

Mainstream Weekly



Notice: Mainstream Weekly appears online only.

Mainstream, VOL LIV No 30 New Delhi July 16, 2016

History and Legacy of International Working Men's Association After 150 Years

Sunday 17 July 2016

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On September 28, 1864, St. Martin's Hall, in the heart of London, was packed to overflowing with some two thousand workers. They had come to attend a meeting called by English trade union leaders and a small group of companions from the Continent. This meeting gave birth to the prototype of all the main organisations of the workers' movement: the International Working Men's Association. Quickly, the International aroused passions all over Europe. It made class solidarity a shared ideal and inspired large numbers of women and men to struggle for the most radical of goals: changing the world. Thanks to its activity, workers were able to gain a clearer understanding of the mechanisms of the capitalist mode of production, to become more aware of their own strength, and to develop new, more advanced forms of struggle for their rights.

When it was founded, the central driving force of the International was British trade unionism, the leaders of which were mainly interested in economic questions. They fought to improve the workers' conditions, but without calling capitalism into question. Hence, they conceived the International primarily as an instrument to prevent the import of manpower from abroad in the event of strikes. Then there were the mutualists, long dominant in France. In keeping with the theories of Pierre-

Joseph Proudhon, they opposed any working-class involvement in politics, and the strike as a weapon of struggle. The third group in importance were the Communists, opposing the existing system of production and espousing the necessity of political action to overthrow it. At its founding, the ranks of the International also included a number of workers inspired by utopian theories, and exiles having vaguely democratic ideas and cross-class conception who considered the International as an instrument for the issuing of general appeals for the liberation of oppressed peoples.

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

Not Only Marx

Nevertheless, despite the impression created by the Soviet Union's propaganda and by the majority of the ideologically driven scholars who wrote on the International, this organisation was much more than a single individual, even one as brilliant as Marx.

The International was a vast social and political movement for the emancipation of the working classes; not, as it has often been written, the "creation of Marx". It was made possible first of all by the labour movement's struggles in the 1860s. One of its basic rules—and the fundamental distinction from previous labour organisations—was "that the emancipation of the working classes must be conquered by the working classes themselves". The orthodox, dogmatic view of Marx's role in the International, according to which he mechanically applied to the stage of history a political theory already forged in the confines of his study, is totally divorced from the historical reality. Marx was essential to the International, but also the International had a very positive impact on Marx. Being directly involved in workers' struggles, Marx was stimulated to develop and sometimes revise his ideas, to put

old certainties up for discussion and ask himself new questions, and, in particular, to sharpen his critique of capitalism by drawing the broad outlines of a communist society.

From late 1866 on, strikes intensified in many countries and formed the core of a new and important wave of mobilisations. The first major struggle to be won with the International's support was the Parisian bronze workers' strike in the winter of 1867. Also successful in their outcomes were the iron workers' strike at Marchienne, in Belgium, the long dispute in the Provençal mineral basin, and the Geneva building workers' strike. The scenario was the same in each of these events: workers in other countries raised funds in support of the strikers and agreed not to accept work that would have turned them into industrial mercenaries; as a result, the bosses were forced to compromise on many of the strikers' demands. These advances were greatly favoured by the diffusion of newspapers that either sympathised 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.

Across Europe, the Association increased the number of its members and developed an efficient organisational structure. More symbolically significant still, at least for the hopes it initially awakened, was its new mooring on the other side of the Atlantic, where immigrants who had arrived in recent years began to establish the first sections of the International in the United States. However, the organisation suffered from two handicaps at birth that it would never overcome. Despite repeated exhortations from the General Council in London, it was unable either to cut across the nationalist character of its various affiliated groups or to draw in workers born in the "New World". When the German, French and Czech sections founded the Central Committee of the International for North America, in December 1870, it was unique in the history of the International in having only "foreign-born" members. The most striking aspect of this anomaly was that the International in the United States never disposed of an English-language press organ. At the beginning of the 1870s, the International reached a total of 50 sections with a combined membership of 4000, but this was still only a tiny proportion of the American industrial workforce of more than two million.

