



Belgique - België  
PB  
2600 Berchem 1-2  
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# International Communist Current

Winter 2016

# International Review

## 21st Congress of the ICC

40 years after the foundation of the ICC

**What balance sheet and perspectives  
for our activity?**

Report on the role of the ICC as a "fraction"

**The idea of the fraction in the history of  
the workers' movement**

**Resolution on the international situation**

**Report on the class struggle**

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

# 156

périodique semestriel  
Supplement à INTERNATIONALISME.FR  
Bureau de Depot: B-2600 Berchem 1-2  
N° d'agrégation P408982

# Contents

## **21st congress of the ICC**

This issue is devoted to texts from the ICC's 21st Congress.  
For reasons of space, some of these texts have had to be truncated:  
a fuller version is published on our web site

### 40 years after the foundation of the ICC

#### **What balance sheet and perspectives for our activity? 1**

The critical balance-sheet of our analysis of the international situation  
The ICC's role as a "fraction of a certain type"  
The need for a moral and cultural "renaissance"  
The defence of the organisation against attacks on the ICC

### Report on the role of the ICC as a "fraction"

#### **The idea of the fraction in the history of the workers' movement 8**

The party in the history of the workers' movement  
The idea of the fraction at the dawn of the workers' movement  
The fractions in the Second International  
The fractions that emerged from the Communist International  
By way of a conclusion

#### **Resolution on the international situation 18**

Basing ourselves on the history of the workers' movement  
Understanding the historic period  
The class struggle  
The economic crisis  
Imperialist tensions  
A better understanding of still valid perspectives

#### **Report on the class struggle 22**

The historic resurgence of the proletariat  
The second wave, 1978-81  
1983-88: the third wave  
A proletariat on the offensive? The difficulties of politicisation  
The period of decomposition  
Underestimating the enemy  
The moral dimension of class consciousness  
The historic course

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40 years after the foundation of the ICC

# What balance sheet and perspectives for our activity?

*“Marxism is a revolutionary world outlook which must always strive for new discoveries, which completely despises rigidity in once-valid theses, and whose living force is best preserved in the intellectual clash of self-criticism and the rough and tumble of history.”* (Rosa Luxemburg, *An Anti-Critique*)

Last spring the ICC held its 21<sup>st</sup> Congress. Since this event coincided with 40 years of existence of our organisation, we took the decision to give this Congress an exceptional character with the central objective of making a critical balance sheet of our analyses and activities over these four decades. The work of the Congress was therefore committed to making as lucid an examination as possible of our strengths and weaknesses; of what was valid in our analyses and what errors we have made in order to arm ourselves to overcome them.

This critical balance sheet was fully in continuity with the approach that has always been adopted by marxism throughout the history of the workers’ movement. Thus Marx and Engels, loyal to a method that is both historical and self-critical, were able to recognise that certain parts of the *Communist Manifesto* had been proved wrong or had been overtaken by historical experience. It is this ability to criticise their mistakes that has enabled marxists to make theoretical advances and continue to make their contribution to the revolutionary perspective of the proletariat. In the same way that Marx was able to learn from the experience of the defeat of the Paris Commune, the Italian Left was able to recognise the profound defeat of the world proletariat in the late 1920s, to make a balance sheet or “bilan”<sup>1</sup> of the revolutionary wave of 1917-23 and of the programmatic positions of the Third International. It is this critical balance-sheet that allowed them, despite their errors, to make invaluable theoretical advances, both in terms of the analysis of the period of counter-revolution and on the organisational level by understanding the role and tasks of a fraction within a degenerating proletarian party and as a bridge to a future party when the previous one had been won over by the bourgeoisie.

This exceptional Congress of the ICC was held in the context of our recent internal crisis that led to the holding of an extraordinary international conference a year ago.<sup>2</sup>

1. *Bilan* was from 1933 to 1938 the name of the French language publication of the Left Fraction of the Communist Party of Italy, which in 1935 became the Italian Fraction of the Communist Left.

2. See our article “2014 Extraordinary International Conference of the ICC: news of our death is greatly exaggerated”, (<http://en.internationalism.org/>

It was with the utmost seriousness that all delegations prepared for the Congress and participated in the discussions with a clear understanding of the issues and of the necessity, for all the generations of militants, to make this critical evaluation of 40 years of the existence of the ICC. For the militants (especially the younger ones) who were not members of the ICC at its founding, this Congress and its preparatory texts allowed them to learn from the experience of the ICC while actively participating in the Congress’s work and taking a stand in the debates.

## The critical balance-sheet of our analysis of the international situation

The foundation of the ICC was a sign of the end of the counter-revolution and the historic resurgence of the class struggle, which was shown particularly by the May ‘68 movement in France. The ICC was the only organisation of the Communist Left to analyse this event in the framework of the re-emergence of the open crisis of capitalism in 1967. With the end of the post-war reconstruction period, and with the continuation of the Cold War arms race, the alternative was again posed of “global war or the development of proletarian struggles”. May ‘68 and the wave of workers’ struggles that developed at the international level marked the opening of a new historic course: after 40 years of counter-revolution, the proletariat had raised its head again and was not prepared to be mobilised for a third world war behind the defence of

[internationalreview/201409/10330/news-our-death-greatly-exaggerated](http://internationalreview/201409/10330/news-our-death-greatly-exaggerated)

national flags.

The Congress underlined that the emergence and development of a new international and internationalist organisation confirmed the validity of our analytical framework on this new historic course. Armed with this concept (as well as the analysis that capitalism had entered its historic period of decadence with the outbreak of the First World War), the ICC has continued throughout its existence to analyse the three components of the international situation – the evolution of the economic crisis, the class struggle and imperialist conflicts – in order to avoid falling into empiricism and to establish the orientations for its activity. Nevertheless, the Congress applied itself to making the most lucid examination possible of the mistakes we have made in some of our analyses in order to allow us to identify the source of these errors and thus improve our analytical framework.

On the basis of the report submitted on the evolution of the class struggle since 1968, the Congress underlined that the main weakness of the ICC, since its origins, has been what we have called immediatism; that is to say a political approach marked by impatience and which is focused on immediate events to the detriment of a broad historical view of the perspective from which to understand these events. While we rightly identified that the return of the class struggle in the late 1960s marked the opening of a new historic course, the characterisation of this as a “course towards revolution” was wrong and we corrected it by using the term “course towards class confrontations.” This more appropriate wording however, due to a certain imprecision, did not close the door to a linear, schematic vision of the class struggle, with a certain hesitation among us to recognise difficulties, defeats and periods of retreat for the proletariat.

The inability of the bourgeoisie to mobilise the working class of the central countries for a third world war did not mean that the international waves of struggles that followed up until 1989 would continue in a mechanical and inevitable way towards the opening of a revolutionary period.

The Congress confirmed that the ICC has underestimated the seriousness of the break in the historic continuity with the workers' movement of the past and the ideological impact, within the working class, of 50 years of counter-revolution; leading in particular to a suspicion, and even a rejection, of communist organisations.

The Congress also underlined another weakness of the ICC in its analyses of the balance of forces between the classes: the tendency to see the proletariat constantly "on the offensive" in each movement of struggle, even when the latter had only gone as far as defensive struggles for its immediate economic interests (important and meaningful as they are) and had failed to take on a political dimension.

The work of the Congress allowed us to note that these difficulties in analysing the evolution of the class struggle were based on an erroneous vision of the functioning of the capitalist mode of production, with a tendency to lose sight of the fact that capital is first of all a social relationship, which means that the bourgeoisie is obliged to take account of the class struggle in the implementation of its economic policies and its attacks against the proletariat. The Congress also highlighted a certain lack of mastery by the ICC of Rosa Luxemburg's theory as an explanation of the decadence of capitalism. Following Rosa Luxemburg, to be able to continue its accumulation capitalism needs to find outlets in extra-capitalist sectors. The gradual disappearance of these sectors condemns capitalism to increasing convulsions. This analysis was adopted in our platform (even though a minority of our comrades based themselves on another analysis to explain decadence: that of the tendency of the rate of profit to fall). This lack of mastery by the ICC of Rosa Luxemburg's analysis (developed in her book *The Accumulation of Capital*) was reflected in a "catastrophist" vision, an apocalyptic view of the breakdown of the world economy. The Congress recognised that throughout its existence, the ICC has consistently overestimated the pace of the development of the economic crisis. But in recent years, particularly with the sovereign debt crisis, our analyses had in the background the underlying idea that capitalism could collapse by itself since the bourgeoisie was "in a dead-end" and had exhausted all the palliatives that had allowed it artificially to prolong the survival of its system.

This "catastrophist" vision is largely due to a failure to deepen our analysis of state capitalism, an underestimation of the bourgeoisie's ability that we identified a long time ago, to draw the lessons of the crisis in the 1930s and to support its bankrupt system

by all sorts of manipulations and trickeries with the law of value, through permanent state intervention in the economy. It is also due to a reductionist and schematic understanding of the economic theory of Rosa Luxemburg, with the mistaken idea that capitalism had already exhausted all its capacities for expansion in 1914 or in the 1960s. In reality, as Rosa Luxemburg stressed, the real catastrophe of capitalism lies in the fact that it subjects humanity to a decline, a long agony, by plunging society into a growing barbarism.

It is this error of denying any possibility of capitalism's expansion in its decadent period which explains the difficulties the ICC has had in understanding the dizzying growth and industrial development in China (and other peripheral countries) after the collapse of the Eastern bloc. Although this industrial take-off in no way calls into question the analysis of the decadence of capitalism,<sup>3</sup> the ensuing vision that there was no possibility of development for the "Third World" countries in the period of decadence does not hold. This error, highlighted by the Congress, led us to ignore the possibility that the bankruptcy of the old autarchic model of the Stalinist countries could open up new opportunities, previously frozen, for capitalist investments<sup>4</sup> (including the integration into wage labour of an enormous mass of workers who previously lived outside of directly capitalist social relations and who were subjected to a ferocious exploitation).

On the question of imperialist tensions, the Congress confirmed that the ICC had in general developed a very solid framework of analysis, whether during the epoch of the Cold War between the two rival blocs or after the collapse of the USSR and the Stalinist regimes. Our analysis of militarism, the decomposition of capitalism and the crisis in the Eastern countries allowed us to see the weaknesses that would lead to the collapse of the Eastern bloc. The ICC was the first organisation to have predicted the disappearance of the two blocs led by the USSR and United States, as well as the decline of US hegemony and the development of the tendency to "every man for himself" on the imperialist scene with the end of the discipline of military blocs.<sup>5</sup>

If the ICC was able to correctly under-

3. See in particular our article "The sources, contradictions and limitations of the growth in Eastern Asia" (<http://en.internationalism.org/ir/133/china>).

