



Belgique - België
PB
2600 Berchem 1-2
BC 9925

International Communist Current

4th Quarter 2011

International Review

The world economic catastrophe is unavoidable

Movement of the Indignants in Spain,
Greece and Israel
**From indignation to the preparation
of class struggles**

**Contribution to a history
of the workers' movement in Africa (iii)**

Revolutionary syndicalism in Germany (iii)
**The revolutionary syndicalist FVDG
during the First World War**

The decadence of capitalism (xi)
**The post-war boom did not reverse
the decline of capitalism**

£2.50 \$3 \$6Can \$7Aus 20Rupees 3Euros 650Yen 50.00PHP 12Rand

147

périodique trimestriel
Supplément à INTERNATIONALISME.FR
Bureau de Depot: B-2600 Berchem 1-2
N° d'agrément P408982

International Review 147 4th Quarter 2011

Quarterly in French, English, Spanish, selections of articles in German, Italian, Dutch, Swedish

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The world economic catastrophe is unavoidable

In quick succession over the last few months we have seen a number of important events bearing witness to the gravity of the world economic situation: Greece's inability to deal with its debts; similar threats to Italy and Spain; warnings to France of its extreme vulnerability in the event of a cessation of payment by Greece or Italy; the paralysis of the US House of Representatives over the issue of raising the debt-ceiling; the USA's loss of its "Triple A" status – the guarantee of its ability to repay its debts; more and more persistent rumours about the danger of certain banks collapsing, with denials to the contrary fooling nobody given that the same banks have often already imposed massive job-cuts; the first confirmation of the rumours with the failure of the Franco-Belgian bank Dexia. Each time, the leaders of this world have been running after events, but each time the holes they seem to have filled in seem to open up again a few weeks or even days later. Their inability to hold back the escalation of the crisis is less the result of their incompetence and their short-term view than of the current dynamic of capitalism towards catastrophes which cannot be avoided: the bankruptcy of financial establishments, the bankruptcy of entire states, a plunge into deep global recession.

Dramatic consequences for the working class

The austerity measures pushed through in 2010 were implacable, placing a growing part of the working class – and of the rest of the population – in a situation where their most basic needs can no longer be met. To enumerate all the austerity measures which have been introduced in the euro zone, or which are about to be introduced, would make a very long list. It is however necessary to mention a certain number of those that are becoming widespread and which are a significant indication of the lot of millions of the exploited. In Greece, while taxes on consumer goods were increased, the retirement age was raised to 67 and public sector wages were brutally reduced. In September 2011 it was decided that 30,000 public sector workers should be put on technical unemployment with a 40% reduction in wages, while pensions over €1,200 were cut by 20%; the same measure was applied to incomes over €5,000 a year.¹ In nearly all countries taxes have been raised and thousands of public sector jobs axed. This has created many problems in the operation of public services, including the most vital ones: thus, in a city like Barcelona, operating theatres, emergency services and hospital beds have been greatly reduced;² in Madrid, 5,000 uncontracted teachers lost their jobs³

1. lefigaro.fr, 9.22.11, "La colère grande de plus en plus en Grèce".

2. news.fr.msn.com; "Espagne, les enseignants manifestent à Madrid contre les coupes budgétaires".

3. rfi.fr, 21.9.11, "Manifestations d'enseignants et

and this was made up for by the contracted teachers having to take on an extra two hours teaching a week.

The unemployment figures are more and more alarming: 7.9% in Britain at the end of August; 10% in the euro zone (20% in Spain) at the end of September⁴ and 9.1% in the US over the same period. Throughout the summer, redundancy plans and job-cuts came one after the other: 6,500 at Cisco, 6,000 at Lockheed Martin, 10,000 at HSBC, 3,000 at the Bank of America: the list goes on. The earnings of the exploited have been falling: according to official figures, real wages were going down at an annual rate of 10% by the beginning of 2011, by over 4% in Spain, and to a lesser extent in Italy and Portugal. In the US, 45.7 million people, a 12% increase in a year,⁵ only survive thanks to the weekly \$30 food stamps handed out by the state.

And despite all this, the worst is yet to come.

All this demonstrates the necessity to overthrow the capitalist system before it leads humanity to ruin. The protest movements against the attacks which have been taking place in a whole number of countries since the spring of 2011, whatever their insufficiencies and weaknesses, nevertheless represent the first steps of a broader proletarian response to the crisis of capitalism (see the article "From indignation to the preparation of class struggles" in this issue of the *Review*).

lycéens en Espagne".

4. *Statistique Eurostat*.

5. *Le Monde*, 7-8.8.11.

Since 2008, the bourgeoisie has not been able to block the tendency towards recession

At the beginning of 2010, it was possible to have the illusion that states had succeeded in sheltering capitalism from the continuation of the recession that began in 2008 and early 2009, taking the form of a dizzying fall in production. All the big central banks of the world had injected massive amounts of money into the economy. This was when Ben Bernanke, the director of the Fed and architect of major recovery plans was nicknamed "Helicopter Ben" since he seemed to be inundating the US with dollars from a helicopter. Between 2009 and 2010, according to official figures, which we know are always overestimated, the growth rate in the US went from -2.6% to +2.9%, and from -4.1% to +1.7% in the euro zone. In the "emerging" countries, the rates of growth, which had fallen, seemed in 2010 to return to their levels before the financial crisis: 10.4% in China, 9% in India. All states and their media began singing about the recovery, when in reality production in all the developed countries never succeeded in going back to 2007 levels. In other words, rather than a recovery, it would be more accurate to talk about a pause in a downward movement of production. And this pause only lasted a few quarters:

– In the developed countries, rates of growth began to fall again in mid-2010. Predicted growth in the US in 2011 is 0.8%. Ben Bernanke has announced that the American recovery is more or less "marking time". At the same time, growth in the main European countries (Germany, France, Britain) is near to zero and while the governments of southern Europe (Spain, 0.6% in 2011 after -0.1% in 2010;⁶ Italy 0.7% in 2011)⁷ have been repeating non-stop that their countries "are not in recession", in reality, given the austerity plans that they are and will be going through, the perspective opening in front of them is not very different from what Greece is currently experiencing: in 2011, production there has fallen by over 5%.

6. finance-economie.com, 10.10.11, "Chiffres clés Espagne".

7. globalix.fr "La dynamique de la dette italienne".

– In the “emerging” countries the situation is far from brilliant. While they saw important growth rates in 2010, 2011 is looking much gloomier. The IMF has predicted that their growth rate for 2011 will be 8.4%,⁸ but certain indices show that activity in China is about to slow down.⁹ Growth in Brazil is predicted to

in the world economy in 2010 and 2011: having previously noted that growth had “considerably weakened”, they have now said that we “cannot exclude” a recession in 2012.¹² In other words, the bourgeoisie is becoming aware of the degree to which economic activity is contracting. In the light of all this, the following question is

posed: why have the central banks not carried on showering the world in money as they did at the end of 2008 and in 2009, thus considerably increasing the monetary mass (it was multiplied by 3 in the US and 2 in the euro zone)? The reason is that pouring “funny money” into the economy doesn’t resolve the contradictions of capitalism. It results not so much in a recovery of production, but a recovery of inflation. The latter stands at nearly 3% in the euro zone, a bit more in the US, 4.5% in the UK and between 6 and 9% in the emerging countries.

The production of paper or electronic money

allows new loans to be agreed... thereby increasing global debt. The scenario is not new. This is how the world’s big economic actors have become mired in debts to the point where they can no longer pay them back. In other words, they are now insolvent, and this includes none other than the European states, America, and the entire banking system.

The cancer of public debt

The euro zone

The states of Europe are finding it increasingly difficult to honour the interest on their debts.

The reason that the euro zone has been

12. *lefigaro.fr*, 5.10.11: “FMI, recession mondiale pas exclue”.

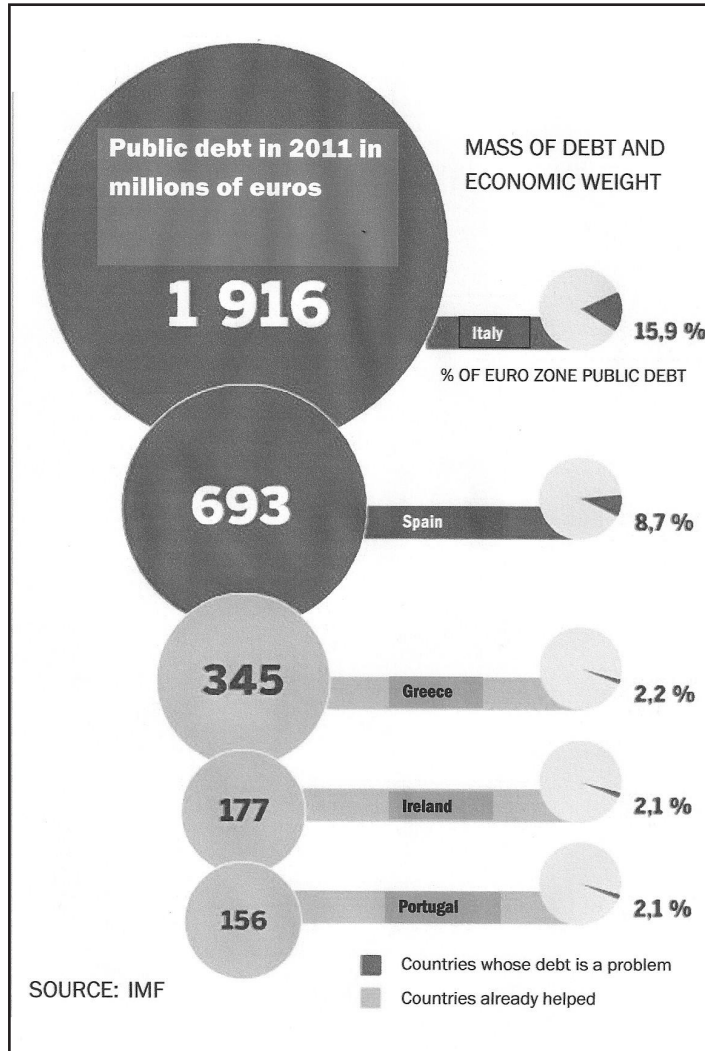
the first to see certain states in default of payment is that, unlike the US, Britain and Japan, they don’t control the printing of their own money and so don’t have the opportunity to pay towards their debts in fictional money. Printing euros is the responsibility of the European Central Bank (ECB) which is basically controlled by the big European states and in particular Germany. And, as everyone knows, multiplying the mass of currency by two or three times at a time when production is stagnating only leads to inflation. It’s in order to avoid this that the ECB has become more and more reluctant to finance states that need it; otherwise it risks being in default of payment itself.

This is one of the central reasons why the countries of the euro zone have for the last year and a half been living under the threat of Greece defaulting on its payments. In fact, the problem facing the euro zone has no solution since its failure to finance Greece’s debt will result in a cessation of payment by Greece and its exit from the euro zone. Greece’s creditors, which include other European states and major European banks, would then find it very hard to honour their commitments and would themselves face bankruptcy. The very existence of the euro zone is being put into question, even though its existence is essential for the exporting countries in the north of the zone, especially Germany.

For the last year and a half the issue of defaulting on payments has been focussed mainly on Greece. But countries like Spain and Italy are going to find themselves in a similar situation since they have never found a fiscal recipe for amortising part of their debt (see graph¹³). A glance at the breadth of Italy’s debt, which is very likely to default in the near future, shows that the euro zone would not be able to support these countries to ensure that they could honour their commitments. Already investors believe less and less in their capacity to repay, which is why they are only prepared to lend them money at very high rates of interest. The situation facing Spain is also very close to the one that Greece is now in.

The positions adopted by governments and other euro zone institutions, especially the German government, express their inability to deal with the situation created by the threat of certain countries going bust. The major part of the bourgeoisie of the euro zone is aware of the fact that the problem is not knowing whether or not Greece is in default: the announcement that the banks are going to take part in salvaging 21% of Greece’s debts is already a recognition of this situation, which was

13. Adapted from *Le Monde* 5.8.11.



go from 7.5% in 2020 to 3.7% in 2011.¹⁰ Finally, capital is starting to flee Russia.¹¹ In brief, contrary to what we have been sold by the economists and numerous politicians for years, the emerging countries are not going to act as locomotives pulling world growth. On the contrary, they are going to be the first victims of the situation in the developed countries and will see a fall in their exports, which up till now have been the main factor behind their growth.

The IMF has just revised its predictions which had assumed a 4% growth

8. IMF, *World Economic Outlook Update*, July 2010.

9. *Le Figaro*, 3.10.11.

10. *Les Echos*, 9.8.11.

11. *lecourrierderussie.com*, 10.12.11: “Putin, la crise existe”.

confirmed at the Merkel-Sarkozy summit on 9 October which admitted that Greece would default on repaying 60% of its debt. From this point the problem posed to the bourgeoisie is to find a way of making sure that this default will lead to the minimum of convulsions in the euro zone. This is a particularly delicate exercise that has provoked hesitation and divisions within it. Thus, the political parties in Germany are very divided over the issue of how, if they are going to aid Greece financially, they will then be able to help the other states that are rapidly heading towards the same position of default as Greece. As an illustration, it is remarkable that the plan drawn up on 21st July by the authorities of the euro zone to “save” Greece, which envisages a strengthening of the capacity of the European Financial Stability Facility from 220 to 440 billion euros (with the obvious corollary of an increased contribution from the different states), was contested for weeks by an important section of the ruling parties in Germany. After a turn-around in the situation, it was finally voted for by a large majority in the Bundestag on 29th September. Similarly, up till the beginning of August, the German government were opposed to the ECB buying up the titles of Italy and Spain’s sovereign debt. Given the degradation of these countries’ economic situation, the German state finally agreed that from August 7th the ECB could buy up such obligations.¹⁴ So much so that between August 7th and 22nd the ECB bought up 22 billion euros of these two countries’ sovereign debt!¹⁵ In fact, these contradictions, these coming and goings, show that a bourgeoisie as internationally important as the German bourgeoisie doesn’t know what policies to carry out. In general, Europe, pushed by Germany, has opted for austerity. But this doesn’t rule out a minimal financing of states and banks via the European Financial Stability Facility (which thus presupposes increasing the financial resources available to this organism) or authorising the ECB to create enough money to come to the aid of a state which can no longer pay its debts and so avoid an immediate default.

Certainly this is not just a problem for the German bourgeoisie but for the entire ruling class, because the whole bourgeoisie has been getting into debt since the 1960s to avoid overproduction, to the point where it is now very difficult not only to pay back the debts but even to pay back the interest on those debts. Hence the economies it is now trying to make via draconian austerity policies, draining incomes everywhere, and at the same time causing a reduction in demand, aggravating overproduction and

accelerating the slide into depression.

The USA

The USA was faced with the same kind of problem in the summer of 2011.

The debt ceiling, which in 2008 was fixed at \$14,294bn, was reached by May 2011. It had to be raised in order for the US, like the countries in the euro zone, to be able to keep up the payments, including internal ones: the functioning of the state was at stake. Even if the unbelievable stupidity and backwardness of the Tea Party was an element aggravating the crisis, they were not at the root of the problem facing the President and Congress. The real problem was the necessity to choose between two alternatives:

- either carry on with the policy of increasing Federal state debt, as the Democrats argued, which basically meant asking the Fed to print money, with the risk of an uncontrolled fall in the value of the dollar;
- or push through a drastic austerity programme, as the Republicans demanded, through the reduction over the next ten years of public expenditure by something between \$4,000bn and \$8000bn. By way of comparison, the Gross Domestic Product of the US in 2010 was \$14,624bn, which gives an idea of the scale of the budget cuts, and thus the slashing of public sector jobs, implied by this plan.

To sum up, the alternative posed this summer to the US was the following: either take the risk of opening the door to galloping inflation, or carry through an austerity programme which could only strongly restrict demand and provoke a fall or even a disappearance of profits: in the long run, a chain reaction of closures and a dramatic fall in production. From the standpoint of the national interest, both the Democrats and the Republicans are putting forward legitimate answers. Pulled hither and thither by the contradictions assailing the national economy, the US authorities have been reduced to contradictory and incoherent half measures. Congress will still be faced with the need both to make massive economic cuts and to get the economy moving.

The outcome of the conflict between Democrats and Republicans shows that, contrary to Europe, the USA has opted more for the aggravation of debt because the Federal debt ceiling was raised by 2100 billion up till 2013, with a corresponding reduction in budgetary expenses of around 2500 billion in the next ten years.

But, as for Europe, this decision shows that the American state does not know what policies to adopt in the face of the debt crisis.

The lowering of America’s credit rating by the rating agency Standard and Poor, and the reactions that followed, are an illustration of the fact that the bourgeoisie knows quite well that it has reached a dead-end and that it can’t see a way out of it. Unlike many other decisions taken by the ratings agencies since the beginning of the sub-prime crisis, Standard and Poor’s decision this summer looked coherent: the agency is showing that there is no recipe to compensate for the increase in debt agreed by Congress and that, as a result, the USA’s capacity to reimburse its debts has lost credibility. In other words, for this institution, the compromise, which avoided a grave political crisis in the US by aggravating the country’s debt, is going to deepen the insolvency of the US state itself. The loss of confidence in the dollar by the world’s financiers, which will be an inevitable result of Standard and Poor’s judgement, will lead to a fall in its value. At the same time, while the vote on increasing the Federal debt ceiling made it possible to avoid a paralysis in the Federal administration, the different states and municipalities are already faced with exactly that problem. Since July 4, the State of Minnesota has been in default and it had to ask 22,000 state employees to stay at home.¹⁶ A number of US cities, such as Central Falls and Harrisburg, the capital of Pennsylvania, are in the same situation, while it looks like the State of California and others will soon be in the same boat

Faced with the deepening of the crisis since 2007, the economic policies of both the US and the euro zone have meant the state taking charge of debts that were originally contracted in the private sector. These new debts can’t fail to increase the overall public debt, which has itself been growing ceaselessly for decades. States are facing a deadline on debt that they can never pay back. In the US as in the euro zone, this will mean massive lay-offs in the public sector, endless wage-cuts and ever-rising taxes.

The threat of a grave banking crisis

In 2008-9, after the collapse of certain banks such as Bear Stearns and Northern Rock and the utter downfall of Lehman Brothers, states ran to the aid of many other banks, pumping in capital to avoid the same fate. What is the state of health of the banks

14. *Les Echos*, August 2011.

15. *Les Echos*, 16 August 2011.

16. rfi.fr, 2.7.11, “Faillite: le gouvernement de Minnesota cesse activités”

today? It is once again very bad. First of all, a whole series of irrecoverable loans have not been removed from their balances. In addition, many banks themselves hold part of the debts of states that are now struggling to make their repayments. The problem for the banks is that the value of the debts they have taken on has now considerably diminished.

The recent declaration by the IMF, based on a recognition of the current difficulties of the European Banks and stipulating that they must increase their own funds by 200 billion euros, has provoked a number of sharp reactions and declarations from these institutions, claiming that everything was fine with them. And this at a moment when everything was showing the contrary:

- American banks no longer want to refinance in dollars the American affiliates of the European banks and have been repatriating funds which they had previously placed in Europe;
- European banks are lending less and less to each other because they are less and less sure of being repaid. They prefer to put their liquidities in the ECB, despite very high bank rates;
- a consequence of this growing lack of confidence is that the rate of interest on inter-bank loans has been climbing continually, even if it has not yet reached the levels of the end of 2008.¹⁷

The high point was reached a few weeks after the banks proclaimed their wonderful state of health, when we saw the collapse and liquidation of the Franco-Belgian bank Dexia, without any other bank being willing to come to the rescue.

