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Labor's Battle Against Exploitation By Capital, 150 Years

Ago

By Marcello Musto

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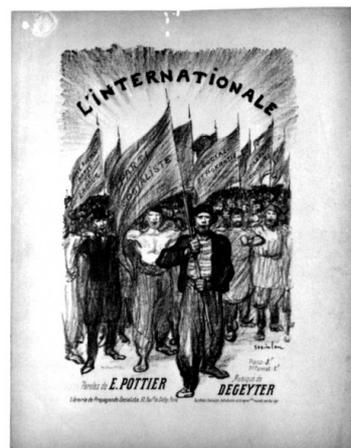
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rights and interests.

The 150th anniversary of the International takes place, however, in a very different context. The world of labor has suffered an epochal defeat and is in the midst of a deep crisis. After a long period of neoliberal policies almost everywhere in the world, the system against which workers fought and won important victories has returned to become more exploitative. Decades of assault on the rights of workers have compelled labor organizations to seek new ways forward, to discover avenues of collaboration and solidarity that can again make gains against the enormous power of globalized capital. As before, workers must discover how to turn the power of their numbers and commitment into a force that will realize substantial social and economic benefits. The lessons of the International can help to reverse the trend.

The workers' organizations that founded the International were something of a motley group. The central driving force was British trade unionism, whose leaders largely conceived the International as an instrument to block the importation of workers from abroad in the event of strikes. Another significant force in the organization were "mutualists," a moderate tendency—long dominant in France—inspired by the theories of Pierre-Joseph Proudhon. The third group in importance were the communists, surrounding the figure of Karl Marx. The ranks of the International also included numbers of workers inspired by utopian theories and exiles having vaguely democratic ideas.

Securing the cohabitation of all these currents in the same organization was Marx's great political accomplishment. His talents enabled him to reconcile the seemingly irreconcilable, ensuring that

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I Am Greta isn't about

the International did not swiftly follow the many previous workers' associations down the path to oblivion. It was Marx who gave a clear purpose to the International and who achieved a non-exclusionary, yet firmly working class-based, political program that won it mass support beyond sectarianism. The political soul of its General Council was always Marx: he drafted all its main resolutions.

The late 1860s and early 1870s were a period rife with social conflicts. Many workers who took part in protest actions decided to make contact with the International, whose reputation quickly spread. Across Europe, the Association increased the number of its members and developed an efficient organizational structure. It reached, moreover, the other side of the Atlantic through the efforts of immigrants to the United States. Thus, for all the difficulties bound up with a diversity of nationalities, languages, and political cultures, the International managed to achieve unity and coordination across a wide range of organizations and spontaneous struggles. Its greatest merit was to demonstrate the crucial importance of class solidarity and international cooperation.

When the International dissolved in 1872, it was a very different organization from the time of its foundation. Reformists no longer constituted the bulk of the organization and anti-capitalism had become the political line of the whole Association (including recently formed tendencies such as the 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—evident also in the unification of Italy and the Meiji Restoration in Japan—where the nation-state would become the central form of political, legal, and territorial identity. This placed a question mark over any supranational body that called for members to surrender a sizeable share of political leadership.

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

The International helped workers to grasp that the emancipation of labor could not be won in a single country, but was a global objective. It also spread an awareness in their ranks that they had to achieve the goal themselves, through their own capacity for organization, rather than by delegating it to some other force; and that—here Marx's theoretical contribution was fundamental—it was essential to overcome the limits of the capitalist system, since improvements within it, though necessary to pursue, would not eliminate exploitation and social injustice.

Major political and economic shifts have succeeded one another over the past 25 years: the collapse of the Soviet bloc; the rise to prominence of ecological issues; social changes generated by globalization; and one of the biggest economic crises of capitalism in history that, according to International Labor Organization figures, has added another 27



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million unemployed since 2008 to bring the total to more than 200 million. Moreover, labor market “reforms” (a term that has changed its original progressive meaning), that have introduced, year after year, more “flexibility” and easier termination of workers, have created deeper inequalities, not supposed improvements in terms of jobs. The current situation of many European countries, with alarming rates of unemployment, is paradigmatic of this failure.

Nevertheless, the global protest movements that have been recently active in most parts of the world have distinguished themselves so far by the very general character of their demand for social equality, without giving sufficient thought to the new problems and radical changes in the world of work. Indeed, in a slightly earlier period, a number of authors put forward the thesis that the “end of work” was in sight. In this way, labor, having been a key protagonist throughout the 20th century, increasingly has become a weak and secondary player, with unions finding it more difficult to represent and organize younger or migrant workers, in an ever more flexible labor market, where jobs are insecure and increasingly stripped of rights.

Yet, if capitalist globalization has weakened the labor movement, it has also, in many ways, opened new avenues, through increased capacity for communication, that may facilitate workers' international cooperation and solidarity. With the recent crisis of capitalism—that has sharpened more than before the division between capital and labor—the political legacy of the organization founded in London in 1864 has regained profound relevance and its lessons are today more timely than ever.

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