialist groups with a purely consultative function – one was Peter Kropotkin (1842–1921), later to become the founding father of anarcho-communism – but the only active participants were anarchists, including some like the Italian Andrea Costa (1851–1910) who would shortly go over to socialism. Thus, the autonomist International too, which had retained mass roots only in Spain, had run its course. Their perspective was overtaken by a growing realization throughout the European workers’ movement that it was crucially important to participate in the political struggle by means of organized parties. With the end of the autonomist experience, there was also a definitive parting of the ways between anarchists and socialists.

### XIII The new International

From 9 to 16 September 1877, the city of Ghent hosted the Universal Socialist Congress, with more countries represented than at any comparable event before. Some 3,000 workers welcomed delegates from nine countries (France, Germany, Switzerland, Britain, Spain, Italy, Hungary, Russia and Belgium), some of whom additionally held a mandate from an organization in another country (Denmark, the United States and, for the first time, labour groups in Greece and Egypt). Historic leaders of the International such as De Paepe and Liebknecht were present, as were Frankel, Guillaume, Hales and others, testifying to the importance of the organization for a whole generation of the European labour movement.

<sup>161</sup> PI, IV, p. 498.

In the concluding *Manifesto to Workers' Organizations and Societies in All Countries*, written by De Paepe and the future Belgian Socialist leader Louis Bertrand (1856–1943), the congress called for the establishment of a 'General Union of the Socialist Party'. A large majority also signed a 'pact':

Inasmuch as social emancipation is inseparable from political emancipation; inasmuch as the proletariat, organized in a separate party opposed to all the parties of the possessing classes, must avail itself of all the political means tending to promote the liberation of its members; and inasmuch as the struggle against the dominion of the possessing classes must be worldwide in its scope and not merely local or national, and success in this struggle will depend upon harmonious and united activity on the part of the organizations in different lands – the undersigned delegates to the Universal Socialist Congress at Ghent decide that it is incumbent on the organizations they represent to furnish one another with material and moral support in all their industrial and political endeavours.

Six years after the London Conference of 1871, the Ghent theses confirmed that Marx had merely been in advance of the times. For the same document affirmed:

We urge the necessity of political action as a powerful means of agitation, propaganda, popular education and association. The present organization of society must be combated on all sides at once and with all the means at our disposal. [...] Socialism should not be just theoretical speculation about the likely organization of future society; it should be real and living, involved with the actual aspirations, immediate needs and daily struggles of the proletarian class against those who control the social capital as well as social power.

To wrest a political right from the bourgeoisie, to organize formerly isolated workers into an association, to obtain a reduction in working hours through strike action or resistance societies: these mean both working to build a new society and engaging in actual explorations with regard to the social arrangements of the future.

Let the still unassociated workers organize and form associations! Let those who are organized only at the level of the economy descend into the political arena; they will find there the same adversaries and the same battle, and any victory scored at one of these levels will signal a triumph in the other!



Let the disinherited class in each nation form itself into a vast party distinct from all the bourgeois parties, and let this social party march hand in hand with those of other countries!

To claim all your rights, to abolish all privileges, workers of the world, unite!<sup>162</sup>

In later decades, the workers' movement adopted a socialist programme, expanded throughout Europe and then the rest of the world, and built new structures of supranational coordination. Apart the continuity of names (the Second International from 1889 to 1916, the Third International from 1919 to 1943), each of these structures constantly referred to the values and doctrines of the First International. Thus, its revolutionary message proved extraordinarily fertile, producing results over time still greater than those achieved during its existence.

The International helped workers to grasp that the emancipation of labour 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 capitalist mode of production and wage labour, since improvements within the existing system, though necessary to pursue, would not eliminate dependence on employers' oligarchies.

An abyss separates the hopes of those times from the mistrust so characteristic of our own, the antisystemic 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 passion for politics among the workers who gathered in London in 1864 contrasts sharply with the apathy and resignation prevalent today.

And yet, while the world of labour has been reverting to conditions of exploitation similar to those of the nineteenth century, the project of the International has once again acquired an extraordinary topicality. Today's barbarism of the 'world order', ecological disasters produced by the present

<sup>162</sup> César De Paepe and Louis Bertrand, 'Manifeste aux Organisations ouvrières et Sociétés de tous les pays', in *PI*, IV, pp. 591–3.

mode of production, the growing gulf between the wealthy exploitative few and the huge impoverished majority, the oppression of women, and the blustery winds of war, racism and chauvinism, impose 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 150 years ago are today more vital than ever. To rise to the challenges of the present, however, the new International cannot evade that twin requirements: it must be plural and it must be anticapitalist.

### Appendix: International Working Men's Association: Timeline and Membership

The first part of this appendix lists in chronological order all the congresses and conferences of the International: the unitary ones from the foundation in 1864 to the split at the Hague Congress in 1872; then the separate 'autonomist' and 'centralist' events beginning in 1873.

The second part is a table containing membership data for the International in various countries. Precise figures are impossible to establish for several reasons: (1) only a small number of workers' movement organizations at the time – above all, the British trade unions and the German socialist parties – kept an exact count; (2) workers mostly joined the International not on an individual basis but through the affiliation of trade unions and other collective bodies and (3) the International was illegal for some of the period in a number of countries, making it especially difficult to evaluate its size.

This is perhaps why – with the exception of the invaluable collective work *La Première Internationale: l'institute, l'implantation, le rayonnement* (Paris: Éditions du Centre national de la recherche scientifique, 1968) – none of the many books on the International have ventured to calculate its total membership. If it has seemed useful to attempt this here, at the risk of some approximation and imprecision, this is largely because most publications in the past bandied around excessive figures that created a misleading picture of the reality.

The first column of the table lists – in chronological order of foundation – the countries where the International established a presence; it does not include Australia, New Zealand or India, for example, where it had only sporadic contacts with small groups of workers. Nor does it cover Russia, since the International never managed to penetrate that country (although some exiles founded a circle in Switzerland). The second column gives the years in which the organization reached its peak in the respective countries, while the third offers an approximate figure for the size of its membership. These totals have been calculated from the studies in *La Première Internationale: l'institute, l'implantation, le rayonnement* and other monographs listed in the bibliography at the end of this book.

## Timeline

### **Conferences and Congresses (1864–1872)**

London Conference: 25–29 September 1865

I Congress: Geneva, 3–8 September 1866

II Congress: Lausanne, 2–8 September 1867

III Congress: Brussels, 6–13 September 1868

IV Congress: Basel, 6–12 September 1869

London Delegate Conference: 17–23 September 1871

V Congress: The Hague, 2–7 September 1872

### **The “Autonomist” International**

VI Congress: Geneva, 1–6 September 1873

VII Congress: Brussels, 7–13 September 1874

VIII Congress: Berne, 26–30 October 1876

IX Congress: Verviers, 6–8 September 1877

### **The “Centralist” International**

VI Congress: Geneva, 7–13 September 1873

Philadelphia Delegate Conference: 15 July 1876

**Membership Table**

<b>Country</b>	<b>Peak Year</b>	<b>Membership</b>
Britain	1867	50,000
Switzerland	1870	6,000
France	1871	More than 30,000
Belgium	1871	More than 30,000
USA	1872	4,000
Germany	1870	11,000 (including the members of the Social Democratic Workers' Party)
Spain	1873	About 30,000
Italy	1873	About 25,000
Netherlands	1872	Less than 1,000
Denmark	1872	A couple of thousands
Portugal	1872	Less than 1,000
Ireland	1872	Less than 1,000
Austria-Hungary	1872	A couple of thousands