We can add that the American banks are poorly placed to keep the machine going on behalf of their European consorts: because of the difficulties they are facing, the Bank of America has just cut 10% of its workforce and Goldman Sachs, the bank which has become the symbol of global speculation, has just laid off 1,000 people. And they too prefer depositing their liquidities in the FED rather than loaning to other American banks.

The health of the banks is essential for capitalism because it can't function without a banking system that supplies it with currency. But the tendency we are seeing today is towards another "Credit Crunch", i.e. a situation where the banks no longer want to loan as soon as there is the least risk of not being repaid. What this means in the long run is a blockage in the circulation of capital, which amounts to the blockage of the economy. From this perspective we can

better understand why the problem of shoring up the banks' own funds has become the first item on the agenda of the various international summit meetings that have taken place, even ahead of the situation in Greece, which has certainly not been resolved. At root, the problem of the banks reveals the extreme gravity of the economic situation and illustrates the inextricable difficulties facing capitalism.

When the US lost its triple A status, the headline of the French economic daily *Les Echos* of 8th August read: "*America downgraded, the world enters the unknown*". When the main economic media of the French bourgeoisie expresses its disorientation like this, when it shows its anxiety about the future, it merely expresses the disorientation of the entire bourgeoisie. Since 1945, western capitalism (and world capitalism after the collapse of the USSR) has been based on the fact that the strength of American capital was the final guarantor of the dollars that ensured the circulation of commodities and thus of capital around the world. But now the immense accumulation of debts contracted by the American bourgeoisie to deal with the return of the open crisis of capitalism since the end of the 1960s has ended up becoming a factor aggravating and accelerating the crisis. All those holding parts of the American debt, starting with the American state itself, are holding an asset which is worth less and less. The currency on which the debt is based can now only weaken the American state.

The base of the pyramid on which the world has been built since 1945 is breaking up. In 2007, when the financial crisis broke, the financial system was saved by the central banks, i.e. by the states. Now the states themselves are on the verge of bankruptcy and it is out of the question that the banks can come along and save them. Whichever way the capitalists turn, there's nothing that can make a real recovery possible. Even a very feeble rate of growth would require the development of fresh debts in order to create the demand needed to absorb commodities; but even the interest on the debts already taken out is no longer repayable and this is dragging banks and states towards bankruptcy.

As we have seen, decisions that once seemed irrevocable are being put into question in the space of a few days and certainties about the health of the economy are being disproved just as quickly. In this context, states are more and more obliged to navigate from one day to the next. It is probable, but not certain because the bourgeoisie is so disoriented by a situation it has never been in before, that to deal with immediate issues it will continue to sustain

capital, whether financial, commercial or industrial, with newly-printed money, even if this gives a new impetus to the inflation that is already on the march and is going to become more and more uncontrollable. This will not stop the continuation of layoffs, wage-cuts and tax increases; but inflation will more and more make the poverty of the great majority of the exploited even worse. The very day that *Les Echos* wrote "*America downgraded, the world enters the unknown*", another French economic daily, *La Tribune* led with "*left behind*", describing the planet's big decision-makers whose photos appeared on the front page. Yes indeed: those who once promised us marvels and mountains, and then tried to console us when it became obvious that the marvel was actually a nightmare, now admit that they have been left behind. And they have been left behind because their system, capitalism, is definitively obsolete and is in the process of pulling the vast majority of the world's population into the most terrible poverty.

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17. gecodia.fr "Le stress interbancaire en Europe approche du pic post Lehman"

From indignation to the preparation of class struggles

In the editorial of *International Review* n° 146 we gave an account of the struggles that had developed in Spain.¹ Since then, the contagion of its example has spread to Greece and Israel.² In this article, we want to draw the lessons of these movements and look at what perspectives they hold faced with the bankruptcy of capitalism and the ferocious attacks against the proletariat and the vast majority of the world population.

In order to understand these movements we have to categorically reject the immediatist and empiricist method that dominates society today. This method analyses each event in itself, outside of any historical context and isolated in the country where it appears. This photographic method is a reflection of the ideological degeneration of the capitalist class, because “*All that the latter can offer is a day-by-day resistance, with no hope of success, to the irrevocable collapse of the capitalist mode of production.*”³

A photograph can show us a person with a big happy smile, but this can hide the fact that a few seconds before or after they were grimacing with anxiety. We cannot understand social movements in this way. We can only see them in the light of the past in which they have matured and the future to which they are pointing; it is necessary to place them in their international context and not in the narrow national confines where they appear, and, above all, we have to understand them in their dynamic; not by what they are at any given moment but by what they can become due to the tendencies, forces and perspectives they contain and which will sooner or later come to the surface.

1. See <http://en.internationalism.org/ir/146/editorial-protests-in-spain>. Given that this article analysed this experience in depth we will not repeat what we said here.

2. See our articles on these movements: <http://en.internationalism.org/icconline/2011/08/social-protests-israel> and <http://en.internationalism.org/icconline/2011/07/notes-on-popular-assemblies-greece>

3. “Communist revolution or the destruction of humanity”, *Manifesto of the 9th ICC Congress*, 1991.

Will the proletariat be able to respond to the crisis of capitalism?

At the beginning of the 21st century we published a series of two articles entitled “Why the proletariat has not yet overthrown capitalism”,⁴ in which we recalled that the communist revolution is not inevitable and that its realisation depends on the union of two factors, the objective and subjective. The objective condition is supplied by the decadence of capitalism⁵ and by “*the open crisis of bourgeois society, clearly proving that capitalist relations of production must be replaced by others.*”⁶ The subjective factor is related to the collective and conscious action of the proletariat.

The articles acknowledge that the proletariat has previously missed its appointments with history. During the first – the First World War – its attempt to respond with an international revolutionary wave in 1917-23 was defeated; in the second – the Great Depression of 1929 – it was absent as an autonomous class; in the third – the Second World War – it was not only absent but also believed that democracy and the welfare state, those myths used by the victors, were actually victories. Subsequently, with the return of the crisis at the end of the 1960s, it “*did not fail to respond but it was confronted by a series of obstacles that it has had to face and which have blocked its progress towards*

the proletarian revolution.”⁷ These obstacles led to a significant new phenomenon – the collapse of the so-called “communist” regimes in 1989 – in which not only was the proletariat *not* an active factor, but it was the victim of a formidable anti-communist campaign that made it retreat, not only at the level of its consciousness but also its combativity.

What we might call the “the fifth rendezvous with history” opened up from 2007. The crisis is more openly showing the almost definitive failure of the policies that capitalism has put in place to try to respond to the emergence of its insoluble economic crisis. The summer of 2011 made clear that the enormous sums injected cannot stop the haemorrhage and that capitalism is sliding towards a Great Depression far more serious than that of 1929.⁸

But initially, and despite the blows that have rained down on it, the proletariat has appeared equally absent. We foresaw such a situation at our 18th International Congress (2009): “*In a historic situation where the proletariat has not suffered from a historic defeat as it had in the 1930s, massive lay-offs, which have already started, could provoke very hard combats, even explosions of violence. But these would probably, in an initial moment, be desperate and relatively isolated struggles, even if they may win real sympathy from other sectors of the working class. This is why, in the coming period, the fact that we do not see a widescale response from the working class to the attacks should not lead us to consider that it has given up the struggle for the defence of its interests. It is in a second period, when it is less vulnerable to the bourgeoisie’s blackmail, that workers will tend to turn to the idea that a united and solid struggle can push back the attacks of the ruling class, especially when the latter tries to make the whole working class pay for the huge budget deficits accumulating today with all the plans for saving the banks*

7. *International Review* n° 104, op. cit.

8. See <http://en.internationalism.org/wr/347/economic-crisis-murderous-summer>.

4. *International Review* n°s. 103 and 104.

5. For discussion of this crucial concept of the decadence of capitalism, see amongst others <http://en.internationalism.org/ir/146/great-depression>.

6. “Why the proletariat has not yet overthrown capitalism”, *International Review* n° 103.

and stimulating the economy. This is when we are more likely to see the development of broad struggles by the workers.”⁹

The current movements in Spain, Israel and Greece show that the proletariat is beginning to take up this “fifth appointment with history”, to prepare itself to be present, to give itself the means to win.¹⁰

In the series cited above, we said that the two pillars on which capitalism – at least in the central countries – has relied on to keep the proletariat under its control, are democracy and the so-called “welfare state”. What the three movements show is that these pillars are beginning to be questioned, albeit in a still confused way, and this questioning is being fuelled by the catastrophic evolution of the crisis.

The questioning of democracy

Anger against politicians and against democracy in general has been shown in all three movements, which have also displayed outrage at the fact that the rich and their political personnel are becoming increasing richer and more corrupt while the vast majority of the population are treated as commodities to service the scandalous profits of the exploiting minority, commodities to be thrown in the trash when the “markets are not going well”; the brutal austerity programmes have also been denounced, programmes no one talked about in the election campaigns but which have become the main occupation of those elected.

It is clear that these feelings and attitudes are not new: ranting about politicians for example has been common currency during the last thirty years. It is equally clear that these feelings can be diverted into dead ends, which is what the forces of the bourgeoisie have been insistently trying to do in the three movements: “towards a participative democracy”, towards a “democratic renewal”, etc.

But what is new and of significant importance is that, despite the intentions of those spreading these ideas, democracy, the bourgeois state and its apparatus of domination are the subject of debate in countless assemblies. You cannot compare individuals who ruminate on their disgust, in an atomized, passive and resigned way, with the same individuals who express this collectively in assemblies. Beyond the errors, confusions and dead ends which inevitably find expression and which must be combated with great patience and en-

9. See <http://en.internationalism.org/iconline/2009/07/Int-Sit-Resn>.

10. “Since it has no economic basis within capitalism, its only real strength apart from its numbers and organisation, is its ability to become clearly aware of its nature, of its struggle’s ends and means” (*International Review* n° 103, op. cit.)

ergy, what is most important is that these problems are being posed publicly; clear evidence of a politicisation of the masses, and also that this democracy, which has rendered capitalism such good service throughout the last century, is now being put into question.

The end of the so-called “welfare state”

After the Second World War, capitalism installed the so-called “welfare state”.¹¹ This has been one of the principal pillars of capitalist rule in the last 70 years. It created the illusion that capitalism could overcome its most brutal aspects: the welfare state would guarantee security against unemployment, for retirement, provide free health care, education, social housing, etc.

This “social state”, the complement to political democracy, has already suffered significant amputations over the last 25 years and is now heading for its disappearance pure and simple. In Greece, Spain and Israel (where it is above all the shortage of housing that has polarised the young), discontent over the removal of minimum social benefits has been at the centre of the movements. There have certainly been attempts by the bourgeoisie to divert this towards “reforms” of the constitution, the passing of laws that “guarantee” these benefits, etc. But the wave of growing discontent will help to challenge these dykes which are meant to control the workers.

The movement of the Indignants, the culmination of eight years of struggle

The cancer of scepticism dominates ideology today and infects the proletariat and its own revolutionary minorities. As stated above, the proletariat has missed all of the appointments that history has given it during the course of a century of capitalist decadence, and this has resulted in an agonising doubt in its own ranks about its identity and its capacities as a class, to the point where even in displays of militancy some reject the term “working class”.¹² This scepticism is made even stronger because it

11. “Nationalisations, and a certain number of “social measures” (such as the state’s taking charge of the health system), were all completely capitalist measures. [...] The capitalists had every interest in the good health of the workforce [...] But these capitalist measures were presented as ‘workers’ victories’” (*International Review* n° 104, op. cit.)

12. We cannot deal here with why the working class is the revolutionary class of society and why its struggle represents the future for all other non-exploiting strata, a burning question as we have seen in the movement of the Indignants. The reader can find more material on this question in two articles published in *International Review* n°s. 73 and 74, “Who can change the world?: the proletariat is still the revolutionary class”.

is fed by the decomposition of capitalism;¹³ despair, the lack of concrete plans for the future foster disbelief and distrust of any perspective of collective action.

The movements in Spain, Greece and Israel – despite all the weaknesses they contain – have begun to provide an effective remedy against the cancer of scepticism, as much by their very existence and what they mean for the continuity of struggles and the conscious efforts made by the world proletariat since 2003.¹⁴ They are not a storm that suddenly burst out of a clear blue sky but the result of a slow accumulation over the last eight years of small clouds, drizzle and timid lightning that has grown until it acquires a new quality.

Since 2003 the proletariat has begun to recover from the long reflux in its consciousness and combativity that it suffered after the events of 1989. This process follows a slow, contradictory and very tortuous rhythm, expressed by:

- a series of struggles isolated in different countries in the centre as well as on the periphery, characterised by protests “pregnant with possibilities”; searching for solidarity, attempts at self-organisation, the presence of new generations, reflection about the future;
- a development of internationalist minorities looking for revolutionary coherence, posing many questions, seeking contact with each other, discussing, drawing up perspectives...

In 2006 two movements broke out – the student movement against the Contract of Primary Employment in France and the massive workers’ strike at Vigo in Spain¹⁵ – which, despite their distance, difference in conditions and age, showed similar features: general assemblies, extension to other workers, massive demonstrations... They were like a first warning shot that, apparently, had no follow up.¹⁶

A year later an embryonic mass strike exploded in Egypt starting in a large textile factory. At the beginning of 2008 many struggles broke out, isolated from each other but simultaneously in many countries, from the periphery to the centre of capitalism. Other movements also stood out, such as the proliferation of hunger revolts

13. See the “Theses on Decomposition”, http://en.internationalism.org/ir/107_decomposition.

14. See the articles that analysed this development of the class struggle in the *International Review*.

15. See http://en.internationalism.org/ir/125_france_students and http://en.internationalism.org/wr/295_vigo.

16. The bourgeoisie is careful to hide these events: the nihilist riots in November 2005 in France are much better known, including in the politicised milieu, than the conscious movement of students five months later.

in 33 countries during the first quarter of 2008. In Egypt, these were supported and in part taken over by the proletariat. At the end of 2008 the revolt of young workers in Greece exploded, supported by a section of the proletariat. We also saw the seeds of an internationalist reaction at Lindsey (Great Britain) and an explosive generalized strike in southern China (in June).

After the initial retreat of the proletariat faced with the first impact of the crisis – as we pointed out above – much more determined struggles began to take place, and in 2010 France was rocked by massive protest movements against pension reform, with the appearance of inter-professional assemblies; British youth rebelled in December against the sharp rise in student fees. 2011 saw major social revolts in Egypt and Tunisia. The proletariat seemed to gain momentum for a new leap forward: the movement of the “Indignant” in Spain, then in Greece and Israel.

Does this movement belong to the working class?

These three movements cannot be understood outside the context that we have just analysed. They are like a puzzle that brings together all the pieces provided throughout the past eight years. But scepticism is very strong and many have asked: can we talk about movements of the working class if it is not present as such, and if they are not reinforced by strikes or assemblies in the workplace?

The so-called “Indignant” movement is a very valuable concept for the working class¹⁷ but this is not revealed immediately because it does not identify itself directly with its class nature. Two factors give it the appearance of being essentially a social revolt:

The loss of class identity

The working class has gone through a long period of reflux which has inflicted significant damage on its self-confidence and the consciousness of its own identity: “*With the collapse of the eastern bloc and the so-called ‘socialist’ regimes, the deafening campaigns about the ‘end of communism’, and even the ‘end of the class struggle’*

17. Indignation is neither resignation nor hate. Faced with the insupportable dynamic of capitalism, resignation expresses passivity, a tendency to reject it without seeing how to confront it. Hate, on the other hand, expresses an active sentiment since rejection is turned into a struggle, but it is a blind struggle, without the perspective or reflection to elaborate an alternative, it is purely destructive, a collection of individual responses but without generating anything collective. Indignation expresses the active transformation of rejection with the effort to struggle consciously, seeking the development of a collective and constructive alternative.

dealt a severe blow to the consciousness and combativity of the working class; the proletariat suffered a profound retreat on these two levels, a retreat which lasted for over ten years.. At the same time, it [the bourgeoisie] managed to create a strong feeling of powerlessness within the working class because it was unable to wage any massive struggles.”¹⁸ This partly explains why the participation of the proletariat as a class has not been dominant even though it was present through the participation of individual workers (employed, unemployed, students, retired...) who attempted to clarify, to get involved according to their instincts, but who lacked the strength, cohesion and clarity there would be if the class participated collectively as a class.

It follows from this loss of identity that the programme, theory, traditions, methods of the proletariat, are not recognised as their own by the immense majority of workers. The language, forms of action, even the symbols which appear in the Indignants movement derive from other sources. This is a dangerous weakness that must be patiently combated to bring about a critical re-appropriation of the theoretical heritage, experience, traditions, that the workers’ movement has accumulated over the past two centuries.

The presence of non-proletarian social strata

Among the Indignants there is a strong presence of non-proletarian social strata, especially a middle layer that is in the throes of proletarianisation. As for Israel, our article underlined that: “*Another tack is to label this as a ‘middle class’ movement. It’s true that, as with all the other movements, we are looking at a broad social revolt which can express the dissatisfaction of many different layers in society, from small businessmen to workers at the point of production, all of whom are affected by the world economic crisis, the growing gap between rich and poor, and, in a country like Israel, the aggravation of living conditions by the insatiable demands of the war economy. But ‘middle class’ has become a lazy, catch-all term meaning anyone with an education or a job, and in Israel as in North Africa, Spain or Greece, growing numbers of educated young people are being pushed into the ranks of the proletariat, working in low paid and unskilled jobs where they can find work at all.*”¹⁹

If the movement appears vague and poorly defined, this cannot put into question its class character, especially if we view

18 See “Resolution on the international situation”, *International Review* n° 130.

19. ICC online: “Israel protests: “Mubarak, Assad, Netanyahu!””, <http://en.internationalism.org/icconline/2011/08/social-protests-israel>.

things in their dynamic, in the perspective of the future, as the comrades of the TPTG do concerning the movement in Greece: “*What the whole political spectrum finds disquieting in this assembly movement is that the mounting proletarian (and petit-bourgeois) anger and indignation is not expressed anymore through the mediation channels of the political parties and the unions. Thus, it is not so much controllable and it is potentially dangerous for the political and unionist representation system in general.*”²⁰

The presence of the proletariat is visible neither as a force leading the movement, nor through a mobilisation in the workplace. It lies in the dynamic of searching, clarification, preparation of the social terrain, of recognition of the battle that is being prepared. That is where its importance is found, despite the fact that this is only an extremely fragile small step forward.

In relation to Greece, the comrades of the TPTG say that “*One thing is certain: this volatile, contradictory movement attracts the attention from all sides of the political spectrum and constitutes an expression of the crisis of class relations and politics in general. No other struggle has expressed itself in a more ambivalent and explosive way in the last decades,*”²¹ and on Israel, a journalist noted, in his own language, that “*it was never oppression that held the social order in Israel together, as far as the Jewish society was concerned. It was indoctrination - a dominant ideology, to use a term preferred by critical theorists. And it was this cultural order that was dented in this round of protests. For the first time, a major part of the Jewish middle class - it’s too early to estimate how large is this group - recognized their problem not with other Israelis, or with the Arabs, or with a certain politician, but with the entire social order, with the entire system. In this sense, it’s a unique event in Israel’s history.*”²²

The characteristics of future struggles

With this vision we can understand the features of these struggles as the characteristics that future struggles will assume with a critical spirit and develop at higher levels:

- **the entry into struggle of new generations of the proletariat**, with, however, an important difference with the 1968 movements: while the young then gave

20. ICC online: “Preliminary notes towards an account of the “Movement of popular assemblies”” (TPTG, Greece), <http://en.internationalism.org/icconline/2011/07/notes-on-popular-assemblies-greece>.