4. This analysis is currently the subject of a deeper discussion in our organisation.

5. See in particular our article "After the collapse of the Eastern Bloc, destabilization and chaos" in *International Review* n° 61 (<http://en.internationalism.org/node/3204>).

stand the dynamics of imperialist tensions, this is because it was able to analyse the dramatic collapse of the Eastern bloc and the Stalinist regimes as a major manifestation of capitalism's entry into the final phase of its decadence: that of decomposition. This framework was the last contribution that our comrade MC<sup>6</sup> bequeathed to the ICC

6. MC (Marc Chirik) was a militant of the Communist Left: he was born in Chişinău (Kishinev, then in Bessarabia and now the capital of Moldavia) in 1907, and died in Paris in 1990. His father was a rabbi, and his elder brother the Bolshevik Party secretary in the city. Marc took part in the revolutions of February and October 1917 at his brother's side. In 1919 the whole family emigrated to Palestine to escape the anti-Jewish pogroms of the Romanian White armies; Marc, barely 13 years old, became a member of the Palestine Communist Party founded by his elder brother and sisters. He soon found himself in opposition to the Communist International's support for national liberation movements, which led to a first exclusion from the International in 1923. In 1924 some of his siblings returned to Russia, but Marc and one of his brothers moved to France. Marc joined the French Communist Party (PCF) and quickly joined the fight against its degeneration, leading to his exclusion in 1928. For a while he was a member of Trotsky's International Left Opposition, where he fought against the latter's opportunist turn and in 1933 he joined Gaston Davoust (Chazé) in founding the "Union Communiste" group publishing *L'Internationale*. Marc opposed UC's ambiguous attitude towards anti-fascism at the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War, and in early 1938 he left to join the Italian Fraction of the Communist Left with whom he was already in contact. Here he found himself once again in opposition, this time to the analyses of the organisation's leading member Vercesi, who thought that the various military conflicts of the day were not preparations for a new world war, but intended to crush the proletariat to prevent it from launching a revolution. The outbreak of war in September 1938 threw the Italian Left into disarray. Vercesi justified theoretically a complete withdrawal from politics for the duration, while Marc regrouped those members of the Fraction who refused to follow Vercesi, in the non-occupied south of France. In the most difficult conditions imaginable, Marc and this tiny handful of militants continued the work undertaken by the Italian Left since 1928. But in 1945, the Fraction learnt of the formation in Italy of the Partito Comunista Internazionalista, which considered itself in continuity with the Italian Communist Left, and dissolved itself so that its members could join the new Party on an individual basis. Marc disagreed with this decision, which ran counter to everything that had characterised the Italian Left up to then, and instead joined the French Fraction of the Communist Left (whose positions he had largely inspired), which was shortly afterwards to become the Gauche Communiste de France (GCF).

This group was to publish 46 issues of its review *Internazionalismo*, continuing the Fraction's previous theoretical efforts and drawing inspiration particularly from the contributions of the Dutch-German Communist Left. In 1952, fearing that the world was heading for a new war whose main battleground would be Europe and which therefore threatened to eradicate the last surviving handful of revolutionaries, the GCF decided to disperse some of its militants to other continents – Marc leaving for Venezuela. This was one of MC's and the GCF's major mistakes, and it led to the GCF's formal disappearance. But in 1964, Marc gathered a number of very young elements around him to form the group *Internazionalismo*. In May 1968, as soon as news reached him of the general strike in France, Marc returned to France to renew the contact with his old comrades and, together with another militant who had been a member of *Internazionalismo* in

to enable it to face an unprecedented and particularly difficult historical situation. For over 20 years, the rise of fanaticism and religious fundamentalism, the development of terrorism and nihilism, the unleashing of barbarism in armed conflict, the resurgence of pogroms (and, more generally, of a mentality of scapegoating), only confirms the validity of this analytical framework.

Although the ICC understood how the ruling class was able to exploit the collapse of the Eastern bloc and of Stalinism to turn this manifestation of the decomposition of its system against the working class by unleashing its campaigns on the “bankruptcy of communism”, we greatly underestimated the depth of their impact on the consciousness of the proletariat and the development of its struggles.

We underestimated the fact that the deleterious atmosphere of social decomposition (as well as deindustrialisation and the relocation policies of some central countries) contributed to undermining the confidence and solidarity of the proletariat and reinforcing the loss of its class identity. Because of this underestimation of the difficulties of the new period opened up with the collapse of the Eastern bloc, the ICC has had a tendency to retain the illusion that the deepening economic crisis and attacks against the working class would necessarily, and in a mechanical way, provoke “waves of struggle” that would develop with the same characteristics and on the same model as those of 1970-80. In particular, despite rightly saluting the movement against the CPE in France and the Indignados in Spain, we have underestimated the enormous difficulties that confront today’s young generation of the working class to develop a perspective for its struggles (including the weight of democratic illusions, fear and rejection of the word “communism” and the fact that this generation has not benefited from the transfer of the living experience of the generation of workers, retirees today, who participated in the class struggles of the 1970s and 1980s). These difficulties affect not only the working class as a whole but also the young searching elements who want to engage in political activity.

The isolation and negligible influence of the ICC (like all the groups histori-

Venezuela, played a decisive role in the formation of the *Révolution Internationale* group, which was to push for the international regroupment which, in 1975, gave birth to the International Communist Current. To his dying day, in December 1990, Marc Chirik was to play a vital part in the ICC’s life, especially in passing on the organisational heritage of the workers’ movement, and in its theoretical progress. For more details on MC’s biography, see the articles in *International Review* n°s 65 and 66 (<http://en.internationalism.org/ir/065/marc-01> and <http://en.internationalism.org/ir/066/marc-02>).

cally issuing from the communist left) in the working class for four decades, and particularly since 1989, indicates that the perspective of the world proletarian revolution is still a long way off. At its foundation, the ICC did not imagine that, 40 years later, the working class would still not have overthrown capitalism. This does not mean that marxism was mistaken and that the system is eternal. The principal error we made was that of underestimating the slow pace of the economic crisis which had resurfaced at the end of the reconstruction period after the Second World War, as well as the capacity of the ruling class to brake and prevent the historic collapse of the capitalist mode of production.

Moreover, the Congress highlighted that our latest internal crisis (and the lessons we have learned from it), has enabled the ICC to begin to clearly re-appropriate a fundamental acquisition of the workers’ movement highlighted by Engels: that the proletarian struggle has three dimensions – economic, political and theoretical. It is the theoretical dimension that the proletariat must develop in its future struggles in order to rediscover its identity as a revolutionary class, to resist the weight of social decomposition and put forward its own perspective of the transformation of society. As Rosa Luxemburg affirmed, the proletarian revolution is essentially a vast “cultural movement”, because communist society will not only have as its objective the satisfaction of the basic material needs of humanity but also the satisfaction of social, intellectual and moral needs. From the awareness of this gap in our understanding of the struggle of the proletariat (revealing an “economistic” and vulgar materialist tendency), we are able not only to identify the nature of our recent crisis but also understand that this “intellectual and moral” crisis, that we had already discussed at our extraordinary conference in 2014,<sup>7</sup> has existed in reality for more than 30 years, and that the ICC has suffered from a lack of reflection and in-depth discussions on the roots of all the organisational challenges it has faced since its origins, and particularly since the late 1980s.

### The ICC’s role as a “fraction of a certain type”

To begin a critical assessment of 40 years of the ICC, the Congress put at the centre of its work the discussion not only of a general report on activity but also on the

7. See our article on this extraordinary conference in *International Review* no. 153: <http://en.internationalism.org/internationalreview/201409/10330/news-our-death-greatly-exaggerated>

role of the ICC as a “fraction”.

Our organisation has never had the pretension of being a party (let alone THE world party of the proletariat).

As underlined in our founding texts, “*The effort of our current to constitute itself as a pole of regroupment around class positions is part of that process towards the formation of the party at a time of intense and generalised struggles. We do not claim to be a ‘party’*” (‘Report from the International Conference’, *International Review* n°1). The ICC must still undertake work that has a number of similarities with a fraction, even if it is not a fraction.

The ICC arose after an organic break with previous communist organisations and did not issue from a pre-existing organisation. There was therefore no organisational continuity with a particular group or party. The only comrade (MC) who had come from a fraction of the workers’ movement issuing from the Third International, could not represent the continuity of a group, but was the only “living link” with the past of the workers’ movement. Because the ICC was not rooted in or a split from a party that had degenerated, betrayed proletarian principles and passed into the camp of capital, it was not founded in the context of a struggle against its degeneration. The first task of the ICC, because of the break in organic continuity and the depth of the 50 years of counter-revolution, was to re-appropriate the positions of the groups of the communist left who had preceded us.

The ICC had therefore to build and develop itself at the international level somehow from “zero.” This new international organisation had to learn “on the job” in new historical conditions and with a first generation of young inexperienced militants, coming from the student movement of May ‘68 and very strongly influenced by the weight of the petty bourgeoisie, of immediatism, the atmosphere of the “generation war” and the fear of Stalinism, which from the outset showed itself in particular in a mistrust of centralisation.

From its foundation, the ICC re-appropriated the experience of the organisations of the past workers’ movement (notably the Communist League, the IWA, *Bilan* and the GCF<sup>8</sup>) by adopting Statutes, principles of functioning that are an integral part of its platform. But unlike past organisations the ICC was not conceived as a federalist organisation composed of a sum of national sections, each with its own local specificities. By constituting itself from

8. GCF: Gauche Communiste de France, a small group formed on the positions of the Italian Fraction of the Communist Left following the dissolution of this group in May 1945. It published 46 issues of its review *Internationalisme* until 1952.

the start as an international and centralised organisation, the ICC was conceived as an internationally unified body. Its principles of centralisation were the guarantor of the unity of the organisation.

*“While for Bilan and the GCF - given the conditions of the counter-revolution - it was impossible to grow and to build an organisation in several countries, the ICC has undertaken the task of constructing an international organisation based on solid positions (...) As an expression of the newly opened historic course towards class confrontations (...), the ICC has been international and centralised from the beginning, while other organisations of the Communist Left of the past were all confined to one or two countries.”*<sup>9</sup>

Despite these differences with *Bilan* and the GCF, the Congress emphasised that the role of the ICC was similar to that of a fraction: to constitute a bridge between the past (after a period of rupture) and the future. *“The ICC defines itself not as a party, nor as a ‘miniature party’, but as a ‘fraction of a certain kind’.”*<sup>10</sup> The ICC must be a pole of reference, of international regroupment and transmission of the lessons of the experience from the past workers’ movement. It must also guard against any dogmatic approach, knowing how to criticise, when necessary, erroneous or obsolete positions, to go beyond them and continue to keep marxism alive.

The ICC’s re-acquisition of the positions of the communist left was undertaken relatively quickly, although their assimilation was marked from the beginning by great heterogeneity. *“Re-appropriation was not to say that we had arrived at clarity and truth once and for all, that our platform had become ‘invariant’ (...) The ICC modified its platform in early 1980 after intense debate.”*<sup>11</sup> It was on the basis of this re-appropriation that the ICC could make theoretical elaborations of its analysis of the international situation (eg. the critique of Lenin’s theory of “weak links” after the defeat of the mass strike in Poland in 1980,<sup>12</sup> and the analysis of decomposition as the final phase of the decadence of capitalism announced by the collapse

of the USSR<sup>13</sup>).

From the outset, the ICC has adopted the approach of *Bilan* and the GCF who insisted throughout their existence on the need for an international debate (even under conditions of repression, fascism and war) to clarify the respective positions of the different groups by engaging in polemics on issues of principle. Right from the foundation of the ICC in January 1975, we took up this approach by engaging in numerous public debates and polemics, not with a view to a hasty regroupment but to promote clarification.

Since the beginning of its existence, the ICC has always defended the idea that there is a “proletarian political milieu” defined by principles and has endeavoured to play a dynamic role in the process of clarification within this milieu.

The trajectory of the Italian Left was marked, from beginning to end, by a permanent struggle for the defence of the principles of the workers’ movement and of marxism. This has equally been a permanent preoccupation of the ICC throughout its existence, either in external polemical debates or in the political struggles we have had to wage within the organisation, particularly in situations of crisis.