Developments across Europe

In Europe, the situation was very different. For all the difficulties bound up with a diversity of nationalities, languages and political cultures, the International managed to achieve unity and coordination across a wide range of organisations and spontaneous struggles. Its greatest merit was to demonstrate the crucial importance of class solidarity and international cooperation.

The most significant moment of the Inter-national coincided with the Paris Commune. In March 1871, after the end of Franco-Prussian War, the workers of Paris rose against the new government of Adolphe Thiers and took power in the city. Henceforth, the International was at the centre of the storm, and gained enormous notoriety. For capitalists and the middle classes, it represented a great threat to the established order, whereas for workers it fuelled hopes for a world without exploitation and injustice. The labour movement had an enormous vitality and that was apparent everywhere. News-papers linked to the International increased in both number and overall sales. The insurrection of Paris fortified the workers' movement, impelling it to adopt more radical positions and to intensify its militancy. Once again, France showed that revolution was possible, clarifying its goal to be building a society different from that of capitalism, but also that, to achieve this, the workers would have to create durable and well-organised forms of political association. The next step to take then, as stated by Marx, was understanding that "the economic move-ment of the working class and its political action are indissolubly united". That led the International to push for the foundation of a key instrument of the modern workers' movement: the political party (although it should be stressed that the understanding of this was much broader than that adopted by communist organisations after the October Revolution).

When the International dissolved itself in 1872, it was a very different organisation from what it had been at the time of its foundation: reformists no longer constituted the bulk of the organisation and anti-capitalism had become the political line of the whole Association (including new tendencies like the anarchists led by Mikhail Bakunin). The wider picture, too, was radically different. The unification of Germany in 1871 confirmed the onset of a new age, with the nation-state the central form of political, legal and territorial identity.

The initial configuration of the International thus became outmoded, just as its original mission came to an end. The task was no longer preparing for and organising Europe-wide support for strikes, nor calling congresses proclaiming the usefulness of trade unions or the need to socialise the land and the means of

production. Such themes were now part of the collective heritage of the organisation. After the Paris Commune, the real challenge for the workers' movement became how to organise to end the capitalist mode of production and overthrow the institutions of the bourgeois world.

In later decades, the workers' movement adopted a consistent socialist programme, expanded throughout Europe and then the rest of the world, and built new structures of supranational coordination. Apart from the continuity of names (the Second International of Karl Kautsky, from 1889–1916, the Third International of Lenin, from 1919 to 1943, or the Socialist International of the German Chancellor Willy Brandt, from 1951 till today), the various “Internationals” of socialist politics have referred—although in very different ways—to the legacy of the “First” International. Thus, its revolutionary message proved extraordinarily fertile, producing results over time much greater than those achieved during its existence.

A Dispersed Heritage

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

After the fall of the Berlin Wall, everything that had to do with socialism was wrongly associated with the Soviet Union and, therefore, hastily dismissed. Everywhere, the moderate Left embraced completely the agenda of neoliberalism and treated Marx as a skeleton of the past to be hidden in the closet. At the same time, what was left of the radical Left abandoned references to the dense theory of the classical labour movement and opted for “instant book thinkers” who did not provide much more than empty slogans that were, after a few years, quickly forgotten. In different ways, both social–democrats and neo–“Marxists” contributed to the general trend which held that socialism belonged to eternal oblivion.

With the most recent crisis of capitalism—that has sharpened even more than before the division between social classes—the political legacy of the organisation founded in London in 1864 has regained relevance, making its lessons today more timely than ever. The literature dealing with alternatives to capitalism, which all but dried up after 1989, is showing signs of revival in many countries; and after 2014 there have been, all over the world, dozens of conferences and publications of articles, books and special issues of journals commemorating the 150th anniversary of the International.

At a time when socialist ideas have finally been liberated from the chains of Soviet ideology, a more faithful account of their genesis may well have important implications for future studies on the history of the labour movement, and for the contemporary struggle of the working classes.

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