21. Ibid.

22. “Israel protests...”, op. cit.

zero consideration to their “defeated and embourgeoisified” elders, today we see a struggle that unites the different generations of the working class;

- **mass direct action:** the struggle has won the street, the squares have been occupied. The exploited have found in these a place where they are able to live, discuss and act together;
- **the beginnings of politicisation:** beyond the false answers that are and will be given, it is important that the great masses are beginning to be directly and actively involved in the great questions of society; this is the beginning of their politicisation as a class;
- **the assemblies:** they are linked to the proletarian tradition of the workers’ councils of 1905 and 1917, which spread to Germany and other countries during the world revolutionary wave of 1917-23. They reappeared in 1956 in Hungary and in 1980 in Poland. They are the weapon of unity, of the development of solidarity, of the capacity of the proletarian masses to understand and make decisions. The slogan “All power to the assemblies!”, very popular in Spain, expresses the birth of a deep reflection on the key questions of the state, dual power, etc.;
- **the culture of debate:** the clarity that inspires the determination and heroism of the proletarian masses cannot be decreed, nor is it the fruit of indoctrination by a minority possessed of “the truth”: it is the combined product of experience, of struggle and especially of discussion. The culture of debate has been present in these three movements: everything was up for discussion, nothing that was political, social, economic, human, escaped the critique of these immense improvised ‘town squares’. As we say in the introduction to the article by the comrades in Greece, this has an enormous importance: “*a determined effort to contribute towards the emergence of what the comrades of the TPTG call a ‘proletarian public sphere’ which will make it possible for growing numbers of our class not only to work out how to resist capitalism’s attacks on our lives, but to develop the theories and actions that lead to a new way of life altogether*”;²³
- **the way to confront the question of violence:** “*The proletarian movement has been confronted from the beginning with the extreme violence of the exploiting class, with repression when it tries to defend its interests, with imperialist war but also with the daily violence of*

exploitation. Unlike exploiting classes, the class that is the bearer of communism is not the bearer of violence; and even though it has to make use of it, it does not do so by identifying with it. In particular, the violence it has to use in the overthrow of capitalism, which it will have to use with great determination, is necessarily a conscious and organised violence and must always be preceded by a whole process of growth in consciousness and organisation through the various struggles against exploitation.”²⁴ As in the students’ movement in 2006, the bourgeoisie has tried on numerous occasions to lead the Indignants movement (especially in Spain) into the trap of violent confrontations with the police in conditions of dispersion and weakness, in order to discredit the movement and facilitate its isolation. These traps have been avoided and an active debate on the question of violence has begun to emerge.²⁵

Weaknesses and confusions of the struggle

The last thing we want to do is glorify these movements. Nothing is more alien to the Marxist method than to make a certain struggle, however important and rich in lessons it is, into a definitive, finished and monolithic model that must be followed to the letter. We are perfectly aware of the weaknesses and problems of these movements.

The presence of a “democratic wing”

This strives for the realisation of a “real democracy”. It is represented by various currents, including some of the right as in Greece. It is clear that the media and politicians support this wing in order to try and get the whole movement to identify with it.

Revolutionaries must vigorously struggle against all the mystifications, false measures and false arguments of this trend. But why is there still such a strong tendency to be seduced by the siren songs of democracy after so many years of lies, traps and deceptions? We can point to three reasons. The first is the weight of non-proletarian social layers who are very open to such democratic and inter-classist mystifications. The second is the strength of confusions and democratic illusions still very present in the working class itself, especially among young people who have not yet been able to develop a

political experience. Finally, the third is the weight of what we call the social and ideological decomposition of capitalism, that encourages the tendency to seek refuge in an entity that is “above classes and class conflicts” – that is to say the state, which will allegedly bring some order, justice and mediation.

But there is a deeper cause, to which it is necessary to draw attention. In *The 18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, Marx states that “*proletarian revolutions constantly retreat faced with the enormity of their own aims*”. Today, events underscore the bankruptcy of capitalism, the need to destroy it and to build a new society. For a proletariat that doubts its own capacities, that has not yet recovered its identity, this creates and will continue to create for some time the tendency to cling to false hopes, to false measures for “reforms” and “democratisation”, even while doubting them. All this undoubtedly gives the bourgeoisie a margin of manoeuvre that allows it to sow division and demoralisation and, consequently, to make it even more difficult for the proletariat to recover its self-confidence and class identity.

The poison of apoliticism

This is an old weakness which has weighed on the proletariat since 1968 and has its origin in the huge disappointment and profound scepticism provoked by the Stalinist and social democratic counter-revolution, which caused a tendency to believe that all political opposition, including that which claims to be proletarian, is nothing but a vile lie, containing within it the worm of treachery and oppression. This has widely benefited the forces of the bourgeoisie which, hiding their real identity and under the fiction of intervening “as free citizens”, work within the movement to take control of the assemblies and sabotage them from within. The comrades of the TPTG show this clearly: “*In the beginning there was a communal spirit in the first efforts at self-organizing the occupation of the square and officially political parties were not tolerated. However, the leftists and especially those coming from SYRIZA (Coalition of Radical Left) got quickly involved in the Syntagma assembly and took over important positions in the groups that were formed in order to run the occupation of Syntagma square, and, more specifically, in the group for “secretarial support” and the one responsible for “communication”. These two groups are the most important ones because they organize the agenda of the assemblies as well as the flow of the discussion. It must be noted that these people do not openly declare their political allegiance and appear as*

24. See http://en.internationalism.org/ir/125_france_students.

25. See *¿Qué hay detrás de la campaña contra los violentos por los incidentes de Barcelona?*, <http://es.internationalism.org/node/3130>.

23. “Preliminary notes...”, op. cit.

'individuals'."²⁶

The danger of nationalism

This is very present in Greece and Israel. As the comrades of the TPTG denounced, "*Nationalism (mostly in a populist form) is dominant, favoured both by the various extreme right wing cliques as well as by left parties and leftists. Even for a lot of proletarians or petty-bourgeois hit by the crisis who are not affiliated with political parties, national identity appears as a last imaginary refuge when everything else is rapidly crumbling. Behind the slogans against the 'foreign, sell out government' or for the 'Salvation of the country', 'National sovereignty' and a 'New Constitution' lies a deep feeling of fear and alienation to which the 'national community' appears as a magical unifying solution.*"²⁷

This reflection by the comrades is as accurate as it is profound. The loss of identity and confidence of the proletariat in its own strength, the slow process through which the struggle in the rest of the world is going, encourages the tendency to "cling on to the national community", as a utopian refuge faced with a hostile world full of uncertainties.

So for example, the consequences of the cuts in health and education, the real problems created by the weakening of these services, are used to confine the struggles behind nationalist barriers by demanding a "good education" (because it will make us more competitive on the world market), and a "health service for all citizens".

The fear and difficulty of taking up class confrontations

The frightening threat of unemployment, massive casualisation, the growing fragmentation of employees – divided, in the same workplaces, into an inextricable web of subcontractors and an incredible variety of different terms of employment – have a powerfully intimidating effect and make it more difficult for workers to come together for the struggle. This situation cannot be overcome either through voluntarist calls for mobilization or by admonishing the workers for their alleged "cowardice" or "servility".

Thus, the step towards the mass mobilization of the unemployed, casual workers, places of work and study, is made much more difficult that it might seem at first sight, causing in turn a hesitation, a doubt and a tendency to cling to "assemblies" which every day are becoming more minoritarian "and whose "unity" favours only the forces of the bourgeoisie who work within them. This gives the bourgeoisie a

margin of manoeuvre to prepare its dirty tricks intended to sabotage the general assemblies. And this is precisely what the comrades of the TPTG denounced: "*The manipulation of the main assembly in Syntagma square (there are several others in various neighbourhoods of Athens and cities in Greece) by "incognito" members of left parties and organizations is evident and really obstructive in a class direction of the movement. However, due to the deep legitimization crisis of the political system of representation in general they, too, have to hide their political identity and keep a balance between a general, abstract talk about "self-determination", "direct democracy", "collective action", "anti-racism", "social change" etc on the one hand and extreme nationalism, thug-like behaviour of some extreme-right wing individuals participating in groups in the square on the other hand, and all this in a not so successful way.*"²⁸

Looking to the future with confidence

While it is clear that "*for humanity to survive, capitalism must die*",²⁹ the proletariat is still very far from having the capacity to execute this sentence. The movement of the Indignants has laid the foundation stone.

In the series mentioned above, we said: "*one of the reasons why the revolutionaries where unable to be successful in previous revolutions was that they underestimated the forces of the ruling class, especially its political intelligence.*"³⁰ This capacity of the bourgeoisie to use its political intelligence against the struggles is today stronger than ever! So for example, the Indignants movements in three countries were completely blacked out, except when they were given the veneer of "democratic regeneration". Likewise, the British bourgeoisie was able to take advantage of the discontent to channel it into a nihilistic revolt that served as a pretext to strengthen repression and intimidate any response from the class.³¹ The movements of the Indignant have laid a first stone, in the sense that they have taken the first steps for the proletariat to recover its self-confidence and its class identity, but this is still a long way off because it requires the development of mass struggles on a directly proletarian terrain, which will show that, faced with the bankruptcy of capitalism, the working class is capable of offering a revolutionary alternative to the non-exploiting social layers.

28. Ibid.

29. Slogan of the Third International.

30. *International Review* n° 104, op. cit.

31. See <http://en.internationalism.org/wr/347uk-riots>.

We do not know how this goal will be achieved and we must remain vigilant to the capabilities and initiatives of the masses, like that of 15th May in Spain. What we do know is that the international extension of the struggle will be a key factor in this direction.

The three movements have planted the seed of an internationalist consciousness: when the movement of the Indignants arose in Spain, it said its inspiration was Tahrir Square in Egypt;³² it sought an international extension of the struggle, although this would be done in the utmost confusion. For their part, the movements in Israel and Greece explicitly stated they were following the example of the Indignants of Spain. Protesters in Israel displayed placards saying, "*Mubarak, Assad, Netanyahu: all the same!*", which shows not only an awareness of who the enemy is but also at least an embryonic understanding that their struggle is waged with the exploited of these countries and not against them in the framework of national defence.³³ "*In Jaffa, dozens of Arab and Jewish protesters carried signs in Hebrew and Arabic reading 'Arabs and Jews want affordable housing,' and 'Jaffa doesn't want bids for the rich only. [...] there have been ongoing protests of both Jews and Arabs against evictions of the latter from the Sheikh Jarrah neighbourhood. In Tel Aviv, contacts were made with residents of refugee camps in the occupied territories, who visited the tent cities and engaged in discussions with the protesters.*"³⁴ The movements in Egypt and Tunisia, like that in Israel, change the face of the situation in a part of the world that is probably the main focus of imperialist confrontations on the planet. As our article says, "*The present international wave of revolts against capitalist austerity is opening the door to another solution altogether: the solidarity of all the exploited across religious or national divisions; class struggle in all countries with the ultimate goal of a world wide revolution which will be the negation of national borders and states. A year or two ago such a perspective would have seemed completely utopian to most. Today, increasing numbers are seeing global revolution*

32. The "Plaza de Catalunya" was renamed "Tahrir Square" by the assembly, which not only showed an internationalist commitment but was also a slap in the face for Catalan nationalism, which considers this place as its crown jewel.

33. See "Israel protests...", op. cit.: "A demonstrator interviewed on the RT news network was asked whether the protests had been inspired by events in Arab countries. He replied, "*There is a lot of influence of what happened in Tahrir Square... There's a lot of influence of course. That's when people understand that they have the power, that they can organise by themselves, they don't need any more the government to tell them what to do, they can start telling the government what they want.*"

34. Ibid.

26. "Preliminary notes...", op. cit.

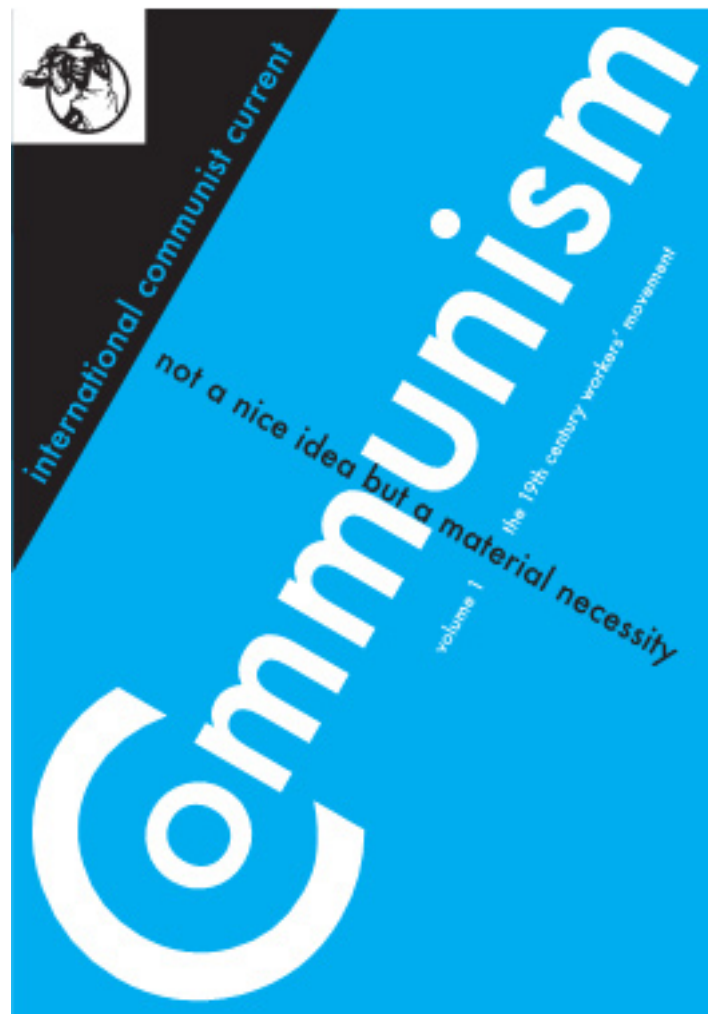
27. Ibid.

as a realistic alternative to the collapsing order of global capital.”³⁵

The three movements have contributed to the crystallization of a proletarian wing: in both Greece and Spain but also in Israel,³⁶ a “proletarian wing” is emerging, in search of self-organization, uncompromising struggle for class positions and a fight for the destruction of capitalism. The problems but equally the potentialities and the perspectives of this large minority cannot be addressed in the context of this article. What is certain is that this is a vital weapon that the proletariat has given life to in order to prepare its future battles.

C. Mir, 23-9-2011

ICC publications



Since 1990 and the collapse of the communist bloc - in reality a form of state capitalism - the International Communist Current has been publishing a series of articles in its theoretical journal, the *International Review*, around the theme "Communism is not a nice idea, but a material necessity". The first volume of the series, which has now been published in book form, begins with "primitive" communism and goes on to explore the conception of communism in the writings of Marx, Engels and other revolutionaries during the 19th century. The second volume of the series deals with the period from the mass strikes of 1905 to the end of the first great revolutionary wave that followed the First World War. A third volume is now underway.

£7.50, \$14.00, 10 Euros

35. Ibid.

36. In this movement, "Some have openly warned of the danger that the government could provoke military clashes or even a new war to restore 'national unity' and split the protest movement" (ibid.), which at least implicitly reveals a distancing from the Israeli state of national unity in the service of the war economy and of war.

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Contribution to a history of the workers' movement in Africa (iii)

The 1920s: faced with the development of workers' struggles the French bourgeoisie reorganises its repressive apparatus

1923: "The Bordeaux Agreement" or "class collaboration" pact

It was in this year that that "the Bordeaux Agreement" was signed; a "treaty of friendship" between the colonial economic interests¹ and Blaise Diagne, the first African deputy to sit in the French National Assembly. Having drawn lessons from the magnificent insurrectionary strike in Dakar in May 1914 and its repercussions in subsequent years,² the French bourgeoisie had to reorganise its political apparatus to deal with the inexorable rise of the young proletariat in its African colony. It was in this context that it decided to use Blaise Diagne, making him "mediator/peacemaker" in conflicts between the classes, in fact a counter-revolutionary role. Indeed, the day after his election as deputy and having been a major witness to the insurrectionary movement against the colonial power, in which he himself had been involved at the beginning, Diagne was now faced with three options to play a historic role in future events: 1) to profit from the political weakening of the colonial bourgeoisie in the aftermath of the general strike, in which it suffered a defeat, by triggering a "national liberation struggle"; 2) to fight for the communist program by raising the banner of proletarian struggle inside the colony, profiting in particular from the success of the strike; 3) to bolster his own personal political interests by allying himself with the French bourgeoisie which at this time was holding out its hand to him.

Diagne eventually chose the last course, namely an alliance with the colonial power. In reality, the "Bordeaux Agreement" showed that the French bourgeoisie was

1. This refers to the big businesses dominated by Bordeaux merchants like Maurel & Prom, Peyrissac, Chavanel, Vezia, Deves, etc., a group with the monopoly of credit from the sole Bank of West Africa.

2. A general strike and a riot over five days spread throughout the Dakar region, totally paralysing economic and political life and forcing the colonial bourgeoisie to give in to strikers' demands (see *International Review* n° 146).

not only afraid of working class militancy in its African colony, but was equally concerned by the international revolutionary situation.

"...Given the turn of events, the colonial government set about winning the black deputy's support so that his powers of persuasion and his foolhardy courage could be used to serve the colonial power and its commercial interests. This way it would be able to pull the rug from under the feet of the African elite whose minds were running away with them when, at the time, the October Revolution (1917), the Pan-black movements and the threat of world communism were having a dangerously seductive affect in the colonies on the thinking of the colonised.

*"[...] Such was the real meaning of the agreement signed in Bordeaux on June 12th, 1923. It marked the end of the combative and headstrong Diagnism and opened up a new era of collaboration between the colonisers and colonised, and left the deputy stripped of all his charisma that up to this point was his major political asset. A great impetus had been lost."*³

The first black member of the African colony remains faithful to French capital until his death

To better understand the meaning of this agreement between the colonial bourgeoisie and the young deputy, let's retrace the path of the latter. Blaise Diagne was noticed very early on by the representatives of French capital, who saw him playing a future role in their political strategy and steered him in this direction. Indeed, Diagne had a strong influence on urban youth through the Young Senegalese Party that supported his campaign. With the support of youth, especially educated and intellectual youth, he entered the electoral arena in April 1914 and secured the single

3. Iba Der Thiam, *History of the African Trade Union Movement 1790-1929*, Editions L'Harmattan, 1991.

post of deputy with responsibility for the whole of French West Africa (FWA). Let's recall that we were on the eve of massive imperialist slaughter and it was in these circumstances that the famous general strike broke out in May 1914 when, after mobilising the youth of Dakar with the prospect of mounting a formidable revolt, Diagne tried unsuccessfully to stop it, not wanting to jeopardise his interests as a young petit-bourgeois deputy.