*Bilan* and the GCF were convinced that their role as fractions was equally the “formation of cadres”. Although this concept of “cadres” is very questionable and can lead to confusion, their main concern was perfectly valid: it was to train the next generation of militants by transmitting the lessons of historical experience so that it could pick up the torch and continue the work of the previous generation.

The fractions of the past did not disappear just because of the weight of the counter-revolution. Their erroneous analyses of the historic situation equally contributed to their demise. The GCF was dissolved following the analysis, which proved incorrect, of the imminent and inevitable outbreak of a third world war. The ICC is the international organisation that has had the longest life in the history of the workers’ movement. It still exists, 40 years after its founding. We have not been swept away by our various crises. Despite the loss of many militants, the ICC has managed to keep most of its founding sections and to constitute new sections allowing the distribution of our press in different languages, countries and continents.

However, the Congress emphasised, in a lucid way, that the ICC still carries the burden of the historical conditions of its

origins. Because of these unfavourable historical conditions, there has been in our midst a generation “lost” after 1968 and a generation “missing” (because of the prolonged impact of the anti-communist campaigns after the collapse of the Eastern bloc). This situation has been a handicap to consolidating the organisation in its activity over the long term. Our difficulties have been further aggravated since the late 1980s by the weight of decomposition which affects the whole of society, including the working class and its revolutionary organisations.

In the same way that *Bilan* and the GCF had the capacity to carry on the fight “against the current”, the ICC, in order to assume its role as a bridge between past and future, must today develop that same fighting spirit knowing that we are also “against the current”, isolated and cut off from the whole of the working class (like the other organisations of the communist left). Although we are no longer in a period of counter-revolution, the historic situation opened up since the collapse of the Eastern bloc and the very great difficulties of the proletariat to regain its revolutionary class identity and perspective (as well as all the bourgeois campaigns to discredit the communist left) have reinforced this isolation. *“The bridge to which we must contribute will be one that goes from the ‘lost’ generation’ from 1968 and from the desert of decomposition towards the future generations.”*<sup>14</sup>

The Congress debates emphasised that the ICC, over time (and especially since the death of our comrade MC which came shortly after the collapse of Stalinism), has largely lost sight of the fact that it must continue the work of the fractions of the communist left. This was shown in an underestimation of the fact that our principal task is that of theoretical deepening<sup>15</sup> (which must not be left to a few “experts”) and the construction of the organisation through the formation of new militants by transmitting the culture of theory. The Congress noted that the ICC has failed, over the last 25 years, to pass on to new comrades the method of the Fraction. Instead of transmitting the method of the long term construction of a centralised organisation, we have tended to transmit the vision of

9. “Report on the role of the ICC as a ‘fraction’” presented to the Congress.

10. Ibid.

11. Ibid.

12. See our texts published in the *International Review*: “The Historic Conditions for the Generalization of Working Class Struggle” (*Review* n° 26) (<http://en.internationalism.org/node/3105>); “The proletariat of Western Europe at the centre of the generalization of the class struggle” (*Review* n° 31) (<http://en.internationalism.org/ir/1982/31/critique-of-the-weak-link-theory>); “Debate: On the critique of the theory of the “weakest link” (*Review* n° 37) (<http://en.internationalism.org/node/2962>).

13. See *International Review* n° 62, “Decomposition, final phase of the decadence of capitalism”, point 13 (<http://en.internationalism.org/node/3253>).

14. “Report on the role of the ICC as a ‘fraction’”.

15. This does not mean that this deepening is not valid during a revolutionary period or a significant movement of the working class where the organisation can exert a decisive influence on the course of the struggles. For example, Lenin wrote his most important theoretical work, *The State and Revolution*, in the midst of the revolutionary events of 1917. Similarly, Marx published *Capital* in 1867, when since September 1864 he had been fully engaged in the activities of the IWA.

the ICC as a “mini party”<sup>16</sup> whose main task will be intervention in the immediate struggles of the working class.

At the time of the ICC’s foundation, a great responsibility rested on the shoulders of MC, who was the sole comrade who could pass on to a new generation the marxist method, of the construction of the organisation and the uncompromising defence of its principles. There are today in the organisation many more experienced militants (who were present at the foundation of the ICC), but there is always a danger of “organic rupture” given our difficulties in carrying out this work of transmission.

In fact, the conditions that led to the foundation of the ICC were a huge handicap to the construction of the organisation over the long term. The Stalinist counter-revolution was the longest and deepest in the history of the workers’ movement. Never before, since the Communist League, had there been a discontinuity, an organic break between generations of militants. There had always been a living link of one organisation to the other, and the work of transmitting experience had never rested on the shoulders of a single individual. The ICC is the only organisation that has experienced this unprecedented situation. This organic break which lasted nearly half a century was a very difficult challenge to overcome and it was compounded by the reluctance of the young generation after May ‘68 to “learn” from the experience of the previous generation. The weight of the ideologies of the petty bourgeoisie in revolt, of the student milieu, contestating everything for its own sake and strongly marked by the “battle of generations” (due to the fact that the preceding generation was precisely the one that had lived in the depths of the counter-revolution) further reinforced the weight of the organic break with the living experience of the past workers’ movement.

Obviously, the death of MC, at the very beginning of the period of capitalism’s decomposition, could only make the ICC’s efforts to overcome its congenital weaknesses more difficult.

#### The loss of the ICC section in Turkey

16. This notion of a “mini party” or “miniature party” contains the idea that even in periods when the working class is not waging large scale struggles a small revolutionary organisation can have the same kind of impact (albeit on a reduced scale) as a party in the full sense of the word. Such an idea is in total contradiction with the analysis developed by *Bilan*, which emphasised the fundamental qualitative difference between the role of a party and that of a fraction. It should be noted that the Internationalist Communist Tendency, despite tracing its origins to the Italian Communist Left, is not clear on this issue since its section in Italy continues today to be called the “Partito Comunista Internazionalista”.

was the most obvious manifestation of these difficulties in transmitting to young militants the method of the Fraction. The Congress made a very severe criticism of our error in having prematurely and precipitously integrated these ex-comrades when they had not really understood the Statutes and the organisational principles of the ICC (and tended to exhibit a strong localist, federalist tendency, conceiving the organisation as a sum of “national” sections and not as a unified and centralised body at the international level).

The Congress also noted that the weight of the circle spirit (and the dynamics of clans),<sup>17</sup> which is one of the ICC’s congenital weaknesses, has been a permanent obstacle to its work of assimilation and transmission of the lessons of past experience to new militants.

The historic conditions in which the ICC lives have changed since its foundation. During the first years of our existence, we could intervene in a working class that was waging significant struggles. Today, after 25 years of stagnation in the class struggle at the international level, the ICC must now focus on a task similar to that of *Bilan* in its time: **to understand the reasons for the failure of the working class to regain a revolutionary perspective almost half a century after the historic resurgence of the class struggle in the late 1960s.**

*“The fact that we are almost alone today to examine the colossal problems can prejudice the results, but not the need for a solution.”*<sup>18</sup>

*“This work must bear not only on the issues we need to resolve today to establish our tactics but also on the problems that will arise tomorrow in the dictatorship of the proletariat.”*<sup>19</sup>

#### The need for a moral and cultural “renaissance”

The debates on the critical evaluation of forty years of the ICC forced us to take the measure of the danger of sclerosis and degeneration that has always threatened revolutionary organisations. No revolutionary organisation has ever been immunised against this danger. The SPD (Socialist Party of Germany) was plagued by opportunism, to the point of a total questioning

of the foundations of marxism; essentially because it had abandoned any theoretical work in favour of immediate tasks aimed at gaining influence among the working masses through its electoral successes. But the process of degeneration in the SPD began long before this abandonment of theoretical tasks. It began with the progressive destruction of solidarity between militants. Due to the abolition of anti-socialist laws (1878-1890) and the legalisation of the SPD, the solidarity between the militants, which had been a necessity in the preceding period, was no longer evident since they were no longer likely to be subjected to repression and the need for clandestinity. This destruction of solidarity (permitted by the “comfortable” conditions of the democratic bourgeoisie) opened the way to a growing moral depravity with the emergence of a pogrom mentality within the SPD, the leading party of the international workers’ movement, and which was manifested, for example, by the peddling of the most nauseating gossip about the most uncompromising representative of the left wing, Rosa Luxemburg.<sup>20</sup> It is this combination of factors (not just opportunism and reformism), which opened the floodgates to a long process of internal degeneration leading to the collapse of the SPD in 1914.<sup>21</sup> For a long time, the ICC had only addressed the issue of moral principles from an empirical, practical point of view (especially during the 1981 crisis when we were faced, for the first time, with thuggish behaviour with the theft of our equipment by the Chénier tendency). If the ICC had not been able to address this issue from a theoretical point of view, it is essentially because from the foundation of the ICC there was a rejection and a certain “phobia” of the term “morality”. Contrary to MC, the younger generation after the May ‘68 movement did not want the word “morality” to be included in the Statutes of the ICC (even though the idea of a proletarian morality was present in the statutes of the GCF). This aversion to “morality” was another manifestation of the ideology and the approach of the student petty bourgeoisie of the time.

It was only with the repetition, during the 2001 crisis, of thuggish behaviour (and after identifying the existence of a pogromist mentality among the ex-militants

20. These despicable campaigns against Rosa Luxemburg were, in a way, preparations for her assassination by order of the SPD-led government during “Bloody Week” in Berlin in January 1919 and more generally the calls for a pogrom against the Spartacists launched by the same government.

21. See our article “1914: how German socialism came to betray the workers” in the special issue of the *International Review* devoted to World War I (<http://en.internationalism.org/internationalreview/201407/10160/1914-how-german-socialism-came-betray-workers>).

17. On this question see our text “The question of organisational functioning in the ICC” published in *International Review* n° 109, and particularly point e), relations between militants ([http://en.internationalism.org/ir/109\\_functioning](http://en.internationalism.org/ir/109_functioning)).

18. *Bilan* n° 22, September 1935, “Draft resolution on the problems of international links”.

19. *Internationalisme* n° 1, January 1945 “Resolution on political tasks.”

who were to form the “Internal Fraction of the ICC”) that the ICC understood the need for a theoretical re-appropriation of the achievements of Marxism on the question of morality. It took four decades for us to begin to realise the need to close this loophole. And it is since our last crisis that the ICC has begun a reflection aimed at a better understanding of what Rosa Luxemburg meant when she said that “*the proletarian party is the moral conscience of the revolution*”.

The workers’ movement as a whole has neglected this issue. The debate at the time of the Second International was never sufficiently developed (apart from Kautsky’s book *Ethics and the materialist conception of history*) and the loss of morality was a decisive element in its degeneration. Although groups of the communist left have had the courage to defend in practice proletarian moral principles, neither *Bilan* nor the GCF sufficiently addressed them theoretically. The difficulties of the ICC in this area must be seen in the light of the shortcomings of the revolutionary movement during the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Today, the risk of the moral degeneration of revolutionary organisations is aggravated by the miasma of putrefaction and the barbarism of capitalist society. This question concerns not only the ICC but also the other groups of the Communist Left.

After our last Extraordinary Conference which was devoted to identifying the moral dimension of the crisis of the ICC, the Congress gave itself the objective of discussing its intellectual dimension. Throughout its existence the ICC has not ceased to point out its difficulties in deepening theoretical issues: the loss of the vision that the ICC plays a role similar to that of a fraction (and is not a “mini party”); immediatism in our analyses; activist and workerist tendencies in our intervention; contempt for theoretical work and the search for truth, have all been the breeding ground for the development of this crisis.