In fact, once elected, he was responsible for ensuring the interests of big business on the one hand and enforcing the "laws of the Republic" on the other. Even before the Bordeaux Agreement was signed, Diagne had distinguished himself by successfully recruiting 72,000 "Senegalese Sharpshooters" for the global butchery of 1914-1918. It was for this reason that, in January 1918, he was appointed Commissioner of the Republic by the then French prime minister Georges Clemenceau. Given the reluctance of young people and their parents to be enrolled, he toured the African villages of FWA to persuade reluctant individuals and, by the use of propaganda and intimidation, managed to recruit tens of thousands of African young men to be sent off to their deaths.

He was also a strong advocate of that abominable "forced labour" in the French colonies, as indicated by his speech at the fourteenth session of the International Labour Office in Geneva⁴.

All in all, the first black member of the African colony was never a real supporter of the workers' cause; on the contrary, ultimately he was just a counter-revolutionary opportunist. Furthermore the working class would soon come to realise it: *"...as if the Bordeaux Agreement had convinced the workers that the working class was now able to lead the march itself in the fight against economic injustice and for social and political equality, the trade union struggles were given, like a pendulum swing, an*

4. See *Black Africa, the Colonial Era 1900-1945*, Jean Suret-Canale, Editions Sociales, Paris 1961.

exceptional boost.”⁵ Clearly, Diagne could not long keep the trust of the working class, and he remained faithful to his colonial sponsors until his death in 1934.

1925: a year of heightened militancy and solidarity faced with police repression

“The year of 1925 was shaken by three great social conflicts all of which had important consequences and all of which were indeed on the railways. First there was a strike of indigenous and European railwaymen in Dakar - Saint-Louis, from January 23rd to 27th, for economic demands; next, shortly afterwards, there was the threat of a general strike in Thies-Kayes, planned around specific demands including trade union rights; and finally, there was the workers’ revolt in Bambara, on the railway construction site at Ginguiné, a revolt where soldiers were called in to suppress it and refused to do so.”⁶

And yet the time was not particularly favourable for entering into struggle because to discourage working class militancy the colonial authorities had adopted a series of extremely repressive measures.

“During 1925, on the recommendations of the Governors General, particularly the one of FWA, some draconian measures were imposed by the Department for the Colonies specifically making revolutionary propaganda illegal.

“In Senegal, new instructions from the Federation (the two French colonies, FWA, FEA) had led to increased surveillance across the whole territory. And in each of the colonies of the group, a special service was established in conjunction with the General Security Service, to centralise in Dakar, and examine, all the evidence from the listening posts.

“[...] A new emigration regime with new arrangements for identifying natives was drawn up in the Ministry in December 1925. Every foreigner and every suspect had a file thereafter; the foreign press was under

strict control, and it was commonplace for newspapers to be shut down [...] The mail was systematically violated, shipments of papers opened and often destroyed.”⁷

Once again, the colonial power trembled at the announcement of a new outbreak of working class struggle, hence its decision to establish a police state to take tight control of civil life and contain any social unrest arising in the colony, but also, and above all, to avoid contact between the workers in struggle in the colonies and their class brothers around the world; hence the draconian measures against “revolutionary propaganda”. And yet, in this context, important workers’ struggles could violently erupt, despite all the repressive arsenal wielded by the colonial state.

A highly political railway strike

On January 24th 1925, European and African railway workers came out on strike together, establishing a strike committee and raising the following demands: “The employees of the Dakar - Saint-Louis railway unanimously agreed to halt the traffic on January 24th. They only took this action after much consideration and after feeling genuinely aggrieved. They had had no wage increase since 1921, despite the steady increase in the cost of living in the colony. Most of the Europeans were getting less than 1,000 francs in their monthly salary and a native got a daily wage of 5 francs. They were after higher wages to be able to live decent lives.”⁸

Indeed, the very next day, all employees in the various sectors of the railway left their machines, their workshops and offices, paralysing the railway for a short time. But this movement was above all highly political in nature in that it came right in the middle of a legislative campaign, forcing the parties and their candidates to take a clear position on the demands of the strikers. As a result, from that moment, the various politicians and commercial lobbies called on the colonial administration to get them back to work immediately by meeting the employees’ demands. And right away, on the second day of the strike, the railway workers’ demands were met in full. In fact, the members of the jubilant strike committee delayed their response until after consulting the rank and file. Similarly, the strikers insisted on having the order to return to work from their delegates in writing and sent by special train to all the stations.

“The workers had once again won an important victory in the struggle, showing great maturity and determination, along with adaptability and realism. [...] This

success is all the more significant from the fact that all workers of the network, European and native, who had been at loggerheads over issues of colour and had problems working together, had wisely set aside their differences as soon as the threat of the draconian labour laws was on the horizon. [...] The governor himself could not help but notice the maturity and the unity and the timing of the strike’s organisation. The preparation, he wrote, had been very cleverly carried out. The mayor of Dakar himself, experienced and loved by the indigenous people, had not been notified of their participation. The timing of the deal was chosen so that commerce, to safeguard its own interests, supported the claims. The reasons given, with some justification, put the campaign in big trouble. In short, he concluded, everything came together for it to have its maximum effect and to give it the support of public opinion.”⁹

This is a vivid illustration of the high level of militancy and class consciousness shown by the working class of the French colony, where European and African workers collectively took charge of organising their victorious struggle. Here we have a brilliant lesson in class solidarity consolidating gains from all previous experiences of confrontation with the bourgeoisie. And this makes even clearer the international character of the workers’ struggles at that time, despite the continual efforts of the bourgeoisie to “divide and rule”.

In February 1925, the strike of the telegraph office workers forces the authorities to back down after 24 hours

The movement of railwaymen had hardly finished when the telegraph office workers (‘câblistes’) went on strike, also raising many demands including a big wage increase and an improvement to their status. This movement came to an end after 24 hours for a good reason: “With the collaboration of the local and metropolitan powers, thanks to the successful intervention from members of the elected bodies, complete order returned within 24 hours, because satisfaction was given in a partial settlement to the câblistes, as conceded in the granting of an standby allowance to all staff.”¹⁰

So, buoyed by this success, the telegraph workers (European and indigenous together) put the rest of their demands on the table, threatening to go out on strike immediately. They took advantage of the strategic position they occupied as highly skilled technicians in the administrative and economic machinery who were clearly able to shut down communication networks across the territory. For their part,

5. Thiam, *ibid.* It’s worth recalling here what we said at the time of the publication of the first part of this article in *International Review* n° 145: “...if we largely recognise the seriousness of the researchers who provide these reference sources, we do not necessarily share some of their interpretations of historic events. It’s the same for certain ideas, for example when they talk about ‘union consciousness’ instead of ‘class consciousness’ (of workers), or again ‘union movement’ (instead of workers’ movement). Otherwise, up to another order, we have confidence in their scientific rigour as long as their theses don’t come up against historical facts and don’t prevent other interpretations.” [NB. Part of the section quoted above was omitted from the version of the article published in the English language edition of *International Review* n° 145.]

6. *Ibid.*

7. *Ibid.*

8. *Ibid.*

9. *Ibid.*

10. *Ibid.*

faced with the demands of the telegraph employees threatening a new strike, the bourgeoisie's representatives decided to retaliate with a campaign of intimidation and accusation against the strikers: "*How is it that the few functionaries who are agitating for an increase in pay can't see they are digging their own grave?*"¹¹

In fact, political power and big business piled a great deal of pressure on the strikers, going as far as accusing them of trying to "deliberately destroy the economy" while also trying to undermine their unity. With the pressure intensifying, the workers decided to resume work on the basis of demands met at the end of the previous strike.

This episode was also one of the high points in the struggle when the unity between the European and African workers was fully achieved.

Rebellion in the Thies-Kayes railway yards, December 11th 1925

A rebellion broke out on this line when a group of about a hundred workers decided to cross swords with their boss, a captain of the colonial army. A cynical and authoritarian figure, he was accustomed to being obeyed without question and inflicted physical harm on workers he deemed "lazy".

*"According to the investigation that had been carried out by the Administrator Aujas, commander of the Kaolack area, it appeared that a rebellion had broken out on December 11th because of "ill treatment" inflicted on these workers. The area commander added that, without admitting these statements entirely, captain Heurtematte acknowledged that he sometimes happened to hit a lazy and uncooperative labourer with a whip. [The incident] escalated after the captain had tied three Bambaras [an ethnic term], whom he took to be the main culprits, to stakes with ropes."*¹²

And things went wrong for the captain when he began to whip the three workers because their comrades in the yard decided to put an end to their torturer for good. He was only saved in the nick of time by the arrival on site of soldiers called to his aid. *"The soldiers in question were French subjects from eastern Senegal and from Thies; having arrived there and heard what had happened, they unanimously refused the order to fire on the black workers. The poor captain said he had issued it as he feared for his life, assailed on all sides by a ferocious and menacing crowd."*¹³

This is quite remarkable because until

now we were quite used to seeing the "sharpshooters" as submissive individuals, obediently accepting roles as "blacklegs" or outright "liquidators" of strikers. This gesture of fraternisation reminds us of other historical episodes where conscripts refused to use force against strikes or revolutions. The most famous example is of course the episode in the Russian Revolution where a large number of soldiers refused to fire on their revolutionary brothers, disobeying the orders from above despite the high risks involved.

The attitude of the "sharpshooters" against their captain was all the more heart-warming since the conditions of the time were dominated by a strong tendency towards the militarisation of social and economic life in the colony. Moreover, the affair took a highly political turn because the civil and military administration found itself very embarrassed by having to choose between punishing the soldiers' insubordination and risk strengthening their solidarity with the workers, or playing the incident down. Eventually the Colonial authority chose the latter.

*"But the affair strongly hit the headlines and threatened to create complications in interracial relations that were already a concern in a service like the railways, so the federal authorities, and local too, finally agreed on the need to smooth over the incident and to play it down, having already come to realise the disastrous consequences of the policy favouring racial collaboration introduced by Diagne in signing the Bordeaux Agreement which was already costing them dear."*¹⁴

Indeed, like its predecessors, this phase of struggle clearly exposed the limitations of the "Bordeaux Agreement" by which the deputy Blaise Diagne thought he had secured "collaboration" between the exploiters and exploited. But unfortunately for the colonial bourgeoisie, class consciousness had been there.

The militant sailors' strike in 1926

Like the previous year, 1926 was marked by an episode of struggle that was both very militant and very rich in terms of combativeness and class solidarity. This was all the more remarkable as the movement was launched in the same conditions of repression of social struggles, which in the previous year had seen a number of shipyards and other sectors continuously occupied by the forces of the police and gendarmerie in the name of "safeguarding" the economy.

"While the attacks on the railways

*continued inexorably*¹⁵ *and the agitation spread to the sectors more attached to order and discipline of the ex-servicemen, the workers of the African Freight Co. of Saint-Louis launched a strike action, which would hold the record for the longest duration of all the social movements studied in this locality.*

*"It all started on September 29th when a telegram from the Lieutenant Governor informed the Head of the Maritime Federation that sailors of the African Freight Company in St. Louis had gone on strike for improved wages. In a real spirit of almost spontaneous solidarity, their colleagues in the Maison Peyrissac employed on the Steamship Cadenelle, then anchored in Saint-Louis, although not directly involved in the demands being pursued, also stopped work on October 1st."*¹⁶

Driven by frighteningly high rises in living costs, many sectors put forward wage demands with the threat of going on strike, and a large number of companies had agreed to give their employees wage increases. This was not the case for workers of the Freight Company, however, and this led them to take action with the support of their comrades on the steamship. Despite this, the bosses remained unmoved and refused any negotiations with the strikers until the fifth day of the strike, letting the action continue in the hope that it would quickly exhaust itself.

*"But the movement retained the cohesion and solidarity of the first few days and on October 6th the management of the Freight Co., beset on all sides by commercial interests and secretly encouraged by the Administration to be more flexible, saw the danger in the situation and gave in suddenly. It made the following offer to the crews: 'a monthly increase of 50 francs (regardless of category) and food for sustenance (around 41 francs per month)'. [...] But the workers involved, wanting to show active solidarity with their colleagues at Maison Peyrissac, asked for and won the same benefits to be given to them. The management at this company gave in. On October 6th, the strike ended. The movement had lasted eight full days, during which time the unity of workers stayed solid throughout. This had been an event of great importance."*¹⁷

Once again we are witnessing a formidable movement, providing clear insights into the vitality of the struggles of this time. In other words, the unfolding of the struggle provided the opportunity for a real expression of "active solidarity" (as

11. Ibid.

12. Ibid.

13. Ibid.

14. Ibid.

15. The information we have does not give any indication who perpetrated these attacks.

16. Thiam, *ibid.*

17. Ibid.

Thiam says) between workers from different companies. What better example of solidarity than one crew demanding and obtaining the same benefits it had won through its strike for its comrades of another company in “gratitude” for the support received from them!

What to say too about the combativeness and cohesion that the workers of the freight company showed with their solid show of force against the might of capital!

The long and bitter strike of seamen from Saint-Louis in July-August 1928

The announcement of this strike was of great concern to the colonial authorities because it seemed to echo the demands of seamen in France who were preparing to enter the struggle at the same time as their African comrades.

At the Congress of the International Federation of Trade Unions (in the pay of Stalin) held in Paris in August 1927, an appeal was made in defence of the proletariat of the colonies, as related:

“An English delegate to the Congress of the International Federation of Trade Unions (IFTU) in Paris, seizing the occasion... had particularly insisted on the existence in the colonies of millions of men subjected to unbridled exploitation, proletarians in the fullest sense, who now needed to become organised and engaged in trade union type actions, pressing for their demands in particular by using the weapon of protests and strikes. Echoing this, Koyaté (an African syndicalist) said himself that ‘the right to organise has the power to resist in French Black Africa through mass strikes, in illegality’”.¹⁸

In France unrest had been growing since June 1928 among seamen who were demanding a wage increase and were thus expected to strike on July 14th. But on the set date, it was the native seamen of the shipping companies in Saint-Louis who went on strike en masse, with the same demands as their comrades back in the home country. The reaction of the colonial authorities was to cry “international conspiracy” and point, among others, to two native union leaders as the “ring leaders” of the movement. And to deal with it, the Administration of the colony made a common front with the employers by combining political manoeuvres and repressive measures to break the strike.

“...Then the hard bargaining began. While the sailors were prepared to see their wage claim reduced by up to 25 francs, the bosses said it was impossible to award

18. Ibid.

them more than 100 francs per month. As the workers (seeking 250 francs more), considered the offer inadequate, the strike continued unabated.”¹⁹

The strikers of the St. Louis region found immediate support from other seamen:

“(State Archives) *The head of the maritime Register tells us, in effect, that in the afternoon of the 19th, the ‘Cayor’ tugboat came from Dakar and arrived with the barge ‘Forez’. The boat had hardly anchored when the crew made common cause with the strikers with the exception of an old boatswain and another sailor. But he tells us that the next morning on July 20th, the strikers stormed aboard the ‘Cayor’ and forcibly dragged the two sailors who remained at their posts ashore. A brief demonstration outside the town hall was dispersed by police.*”²⁰

The strike lasted more than a month before being broken militarily by the colonial Governor who used force to remove the native crews and replaced them with troops. Exhausted by the long weeks of struggle, deprived of the necessary financial resources to support their families, in short to avoid starving, the sailors had to return to work; hence the smug satisfaction of the local representative of the colonial power who offered his own account of events: “[At the end of the strike] the seamen asked to go back onto the ships of the African Freight Co. They returned to their old conditions, and the strike resulted in the sailors losing one month’s salary, whereas, if they had listened to the proposals of the Head of the Maritime Register they would have benefited with an increase in their pay from 50 to 100 francs a month.”²¹

This retreat of the strikers, realistic in the circumstances, was regarded by the bourgeoisie as a “victory” that announced the crisis of 1929, whose effects began to be felt locally. From then on, the colonial power was not slow to profit from its “victory” over the striking seamen and from the opportunity to strengthen its repressive forces.

“Confronted with this situation, the colonial Governor, aware of the political tensions already brewing from the declarations of Ameth Sow Télémaquem²² talking about the coming revolution in Senegal, about the succession of social movements and the deteriorating financial situation and popular discontent, adopted two measures to maintain order.

“Firstly he had accelerated the process,

19. Ibid.

20. Ibid.

21. Ibid.

22. African trade union member of the IFTU social democratic tendency.

begun in 1927, aimed at placing control of the Senegal security services in Dakar from where, he said, the surveillance of the colony would be increased. [...] The second measure was to more quickly put in place training for the gendarmerie responsible for policing Thies-Niger.”²³

This meant: the presence of police assigned to escort duty on trains to “accompany” train crews with “intervention brigades” on all lines, measures aimed at individuals or groups who would be arrested and imprisoned if they defied police orders, while anyone stirring up “social unrest” (strikes and demonstrations) would be severely punished. Let us note that all these means of repression, increasing the militarisation of labour, were targeted principally at the two sectors that were the lungs of the colonial economy, namely the waterways and railways.

But despite all this military control, the working class did not cease to pose a threat to the colonial authorities.

“Yet when social unrest continued on sections of the railway in Thies, where strike action was threatened after the non-payment of back pay they were due, with the submission of claims for wage increases and a denunciation of the negligence of an administration that was completely disinterested in their fate, the Governor took these threats very seriously, working to establish, in 1929, a new private police force, this time composed of former military, mostly officers who, under the direction of the Commissioner of the special police, would ensure a permanent peace in the depot at Thies.”²⁴

So in this period of acute social tensions related to the terrible world economic crisis, the colonial regime had no alternative but to rely more than ever on its armed forces to put an end to working class combativeness.

The Great Depression and the militarisation of labour weaken workers’ combativeness

As we saw previously, the colonial power did not wait for the arrival of the 1929 crisis to militarise the world of work, because it began to resort to the army in 1925 faced with the pugnacity of the working class. But this situation, with both the deepening global economic crisis and the militarisation of labour, must have weighed heavily on the working class of the colony because, between 1930 and 1935, there were few struggles. In fact the only important class movement that we know of was that of the

23. Thiam, *ibid.*

24. *Ibid.*

workers in the port of Kaolack:

*"A short and violent strike in Kaolack on May 1st 1930: between 1500 and 2000 workers from peanut farms and from the port stopped work while loading the boats. They asked for the doubling of their wages of 7.50 francs. The police intervened and a striker was slightly injured. Work resumed at 1400 hours: the workers had won a wage of 10 francs a day."*²⁵

This short yet vigorous strike brought to a close the series of dazzling struggles since 1914. In other words, 15 years of class confrontations after which the proletariat of the colony of French West Africa was able to stand up to its enemy and to build its identity as an autonomous class.

For its part, in the same period, the bourgeoisie showed its real nature as a bloodthirsty class by using every means at its disposal, including the most ferocious, to attempt to put an end to working class combativeness. But in the end it still had to regularly back down faced with the onslaughts of the working class, often giving in completely to the strikers' demands.

1936/1938: important workers' struggles under the Popular Front government

In the wake of the arrival of the Popular Front government of Leon Blum, there was a fresh explosion of working class combativeness with the outbreak of numerous strikes. Hence, there were no fewer than 42 "wildcat strikes" in Senegal between 1936 and 1938, including that of September 1938, which we will deal with below. This fact is especially significant as the unions had just been legalised, given "new rights", by the Popular Front government, and therefore benefited from its legitimacy.