Our recurring underestimation of theoretical work (especially on organisational issues) finds its roots in the origins of the ICC: the impact of the student revolt with its academicist component (of a petty bourgeois nature), which has as its opposite an activist, “workerist” tendency (of a leftist nature), which confuses anti-academicism with a contempt for theory. And this in an atmosphere of infantile protest against “authority” (represented by the “old” MC). From the late 1980s, this underestimation of theoretical work in the organisation has been fuelled by the pernicious atmosphere of social decomposition which tends to destroy rational thought in favour of obscurantist beliefs and prejudices, which

substitutes “gossip culture” for the culture of theory.<sup>22</sup> The loss of our acquisitions (and the danger of sclerosis that this carries) is a direct consequence of this lack of a culture of theory. Faced with the pressure of bourgeois ideology, the gains of the ICC (whether programmatic, analytical or organisational) can only be maintained if they are constantly enriched by reflection and theoretical debate.

The Congress emphasised that the ICC is still affected by its “youthful indiscretion”, immediatism, which has repeatedly made us lose sight of the historic and long term framework for the function of the organisation. The ICC was established by the regroupment of young elements who were politicised at a moment of spectacular revival of the class struggle (May ‘68). Many of them had the illusion that the revolution was already underway. The more impatient and immediatist were demoralised and abandoned their militant commitment. But this weakness was also maintained among those who stayed in the ICC. Immediatism continued to permeate us and was manifested on many occasions. The Congress realised that this weakness can be fatal for us because, linked to our loss of acquisitions, to the disdain for theory, it inevitably leads to opportunism; a drift that will always undermine the foundations of the organisation.

The Congress recalled that opportunism (and its variant, centrism) results from the permanent infiltration of bourgeois and petty bourgeois ideology into revolutionary organisations, demanding vigilance and a permanent struggle against the weight of these ideologies. Although the organisation of revolutionaries is a “foreign body”, antagonistic to capitalism, it arises and lives within class society and is therefore constantly threatened, either by the infiltration of ideologies and practices foreign to the proletariat, or a drift towards putting into question the gains of marxism and the workers’ movement. During these 40 years of existence, the ICC has constantly had to defend its principles and fight, in the course

22. “*The different elements which constitute the strength of the working class directly confront the various facets of this ideological decomposition:*

- *solidarity and collective action are faced with the atomization of “look out for number one”;*
- *the need for organization confronts social decomposition, the disintegration of the relationships which form the basis for all social life;*
- *the proletariat’s confidence in the future and in its own strength is constantly sapped by the all-pervasive despair and nihilism within society;*

- *consciousness, lucidity, coherent and unified thought, the taste for theory, have a hard time making headway in the midst of the flight into illusions, drugs, sects, mysticism, the rejection or destruction of thought which are characteristic of our epoch.”* (*International Review* n° 62, “*Decomposition, final phase of the decadence of capitalism*”, point 13 (<http://en.internationalism.org/node/3253>).

of difficult debates, all these ideologies that have shown themselves in its midst as, among others, leftist, modernist, anarcho-libertarian and councilist deviations.

The Congress also discussed the difficulties of the ICC in overcoming another major weakness of its origins: the circle spirit and its most destructive form, the clan spirit.<sup>23</sup> This circle spirit is, as revealed in the history of the ICC, one of the most dangerous poisons for the organisation. And this for various reasons. It carries within itself the transformation of the revolutionary organisation into a simple grouping of friends, distorting its political nature as a product and instrument of the struggle of the working class. Through personalisation of political questions, it undermines the culture of debate and the clarification of disagreements through the confrontation of coherent and rational arguments. The constitution of clans or circles of friends clashing with the organisation or certain parts of it destroys collective work, solidarity and the unity of the organisation. Because it is powered by emotional, irrational approaches, by power relationships and personal animosities, the circle spirit is opposed to the work of thinking, of the culture of theory, in favour of a craze for idle gossip “between friends” and, in the end, for slander, undermining the moral health of the organisation.

The ICC has not succeeded in ridding itself of the circle spirit despite all the battles it has fought during these forty years of existence. The persistence of this poison is explained by the origins of the ICC, which was constituted from circles and in a “family” atmosphere where emotions (personal sympathies or antipathies) took precedence over the need for solidarity among militants fighting for the same cause and regrouped around the same programme. The weight of social decomposition and the tendency towards “every man for himself”, towards irrational actions, has compounded this original weakness. And above all, the lack of in-depth theoretical discussions on organisational issues has not allowed the organisation as a whole to overcome this “infantile disorder” of the ICC and the workers’ movement. The Congress underlined (in recalling the observation already made by Lenin in 1904 in his book *One step forward, two steps back*) that the circle spirit is conveyed essentially by the pressure of the ideology of the petty bourgeoisie.

To face all these difficulties, and given the seriousness of the challenges of the present historical period, the Congress underlined that the organisation must develop a spirit of struggle against the in-

23. See note 17.



fluence of the dominant ideology, against the weight of social decomposition. This means that the revolutionary organisation must fight permanently against routinism, superficiality, intellectual laziness, schematism, to develop a critical spirit in lucidly identifying its mistakes and theoretical shortcomings.

To the extent that “*socialist consciousness precedes and conditions the revolutionary action of the working class*”,<sup>24</sup> the development of marxism is the central task of all revolutionary organisations. The Congress identified as a priority orientation for the ICC the collective strengthening of its work of deepening, of reflection, in re-acquiring the marxist culture of theory in all our internal debates.

In 1903, Rosa Luxemburg deplored the abandonment of the deepening of marxist theory thus:

“...it is only where economic matters are concerned that we are entitled to speak of a more or less completely elaborated body of doctrines bequeathed us by Marx. The most valuable of all his teachings, the materialist-dialectical conception of history, presents itself to us as nothing more than a method of investigation, as a few inspired leading thoughts, which offer us glimpses into the entirely new world (...) It is pure illusion to suppose that the working class, in its upward striving, can of its own accord become immeasurably creative in the theoretical domain.”<sup>25</sup>

The ICC is today in a period of transition. Thanks to this critical balance-sheet, its capacity to examine its weaknesses and to admit mistakes, it is making a radical critique of the vision of militant activity that we have had until now, of relations between militants and between militants and the organisation, with as a guiding principle the question of the intellectual and moral dimension of the proletariat’s struggle. It is a real “cultural renaissance” we must engage in, to continue to learn to assume our responsibilities. It is a long and difficult process, but vital for the future.

### The defence of the organisation against attacks on the ICC

Throughout its existence, the ICC has waged a permanent struggle for the defence of its principles, against the ideological pressure of bourgeois society, against anti-proletarian behaviours or the manoeuvres of lawless adventurers. The defence of the organisation is a political responsibility

and also a moral duty. The revolutionary organisation is not for the militants, but for the whole of the working class. It is a product of the latter’s historical struggle, an instrument of its fight for the development of its consciousness with the aim of the revolutionary transformation of society.

The Congress insisted on the fact that the ICC is a “foreign body” in society, antagonistic to and an enemy of capitalism. This is precisely why the ruling class has been very interested in our activities since the beginning of our existence. And this reality has nothing to do with paranoia or “conspiracy theories”. Revolutionaries must not be naive or ignorant of the history of the workers’ movement and even less yield to the siren song of bourgeois democracy (and its “freedom of expression”). If today, the ICC is not subject to the direct repression of the capitalist state, it is because our ideas are in a very small minority and do not represent any immediate danger to the ruling class. Like *Bilan* and the GCF, we swim “against the current”. However, even if the ICC today has no direct and immediate influence in the working class, in disseminating its ideas it sows seeds for the future. This is why the bourgeoisie is interested in the disappearance of the ICC which is the only centralised international organisation of the communist left having sections in different countries and continents.

This is also what fuels the hatred of declassed elements<sup>26</sup> who are always on the lookout for “warning signs” of our disappearance. The ruling class cannot but rejoice to see a constellation of individuals claiming to be part of the communist left agitating around the ICC (through blogs, websites, internet forums, Facebook and other social networks) to peddle gossip, slanders against the ICC, pogromist attacks and police methods, targeting repeatedly and *ad nauseam* certain of our militants.

The Congress emphasised that the increase in attacks against the ICC by this parasitic milieu,<sup>27</sup> which seeks to recuperate and distort the militant work of the groups of the communist left, is a manifestation of the putrefaction of bourgeois society.

The Congress took full measure of the new dimension taken on by parasitism since the beginning of the period of decomposition. Its objective, avowed or not, is today not only to cause trouble and confusion, but above all to sterilise the potential forces that could become politicised around the historic organisations of the communist left. It aims to form a “*cordon sanitaire*”

(notably by raising the spectre of Stalinism that is still allegedly rampant inside the ICC!) to prevent young searching elements from moving closer to our organisation. This work of undermining today complements the anti-communist campaigns unleashed by the bourgeoisie during the collapse of the Stalinist regimes. Parasitism is the best ally of the decadent bourgeoisie against the revolutionary perspective of the proletariat.

While the proletariat has enormous difficulties in regaining its identity as a revolutionary class and reconnecting with its own past, the slanders, attacks and the sickening mentality of the individuals claiming to be part of the communist left and who denigrate the ICC can only defend the interests of the ruling class. In defending our organisation, we will not merely be defending “our own” chapel. It is for the ICC to defend the principles of marxism, of the revolutionary class and of the communist left which risk being swallowed up by the ideology of “no future” that parasitism carries within it.

The strengthening of the public and intransigent defence of the organisation is an orientation given by this Congress. The ICC is well aware that this orientation may temporarily lead to being misunderstood, to being criticised for our lack of “fair play”, and so to an even greater isolation. But the worst thing would be to let parasitism do its destructive work without reacting. The Congress emphasised that in this regard too, the ICC must have the courage to “swim against the current,” just as it has had the courage to make a relentless critique of its own errors and difficulties during this Congress, and to publicly report them.

“*Self-criticism, remorseless, cruel, and going to the core of things is the life’s breath and light of the proletarian movement. (...) But we are not lost, and we will be victorious if we have not unlearned how to learn. And if the present leaders of the proletariat, the Social Democrats, do not understand how to learn, then they will go under ‘to make room for people capable of dealing with a new world.’*”<sup>28</sup>

ICC (December 2015)

24. *Internationalisme*, “Nature and function of the political party of the proletariat.”

25. *Stagnation and progress of marxism*.

26. See our text “Theses on parasitism” in *International Review* n° 94 ([http://en.internationalism.org/ir/94\\_parasitism](http://en.internationalism.org/ir/94_parasitism)).

27. *Ibid*.

28. Rosa Luxemburg, *The crisis of social democracy*.

## Report on the role of the ICC as a "fraction"

# The idea of the fraction in the history of the workers' movement

As we have said in the article "40 years after the formation of the ICC – what is our balance-sheet and what are the perspectives for our activity?", the ICC's 21<sup>st</sup> Congress adopted a report on the ICC's role as a "Fraction". This report was in two parts, the first giving the historical context and a reminder of the Fraction as a concept, the second being a concrete analysis of how our organisation has discharged its responsibility in this respect. We publish below the first part of the report, which is of a general interest over and above the specific questions confronting the ICC.

The 21<sup>st</sup> International Congress will put at the centre of its concerns a critical assessment of 40 years existence of the ICC. This critical balance sheet is related to :

- the general analyses worked out by the ICC;
- the way the ICC assumed its role in the preparation of the future party.

The answer to this second question obviously supposes that the role which falls to the ICC in the current historical period is well defined. That's to say: in a period in which the conditions do not yet exist for the appearance of a revolutionary party, i.e. of an organisation having a direct influence on the course of class confrontations:

*"One cannot study or understand the history of this organism, the party, unless you situate it in the general context of the different stages the movement of the class has gone through, of the problems posed to the class, of its efforts at any given moment to become aware of these problems, to respond to them adequately, to draw the lessons from experience and use these lessons as a springboard towards future struggles. While political parties are a major factor in the development of the class, they are thus, at the same time, an expression of the real state of the class at a given moment in its history.*

*"Throughout its history, the working class has been subjected to the weight of bourgeois ideology which tends to deform and corrupt proletarian parties, to distort their real function. In response to this tendency, revolutionary fractions have arisen with the aim of elaborating and clarifying communist positions, of making them more precise. This was notably the case with the communist left which came out of the Third International: any understanding of the question of the party necessarily*

*involves assimilating the experience and the acquisitions of the whole international communist left.*

*"It was the Italian Fraction of the Communist Left, however, which had the specific merit of pointing out the qualitative differences in the organisation of revolutionaries according to whether the period was one of developing class struggle or one of defeat or retreat. The Italian Fraction showed what form the revolutionary organisation took in each of these two periods: in the first case, the form of the party, an organisation which could have a direct and immediate influence on the class struggle; in the second case, a numerically restricted organisation with a much weaker influence in the immediate life of the class. To this second type of organisation it gave the distinctive name of the 'fraction' which, between two periods in the development of the class struggle, i.e. two moments in the existence of the party, constitutes a link, an organic bridge between the past and future party."<sup>1</sup>*

In this respect we are obliged to pose a certain number of questions:

- What is meant by this concept of the fraction at the different moments in the history of the workers' movement?
- To what extent can the ICC be regarded as a "fraction"?
- What are the tasks of a fraction that are valid for the ICC, and what tasks are not?
- Which particular tasks fall to the ICC and which tasks were not those of the fractions?

In the first part of this Report, we will primarily address the first of these four

1. *International Review* n°35, "On the party and its relation to the class", point 9.

points in order to establish a historic framework for our reflection and to allow us to better approach the second part of the Report, which proposes to answer the key question mentioned above: which balance-sheet can one draw about the way the ICC has played its part in the preparation of the future party?

In order to examine this concept of the fraction at the different moments in the history of the workers' movement, we will distinguish three periods:

- the early period of the workers' movement: the Communist League and the International Workingmen's Association (IWA), known also as the First International;
- the age of its maturity: the Second International;
- the "period of wars and revolutions" (to use the Communist International's expression).

But, to start, it may be useful to include a very short reminder on the history of the parties of the proletariat since the question of the fraction always compels us to pose the question of the party, which constitutes both the point of departure and the point of arrival of the fraction.

### The party in the history of the workers' movement

The notion of the party was gradually elaborated, theoretically and practically, through the experience of the workers' movement (Communist League, IWA, parties of the Second International, Communist parties).

The League was an illegal organisation, still belonging to the period of the sects: *"At the dawn of modern capitalism, in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, a working class still in its phase of constitution undertook local and sporadic struggles and could only give birth to doctrinal schools, sects and leagues. The Communist League was the most advanced expression of this period, while at the same time its Manifesto with its call 'proletarians of all countries – unite' heralded the period to come."<sup>2</sup>*

2. "Nature and function of the political party of the

It was precisely the task of the IWA to go beyond the sects, allowing for a broader gathering of European workers and a decantation with respect to many confusions that weighed on their consciousness. At the same time, with its heterogeneous composition (trade unions, co-operatives, propaganda groups, etc.) it was not yet a party in the modern sense that the word acquired later on, within and thanks to the Second International. "*The First International corresponded to the proletariat's effective entry onto the stage of social and political struggle in the principal countries of Europe. It thus grouped together all the organised forces of the working class, its diverse ideological tendencies. The First International brought together both all the currents and all the contingent aspects of the workers' struggles: economic, educational, political and theoretical.*"

"*It was the highest point of the working class' unitary organisation in all its diversity. The Second International marked a stage of differentiation between the economic struggle of wage labour and the social, political struggle. In this period of the full flourishing of capitalist society, the Second International was the organisation of the struggle for reforms and of political conquests, for the political affirmation of the proletariat, and at the same time it marked a higher stage in the ideological demarcation of the proletariat by clarifying and elaborating the theoretical foundations of its historic revolutionary mission.*"<sup>3</sup>

It was within the Second International that the distinction was clearly made between the general organisation of the class (trade unions) and its specific organization, charged with the defence of its historical programme, the party. A distinction which was quite clear when the Third International (ie the Communist International, the CI) was founded, at the moment when the proletarian revolution was, for the first time, on the agenda of the history. For the new International, the general organisation of the class no longer consisted of the trade unions (which, in any case did not regroup the whole proletariat) but the workers' councils (even if much remained unclear in the CI on the question of the trades unions and on the role of the party).

Despite all the differences between these various organisations, there is a common point between them: they have an impact on the course of the class struggle and it is in this sense that one can attribute them the name "party". This impact was still weak for the Communist League at the time of the revolutions of 1848-1849 when it acted mainly as a left wing of the democratic

proletariat", *Internationalisme* n°38, October 1948)  
3. Ibid.

movement. Thus, the *Neue Rheinische Zeitung*, edited by Marx, and which had a certain influence in the Rhineland and even in the rest of Germany, was not directly the organ of the League but was presented as an "Organ of the Democracy". As Engels pointed out: "(...) *the League proved to be much too weak a lever as against the popular mass movement that had now broken out.*"<sup>4</sup>

One of the most important causes of this weakness lay in the proletariat's weakness in Germany itself, where industrial development had not yet taken off. However, Engels also makes the point that "*The League was incontestably the only revolutionary organisation that was of importance in Germany*". The impact of the IWA was much more important since it was to become a "power" in Europe. But it was above all the Second International (in fact through the different parties that composed it) which could, for the first time in history, claim to have a determining influence on the working masses.

### The idea of the fraction at the dawn of the workers' movement

The question was already posed at the time of Marx, but was of a much greater importance later on: what becomes of the party when the vanguard, which defends the historical programme of the working class, the communist revolution, has no immediate impact on the struggles of the proletariat?

To this question history gave different answers. The first answer is that of the dissolution of the party when the conditions of its existence are no longer present. This was the case with the League and with the IWA. In both cases, Marx and Engels played a decisive role in this dissolution.

It was thus in November 1852, after the Cologne communist trial which sealed the victory of the counter-revolution in Germany, that Marx and Engels called on the Central Council of the League to pronounce its dissolution. It is worth pointing out that the question of the activity of the revolutionary minority in a period of reaction had already been raised in the autumn of 1850 within the League. In the middle of that year, Marx and Engels had come to the conclusion that the revolutionary wave was ebbing as a result of the economic recovery: "*Given this general prosperity, wherein the productive forces of bourgeois society are developing as luxuriantly as it is possible for them to do within bourgeois relationships, a real revolution is out of the question. Such a revolution is possible*"

4. "On the history of the Communist League", November 1885.

*only in periods when both of these factors – the modern forces of production and the bourgeois forms of production — come into opposition with each other.*"<sup>5</sup>

Marx and Engels were thus led to fight the immediatist minority of Willich-Schapper that, despite the ebbing tide, wanted to continue calling the workers to insurrection: "*During our last debate in particular, on the question of 'The position of the German proletariat in the next revolution', views were expressed by members of the minority of the Central Committee which directly contradict our second-to-last circular and even the Manifesto. A national German approach has replaced the universal conception of the Manifesto, flattering the national sentiments of German artisans. The will, rather than the actual conditions, was stressed as the chief factor in the revolution. We tell the workers: If you want to change conditions and make yourselves capable of government, you will have to undergo fifteen, twenty, or fifty years of civil war. Now they are told: We must come to power immediately or we might as well go to sleep. The word 'proletariat' has been reduced to a mere phrase, like the word 'people' was by the democrats. To make this phrase a reality one would have to declare the entire petty bourgeoisie to be proletarians, ie de facto represent the petty bourgeoisie and not the proletariat. In place of actual revolutionary development one would have to adopt the revolutionary phrase*"<sup>6</sup>

Similarly, at the Congress of the Hague of 1872, Marx and Engels supported the decision to transfer the General Council to New York in order to isolate it from the influence of the Bakuninist and Lassallean tendencies, which waxed just as the European proletariat had suffered a major defeat with the crushing of the Paris Commune. Moving the General Council out of Europe was intended to let the IWA lie dormant as a prelude to its dissolution, which took effect at the Philadelphia Conference in July 1876.

In a sense, the dissolution of the party, when the conditions no longer allow its existence, was much easier in the case of the League and of the IWA than later on. The League was a small clandestine organisation (except during the revolutions of 1848-1849), which had not occupied an "official" place in society.

As for the IWA, its formal disappearance did not mean that all its components disappeared. The English trade unions or the German Workers' Party (SAP) survived

5. Marx, *The class struggles in France*, Part IV.

6. Marx, speaking to the meeting of the Central Council of the League of September 15th, 1850, cited in the "Preliminaries" of the *Cologne Communist Trial*.

the IWA. What disappeared was the formal ties between its various components.

Things changed after that. The workers' parties no longer disappeared – they passed over to the enemy. They became institutions of the capitalist system and this conferred a new responsibility on the remaining revolutionaries.

When the League was dissolved, no formal organisation remained, charged with building a bridge towards the new party, which would emerge at some time in the future. During this period, Marx and Engels considered the work of theoretical elaboration to be the first priority. At this juncture, they were practically the only ones to master the theory they had developed, and they did not need a formal organisation to carry on this work. However, they remained in contact with a number of former members of the League, in particular those in exile in England.

There was even a reconciliation, in 1856, between Marx and Schapper. In September 1864, it was Eccarius, former member of the League's Central Council, and who had close ties with the English labour movement, who asked Marx to join the platform of the famous meeting of 28<sup>th</sup> September at Saint Martin's Hall, where the foundation of the International Workingmen's Association (IWA) was decided.

The IWA's General Council also contained a significant number of former members of the League: Eccarius, Lessner, Lochner, Pfaender, Schapper and, of course, Marx and Engels.

When the IWA disappeared, there remained, as we have seen, organisations that would be at the origin of the foundation of the Second International, in particular the German party, brought about by the unification of 1875 (SAP), and whose marxist component (Bebel, Liebknecht), known as the Eisenachers, had been affiliated to the IWA.

Here we should make a point with regard to the role these first two organisations were intended to fulfil at the moment of their formation. It is clear from the Communist Manifesto that the League expected to see the proletarian revolution in the near future. Following the defeat of the 1848 revolutions Marx and Engels understood that historical conditions were not yet ripe. In the same way, at the moment of the foundation of the IWA, there existed (according to its statutes) the idea of an "emancipation of the workers" in the short or medium term, (despite the diversity of the visions contained in this formula, and which corresponded to the different components of the IWA: mutualists, collectivists, etc).

The defeat of the Paris Commune highlighted once again the immaturity of the conditions for the overthrow of capitalism: the period that followed was one of massive capitalist expansion, expressed in particular by the emergence of Germany as an industrial power that, by the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, had overtaken Britain.

### The fractions in the Second International

During this period, while the revolutionary perspective remained distant, the Socialist parties acquired a major importance within the working class (particularly in Germany). This growing impact, at a time when the spirit of the majority of the workers was not revolutionary, is linked to the fact that the Socialist parties not only included in their programme the prospect of socialism, but also defended, in their daily newspapers, the "minimum programme" of reforms within capitalist society.