These struggles were often victorious. For example the one in 1937 when seamen of European origin on a French ship stopping over in the Ivory Coast, having become concerned by the miserable living conditions of the indigenous sailors (the Kroumen), encouraged the latter to demand better working conditions. But the native workers were evicted using military force by the colonial administrator, which straight away led to the French crew going out on strike in support of their African comrades to force the authorities to meet the demands of the strikers in full.

Here yet again is an act of workers' solidarity that can be added to the many episodes cited above where unity and solidarity between Europeans and Africans was

25. Nicole Bernard-Duquenet, *Le Sénégal et le Front populaire*, L'Harmattan, 1985

the source of many of the victorious struggles, despite their "racial differences".

1938: the railway strike arouses the hatred of the whole bourgeoisie against the workers

Another highly significant movement in terms of class confrontation was the strike of the railworkers in 1938, carried out by workers on short-term contracts whose demands had been "neglected" by the unions. In the case of the day labourers or auxiliaries, the more numerous and impoverished of railwaymen, they were paid daily, worked Sundays and public holidays, covered sick days, and worked a 54 hour week without any of the entitlements of the tenured staff, all of this with no guaranteed work on the next day.

It was these railwaymen who carried out the famous strike of 1938.

"The strike movement had moreover broken out spontaneously and outside the unions. On September 27th, the auxiliary railworkers (not the tenured staff) of Dakar-Niger went on strike in Thies and Dakar to protest against the arbitrary removal of one of their comrades.

"The next day, in the depot at Thies, the strikers organised a blockade to prevent the 'blacklegs' coming to work. The Dakar-Niger police tried to intervene, but were quickly overwhelmed, and the management of the railway appealed to the administrator who sent in the troops: the strikers defended themselves throwing stones, the army returned fire. There were six dead and thirty wounded. The next day (29th) there was a general strike across the network. On Thursday, 30th, an agreement was signed between the workers' delegates and the whole government on the following basis:

"1) No sanctions, 2) No interference with the right of association, 3) Compensation for the victims' families, 4) An investigation into the demands.

*"On October 1st, the union gave the order to return to work."*²⁶

Here we see again a dramatic and heroic struggle waged by the railwaymen, outside the union's instructions, which made the colonial power back down, and this despite its resort to a blood-letting, using the army, as indicated by the number of deaths and injuries, not to mention the dozens of workers thrown in jail. To better gauge the barbaric nature of the repression, here is the testimony of a workman painter, one of the survivors of this carnage:

"When we learned of the assignment to Gossas of Cheikh Diack, a violent un-

26. Jean Suret-Canale, op. cit.

*ease spread among the workers' circles, especially the auxiliaries for whom he was the spokesman. We decided to oppose it by striking the next day when our boss was back at his post. I woke up that day, a Tuesday - I will always remember - I heard gunshots. I lived near the city of Ballabey. A few moments later I saw my brother Domingo rush off to the Depot. I rushed after him, aware of the danger he faced. Soon I saw him crossing the railway line and then falling down a few yards further on. When I got near him, I thought he must have been struck by an illness because there was no obvious injury; when I raised him up, he was groaning. Blood flowed from a wound near his left shoulder. He died moments later in my arms. Drunk with rage, I rushed at the soldier in front of me. He fired at me. I advanced not realising I was hurt. I think it was the anger brewing inside me that gave me the strength to reach out and snatch his gun, his belt, his cap, then I knocked him out before falling unconscious."*²⁷

This story illustrates the ferocity of the Senegalese sharpshooters towards the 'native' workers, ignoring the example shown by their colleagues who refused to fire on workers during the rebellion at the workshop at Thies in 1925. The striking workers showed a tremendous fighting spirit and admirable courage in defending their own interests and their dignity as members of the exploited class.

It's important to point out here that before going out on strike, the workers were harassed by all the forces of the bourgeoisie, parties and various leaders, employers and trade unions. All of these representatives of capitalist order hurled insults at and intimidated the workers who dared to go on strike without the "blessing" of anyone but themselves, and indeed wild and hysterical Muslim religious leaders were unleashed on the strikers, at the request of the Governor, as recalled by Nicole Bernard-Duquenet:

*"He (the governor) also appealed to religious leaders and community elders; Nourou Seydou Tall, who had often acted as an emissary of the Governor-General, spoke in Thies (before the striking workers), Cheikh Amadou Moustapha Mbacke went round the network explaining that a good Muslim should not go on strike because it is a form of rebellion."*²⁸

For once we can quite agree with this cynical cleric and say that a strike really is an act of rebellion not only against exploitation and oppression, but also against religious obscurantism.

27. Antoine Mendy, quoted by the publication *Senegal d'Aujourd'hui*, n° 6, March 1964.

28. Nicole Bernard-Duquenet, op. cit.

As for the unions, which didn't lead the struggle of the railwaymen, they still had to join the "bandwagon" so as not lose complete control of the movement. And here their state of mind is described by the strikers' delegate: "We asked for an increase of 1.50 francs per day for the most recent starters with up to 5 years service, 2.50 francs for those with 5 to 10 years, and 3.50 francs over 10 years, along with a travel allowance for the conductors, escorts, mechanics etc. [...] Incredible as it may seem, such claims were favourably received by the management of the network, but by contrast were undermined by the Union of Indigenous Workers of Dakar-Niger, which represented the more senior staff. Indeed, it couldn't resign itself to seeing us win this first round. Its leaders were eager to have exclusive rights to the negotiations with the authorities of the network. The union situation at the time led to rivalries, obscure internecine struggles and competition for loyalty to the employers, which largely explains this position. As a result I was transferred to Dakar. Those in high places were naïve to believe that this action could stifle the protest movement that had arisen amongst the 'lowest paid'"²⁹

Again we see a clear demonstration of the betrayal of the workers' interests and the role played by the unions as "social peacemakers" on behalf of capital and the bourgeois state. Nicole Bernard-Duqueten sums it up:

"It is therefore almost certain that the secretaries of the unions have done everything to stop the threat of a strike that could cause trouble for the authorities.

"But in addition to the military and police forces, trade unions, employers and religious organisations, it was above all the press (of both right and left) that preyed like a hungry vulture on the strikers:

"The 'Courrier colonial' (employers' paper): 'In the home country we have long condemned the disastrous consequences of strikes, constantly provoked by the slogans of agitators, mostly foreigners or in the pay of foreigners, so that the colonial governments rush to combat energetically every vague impulse to transform our colonies into spheres of strike activity';

"'L'Action française' (right wing paper): 'Thus, while those marxists responsible for the rioting are clearly left alone, the Minister of Colonies is considering using sanctions against the Senegalese soldiers (and not against the strikers). And all this to please the socialists and save their creature, Governor General De Coppet, who is acting in a scandalous

manner.'"³⁰

Here we have an insight into the attitude of the media vultures of the right. Yet the approach of the left wing press was hardly less scathing:

"Newspapers supporting the Popular Front are very bitter. The FWA blames the strike on agents provocateurs, a 'pointless strike' [...] The 'Periscope Africain' speaks of a strike 'bordering on rebellion' where no striker was a member of the indigenous union. The Bulletin of the Federation of civil servants condemns the use of bullets to disperse the strikers, interprets the strike as a riot, and says the auxiliaries are neither in the CGT or communists. They are not even union supporters. 'It's all the Fascists' fault.'

"Le Populaire (SFIO) blames the incidents on a 'local right-wing party violently opposed to the CGT and to fascist intrigues of certain unionists (a reference to the strikers' spokesman)'"³¹

And to characterize all these vile anti-working class reactions, let's listen to the conclusions of the historian Iba Der Thiam when he says this:

"As we see it, the events that occurred in Thies were seen on the left and on the right, as the extension of French internal politics, that is to say, a struggle between democrats and fascists in the absence of any concrete and plausible social motivation.

"It is this erroneous assessment, which would explain in large measure why the railway strike in Thies has never been adequately taken up by French unions, even the most advanced.

"[...] The recriminations of FWA and Periscope Africain, against the strikers, are similar in many respects to the articles of Le Populaire and L'Humanite'"³²

In other words, the press of the right and left has a similar attitude to the strike movement of the railwaymen. We see it all in that last paragraph; we see there the unanimity of the forces of the bourgeoisie, national and colonial, against the working class in its struggle against poverty and for dignity. These heinous reactions of the left press against striking workers confirm more than anything the final enrolling of the "Communist Party" into the ranks French capital, knowing that this was already the case with the "Socialist Party" since 1914. In addition, we should recall that this anti-working class conduct was taking place in the context of the military preparations of the Second World War, during which the

French left played a key role in enlisting the proletariat in the French homeland as in the African colonies.

Lassou (to be continued)

29. Cheikh Diack, cited by the same newspaper, *Senegal d'Aujourd'hui*

30. Nicole Bernard-Duqueten, op. cit.

31. Nicole Bernard-Duqueten, op. cit.

32. Iba Der Thiam, *The railway strike of Senegal in September 1938*, Masters Thesis, Dakar 1972.

The revolutionary syndicalist FVDG during the First World War

In the two previous articles¹ we showed that from the 1890s a proletarian opposition developed within the German unions. At the beginning it was against reducing the workers' struggle to purely economic questions as the general confederations of the unions were doing. It then went on to oppose illusions in parliament and the SPD's increasing confidence in the state. But it was only from 1908, following the break with the SPD, that the Free Union of German Unions, the FVDG, developed clearly towards revolutionary syndicalism. The outbreak of the First World War in 1914 presented the revolutionary syndicalists in Germany with the acid test: support the nationalist politics of the dominant class or else defend proletarian internationalism. Together with the internationalist minorities around Liebknecht and Luxemburg, the revolutionary syndicalists of the FVDG in Germany formed a current – too often forgotten unfortunately – which held fast against the war hysteria.

The test of the hour: the “union sacrée” or internationalism

Hand in hand with Social Democracy, which publicly voted for war credits on 4th August 1914, the leadership of the big social democratic unions also bowed down before the war plans of the dominant class. At the conference of the directive committees of the social democratic unions on 2nd August 1914, where it was decided to suspend all strikes and all struggles for demands so as not to compromise the war mobilisation, Rudolf Wissell gave voice to the chauvinist convulsions which had pervaded the social democratic unions: “If Germany is defeated in the present struggle, which none of us wants, then all union struggles after the end of the war will be destined to failure and futility. If Germany triumphs a positive conjuncture will be inaugurated and the means of the organisation will not have to weigh so heavily in the balance.”² The appalling logic of the unions lay in making a direct connection between the lot of the working class and the outcome of the war; if “their country” and their dominant class profited from the war, then this would also benefit the workers, because they could depend on domestic policy to make concessions to the working class. Consequently, every effort had to be made to ensure Germany military victory.

2. See “The birth of revolutionary syndicalism in the German workers’ movement” in *International Review* n° 137 and “The Free Association of German Trade Unions: on the road to revolutionary syndicalism” in *International Review* n° 141

2. H.J.Bieber: *Gewerkschaften in Krieg und Revolution, 1918*, vol.1, p.88 (our translation).

The inability of the social democratic unions to take up an internationalist position against the war is not surprising. Once the defence of working class interests is entrapped in the national framework, once bourgeois parliamentarism is embraced as a panacea rather than the international conflict between the working class and capitalism being the political orientation, this must inevitably lead into the capitalist camp.

In fact the dominant class in Germany was only able to go to war thanks to the public conversion of the SPD and its unions! The social democratic unions did not just passively follow. No, they developed a real war policy, a chauvinist propaganda and were a crucial factor in ensuring intensive war production. “Socialist reformism” was turned into “social imperialism” as Trotsky put it in 1914.

Of those workers who tried to swim against the tide immediately after the declaration of war in Germany, a number of them were influenced by revolutionary syndicalism. The strike on the steam-ship “Vaterland”³ just before the beginning of the war, in May-June 1914, is an example of the confrontation between the combative fractions of the working class and the main social democratic union, which defended the “Union Sacrée”. The largest ship in the world at the time was the proud emblem of German imperialism. Part of the crew, of whom many were workers of the revolutionary industrial union federation, went on strike during its maiden voyage from Hamburg to New York. The Social

3 “Fatherland” in German.

Democratic Federation of the German Transport Workers’ Union was bitterly opposed to this strike: “Consequently, all those who took part in the assemblies of the revolutionary syndicalists have committed a crime against the sailors. [...] We reject wild cat strikes on principle. [...] And with the gravity of the present situation, which requires the mobilisation of the whole work force, the revolutionary unionists are trying to divide the workers and, in doing so claim to follow the slogan of Marx that the emancipation of the workers can only be the task of the workers themselves.”⁴ The calls for unity in the workers’ movement on the part of the social democratic unions were no more than empty phrases aimed at ensuring their control over working class movements and pushing them into “a union to support the war” in August 1914.

It would be quite unfair to reproach the revolutionary syndicalists in Germany for having abandoned the class struggle in the weeks preceding the declaration of war. On the contrary, for a short time they acted as a rallying point for the combative workers: “Workers went there and heard the term revolutionary syndicalism for the first time and here they expected to realise their desire for revolution.”⁵ However, all the organisations of the working class, including the revolutionary syndicalist current, had another task to accomplish. As well as continuing the class struggle, it was indispensable to expose the imperialist nature of the war that was taking place.

What was the attitude of the revolutionary syndicalist FVDG to the war? On 1st August 1914, in their main publication, *Die Einigkeit*, they adopted a clear position against the coming war, not as naïve pacifists but as workers seeking solidarity from those in other countries: “Who wants war? Not the working people, but a military camarilla of good-for-nothings in every European state which is greedy for martial victory. We workers don’t want war! We loath it, it destroys culture, it

4. See Folkert Mohrhof, *Der syndikalistische Streik auf dem Ozean-Dampfer "Vaterland" 1914*, 2008 (our translation).

5. *Die Einigkeit*, main publication of the FVDG, 27th June 1914, article by Karl Roche, “Ein Gewerkschaftsführer als Gehilfe des Staatsanwalts”, (our translation).

rapes humanity and greatly increases the number crippled by the current economic war. We workers want peace! We don't make distinctions between Austrians, Serbs, Russians, Italians, French etc. Brothers in toil, that's our name! We hold out our hands to the workers of all countries in order to prevent a terrible crime which will give rise to torrents of tears from the eyes of mothers and children. Barbarians and those who are against all civilisation may well see war as a sublime and holy thing – men who are sensitive at heart, socialists, guided by a conception of the world formed by justice, humanity and love of man, detest war! Therefore, workers and comrades everywhere, raise your voices in protest against this crime against humanity that is being planned! It will rob the poor of what they have as well as costing them their life-blood, but it will bring profit to the rich, glory and honour to the defenders of militarism. Down with the war!"

On 6th August 1914 German troops attacked Belgium. Franz Jung, a sympathiser of the revolutionary syndicalist FVDG, latter a member of the KAPD, paints a vivid picture of his experience at the time in a Berlin that was drunk with war hysteria: "At least a crowd descended on the few dozen demonstrating for peace, whom I had joined. As far as I can recall, this demonstration had been organised by the revolutionary syndicalists around Kater and Rocker. A banner mounted on two poles was displayed, a red flag was raised and the demonstration 'Down with the war!' started off. We didn't get very far."⁶

Let's hear the words of another revolutionary of the period, the internationalist anarchist, Emma Goldman: "In Germany Gustav Landauer, Erich Mühsam, Fritz Oerter, Fritz Kater and many other comrades stayed in contact. We were obviously no more than a handful in comparison with the thousands intoxicated by the war. Even so we managed to distribute a manifesto of our International Bureau throughout the world and we denounced the war for what it really was with all our might."⁷ Oerter and Kater were the most important experienced members of the FVDG. The FVDG maintained its position against the war throughout the conflict. This was undoubtedly the greatest strength of the FVDG – but strangely enough, it is the

6. Franz Jung, *Der Weg nach unten*, Nautilus, p.89 (our translation).

7. Emma Goldman, *Living my Life*, p. 656 (our translation). In February 1915, Emma Goldman and other internationalist anarchists, such as Berkman and Malatesta, made a public statement against the approval of the war on the part of the main representative of anarchism, Kropotkin, and others. In the *Mitteilungsblatt* of 20th February 1915, the FVDG welcomed this defence of internationalism against Kropotkin on the part of the revolutionary anarchists.

chapter in its history which is the least documented.

As soon as the war started, the FVDG was banned. Many of its members – in 1914 it still had about 6,000 – were placed in detention or forcibly sent to the front. In the Review *Der Pionier*, another of its publications, the FVDG wrote in the editorial of 5th August 1914, "The International Proletariat and the coming world war" that "everyone knows that the war between Serbia and Austria is just a visible expression of chronic war fever..." The FVDG described how the governments of Serbia, Austria and Germany had managed to win over the working class to its "war hysteria" and it denounced the SPD and its lie about a so-called "defensive war": "Germany will never be the aggressor; this is the idea that these government gentlemen are already putting into our heads, and this is why the German Social Democrats, as their press and their spokesmen have already shown to be their perspective, will find themselves to a man squarely in the ranks of the German army." Issue n° 32 of *Die Einigkeit*, 8th August 1914, was the last to be distributed to militants.

Internationalist anti-militarism

In the introduction to this series of articles on revolutionary syndicalism, we distinguished between anti-militarism and internationalism. "Internationalism is based on the understanding that, although capitalism is a world system, it remains nonetheless incapable of going beyond the national framework and an increasingly frenzied competition between nations. As such, it engenders a movement that aims at the international overthrow of capitalist society by a working class that is also united internationally. [...] Anti-militarism, by contrast, is not necessarily internationalist, since it tends to take as its main enemy not capitalism as such, but only an aspect of capitalism."⁸ In which camp was the FVDG?

In the FVDG's press in this period, there is little elaborated or developed political analysis on the causes of the war or the relations between the various imperialist powers. This gap is a consequence of the syndicalist vision of the FVDG. It saw itself, particularly at this time, as an organisation for struggle at an economic level, although in fact it was more like a co-ordination of groups defending syndicalist ideas than a union as such. The bitter confrontations with the SPD that ended in 1908 with its exclusion, had produced

8. "What is revolutionary syndicalism?" *International Review* n° 118, http://en.internationalism.org/ir/118_syndicalism_i.html.

within the ranks of the FVDG a decided aversion to "politics" and, consequently, the loss of what had been learnt from past struggles against the ideology expounded by the big social democratic unions, that there is a separation between the economic and the political. Although the FVDG's understanding of the dynamic of imperialism was not really as clear as it needed to be, the organisation was nevertheless obliged by the war to adopt a decidedly political position.

The history of revolutionary syndicalism in Germany shows, through the example of the FVDG, that theoretical analyses of imperialism alone are not enough to adopt a genuinely internationalist position. A healthy proletarian instinct, a profound feeling of solidarity with the international working class are just as essential – and it was just this that formed the backbone of the FVDG in 1914.

On the whole the FVDG described itself as "anti-militarist"; we hardly find the term internationalism. But to do full justice to the revolutionary syndicalists of the FVDG, it is absolutely necessary to take account of the real nature of its oppositional work against the war. The FVDG's point of view on the war was not at all bound by national frontiers, nor was it imbued with the illusions spread about by pacifism on the possibility of a peaceful capitalism. Unlike the majority of pacifists who, immediately after the declaration of war, found themselves in the ranks of those defending the nation against foreign militarism – the one that was supposed to be the more barbaric – on 8th August 1914 the FVDG clearly warned the working class against any co-operation with the national bourgeoisie: "So the workers must not put their faith credulously in humanity as it is at the moment, that of the capitalists and the bosses. The present war hysteria must not cloud awareness of the class antagonisms existing between Capital and Labour."⁹

For the comrades of the FVDG it was not a matter of opposing just one aspect of capitalism, militarism, but of integrating the struggle against the war into the general struggle of the working class to go beyond capitalism internationally, as Karl Liebknecht had put it in his 1906 pamphlet *Militarism and Anti-militarism*. In his article of 1915, *Anti-militarism!*, he rightly criticised the heroic and apparently radical expressions of anti-militarism, such as desertion, which leave the army even more in the hands of the militarists by eliminating the best anti-militarists. For this reason "any method that functions in an exclusively individual way or is realised individually is to be rejected on principle".

9. *Die Einigkeit*, n° 32, 8 August 1914.

Within the international revolutionary syndicalist movement, there were very different views on the anti-militarist struggle. Domela Nieuwenhuis, historically a representative of the idea of the general strike, described the means to achieve it as a curious mixture of reforms and individual objection in the 1901 pamphlet *Militarism*. This was not at all the case for the FVDG, which shared Liebnicht's conviction that only the class struggle of all the workers collectively – and not individual action – could stop the war.

The production of the FVDG's press was the responsibility of the secretariat (Geschäftskommission) in Berlin, that was composed of 5 comrades around Fritz Kater and it expressed strongly the individual political positions of these comrades because of the weak organisational cohesion of the FVDG. Even so, the internationalism of the FVDG was not restricted to a minority of the organisation, as was the case with the revolutionary syndicalist CGT in France. It did not experience splits within its ranks on the question of the war. It was rather repression against the organisation and the fact that its members were forcibly sent to the front which meant that only a minority was able to sustain a permanent activity. Revolutionary syndicalist groups remained active mainly in Berlin and in about 18 other places. After *Die Einigkeit* was banned in August 1914, contact was maintained by means of the *Mitteilungsblatt* and then, once this too was banned in June 1915, through the publication *Rundschreiben*, which was also made illegal in May 1917. The heavy repression against the internationalist revolutionary syndicalists in Germany meant that from the beginning of the war their publications were more in the nature of internal bulletins than public reviews: "*The directive committees, or those entrusted with the task, must immediately produce only the number of issues needed for their existing members and must distribute the bulletin only to them.*"¹⁰

The comrades of the FVDG also had the courage to oppose the mobilisation for participation in the war carried out by the majority of the revolutionary syndicalist CGT in France: "*All this excitement to war on the part of international socialists, unionists and anti-militarists doesn't serve one jot to shake us from our principles*"¹¹ they wrote, referring to the capitulation of the majority of the CGT. The question

of war had become the touch stone in the international revolutionary syndicalist movement. To confront their big sister, the revolutionary syndicalist CGT, they had to have a very solid loyalty to the working class because the CGT and its theories had been an important reference point over the years in the FVDG's evolution towards revolutionary syndicalism. During the war the comrades of the FVDG supported the internationalist minority, around Pierre Monatte, who left the CGT.

Why did the FVDG remain internationalist?

All the unions in Germany succumbed to nationalist war fever in 1914. Why was the FVDG an exception? We cannot give a reply to this question by simply attributing it to their "luck" in having – as they did – a secretariat (Geschäftskommission) that was firm and internationalist. Likewise, we cannot explain the capitulation of the social democratic unions on the question of war by their misfortune in having treacherous leaders.

The FVDG did not remain solidly internationalist simply because of its clear evolution towards revolutionary syndicalism from 1908 onwards. The example of the French CGT shows that revolutionary syndicalism of the period was not in itself a guarantee of internationalism. On the whole we can say that a declaration of faith in marxism, anarchism or revolutionary syndicalism does not in itself guarantee internationalism in deed.

The FVDG refused the patriotic lie of the dominant class, including social democracy, of a purely "*defensive war*" (a trap into which Kropotkin tragically fell). It denounced in its press the logic according to which each nation presented itself as the one "under attack"; Germany from shady Russian Tsarism, France from Prussian militarism, etc.¹² This clarity could only develop on the basis of understanding that it was now impossible to distinguish, within capitalism, more modern nations from more backward ones and that capitalism as a whole had become destructive for humanity. In the period of the first world war the internationalist position was characterised above all by the political denunciation of the "*defensive war*". It is no accident that, in Autumn 1914, Trotsky dedicated an entire pamphlet to this question.¹³

The FVDG also reasoned in accordance with human principles: "*Socialism places human principles above national principles.*" "*It is ... difficult to find oneself*

on the side of a humanity that is drowning in affliction, but if we want to be socialists, that is our place."¹⁴ The question of solidarity and the human relation to other workers throughout the world is a basis of internationalism. The internationalism of the FVDG, expressed in 1914 in a proletarian way against the war, was a sign of the strength of the revolutionary syndicalist movement in Germany in relation to the decisive question of war.

The principal roots of the FVDG's internationalism are to be found above all in its long history of opposition to the reformism that pervaded the SPD and the social democratic unions. Its aversion to the SPD's universal panacea of parliamentarism played an essential role because it prevented it from becoming ideologically integrated into the capitalist state, unlike the social democratic unions.

In the years leading up to the outbreak of the world war, contrasts between three tendencies within the FVDG appeared: one expressed its identity as a union, another the resistance to "politics" (of the SPD) and a third the reality of the FVDG as a collection of propaganda groups (a reality which, as we have already explained, blocked its capacity to produce clear analyses of imperialism). This confrontation produced only weaknesses. Confronted with the openly chauvinist policies of the SPD and the other unions, the old reflex to resist the depoliticisation of the workers' struggles, quite strong until the debate on the mass strike in 1904, was revived.

Although, as we wrote in our previous article, the resistance of the FVDG to reformism bore with it strange weaknesses, such as an aversion towards "politics", what was determinant in 1914 was its attitude to the war. The internationalist contribution of the FVDG was at that time much more important, for the working class, than its weaknesses.

Its healthy reaction against turning all its attention to Germany, in spite of the difficult conditions, was decisive in its capacity to maintain a firm internationalist position. The FVDG sought contact not only with Monatte's internationalist minority in the CGT, but also with other revolutionary syndicalists in Denmark, Sweden, Spain, Holland (National Arbeids Secretariaat) and Italy (Unione Sindacale Italiana) who were trying to oppose the war.

Insufficient contact with the other internationalists in Germany

How strongly could the international voice of the FVDG make itself heard within the

10. *Mitteilungsblatt*, 15 August 1914.

11. *Mitteilungsblatt*, 10 October 1914. Quoted by Wayne Thorpe in *Keeping the faith: The German Syndicalists in the First World War*. This work, together with the original documents of the FVDG, is the only (and very precious) source on German revolutionary syndicalism during the First World War.

12. See, among others, *Mitteilungsblatt*, November 1914 and *Rundschreiben*, August 1916.

13. *The War and the International*.

14. *Mitteilungsblatt*, 21st November 1914.

working class during the war? It fought energetically against the perfidious organs that had joined the “Union Sacrée”. As its internal publication *Rundschreiben* attests, it accepted the consequences of its position by refusing to participate in the war committees:¹⁵ “*Certainly not! Such a function is not for our members or functionaries [...] no-one can ask that of them.*”¹⁶ But in the years 1914-1917, it addressed itself almost exclusively to its own members. On the basis of a realistic assessment of their impotence at the time and the impossibility of being a real obstacle to the war, but above all, justifiably afraid that the organisation would be destroyed, Fritz Kater, in the name of the secretariat (Geschäftskommission) addressed the comrades of the FVDG on 15th August 1914 in the *Mitteilungsblatt*: “*Our views of militarism and the war, as we have defended them and spread them for decades and which we will guarantee until the end of our lives, are not admissible in a period of feverish enthusiasm for the war. We are condemned to silence. It was to be expected and so we are by no means surprised that we have been outlawed. We must resign ourselves to remaining silent, as must all other union comrades.*”

Kater expresses on the one hand the hope of maintaining an activity as it was before the war (which was however impossible because of the repression!) and on the other hand the minimal aim to save the organisation: “*The secretariat (Geschäftskommission) is of the opinion that it would not be acting in accordance with its duty if it stopped all its other activities now that the publications have been banned. This must not be the case. [...] It will maintain the links between the different organisations and will do all that is necessary to prevent their decomposition.*”

The FVDG in fact survived the war but not because it had a particularly effective survival strategy or because it made insistent appeals not to leave the organisation. It was obviously its internationalism that served as an anchor for its members

15. These war committees (Kriegsausschüsse) were founded after February 1915, initially in the Berlin metal industry, between representatives of the bosses' association and the big unions. The aim was to halt the growing tendency for workers to change workplace in search of a higher salary as the social bloodletting through the massacres had produced a dearth in the workforce. This “uncontrolled” movement was, according to the government and the unions, damaging to war production. The creation of these committees was based on a previous attempt made in August 1914 by the social democratic leader Theodor Leipart, aimed at setting up *Kriegsarbeitsgemeinschaften* (war collectives with the employers) which, under the hypocritical pretence of acting in the interests of the working class to “combat unemployment” and regulate the work process, were in fact simply intended to make war production more efficient.

16. Quotes by W. Thorpe, *Keeping the faith: The German Syndicalists in the First World War*.

throughout the war.

When, in September 1915 the international declaration against the war—the Zimmerwald Manifesto—received considerable echo, the FVDG welcomed it and expressed solidarity. It did so above all because it was close to the internationalist minority of the CGT that was present at Zimmerwald. But the FVDG was suspicious of many of the groups at the Zimmerwald conference on the grounds that they were still too much tied to the parliamentary tradition. In truth, the suspicion was not unjustified; six of those present, including Lenin, said: “*The manifesto accepted by the conference does not completely satisfy us. [...] The manifesto does not contain any clear idea on how to combat the war.*”¹⁷ Unlike Lenin, the FVDG was not sufficiently clear either on how to oppose the war. Its suspicions were rather the expression of a lack of openness towards other internationalists, as shown by their relationship to those in Germany.

Why was there not even any co-operation in Germany between the international opposition of Spartakusbund and the revolutionary syndicalists of the FVDG? For a long time there had been a wide gap between them that could not be closed. About ten years earlier in the debate on the mass strike, Karl Liebknecht had attributed to the FVDG as a whole the individualist weaknesses of one of its temporary spokesmen, Rafael Friedeberg. As far as we know, the revolutionaries around Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht did not seek contact with the FVDG either during the early years of the war, certainly because they underestimated the internationalist capability of the revolutionary syndicalists.

The FVDG's attitude to Liebknecht, the figure who symbolised the movement against the war in Germany, was anything but constant, which prevented it from coming closer politically. On the one hand, it never forgave Liebknecht for approving the war credits in August 1914, a vote that he made without conviction and exclusively on the basis of a wrong conception of fraction discipline, which he himself subsequently criticised. Even so, in its press the FVDG always defended him when he was the victim of repression. The FVDG did not believe that the revolutionary opposition within the SPD was capable of freeing itself from parliamentarism, a step that it had itself managed only by splitting from the SPD in 1908. There was deep distrust. It was only at the end of 1918, when the revolutionary movement had spread throughout the whole of Germany

17. Declaration of Lenin, Zinoviev, Radek, Nerman, Hoglund, Berzin at the Zimmerwald conference, quoted by J. Humbert-Droz *The Origins of the Communist International* p.144.

that the FVDG called upon its members to join the Spartakusbund temporarily, as a second affiliation.

In retrospect neither the FVDG nor the Spartakists tried to establish contact with one another on the basis of their internationalist position during the war. In fact the bourgeoisie recognised the fact that the FVDG and the Spartakists shared an internationalist position rather better than did the two organisations themselves: the SPD-controlled press often tried to denigrate the Spartakists as being close to the “Kater tendency”.¹⁸

If there is a lesson for today and for the future to be learnt from the history of the FVDG during the first world war, it is this: it is essential to make contact with other internationalists, even if there are differences on other political questions. This has nothing to do with the “united front” (which is based on a weakness at the level of principles and is even prepared to co-operate with organisations in the bourgeois camp) as it appeared in the history of the workers' movement in the 1920s-30s. On the contrary, it is the recognition that internationalism is the most important proletarian position and that it is held in common.

Mario 5/8/2011

18. *Vorwärts*, 9th January 1917.

The decadence of capitalism (xi)

The post-war boom did not reverse the decline of capitalism

The last few articles in this series have demonstrated the high level of agreement among Marxists (and even some anarchists) regarding the historical stage capitalism had reached by the middle of the 20th century. The devastating imperialist war of 1914-18, the international revolutionary wave that came in its wake, and the unprecedented world economic depression which marked the 1930s were all seen as irrefutable evidence that the bourgeois mode of production had entered its epoch of decline, the epoch of the world proletarian revolution. The experience of the second

imperialist bloodbath did not call this diagnosis into question; on the contrary, it was seen as providing even more decisive proof that the system had outlived itself. Victor Serge had already described the 1930s as “midnight in the century”, a decade which had seen the victory of the counter-revolution on all fronts at the very moment that the objective conditions for the overthrow of the system had never been more plainly developed. But the events of 1939-45 showed that the night could grow darker still.

As we wrote in the first article in this series: “Picasso’s painting of *Guernica* is rightly celebrated as a ground-breaking depiction of the horrors of modern war. The indiscriminate bombing of the civilian population of this Spanish town by German planes supporting Franco’s armies still had the power to shock because it was a relatively new phenomenon. Aerial bombing of civilian targets during the First World War had been minimal and largely ineffective. The vast majority of those killed during that war were soldiers on the battlefronts. The second world war showed that capitalism in decline was increasing in its capacity for barbarism because this time the majority of those killed were civilians: ‘The total estimated human loss of life caused by World War II, irrespective of political alignment, was roughly 72 million people. The civilian toll was around 47 million, including about 20 million due to war related famine and disease. The military toll was about 25 million, including about 5 million prisoners of war.’ (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/World_War_II_casualties) The most terrifying and concentrated expression of this horror was the industrialised murder of millions of Jews and other minorities by the Nazi regime, shot in batch after batch in the ghettos and forests of eastern Europe, starved and worked to death as slave labourers, gassed in hundreds of thousands at Auschwitz, Belsen or Treblinka. But the civilian death tolls from the bombing of the cities by both sides were proof that this Holocaust, this systematic murder of the innocent, was a generalised feature of this war. Indeed at this level the democracies certainly outdid the fascist powers, as the ‘carpet bombing’ and ‘firebombing’ of German and Japanese cities made the German Blitz seem amateurish in comparison. The symbolic culminating point in this new

method of mass slaughter was the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, but in terms of civilian deaths, the ‘conventional’ bombing of cities like Tokyo, Hamburg and Dresden were even more deadly.”¹

In contrast to the First World War, which had to a large extent been ended by the outbreak of revolutionary struggles in Russia and Germany, the proletariat did not throw off the shackles of defeat at the end of the second. Not only had it been crushed physically, in particular by the steam-hammer of Stalinism and fascism; it had also been mobilised ideologically behind the banners of the bourgeoisie, above all through the fraud of anti-fascism and the defence of democracy. There were outbreaks of class struggle and revolt at the end of the war, particularly with the strikes in northern Italy which had a clearly internationalist spirit. But the ruling class had been well-prepared for such outbreaks and dealt with them with utter ruthlessness, above all in Italy where the allied forces master-minded by Churchill allowed the Nazi forces to put down the workers’ revolt while still bombing the strike-hit northern cities; meanwhile the Stalinists did their best to recruit militant workers into the patriotic resistance. The terror bombing of German cities eliminated any possibility that the military defeat of Germany would see a repeat of the revolutionary struggles of 1918.²

In short, the hope that had animated those small revolutionary groups which had survived the shipwreck of the 20s

and 30s – that a new war would give rise to a new upsurge in the revolution – was quickly dashed.

The state of the proletarian political movement after World War Two

In these conditions, the small revolutionary movement that had maintained internationalist positions during the war, despite a short period of revival following the collapse of the fascist regimes in Europe, faced the most difficult conditions as it set about the task of analysing the new phase of capitalism’s life in the aftermath of six years of carnage and destruction. The majority of Trotskyists had signed their death warrant as a proletarian current during the war by supporting the allied camp in defence of “democracy” against fascism; this betrayal was confirmed by the open support for Russian imperialism and its annexation of eastern Europe after the war. There were still a number of groups that had broken from Trotskyism and maintained an internationalist stance against the war, such as the Austrian RKD, the group around Munis and the Union Communiste Internationaliste in Greece, animated by Aghis Stinas and Cornelius Castoriadis/Paul Cardan, who went on to form the Socialisme ou Barbarie group. The subsequent evolution of these tendencies reflects the extreme difficulties of the period. The RKD, in its readiness to go to the root of Trotskyism’s demise, began by rejecting Bolshevism and ended up abandoning marxism altogether; Munis evolved towards left communist positions and remained all his life convinced that capitalist civilisation was profoundly decadent, applying this with particular clarity to key issues such as the trade union and the

1. “Decadence of capitalism: Revolution has been both necessary and possible for a century”, *International Review* n° 132: http://en.internationalism.org/ir/2008/132/decadence_of_capitalism.

2. See “Class struggle against imperialist war: Workers struggles in Italy, 1943”, *International Review* n° 75: http://en.internationalism.org/ir/075_1943.html.

national question. But he was seemingly unable to grasp how this decadence was connected to the economic impasse of the system: in the 1970s his organisation, the *Ferment Ouvrière Révolutionnaire*, walked out of the conferences of the communist left on the grounds that the other participating groups all agreed that there was an open economic crisis of the system, a position he rejected. As we shall see later on in this article, *Socialisme ou Barbarie* was seduced by the boom that opened up in the 1950s and also began to question the foundations of marxist theory. Consequently none of the former Trotskyist groups seem to have made any lasting contribution to a marxist comprehension of the historic conditions now facing world capitalism.

The evolution of the Dutch communist left after the war was also indicative of the general trajectory of the movement. There was a brief political and organisational revival with the formation of the *Spartacusbond* in Holland. As we show in our book *The Dutch and German Communist Left*, this group momentarily returned to the clarity of the old KAPD, not only in recognising the decline of the system but also in abandoning the “councilist” fear of the party. This development was facilitated by an open attitude to other revolutionary currents, in particular the *Gauche Communiste de France*. This was a short-lived development however. The majority of the Dutch left, especially the group around Cajo Brendel, soon drifted back towards anarchist conceptions of organisation and towards a workerist approach which saw little need to locate workers’ struggles in their general historical context

Debates in the Italian communist left

The revolutionary current which had been clearest about the trajectory capitalism was following in the 1930s – the Italian Communist Left – was by no means spared the turmoil affecting the revolutionary movement at the end of the war. The outbreak of a significant proletarian revolt in Northern Italy in 1943 was initially seen by most of its adherents as signifying a change in the historic course – the stirrings of the expected communist revolution. The comrades of the French Fraction of the International Communist Left, which had been formed during the war in Vichy France, initially shared this outlook, but quickly recognised that the bourgeoisie, profiting from the whole experience of 1917, was well-prepared for such outbreaks and had used all the weapons in its armoury to crush them mercilessly. By contrast, the majority of the comrades who had remained in Italy, joined by members of the Italian Fraction who had

returned to Italy from exile, had already proclaimed the Internationalist Communist Party (henceforward PCInt, to distinguish it from subsequent “International Communist Parties”). The new organisation was clearly internationalist in its opposition to both imperialist camps, but it had been hurriedly cobbled together from a number of different, and in many ways politically disparate, elements; and this was to give rise to numerous difficulties in the next few years. The majority of the comrades of the French Fraction opposed the dissolution of the Italian Fraction and the entry of its members into the new party, and were soon warning it against adopting positions which marked a clear regression from the views of the Italian Fraction in exile. On central issues such as the party’s relationship with unions, its willingness to stand in elections, and its internal organisational practice, the French Fraction saw clear evidence of a slide towards opportunism.³ The result of these criticisms was that the French Fraction was expelled from the International Communist Left and constituted itself as the *Gauche Communiste de France*.