It was also this situation that led to the opposition between those for whom "*the final goal, no matter what it is, is nothing; the movement is everything*" (Bernstein) and those who say that "*the final goal of socialism constitutes the only decisive factor distinguishing the Social-Democratic movement from bourgeois democracy and from bourgeois radicalism, the only factor transforming the entire labour movement from a vain effort to repair the capitalist order into a class struggle against this order, for the suppression of this order—the question: 'Reform or Revolution?' as it is posed by Bernstein, equals for the Social-Democracy the question: 'To be or not to be?' In the controversy with Bernstein and his followers, everybody in the Party ought to understand clearly it is not a question of this or that method of struggle, or the use of this or that set of tactics, but of the very existence of the Social-Democratic movement.*"<sup>7</sup>

Despite the official rejection of Bernstein's theses by the SPD and the Socialist International, this vision actually gained the majority within the SPD (especially in the Party apparatus) and within the International. "*The experience of the Second International confirms the impossibility of maintaining the party of the proletariat during a prolonged period marked by a non-revolutionary situation. The participation of the parties of the Second International in the imperialist war of 1914 only revealed the long corruption of the organisation. The permeability and penetrability of the political organisation of the proletariat to the ideology of the reigning capitalist*

*class, which is always possible, can in long periods of stagnation and reflux of the class struggle assume such an extent that the ideology of the bourgeoisie ends up substituting itself for that of the proletariat, so that inevitably the party is emptied of all its original class content and becomes instead an instrument of the enemy class*"<sup>8</sup>

In this context, for the first time, real fractions emerged.

The first fraction was that of the Bolsheviks who, after the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party Congress of 1903, assumed the fight against opportunism, initially on the question of the organisation and thereafter on the questions of tactics with respect to the tasks of the proletariat in a semi-feudal country like Russia. It should be noted that, until 1917, although the Bolshevik and the Menshevik fractions carried on their policy independently from each other, they formally belonged to the same party, the RSDLP.

From 1907, the marxist current which developed in Holland around the weekly magazine *De Tribune* (led by Wijnkoop, Van Ravesteyn and Ceton, but in which Gorter and Pannekoek also participated) engaged in a similar work in the Dutch SDAP (Social Democratic Workers' Party). This current fought against the opportunist drift within the party (mainly represented by Troelstra and the parliamentary fraction) which proposed, at the 1908 congress to shut down *De Tribune*. Troelstra finally won the case at the Extraordinary Congress of Deventer (February 1909), which decided on the closure of *De Tribune* and the exclusion of its three editors from the party. This policy, which aimed to separate the Tribuneist "leaders" from the sympathisers of this current, actually provoked a strong reaction by the latter.

In the final analysis, Troelstra's policy of exclusion, backed up by the reformist-dominated International Bureau of the Socialist International, which had been called in to arbitrate, coincided with the three editors' desire to break from the SDAP (a wish that Gorter did not share) and led the "Tribunists", in March 1909, to found a new party, the SDP (Social Democratic Party). This party would, until World War I, remain a very small minority, with an insignificant electoral influence, but it benefitted from the support of the Left within the International, and in particular of the Bolsheviks, which allowed it, in the final analysis to be reintegrated into the International in 1910 (after a first refusal by the Bureau of the SI in November 1909) and to send delegates (one mandate against

7. Rosa Luxemburg *Social Reform or Revolution*, Preface.

8. "Nature and function of the political party of the proletariat", *Internationalisme* n°38, October 1948.

7 for the SDAP) to the International Congresses of 1910 (Copenhagen) and 1912 (Basel). During the War, in which Holland remained neutral, but which nonetheless weighed heavily on the working class (unemployment, food shortages, etc) the SDP gained in electoral influence thanks to its internationalist policy and its support of workers' struggles. Finally, in November 1918, and even before the foundation of the Communist Party of Germany (KPD), the SDP adopted the name of Communist Party of the Netherlands (CPN).

The third current which played a decisive role as a fraction in a party of the Second International was to form the KPD. On the evening of 4<sup>th</sup> August 1914, after the unanimous vote for war credits by the Socialist deputies in the Reichstag, a handful of internationalist militants gathered in Rosa Luxemburg's apartment to work out the prospects for the struggle and the means to regroup all those who, in the party, wanted to fight the chauvinist policy of the leadership and the majority. These militants were unanimous in considering that it was necessary to carry out this combat **within** the party. In many cities, the party rank and file denounced the parliamentary fraction's vote for war credits. Even Liebknecht was criticised for having given his support for this, out of party discipline, on 4<sup>th</sup> August.

At the second vote, on 2<sup>nd</sup> December, Liebknecht was the only one who voted against, but in the two votes that followed he was joined by Otto Rühle, then by a growing number of deputies. From the winter of 1914-1915, illegal leaflets were being distributed (in particular one entitled "The main enemy is at home"). In April 1915 the first and only issue of *Die Internationale* was published, selling up to 5000 copies on the first evening, and giving its name to the Gruppe Internationale, around Rosa Luxemburg, Leo Jogiches, Karl Liebknecht, Franz Mehring, and Clara Zetkin. In conditions of illegality, subjected to repression, this tiny group, which adopted the name of "Spartacus Group" and then "Spartacus League", led the fight against the war and the government as well as against the right and the centre of Social Democracy.

Spartacus was not alone: other groups, in particular in Hamburg and Bremen (where Pannekoek, Radek and Fröhlich were active) defended an internationalist policy even more clearly than the Spartakists. At the beginning of 1917, when the leadership of the SPD excluded the oppositions in order to stop the progress of their positions within the Party, these groups continued their activity autonomously, whereas the Spartakists continued as a fraction within

the centrist USPD. Finally, these different currents came together at the moment of the foundation of the KPD, on 31<sup>st</sup> December 1918, but it was clearly the Spartakists who were the backbone of the new party.

A left fraction was formed in Italy somewhat later than in Russia, Holland and Germany. This was the "Abstentionist Fraction" (so called because it advocated abstention from parliamentary elections) around the newspaper *Il Soviet*, published in Naples by Bordiga and his comrades from December 1918, and which was formally constituted as a fraction at the congress of the Italian Socialist Party (PSI) in October 1919. In fact, as early as 1912, in the Federation of the Young Socialists and in the Naples federation of the PSI, Bordiga had animated an intransigent revolutionary current. This delay by the Italian left is partly explained by the fact that Bordiga, who was mobilised into the army, could not intervene in political life before 1917, but above all by the fact that, during the war, the leadership of the party had been in the hands of the left. The Congress of 1912 had expelled the reformist right and that of 1914 expelled the freemasons.

The PSI's paper *Avanti* was run by Mussolini (who had presented the motions for exclusion at these congresses). He took advantage of this position to publish, on 18<sup>th</sup> October 1914, a leading article entitled "From absolute neutrality to an acting and working neutrality", which declared for Italian entry into the war on the side of the Entente. Of course, he was dismissed from his post, but barely one month later, he published *Il Popolo d'Italia*, thanks to the funds brought by the French Socialist deputy Marcel Cachin (a future leader of the French Communist Party) on behalf of the French government and the Entente. He was excluded from the PSI on 29<sup>th</sup> November. Thereafter, as a situation dominated by the World War pushed towards a decantation of a Left, a Right and a Centre, the direction of the party oscillated between the right and left, between a "maximalist" standpoint and a reformist position.

"It is only in 1917, at the Rome Congress, that the opposition between the right and the left hardened. The former obtained 17,000 votes, the latter 14,000. The victory of Turati, Treves and Modigliani, at the time when the Russian revolution was already underway, precipitated the formation of an intransigent revolutionary fraction in Florence, Milan, Turin and Naples."<sup>9</sup> It was only from 1920, under the impetus of the revolution in Russia, the formation of the CI (which gave its support) and also of the workers' struggles in Italy, in particular in Turin, that the Abstentionist

9. ICC, *The Italian Communist Left*.

Fraction gained an influence in the party. It also came into contact with the current gathered around the newspaper *Ordine Nuovo*, animated by Gramsci, even if important disagreements existed between the two currents (Gramsci was in favour of participation in elections; he defended a kind of revolutionary trade unionism and hesitated to break with the right and the centre and to form an autonomous fraction).

"In Milan in October the United Communist Fraction was formed. It put out a Manifesto calling for the formation of the communist party through the expulsion of Turati's right wing; it gave up the electoral boycott, applying the decisions of the Second Congress of the Comintern."<sup>10</sup> At the Congress of Imola, in December 1920 the principle of a split was decided: "our work as a fraction is and must be terminated now (...) an immediate exit from the party and the congress [of the SPI] as soon as the vote puts us in a majority or a minority. From this follows (...) the split with the centre."<sup>11</sup> At the Congress of Livorno, which started on 21 January 1921, "the Imola motion obtained a third of the votes: 58,783 against 172,487. The minority leaves the congress and decides to settle as the Communist Party of Italy, the section of the Communist International. Just before leaving the Congress Bordiga passionately declared: 'we take with us the honour of your past.'<sup>12</sup>

This (very rapid) examination of the work of the main fractions which were constituted within the parties of the Second International makes it possible to define the primary role that falls to a fraction: the defence of revolutionary principles within a degenerating party:

- initially to gain a maximum number of militants for these principles and to exclude from the party the positions of the right and the centre;
- then to transform itself into a new revolutionary party, when circumstances require it.

It should be noted that practically all the currents of the left tried to remain as long as possible within the party. The only exceptions are those of the Tribunists (though Gorter and Pannekoek did not share their haste) and of the "radical lefts" animated by Radek, Pannekoek and Fröhlich which (unlike the Spartakists), refused to enter the USPD after the opposition was expelled in 1917. The separation of the left from the old party, which had betrayed, resulted either from its exclusion, or from the need

10. Ibid.

11. Ibid.

12. Ibid.

to found a new party, able to become the vanguard of the revolutionary wave.

It should also be noted that the action of the left was not condemned to remain a minority within the degenerating party: at the Tours Congress of the French Socialist Party (Section Française de l'Internationale Ouvrière, SFIO), the left's motion calling for adhesion to the CI was passed by a majority. The Communist Party founded at Tours thus kept the newspaper *L'Humanité* whose first editor had been Jean Jaurès. Unfortunately, it also kept Frossard, the general secretary of the SFIO, who for a while was to be the leading figure of the Communist Party (PCF).

A last note: this capacity of the left fractions to constitute the new party right away was only possible because of the short period between the proven treason of the old party and the sudden appearance of the revolutionary wave. Thereafter, the situation would be quite different.

### The fractions that emerged from the Communist International

The Communist International was founded in March 1919. At that moment, very few Communist Parties already existed (the Communist Party of Russia, of the Netherlands, of Germany, of Poland and some others of less importance). And yet, at that moment, a first "Left" fraction (and announced as such) was emerging within the principal party, the one in Russia (which only adopted the name Communist in March 1918, during the 7<sup>th</sup> Congress of the RSDLP): at the beginning of 1918 this current was grouped around the paper *Kommunist* and was animated by Ossinsky, Bukharin, Radek and Smirnov. This fraction's principal disagreement with the orientation followed by the Party was over the negotiations at Brest-Litovsk. The "Left Communists" were opposed to these negotiations and recommended "revolutionary war", "exporting" the revolution to other countries at gunpoint. But, at the same time, this fraction undertook a criticism of the authoritarian methods of the new proletarian power and insisted on the broadest participation of the working masses in this power, a criticism that is rather close to those of Rosa Luxemburg (see her pamphlet *The Russian revolution*).

The signature of the Brest-Litovsk peace agreement announced the end of this fraction. Not long afterwards, Bukharin became a representative of the right wing of the Party, but certain elements of this fraction, such as Ossinsky, were to join the left fractions that arose later. Thus, whereas in Western Europe some of the fractions in the Socialist parties, which were to give

birth to the Communist parties, had yet to be formed (the Abstentionist Fraction animated by Bordiga was only constituted in December 1918), the Russian revolutionaries had already begun the combat (obviously in a very confused way) against the deviations that affected the Communist Party in their country. It is worth remarking (even if it is not necessary to analyse this phenomenon here) that, on a whole series of questions, the Russian militants were in the van during the first years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century: the constitution of the Bolshevik fraction after the Second Congress of the RSDLP; a clear position against the imperialist war in 1914; leading the Left at Zimmerwald; the recognition of the need for the foundation of a new International, the foundation of the first Communist Party in March 1918, the stimulus to and political orientation of the 1<sup>st</sup> Congress of the Communist International.

And this "precocity" is also to be found in the formation of fractions within the Communist Party. Due to its special position as the first (and only) Communist Party to come to power, the Russian Party was also the first to suffer the pressure of the main element in its decay (besides, obviously, the defeat of the worldwide revolutionary wave): its integration into the State. Faced with this process of degeneration of the proletarian party, forms of resistance, however confused, thus started much earlier than elsewhere.

From then on, the Russian Party saw the emergence of a significant number of other "left" currents:

- In 1919 the "Democratic Centralism" group, formed around Ossinsky and Sapronov, fought against the principle of "individual authority" in industry and defended the collective or collegial principle as being the "*most effective weapon against the departmentalisation and bureaucratic stifling of the state apparatus.*"<sup>13</sup>
- Also in 1919, many members of "Democratic Centralism" were engaged in the "Military Opposition", which had been formed for a short period in March 1919 to fight against the tendency to shape the Red Army according to the criteria of a traditional bourgeois army.

During the civil war, criticism of Party policy surfaced less often because of the threat of the White Armies to the new regime; but as soon as this ended with the victory of the Red Army over the Whites, they redoubled in force:

- At the beginning of 1921, on the occasion of the 10<sup>th</sup> Party Congress and the

debate on the trade union question, the "Workers' Opposition" was formed, led by Shliapnikov, Medvedev (both metal-workers) and, especially, Alexandra Kollontai, author of its *Platform*. Like the revolutionary syndicalists, this Opposition wanted to entrust the management of the economy to the trade unions instead of the state bureaucracy. After the prohibition of fractions, a decision taken at this very Congress (which was held during the insurrection of Kronstadt), the Workers' Opposition dissolved, Kollontai later becoming a faithful follower of Stalin.

- In the autumn of 1921 the group "Workers' Truth" was constituted, made up mainly of intellectuals and followers of the "Proletkult" like its principal organizer, Bogdanov. This group, together with the other currents of the opposition, denounced the bureaucratisation of the party and of the State but, at the same time, adopted a semi-Menshevik position, considering that the conditions of the proletarian revolution were not mature in Russia, that these conditions had to be created on the basis of modern capitalism (a position that, later, would become the position of the "councilist" current).
- In 1922-23 the "Worker's Group" was constituted, led by Gabriel Miasnikov, a worker from the Urals, who had distinguished himself in the Bolshevik Party in 1921 when, immediately after the 10<sup>th</sup> Congress, he had called for the "*freedom of the press, from the monarchists to the anarchists*". Despite Lenin's efforts to engage a debate on this question, Miasnikov refused to withdraw and was expelled from the Party at the beginning of 1922. With other militants of working class origin, he constituted the "Workers' Group of the Russian Communist Party (Bolshevik)" that distributed its *Manifesto* at the RCP's 12<sup>th</sup> Congress. This group started illegal work among the working-class members of the Party and seems to have had a significant presence in the strike waves of summer 1923, where it called for mass demonstrations and tried to politicise a primarily defensive class movement. Its activity in these strikes convinced the GPU that the group constituted a threat and its leaders, including Miasnikov, were imprisoned. The group continued its illegal activity in Russia (as well as in exile) until the end of the 1920s, when Miasnikov succeeded in leaving the country and, exiled in Paris, took part in the publication of *L'Ouvrière Communiste* that defended positions close to those of the KAPD.

13. *Theses on the Collegial Principle and Individual Authority.*

Of all the currents that conducted a battle against the degeneration of the Bolshevik Party, it is certainly the Workers' Group which was the most politically clear. It was very close to the KAPD (the latter published its documents and remained in contact with it). In particular, its criticisms of the policy pursued by the Party were based on an international vision of the revolution, contrary to those of the other groups who tended to focus on questions of democracy (in the Party and the working class) and on the management of the economy. It rejected the United Front policies of the CI's 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> Congresses, unlike the Trotskyist current which continued to refer to the first four congresses. There were however discussions (in particular in exile) between the left wing of the Trotskyist current and elements of the Workers' Group.

The Workers' Group was probably the only current to emerge within the Bolshevik party to have acted consistently like a fraction.. But the terrible repression which Stalin unleashed against revolutionaries (putting Tsarist repression in the shade) removed any possibility of developing along this path. After World War II, Miasnikov decided to return to Russia. Predictably, he disappeared immediately, depriving the communist left of one of its bravest militants.

The combat of the left fractions in the other countries necessarily took other forms than in Russia; but to return to the three other Communist Parties mentioned above we can see that the left currents also started the struggle very early.

At the foundation of the German Communist Party, the positions of the left had a majority. On the trade union question, Rosa Luxemburg, who wrote the *Program of the KPD* and presented it to the Congress, was very clear and categorical: "[trade unions] are no longer workers' organisations; they are the most solid defenders of the state and bourgeois society. Consequently it follows that the struggle for socialisation must entail the struggle to destroy the unions. We are all agreed on this point." On the parliamentary question, the Congress rejected, against the position of the Spartakists (Luxemburg, Liebknecht, Jogiches, etc), participation in the elections which were to be held shortly after. After these militants' assassination, the new leadership (Levi, Brandler) initially seemed to make concessions to the left (which remained the majority) on the trade union question. But from August 1919 (Frankfurt Conference of the KPD), Levi, who wanted a rapprochement with the USPD, opted for work in parliament as well as in the trade unions; and, at the Heidelberg Congress in October, it succeeded thanks to a manoeuvre, in

excluding the left-wing anti-trade union and anti-parliamentary majority.

The majority of excluded militants refused to give in. They were firmly supported by the militants of Dutch Left (in particular Gorter and Pannekoek) who had great authority within the CI at the time and who pushed for the formation of the Amsterdam Bureau, appointed by the International to coordinate work in Western Europe and America. Only six months later (April 1920), faced with the February KPD Congress' refusal to reintegrate the expelled militants, and also faced with the Party's conciliatory attitude towards the SPD during the Kapp Putsch (13-17<sup>th</sup> March), the excluded militants founded the KAPD (Communist Workers' Party of Germany).

Their approach was reinforced by the support of the Amsterdam Bureau, which organized an International Conference in February where the Theses of the left triumphed (on the trade union and parliamentary questions and on the rejection of the opportunist turn of the CI, expressed in particular by the insistence that Communists in Britain should enter the Labour Party). The new Party was boosted by the support of the left minority (led by Gorter and Pannekoek) of the Communist Party of the Netherlands (CPN), which published in its newspaper the KAPD programme adopted by the latter's founding congress. This did not prevent Pannekoek from criticising the KAPD (in his letter of 5<sup>th</sup> July, 1920), in particular with regard to its position towards the "Unionen" (warning against any concession to revolutionary syndicalism) and above all for the presence of the "National Bolshevik" current in its ranks, which he regarded as a "monstrous aberration". At this moment, on all the crucial questions facing the world proletariat, (trade unions, parliament, the party, the attitude towards the Socialist parties, the nature of the revolution in Russia, etc.) the Dutch left (and particularly Pannekoek), which inspired the majority of the KAPD, was situated at the vanguard of the workers' movement.

The Congress of the KAPD, which took place between 1<sup>st</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> August, pronounced itself in favour of these orientations: at that moment the "National-Bolsheviks" left the Party and, a few months later, it was the turn of the federalist elements who were hostile to membership of the CI. For their part, Pannekoek, Gorter and the KAPD were determined to remain within the CI, to fight against its increasingly opportunist drift. For this reason the KAPD sent two delegates to Russia, Jan Appel and Franz Jung, for the Second Congress of the CI, which was to take place from 17<sup>th</sup>

July 1920 in Moscow. But in the absence of any news from them, it sent two other delegates, one of them being Otto Rühle. But, faced with the catastrophic situation of the working class in Russia, and with the bureaucratisation of the government, they decided not to take part in the Congress, even though they had been called upon to defend their positions and were entitled to vote there. To prepare this Congress, Lenin wrote *Left Wing Communism an Infantile Disorder*. It should be noted that in this pamphlet, Lenin wrote that: "the mistake of left doctrinarism in communism is at present a thousand times less dangerous and less significant than that of right doctrinarism".

From the standpoint both of the CI and the Bolsheviks on the one hand, and of the KAPD on the other, there was a real will to integrate the KAPD into the International, and thus into the KPD; but the regrouping of the latter with the left of the USPD in December 1920 to form the VKPD, a regroupment which all the left currents of the CI opposed, blocked this possibility. The KAPD nevertheless acquired the statute of a "Party sympathizing with the CI", got a permanent representative in its Executive Committee, and sent delegates to its Third Congress in June 1921. In the meantime however, this cooperation strongly deteriorated, in particular after the "March Action" (an adventurist "offensive" promoted by the VKPD) and with the repression of the Kronstadt revolt (a repression which the left initially supported, believing that this insurrection was indeed the work of the Whites, as the propaganda of the Soviet government claimed). At the same time, the right leadership of the CPN (Wijnkoop, who was called the "Dutch Levi"), with the support of Moscow, undertook a policy of anti-statutory exclusions of the left-wing militants. Finally, in September, these militants would found a new party, the KAPN, on the model of the KAPD.

The United Front policy, adopted at the CI's Third Congress, only worsened things, as did the ultimatum addressed to the KAPD to merge with the VKPD. In July 1921, the leadership of the KAPD, with Gorter's support, adopted a resolution breaking all links with the CI and calling for the constitution of a "Communist Workers' International" (KAI) – this call was issued two months before the congress of the KAPD planned for September. It was clearly an over-hasty decision. At this Congress the question of the foundation of a new International was discussed (militants of Berlin, and in particular Jan Appel, were opposed to it) and the Congress finally decided to create a Bureau of Information with this aim in mind. This Bureau acted as if the new International had been formed already, even

though its founding conference only took place in April 1922. At the same time, the KAPD went through a split between, on the one hand, the majority of the “Berlin tendency”, which was hostile to the formation of a new International and, on the other hand, the “Essen tendency” (which rejected the struggle for wages).