One of the component parts of the PCInt was the “Fraction of Socialists and Communists” in Naples around Amadeo Bordiga; and a central element in the decision to proclaim the party was the prospect of forming the party with Bordiga, who had played an outstanding role in the formation of the CP of Italy in the early 1920s and in the subsequent fight against the degeneration of the Communist International. Bordiga was the last to openly criticise Stalin in the sessions of the CI, denouncing him to his face as the gravedigger of the revolution. But from the beginning of the 1930s and the first years of the war Bordiga had retired from political life, despite many pleas by his comrades to resume activity. Consequently the political gains made by the Italian Fraction in exile – on the fraction/party relationship, the lessons of the Russian revolution, the course of capitalism’s decline and its impact on questions such as the union and national questions – largely passed him by, and he tended to remain stuck on the positions of the 1920s. Indeed, in his determination to oppose all forms of opportunism and revisionism, encapsulated in the constant “new turns” of the official Communist Parties, Bordiga began to develop the theory of the “historical invariance of marxism”: in this view, the communist programme was distinguished by its essentially unchanging

3. See our book *The Italian Communist Left* for an account of the manner in which the PCInt was formed. For the GCF’s criticisms of the party’s platform, see “The second congress of the PCInt in Italy”, in *Internationalisme* no 36, July 1948, reprinted in *International Review* n° 36: <http://en.internationalism.org/node/3136>.

nature, implying that the dramatic changes which came about in the positions of CI or the communist left in their break from social democracy were no more than a “restoration” of the original programme incarnated in the Manifesto of 1848.⁴ This approach logically implied that there had not been any epochal change in capitalism in the 20th century, and Bordiga’s main argument against the notion of capitalist decadence is contained in his polemic against what he called “*the theory of the descending curve*”:

*“The theory of the descending curve compares historical development to a sinusoid: every regime, the bourgeois regime for example, begins with a rising phase, reaches a maximum, begins to decline towards a minimum; after this another regime begins its ascent. This is the vision of gradualist reformism: no convulsions, no leap, no jump. The marxist vision can (in the interests of clarity and conciseness) be represented as a number of branches of curves, all ascending until they reach the top (in geometry: the singular point or cusp), after which there comes a sudden and violent fall and, at the bottom, a new social regime arises; we have another historic ascending branch... The current affirmation that capitalism is in its descending branch can only lead to two errors: one fatalist the other gradualist.”*⁵

Elsewhere Bordiga wrote: “*For Marx, capitalism grows without stopping, beyond all limits.*”⁶ Capitalism was a series of cycles in which each moment of crisis, following a period of “unlimited” expansion, was deeper than the previous one and posed the necessity for a sudden and complete rupture with the old system.

We have responded to these arguments ourselves in *International Review* n°s 48 and 55,⁷ rejecting Bordiga’s charge that

4. Bordigist “invariance”, as we have often pointed out, is actually extremely variable. Thus, while insisting on the integral nature of the communist programme since 1848, and hence the possibility of communism from that moment on, Bordigism was also obliged by its loyalty to the founding congresses of the CI to accept that the war marked the opening of a general, historic crisis of the system. As Bordiga himself wrote in “Characteristic Theses of the Party” in 1951: “*The world imperialistic wars show that the crisis of disaggregation of capitalism is inevitable as it has entered the phase when its expansion, instead of signifying a continual increment of the productive forces, is conditioned by repeated and ever-growing destructions*”. We have written more about the ambiguity of the Bordigists on the problem of capitalism’s decline in *International Review* n° 77 http://en.internationalism.org/ir/077_rejection01.html.

5. From the Rome meeting, 1951: http://www.pcint.org/15_Textes_Theses/07_01_fr/1951-theorie-action-dans-doctrine-marxiste.htm.

6. *Dialogue with the Dead*, 1956. «Dialogue avec les morts», 1956, <http://www.sinistra.net/lib/bas/progra/vale/valeecicif.html>.

7. “Understanding the decadence of capitalism”.

the notion of capitalist decline leads to a gradualist and fatalist vision, and explaining why new societies don't spring into existence overnight without human beings going through a long experience of the old system's incompatibility with their needs. But there was already opposition to Bordiga's theory within the PCInt. Not all the work of the Fraction had been lost within the forces that had formed the PCInt. Faced with the reality of the post war period – marked mainly by increasing isolation of revolutionaries from the class, inevitably transforming an organisation that could initially mistake itself for a party into a small communist group – two main tendencies emerged, preparing the ground for the split of 1952. The current around Onorato Damen, ancestor of the present-day Internationalist Communist Tendency, retained the notion of capitalist decadence – it was they who were principally targeted in Bordiga's "descending curve" polemic – and this enabled them to maintain the clarity of the Fraction on key questions such as the definition of Russia as a form of state capitalism, agreement with Rosa Luxemburg on the national question, and a grasp of the capitalist nature of the trade unions (the latter position being defended with particular clarity by Stefanini who had been one of the first in the Fraction in exile to understand the integration of the unions into the state).

The summer 2011 issue of *Revolutionary Perspectives*, the journal of the Communist Workers' Organisation (the ICT's affiliate in the UK), republishes Damen's introduction to correspondence between himself and Bordiga around the time of the split. Damen, referring to Lenin's conception of capitalism as moribund, and Rosa Luxemburg's view of imperialism as a process hastening the collapse of capitalism, rejects Bordiga's polemic against the theory of the descending curve: "*It is true that imperialism hugely increases and provides the means for prolonging the life of capital but at the same time it constitutes the surest means for cutting it short. This schema of the ever-ascending curve not only does not show this but in a certain sense denies it.*"

Furthermore, as Damen points out, the vision of a capitalism which is in some sense perpetually ascendant permits Bordiga to indulge in ambiguities on the nature and role of the USSR:

"Faced with the alternative of remaining what we have always been, or bending to an attitude of platonic and intellectualist aversion to American capitalism, and

benevolent neutrality towards Russian capitalism merely because it is not yet capitalistically mature, we don't hesitate to restate the classical position which internationalist communists take on all the protagonists in the second imperialist conflict, which is not to hope for a victory of one or other of the adversaries, but to seek a revolutionary solution to the capitalist crisis."

We might add that this idea that the less developed parts of the world economy could contain a "youthful" and thus progressive form of capitalism led the Bordigist current into an even more explicit dilution of internationalist principles, with its support for the movement of the "coloured peoples" in the former colonies.

It is a mark of the post-war retreat of the Italian left back to the confines of Italy that much of the debate between the two tendencies in the PCInt long remained inaccessible to the non-Italian speaking world. But it seems to us that while Damen's current was in general far clearer on the fundamental class positions, neither side had a monopoly on clarity. Bordiga, Maffi and others were correct in their intuition that the period opening up, still characterised by the triumph of the counter-revolution, inevitably meant that theoretical tasks would take priority over wide-scale agitational work. The Damen tendency, by contrast, was even less able to recognise that a real class party, able to develop an effective presence within the working class, was simply not on the agenda in that period. In this sense, the Damen tendency completely lost sight of the crucial insights of the Italian Fraction on the precise question of the fraction as a bridge between the old degenerating party and the new party made possible by the revival of the class struggle. In fact, without any real elaboration, Damen makes an unjustified link between Bordiga's schema of the ever-ascending curve – which was certainly false – and the latter's "*theory of the uselessness of creating a party in a counter-revolutionary period*", which in our opinion was essentially valid. Against this, Damen offers us the idea that "*the birth of the party does not depend, and on this we agree, 'on the genius or value of a leader or a vanguard', but it is the historic existence of the proletariat as a class which poses, not merely episodically in time and space, the need for the existence of its party.*" We might equally argue that the proletariat has a permanent "need" for the communist revolution: it is certainly true at one level, but it does not get us anywhere near understanding whether the balance of class forces makes the revolution something tangible, something within reach, or a perspective for a much more

distant future. Furthermore, if we connect this general problem to the specificities of the epoch of capitalist decline, Damen's logic appears even more suspect: the actual conditions of the working class in the decadent period, in particular the swallowing of its permanent mass organisations in the maws of state capitalism, have quite clearly made it more, not less difficult, for the class party to maintain itself outside of phases of intense proletarian upsurge.

The contribution of the Gauche Communiste de France

The GCF, though formally excluded from the Italian branch of the communist left, was much more faithful to the old Italian Fraction's conception of the role of the revolutionary minority in a period of defeat and counter-revolution. It was also the group which made the most important advances in understanding the characteristics of the period of decadence. They were not content merely to repeat what had been understood in the 1930s but aimed to arrive at a deeper synthesis: their debates with the Dutch left enabled them to overcome some of the Italian left's errors on the role of the party in the revolution and sharpened their understanding of the capitalist nature of the trade unions. And their reflections on the organisation of capitalism in the period of decadence enabled them to develop a clearer insight into the profound changes in the role of war and in the organisation of economic and social life that marked the period. These advances were summarised with particular clarity in two key texts: the report on the international situation from the July 1945 conference of the GCF, and "The evolution of capitalism and the new perspective" published in *Internationalisme* no. 46 in 1952⁸.

The 1945 report focused on the way in which the function of capitalist war had changed from the ascendant to the decadent period. Imperialist war was the most concentrated expression of the system's decline:

"Under capitalism, there is no fundamental opposition between war and peace, but there is a difference between the ascendant and decadent phases of capitalist society and, consequently, a difference in the function of war (and in the relationship between war and peace) in the two respective phases. While in the first phase war had the function of enlarging the market with a view towards a greater production of consumer goods, in the second phase production is focused essentially on the

1 and 5: http://en.internationalism.org/ir/048_decadence_part01.html; http://en.internationalism.org/ir/055_decadence_05.html.

8. Republished in *International Review* n°59: <http://en.internationalism.org/node/3171> and *International Review* n° 21: <http://en.internationalism.org/ir/21/internationalisme-1952>

production of the means of destruction, i.e. with a view towards war. The decadence of capitalist society is strikingly expressed in the fact that whereas in the ascendant period wars led to economic development, in the decadent period economic activity is geared essentially towards war.

“This doesn’t mean war has become the goal of capitalist production, which remains the production of surplus value, but it does mean that war, taking on a permanent character, has become decadent capitalism’s way of life...”

In response to those who argued that the destructiveness of war was merely a continuation of the classic cycle of capitalist accumulation, and thus an entirely “rational” phenomenon, the GCF stressed the profoundly irrational character of imperialist war – not only from the point of view of humanity, but even of capital itself:

“The object of war production is not the solution of an economic problem. Its origins are the result of the state’s need, on the one hand, to defend itself against the dispossessed classes and maintain their exploitation by force, and on the other to maintain its economic position and better it at the expense of other imperialist states, again by force. The permanent crisis makes the solution of inter-imperialist differences by armed struggle inevitable. War and the threat of war are latent or overt aspects of the situation of permanent war in society. Modern war is essentially a war of materials. With a view to war, a monstrous mobilization of a country’s entire economic and technical resources is necessary. War production becomes at the same time the axis of industrial production and society’s main economic arena.

“But does the mass of products represent an increase in social wealth? To this we must reply categorically, no. All the values created by war production are doomed to disappear from the productive process to be destroyed without reappearing in the next cycle. After each cycle of production, society chalks up, not a growth in its social heritage, but a decline, an impoverishment of the totality.”

Thus the GCF saw imperialist war as an expression of a senile capitalism’s tendency to destroy itself. The same could be said for the mode of organisation that becomes dominant in the new era: state capitalism.

In “The evolution of capitalism and the new perspective”, the GCF analysed the role of the state in the survival of the system in the period of decadence; here again capitalism’s agonising collapse is indicated by the continuous flouting or deformation of its own laws:

“Unable to open up new markets, each country closes itself off and tries to live on its own. The universalisation of the capitalist economy, which had been achieved through the world market, is breaking down. Instead we have autarky. Each country tries to go it alone: it creates unprofitable sectors of production to compensate for the break-up of the market. This palliative further aggravates the dislocation of the world market.

“Before 1914, profitability, via the mediation of the market, was the standard, the measure, the stimulant of capitalist production. In the present period this law of profitability is being violated. The law is no longer applied at the level of the enterprise, but at the global level of the state. The distribution of value is carried out according to a plan of accounts at national level, no longer through the direct pressure of the world market. Either the state subsidizes the deficit part of the economy or the state itself takes over the entire economy.

“This does not mean a ‘negation’ of the law of value. What we are seeing here is that a given unit of production seems to be detached from the law of value, that this production takes place without any apparent concern for profitability.

“Monopoly super-profits are realised through ‘artificial’ prices, but on the global level of production this is still connected to the law of value. The sum of prices for production as a whole still expresses the global value of these products. Only the distribution of value among the various capitalist groups is transformed: the monopolies arrogate for themselves a super-profit at the expense of the less well-armed capitalists. In the same way we can say that the law of value continues to operate at the level of national production. The law of value no longer acts on a product taken individually, but on the entirety of products. This is a restriction in the law of value’s field of application. The total mass of profit tends to diminish, because of the burden exerted by deficit branches of the economy on the other branches.”

We have said that there was no monopoly on clarity in the debates within PCInt and the same can be said for the GCF. Faced with the gloomy state of the workers’ movement after the war, they edged towards the conclusion that not only were the old institutions of the workers’ movement, parties and unions, irreversibly integrated into the capitalist state leviathan, but that the defensive struggle itself had lost its class character:

“The economic struggles of the workers can only end in failure -- at best in

maintaining living conditions which have already been degraded. They tie the proletariat to its exploiters by leading it to feel a solidarity with the system in exchange for an extra bowl of soup (which, in the last analysis, is only obtained through increasing ‘productivity’.”⁹

It was certainly true that economic struggles could win no lasting gains in the new epoch, but it was not true that they served merely to tie the proletariat to its exploiters: on the contrary, they remain an indispensable precondition for breaking this “solidarity with the system”.

The GCF also saw no possibility of capitalism achieving any kind of recovery after the war. On the one hand, they considered that there was an absolute dearth of extra-capitalist markets to permit a real cycle of expanded reproduction. In their legitimate polemic against the Trotskyist idea that bourgeois nationalist movements in the colonies or former colonies could undermine the world imperialist system, they argued that:

“The colonies have ceased to represent an extra-capitalist market for the metropolises; they have become new capitalist countries. They have thus lost their character as outlets, which make the old imperialisms less resistant to the demands of the colonial bourgeoisie. To which it must be added that these imperialisms’ own problems have favoured -- in the course of two world wars -- the economic expansion of the colonies. Constant capital destroyed itself in Europe, while the productive capacity of the colonies or semi-colonies grew, leading to an explosion of indigenous nationalism (South Africa, Argentina, India, etc). It is noteworthy that these new capitalist countries, right from their creation as independent nations, pass to the stage of state capitalism, showing the same aspects of an economy geared to war as has been discerned elsewhere.

“The theory of Lenin and Trotsky has fallen apart. The colonies have integrated themselves into the capitalist world, and have even propped it up. There is no longer a ‘weakest link’: the domination of capital is equally distributed throughout the surface of the planet.”¹⁰

It was certainly true that the war enabled certain colonies, outside the main field of conflict, to develop along capitalist lines, and that globally speaking the extra-capitalist markets had become increasingly inadequate as an outlet for capitalist production. But it was premature to announce their complete disappearance. In particular, the ousting of the old powers like France and

9. Ibid.

10. Ibid.

Britain from their former colonies, with their largely parasitic relationship towards their empires, enabled the great victor of the war – the USA – to find lucrative new fields of expansion, particularly in the far east.¹¹ At the same time, there were extra-capitalist markets yet to be exhausted within certain European countries (notably in France), largely made up of those sections of the small peasantry that had not been totally integrated into the capitalist economy.

The survival of certain solvent markets outside of the capitalist economy was one of the factors which made it possible for capitalism to re-animate itself for an unexpectedly long period after the war. But it was very much linked to the more general political and economic reorganisation of the capitalist system. In its 1945 report, the GCF had acknowledged that, while the overall balance sheet of the war was catastrophic, certain imperialist powers could indeed become stronger as a result of their victory in war. In fact, the USA had emerged in a position of unprecedented strength which enabled it to finance the reconstruction of the war-torn powers of Europe and Japan, evidently for its own imperialist and economic needs. And the mechanisms used to revive and expand production in this phase were precisely those which the GCF had itself identified: state capitalism, particularly in its Keynesian form, permitting a certain forced “harmonisation” between production and consumption, not only at national but even international level through the formation of huge imperialist blocs; and, along with this, a real deformation of the law of value, in the form of massive loans and even outright “gifts” from the triumphant USA to the defeated and ruined powers, which permitted production to resume and grow, but not without beginning the irreversible growth of a debt which would never be paid back, in contrast to the classic development of ascendant capitalism.

Thus through remoulding itself on a global scale, capitalism did experience, for the first time since the “Belle Epoque” at the beginning of the 20th century, a period of boom. This was not yet apparent in 1952, which was still dominated by post-war austerity. And rightly seeing that

there had been no revival of the proletariat in the wake of the war, the GCF wrongly concluded that a third world war was on the short-term agenda. This mistake helped to accelerate the demise of the group which disbanded in 1952 – the same year as the split in the PCInt. Both these events were a confirmation that the workers’ movement was still living in the shadow of the profound reaction that followed the defeat of the 1917-23 revolutionary wave.

“The Great Keynesian Boom”

By the mid 50s, as the phase of outright austerity came to an end in the central capitalist countries, it was becoming clear that capitalism was entering into an unprecedented boom. In France this was the period known as the “30 Glorious Years”; others refer to it as “The Great Keynesian Boom”. The former term is a rather obvious misnomer. It’s certainly questionable that it lasted for 30 years,¹² and it was less than glorious for a very considerable part of the global population. Nevertheless it saw very rapid growth rates in the western countries; and even in the much more sluggish and economically backward east there was a spurt of technological development which generated talk of Russia being able to “catch up” with the west, as alarmingly suggested by the USSR’s initial successes in the space race. The USSR’s “development” continued to be based on the war economy, as it had in the 1930s. But although the arms sector also exerted a heavy weight in the west, workers’ real wages in the main industrial countries increased considerably (particularly in relation to the very hard conditions that had prevailed during the period in which the economy was being reconstructed) and mass “consumerism” became a fact of working class life, combined with extensive welfare programmes (health, holidays, sick pay,) and very low rates of unemployment. This was what permitted the British Tory Prime Minister Harold Macmillan to patronisingly proclaim that “most of our people have never had it so good.”¹³

An academic economist gives a brief summary of economic developments during this period:

“Even a casual glance at numbers and growth rates reveals that growth and recovery after World War II was astonishingly rapid. Considering the three largest Western European economies - Britain,

France, and Germany - the Second World War inflicted much more damage and destruction on a much wider area than the First. And (except for France) manpower losses were greater in World War II as well. The war ended with 24 percent of Germans born in 1924 dead or missing, and 31 percent disabled; post-war Germany contained 26 percent more women than men. In 1946, the year after the end of World War II, GNP per capita in the three largest Western European economies had fallen by a quarter relative to its pre-war, 1938 level. This was half again as much as production per capita in 1919 had fallen below its pre-war, 1913 level.

“Yet the pace of post-World War II recovery soon surpassed that seen after World War I. By 1949 average GNP per capita in the three large countries had recovered to within a hair of its pre-war level, and in comparative terms recovery was two years ahead of its post-World War I pace. By 1951, six years after the war, GNP per capita was more than ten percent above its pre-war level, a degree of recovery that post-World War I Europe did not reach in the eleven post-World War I years before the Great Depression began. What post-World War II Europe accomplished in six years had taken post-World War I Europe sixteen.

“The restoration of financial stability and the free play of market forces launched the European economy onto a two-decade long path of unprecedented rapid growth. European economic growth between 1953 and 1973 was twice as fast as for any comparable period before or since. The growth rate of GDP was 2 percent per annum between 1870 and 1913 and 2.5 percent per annum between 1922 and 1937. In contrast, growth accelerated to an astonishing 4.8 percent per year between 1953 and 1973, before slowing to half that rate from 1973 to 1979.”¹⁴

Socialisme ou Barbarie: theorising the boom

Under the enormous weight of this avalanche of facts, the marxist view of capitalism as a crisis-prone system which had been in its epoch of decline for nearly half a century came under challenge on all fronts. And given the absence of generalised class movements (with some notable exceptions, such as the mass struggles in the eastern bloc in 1953 and 1956), official sociology began to talk about the “embourgeoisie-

11. In his articles “Crises and cycles in the economy of capitalism in agony”, originally published in *Bilan* n°s 10 and 11 and republished in *International Reviews* n°s 102 and 103, which we examined in the previous article in this series, Mitchell had asserted that the markets of Asia would be one of the stakes in the coming war. He did not go beyond assertion, but it would be worth delving more deeply into this question, given that in the 1930s, this (and the far east in particular) was an area of the globe that contained the remnants of considerable pre-capitalist civilisations, and given the considerable importance of the capitalisation of the area to the development of capitalism in the last few decades.

12. The late forties was a period of austerity and hardship in most European countries. It was not until the middle fifties that the “prosperity” began to be felt by sections of the working class, and the first signs of a new phase of economic crisis appeared around 1967, becoming globally evident by the early 70s.

13. Speech in Bedford, July 1957.

14. *Slouching Towards Utopia? The Economic History of the Twentieth Century - XX. The Great Keynesian Boom: “Thirty Glorious Years”*, J. Bradford DeLong University of California at Berkeley and NBER, February 1997.

ment” of the working class, the recuperation of the proletariat by a consumer society which seemed to have solved the problems of managing the economy. This questioning of the fundamentals of marxism inevitably affected those who considered themselves to be revolutionaries. Marcuse agreed that the working class in the advanced countries had been more or less integrated into the system, and saw the revolutionary subject displaced towards oppressed ethnic minorities, rebellious students of the advanced countries and the peasants of the “third world”. But the most coherent challenge to the “traditional” marxist categories came from the Socialisme ou Barbarie group in France, a group whose rupture with official Trotskyism after the war had been welcomed by the left communists of the GCF.

In *Modern Capitalism and Revolution*,¹⁵ written by the group’s main theoretician, Paul Cardan/Castoriadis analyses the main capitalist countries of the mid-1960s and concludes that “bureaucratic”, “modern” capitalism has succeeded in eliminating economic crises and can henceforward go on expanding indefinitely.

“Capitalism has succeeded since the second world war in controlling the level of economic activity to a very considerable degree. Fluctuations of supply and demand are maintained within narrow limits. There have been profound modifications in the economy itself and in its relations with the state. The result is that depressions of the pre-war type are now virtually excluded...”

“Capitalist states have now been obliged publicly to assume responsibility for providing relatively full employment, and for eliminating major depressions. This they have more or less succeeded in doing, even if they cannot avoid phases of recession and inflation in the economy, let alone assuring its optimum, rational development. The situation of 1933 – which would correspond today to 20 million unemployed in the USA alone – is henceforth inconceivable. It would provoke an immediate explosion of the system. Neither workers nor capitalists would tolerate it.”¹⁶

Thus, Marx’s vision of capitalism as a crisis-prone system applies only to the 19th century and is no longer the case. There are no “objective” economic contradictions and economic crises, if they do occur, will from now on be essentially accidents (there is a 1974 introduction to the work which describes the recession of that period

precisely as a result of the “accident” of the oil price rises). The tendency towards collapse as a result of inbuilt economic contradictions – in other words, a decline of the system – is no longer the basis for the socialist revolution, whose foundations must be sought elsewhere. Cardan argues that while economic convulsions and material poverty can indeed be overcome, what bureaucratic capitalism can never get rid of is the growth of alienation at work and leisure, the increasing privatisation of daily life,¹⁷ and in particular the contradiction between the system’s need to treat the workers as dumb objects capable only of following orders, and the need of an increasingly sophisticated technological apparatus to count on the initiative and intelligence of the masses to enable it to function at all.

This approach recognised that the bureaucratic system had essentially annexed the old workers’ parties and unions,¹⁸ increasing the masses’ lack of interest in traditional politics. It fiercely criticised the hollowness of the understanding of socialism propagated by the “traditional left”, whose advocacy of a fully nationalised economy (plus a bit of workers’ control, if you were selling the Trotskyist version) would merely offer the masses more of the same. Against these ossified institutions, and against the debilitating bureaucratisation which affected all the habits and organisations of capitalist society, SouB advocated the need for workers’ self-activity both in the day to day struggle and as the only means for reaching socialism. Since it was posed around the essential question of who really controls production in society, this was a far sounder basis for creating a socialist society than the “objectivist” view of the traditional marxists, who were waiting for the next big slump to step in to lead the workers to the promised land, not on the basis of a real increase in consciousness but simply on the back of a kind of biological reaction to impoverishment. This schema of revolution, in short, could never lead to a real transformation in human relations:

“And what about the origin of the ‘contradictions’ of capitalism, of its periodic crises, and of its profound historical crisis? According to the classical conception, the roots of all these lie in private appropriation, in other words in private property and the market. These, it is claimed, con-

stitute an obstacle to the development of the productive forces, which is seen as the sole, true and eternal objective of social life. This type of criticism of capitalism consists, in the last analysis, in saying that what is wrong with capitalism is that it is not capitalist enough, that it is not doing its job well enough. To achieve ‘a more rapid development of the productive forces’ it is only necessary, according to the classical theory, that private property and the market be eliminated. Nationalization of the means of production and planning would then solve the crisis of contemporary society.

“The workers don’t know all this and can’t know it. Their position in society forces them to suffer the consequences of the ‘contradictions’ of capitalism; it does not lead them to discover its causes. This knowledge cannot come to them from their experience in production. It can only come from a ‘theoretical’ knowledge of the ‘laws’ of capitalist economy. This knowledge is certainly accessible to individual, ‘politically conscious’ workers. But it is not available to the working class as a class. Driven forward by their revolt against poverty, but incapable of leading themselves (since their limited experience cannot give them a privileged viewpoint of social reality as a whole), the workers can only constitute an infantry at the disposal of a general staff of revolutionary generals. These specialists know (from knowledge to which the workers as such do not have access) what it is precisely that does not work in modern society. They know what must be done to modify it. It is easy to see why the traditional concepts of economics and the revolutionary perspectives which flow from them can only lead to – and historically have only led to – bureaucratic politics.

“To be sure, Marx himself did not draw these conclusions from his economic theories. His political positions were usually, in fact, the very opposite. But what we have outlined are the consequences which objectively flow from these ideas. And these are the practices that have become more and more clearly affirmed in the historical development of the working class movement. These are the ideas that have finally culminated in Stalinism and which – shared by Trotskyism – have made it impossible for Trotskyism clearly to differentiate itself as a political tendency. For objectivist views of economics and history can only be a source of bureaucratic politics, that is, of politics which in the last analysis attempt only to improve the workings of the capitalist system, whilst preserving its essence.”¹⁹

15. Paul Cardan, *Modern Capitalism and Revolution*: <http://libcom.org/library/modern-capitalism-revolution-paul-cardan>.

16. Cardan, op.cit. From the chapter “Some important features of modern capitalism”.

17. The Situationists, whose view of “economics” was strongly influenced by Cardan, went much further in the criticism of the sterility of modern capitalist culture and daily life.

18. The critique of the unions had its limitations however: the group had considerable illusions in the British shop stewards’ system, which had in reality long made its peace with the official union structure

19. Cardan, op. cit. From the chapter “Political implications of the ‘classical’ theory”.

It's noticeable throughout this text that Cardan makes no attempt to distinguish the "traditional left" – ie the left wing of capital – from the authentic marxist currents which did survive the recuperation by capitalism of the old parties, and who strenuously advocated the self-activity of the working class despite an adherence to Marx's critique of political economy. The latter (despite the post-war discussions between SouB and the GCF) are almost never mentioned; but more to the point, despite the lingering attachment to Marx contained in this passage, Cardan makes no attempt to explain why Marx did not draw "bureaucratic" conclusions from his "objectivist" economics, or to highlight the immense gulf between Marx's conception of socialism and that of the Stalinists and Trotskyists. In fact, elsewhere in the same text, Marx's own method is accused of objectivism, of erecting implacable economic laws which human beings can do nothing about, of falling into the same reification of labour power which he himself criticised. And despite some nods in the direction of the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* of 1844, Cardan never accepts that the critique of alienation informs the whole of Marx's work, which is nothing if not a protest against the reduction of man's creative power to a commodity, but one which at the same time recognises this generalisation of commodity relations as the "objective" basis for the ultimate decline of the system. Similarly, despite some recognition that Marx did see a "subjective" side to the determination of the value of labour power, this doesn't prevent Cardan from reaching his conclusion that "*Marx, who discovered and ceaselessly propagated the idea of the crucial role of the class struggle in history, wrote a monumental work (Capital) from which the class struggle is virtually absent.*"²⁰

Moreover, the economic contradictions which Cardan dismisses are presented in a very superficial manner. Cardan lines up with the neo-harmonist school (Otto Bauer, Tugan-Baranovski, etc) who tried to apply Marx's schemas in Vol. 2 to prove that capitalism could indeed accumulate without crises: for Cardan, the regulated capitalism of the post-war period had finally brought about the necessary balance between production and consumption, eliminating forever the "market" problem. This is really just rehashed Keynesianism and the inherent limitations of trying to achieve a "balance" between production and the market would only too soon reveal themselves. The falling rate of profit is given equally short shrift in an appendix. The most telling aspect of this section is where he writes:

"The whole argument is moreover irrelevant: it is a red herring. We have discussed it only because it has become an obsession in the minds of many honest revolutionaries, who cannot disentangle themselves from the fetters of traditional theory. What difference does it make to capitalism as a whole that profits today average, say, 12% whereas they averaged 15% a century ago? Would this, as sometimes implied in these discussions, slow down accumulation, and thereby the expansion of capitalist production? And even supposing it did: SO WHAT? When and by how much? And what is the relevance of this idea in a world where, not for a year, not for two years, but over the last quarter of a century production has expanded at rates undreamt of even in the heydays of capitalism? And even if this 'law' were true, why would it cease to be true under socialism?"

"The only 'basis' of the 'law' in Marx is something which has nothing to do with capitalism itself; it is the technical fact of more and more machines and fewer and fewer men. Under socialism, things would be even 'worse'. Technical progress would be accelerated – and what, in Marx's reasoning is a check against the falling rate of profit under capitalism, namely the rising rate of exploitation, would not have an equivalent under socialism. Would a socialist economy therefore come to a standstill because of a scarcity of funds for accumulation."²¹

So for Cardan, a fundamental contradiction rooted in the very production of value is irrelevant because capitalism is going through a phase of accelerated accumulation. Worse: there will still be value production under socialism; and why not, since the production of commodities in itself does not inherently lead to crisis and collapse? Indeed, using basic capitalist categories like value and money could even prove to be a rational way of distributing the social product, as Cardan explains in his booklet *Workers Councils and the Economics of a Self-managed Society* (published by Solidarity in 1972, but originally titled '*Sur le Contenu du Socialisme*' in the summer of 1957 in *Socialisme ou Barbarie* n° 22).

This superficiality made it impossible for Cardan to grasp the contingent and temporary nature of the post-war boom. 1973 was not an accident and it wasn't primarily a result of the rise in oil prices – it was the explicit resurfacing of the basic economic contradictions that the bourgeoisie was trying so hard to deny and has spent the last 40 years trying to conjure away, with less and less effect. Today more than ever his prediction than

a new depression is unthinkable seems ridiculously out of date. It is not surprising that the SouB and its successor in Britain, Solidarity, disappeared between the late 60s and the 80s, when the reality of the economic crisis was revealing itself with increasing severity to the working class and its political minorities. However, many of Cardan's ideas – such as his castigation of "classical marxism" for being "objectivist", for denying the subjective dimension of the revolutionary struggle – have proved remarkably persistent, as we shall see in another article.

Gerrard

20. Ibid.

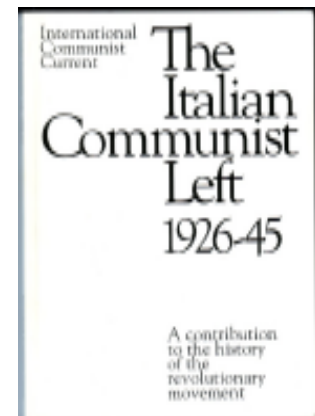
21. Cardan, op. cit. Appendix: "The falling rate of profit".

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This history of the Italian Left is not neutral, looking down on the social battlefield. In today's world of decomposing capitalism, the alternative posed more than sixty years ago by the Communist Left is more valid than ever: "communist revolution or the destruction of humanity".

Of course, according to the ruling classes everywhere today, communism, the revolutionary perspective of the working class, has died with the collapse of Stalinism. But this is a monstrous lie. Stalinism was the gravedigger of the 1917 October Revolution, and therefore the deadliest enemy of the communist perspective. Stalinism was the main vehicle for the greatest counter-revolution in history.

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BASIC POSITIONS OF THE ICC

The **International Communist Current** defends the following political positions:

* Since the first world war, capitalism has been a decadent social system. It has twice plunged humanity into a barbaric cycle of crisis, world war, reconstruction and new crisis. In the 1980s, it entered into the final phase of this decadence, the phase of decomposition. There is only one alternative offered by this irreversible historical decline: socialism or barbarism, world communist revolution or the destruction of humanity.

* The Paris Commune of 1871 was the first attempt by the proletariat to carry out this revolution, in a period when the conditions for it were not yet ripe. Once these conditions had been provided by the onset of capitalist decadence, the October revolution of 1917 in Russia was the first step towards an authentic world communist revolution in an international revolutionary wave which put an end to the imperialist war and went on for several years after that. The failure of this revolutionary wave, particularly in Germany in 1919-23, condemned the revolution in Russia to isolation and to a rapid degeneration. Stalinism was not the product of the Russian revolution, but its gravedigger.

* The stultified regimes which arose in the USSR, eastern Europe, China, Cuba etc and were called 'socialist' or 'communist' were just a particularly brutal form of the universal tendency towards state capitalism, itself a major characteristic of the period of decadence.

* Since the beginning of the 20th century, all wars are imperialist wars, part of the deadly struggle between states large and small to conquer or retain a place in the international arena. These wars bring nothing to humanity but death and destruction on an ever-increasing scale. The working class can only respond to them through its international solidarity and by struggling against the bourgeoisie in all countries.

* All the nationalist ideologies - 'national independence', 'the right of nations to self-determination' etc - whatever their pretext, ethnic, historical or religious, are a real poison for the workers. By calling on them to take the side of one or another faction of the bourgeoisie, they divide workers and lead them to massacre each other in the interests and wars of their exploiters.

* In decadent capitalism, parliament and elections are nothing but a masquerade. Any call to participate in the parliamentary circus can only reinforce the lie that presents these elections as a real choice for the exploited. 'Democracy', a particularly hypocritical form of the domination of the bourgeoisie, does not differ at root from other forms of capitalist dictatorship, such as Stalinism and fascism.

* All factions of the bourgeoisie are equally reactionary. All the so-called 'workers', 'Socialist' and 'Communist' parties (now ex-'Communists'), the leftist organisations (Trotskyists, Maoists and ex-Maoists, official anarchists) constitute the left of capitalism's political apparatus. All the tactics of 'popular fronts', 'anti-fascist fronts' and 'united fronts', which mix up the interests of the proletariat with those of a faction of the bourgeoisie, serve only to smother and derail the struggle of the

proletariat.

* With the decadence of capitalism, the unions everywhere have been transformed into organs of capitalist order within the proletariat. The various forms of union organisation, whether 'official' or 'rank and file', serve only to discipline the working class and sabotage its struggles.

* In order to advance its combat, the working class has to unify its struggles, taking charge of their extension and organisation through sovereign general assemblies and committees of delegates elected and revocable at any time by these assemblies.

* Terrorism is in no way a method of struggle for the working class. The expression of social strata with no historic future and of the decomposition of the petty bourgeoisie, when it's not the direct expression of the permanent war between capitalist states, terrorism has always been a fertile soil for manipulation by the bourgeoisie. Advocating secret action by small minorities, it is in complete opposition to class violence, which derives from conscious and organised mass action by the proletariat.

* The working class is the only class which can carry out the communist revolution. Its revolutionary struggle will inevitably lead the working class towards a confrontation with the capitalist state. In order to destroy capitalism, the working class will have to overthrow all existing states and establish the dictatorship of the proletariat on a world scale: the international power of the workers' councils, regrouping the entire proletariat.

* The communist transformation of society by the workers' councils does not mean 'self-management' or the nationalisation of the economy. Communism requires the conscious abolition by the working class of capitalist social relations: wage labour, commodity production, national frontiers. It means the creation of a world community in which all activity is oriented towards the full satisfaction of human needs.

* The revolutionary political organisation constitutes the vanguard of the working class and is an active factor in the generalisation of class consciousness within the proletariat. Its role is neither to 'organise the working class' nor to 'take power' in its name, but to participate actively in the movement towards the unification of struggles, towards workers taking control of them for themselves, and at the same time to draw out the revolutionary political goals of the proletariat's combat.

OUR ACTIVITY

Political and theoretical clarification of the goals and methods of the proletarian struggle, of its historic and its immediate conditions.

Organised intervention, united and centralised on an international scale, in order to contribute to the process which leads to the revolutionary action of the proletariat.

The regroupment of revolutionaries with the aim of constituting a real world communist party, which is indispensable to the working class for the overthrow of capitalism and the creation of a communist society.

OUR ORIGINS

The positions and activity of revolutionary organisations are the product of the past experiences of the working class and of the lessons that its political organisations have drawn throughout its history. The ICC thus traces its origins to the successive contributions of the *Communist League* of Marx and Engels (1847-52), the three Internationals (the *International Workingmen's Association*, 1864-72, the *Socialist International*, 1889-1914, the *Communist International*, 1919-28), the left fractions which detached themselves from the degenerating Third International in the years 1920-30, in particular the *German, Dutch and Italian Lefts*.

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