Only the latter tendency took part in this Conference, along with Gorter, who was the author of the KAI programme. The participating groups were few in number and represented very limited forces: besides the Essen tendency, there was the KAPN, the Bulgarian Communist Left, the Communist Workers’ Party (CWP) of Sylvia Pankhurst, the KAP of Austria, described as a “Potemkin village” (ie a sham) by the KAPD of Berlin. In the end, this rump “International” was to vanish with the disappearance or progressive withdrawal of its components. The Essen tendency went through multiple splits. The KAPN disintegrated, initially as a result of the appearance of a current attached to the Berlin tendency, hostile to the formation of the KAI, then by internal conflicts, based more on clan conflicts than political principles. In fact, the essential element making it possible to explain the pitiful and dramatic failure of the KAI is to be found in the ebb of the revolutionary wave that had served as a springboard for the foundation of the CI:

*“The mistake of Gorter and his supporters was to proclaim the KAI artificially, when there still remained within the Comintern left fractions which could have been regrouped into an international left communist current. This error weighed heavily on the German revolutionary movement. (...) The decline of the world revolution, which was evident in Europe by 1921, hardly allowed the formation of a new International. Thinking that the course was still towards revolution, with the theory of ‘capitalism’s mortal crisis’, there was a certain logic in the Gorter and Essen current’s proclamation of the KAI. But their premises were wrong.”*<sup>14</sup>

The final failure of the KAPD and the KAPN illustrates in a striking manner the need for revolutionaries to have the clearest possible vision of the evolution of the balance of forces between proletariat and bourgeoisie.

If the German-Dutch Left became aware of the ebb of the revolutionary wave only after much delay, this was not the case with the Bolsheviks, the leaders of the Communist International, or the Communist Left of Italy. But they responded in radically different ways:

– for the Bolsheviks and the majority of the CI, it was necessary “to go to the masses” since the masses were no longer moving towards the revolution. This resulted in an increasingly opportunist policy, in particular towards the “centrist” Socialist parties and currents as well as towards the trade unions;

– for the Italian left, on the contrary, it was necessary to continue to show the same intransigence that had characterised the Bolsheviks during the war and up until the foundation of the CI; for them it was out of the question to attempt to take short-cuts towards the revolution by negotiating on principles and by watering them down; such short cuts were the most certain way towards defeat.

In reality, the opportunist course that affected the CI, already at the Second Congress, but especially from the Third Congress on, and which called into question the clarity and the intransigence of the First Congress, not only expressed the difficulties encountered by the world proletariat to continue and reinforce its revolutionary combat, but also the insoluble contradiction in which Bolshevik Party found itself. On the one hand the Bolsheviks – in effect the CI’s leadership – had been in the vanguard of the world revolution, and had played the same role in the Russian revolution. They had always insisted that the latter was only one very small step towards the world revolution and were quite conscious of the fact that the defeat of the world proletariat would mean the death of the revolution in Russia.

On the other hand, as a Party holding power in an entire country, the Bolsheviks were subject to requirements that are suited to the function of a national state and, above all, to the need to ensure external and internal “security”. In other words: to follow a foreign policy in conformity with the interests of Russia and an internal policy guaranteeing the stability of state power. In this sense, the repression of the strikes in Petrograd and the bloody crushing of the Kronstadt revolt, in March 1921, were the other side of the coin of the policy of the “open hand”. Under the cover of the “United Front”, it conducted this policy towards the Socialist parties with the idea that the latter could exert pressure on their governments to orientate foreign policy in a direction favourable to Russia.

The intransigence of the Italian Communist Left, which was actually at the head of the Communist Party of Italy (the “Rome Theses” adopted by its Second Congress in 1922 were written by Bordiga and Terracini) found exemplary expression towards the rise of fascism in Italy, following the defeat of the class struggles of 1920. On the

practical level, this intransigence expressed itself in a total refusal to make alliances with parties of the bourgeoisie (liberal or “Socialist”) faced with the fascist threat: the proletariat could fight fascism only on its own terrain, the economic strike and the organisation of workers’ militia for its self-defence. On the theoretical level, we owe to Bordiga the first serious analysis (which remains valid to this day) of the fascist phenomenon, an analysis which he presented to the delegates of the CI’s Fourth Congress, rejecting the latter’s analysis:

– *“Fascism was not the product of the middle classes and of the landed bourgeoisie. It was the product of the defeat which the proletariat had suffered and which had the indecisive petty-bourgeois strata behind the fascist reaction.”*<sup>15</sup>

– *“Fascism was not a ‘feudal’ reaction. It was born first of all in the big industrial towns, like Milan...”*<sup>16</sup> and had the support of the industrial bourgeoisie.

– *“Fascism was not opposed to democracy. It was its indispensable complement when ‘the State was no longer able to defend the power of the bourgeoisie.’”*<sup>17</sup>

This intransigence was also expressed with regard to the policy of the United Front, of the “open hand” towards the Socialist parties and its corollary, the slogan of the “workers’ government which amounts to a denial in practice of the political programme of communism, i.e. the necessity to prepare the masses for the struggle for the dictatorship of the proletariat”.<sup>18</sup>

This same intransigence opposed the CI’s policy of merging the Communist Parties with the left currents of the Socialist parties or “centrists”, which led to the formation of the VKPD in Germany. In Italy it resulted in the entry, in August 1924, of 2000 “terzini” (partisans of the Third International) into a party that counted no more than 20,000 members, as a result of repression and demoralisation.

Finally it was expressed in its opposition to the policy of “bolshevisation” of the CP’s, put forward at the Fifth Congress of the CI in July 1924. This policy was also combated by Trotsky. In brief, it consisted in reinforcing the discipline in the Communist Parties, a bureaucratic discipline intended to silence resistance against its degeneration. Bolshevisation also consisted in promoting a mode of organisation of the CPs based on “factory cells”, something that focused the workers on the difficulties that arose in “their”

15. ICC *The Italian Communist Left*, Chapter I

16. *Ibid.*

17. *Ibid.*

18. Bordiga, quoted in *The Italian Communist Left*.

14. ICC *The German and Dutch Left*, Chapter V.4.d.



enterprise to the detriment, it goes without saying, of a general vision and perspective on the proletarian struggle.

Although the left was still the majority within the Party, the CI imposed a rightwing leadership (Gramsci, Togliatti) that supported its policy, a manoeuvre facilitated by the imprisonment of Bordiga between February and October 1923. However, with the clandestine Conference of the Italian Party in May 1924, the theses presented by Bordiga, Grieco, Fortichiari and Repossi, which were very critical of the policy of the CI, were approved by 35 out of 45 federation secretaries and by 4 out of 5 inter-regional secretaries. In 1925 the campaign against the oppositions broke out within the CI, starting with the "Left Opposition" led by Trotsky. "In March-April 1925, the Enlarged Executive of the CI put on the agenda the elimination of the 'Bordigist' tendency at the Third Congress of CPI. It forbade the publication of the article of Bordiga favourable to Trotsky."<sup>19</sup>

"The Bolshevisation of the Italian section began with the removal of Bruno Fortichiari from his post as the federal secretary of Milan. In April, the left, through Damen, Repossi and Fortichiari, founded an 'Entente Committee' (Comitato di intesa) in order to co-ordinate its activities. The Gramsci leadership violently attacked this Committee, denouncing it as an 'organised fraction'. In fact, the left still did not want to constitute itself into a fraction; it did not want to provide any pretext for its expulsion from the Party while it was still a majority. At first, Bordiga refused to adhere to the Committee, as he did not want to go outside the framework of discipline that had been imposed. It was only in June that he rallied to the position of Damen, Fortichiari and Repossi. He was given the task of drawing up a 'platform' of the left, which was the first systematic attack on Bolshevisation."<sup>20</sup>

"Under the threat of expulsion, the Entente Committee had to dissolve, respecting the principle of discipline. It was the beginning of the end for the Italian Left as a majority."<sup>21</sup>

At the January 1926 Congress, which was held abroad because of fascist repression, the left presented the "Lyon Theses" which only received 9.2% of the votes: the policy that had been followed, applying the instructions of the CI, of an intensive recruitment of young and barely politicised elements, now bore fruit. The Lyon Theses were to orientate the policy of the Italian left in emigration.

Bordiga was to carry out a last battle during the 6<sup>th</sup> Enlarged Executive of the CI, from February to March 1926. He denounced the CI's opportunist drift and mentioned the question of the fractions, without considering it to be on the immediate agenda, affirming that "*the history of the fractions is the history of Lenin*"; they are not a disease, but the symptom of this disease. They are a reaction of "*defence against opportunist influences*".

In a letter to Karl Korsch, in September 1926, Bordiga wrote: "*We needn't aspire to a splitting of the parties and the International. Before a split is possible, we need to allow the experience of an artificial and mechanical discipline, with the resulting absurd practices, to run their course, never renouncing however our political and ideological positions or expressing solidarity with the prevailing line. (...) In general I think that the priority today is not so much in the realm of organisation and manoeuvres, but in the elaboration of a political ideology; one which is left-wing and international and based on the revealing experiences undergone by the Comintern. Weakness in this respect will mean that any international initiative will be very difficult.*"<sup>22</sup>

These were also the bases on which the Left Fraction of the Communist Party of Italy would finally be constituted, after its first conference in April 1928 in the Paris suburb of Pantin. At that moment it counted four "federations": Brussels, New York, Paris and Lyon, with militants in Luxemburg, Berlin and Moscow.

This Conference unanimously adopted a resolution defining its perspectives:

"1. To constitute a Left Fraction of the Communist International (...)

3. To publish a bimonthly, to be called Prometeo.

4. To constitute left groups whose task will be to wage a ruthless struggle against opportunism and the opportunists (...)

5. To take up as an immediate goal:

– the reintegration of all those expelled from the International who adhere to the Communist Manifesto and accept the theses of the Third World Congress;

– to call the 6<sup>th</sup> World Congress under the presidency of Leon Trotsky;

– to put on the agenda of the 6<sup>th</sup> World Congress the expulsion of all those who declare themselves to be in solidarity with the resolutions of the 5<sup>th</sup> Russian Congress."

As can be seen:

- the Fraction did not conceive itself as "Italian", but as a fraction of the CI;
- it considered that a proletarian life still existed in the CI and that it could still be saved;
- it considered that the Russian Party must be submitted to the decisions of the Congress of the CI and "put its own house in order" by expelling all those who had openly betrayed (as had already been done earlier with respect to the other parties of International);
- it did not give itself the task of a general intervention towards the workers, but primarily among the militants of the CI.

Thereafter the Fraction would undertake a remarkable work until 1945, a work continued and supplemented by the Gauche Communiste de France until 1952. We have already often referred to this work in our articles, internal texts and discussions and it is not necessary to return to it here.

One of the essential contributions of the Italian Fraction, and which is the heart of this Report, would be precisely the development of the conception of the Fraction on the basis of the whole experience of the workers' movement. This conception is already summarily defined at the beginning of the Report. We will limit ourselves here to citing a passage from an article in our press where the conception of Fraction is defined:

"In our press, we have often dealt with the distinction worked out by the Italian Left between the Party and fraction forms (in particular, see our study on 'The relation between Fraction and Party in the Marxist tradition', in *International Review* n<sup>os</sup>. 59, 61, 64). For clarity's sake, we can just recall the main lines of the issue here. The communist minority exists permanently, as an expression of the proletariat's revolutionary destiny. However, its impact on the class' immediate struggles is closely conditioned by their level, and the extent of the consciousness of the working masses. Only in periods of open and increasingly conscious proletarian struggle can the minority hope to have an impact. Only in these conditions can the minority be described as a party. By contrast, in periods where the proletarian struggle is ebbing historically, and the counter-revolution triumphs, it is vain to hope that revolutionary positions can have a significant and determining impact on the class as a whole. In such periods, the only possible - but vital - work is that of the fraction: preparing the political conditions for the formation of the future Party when the balance of class forces once again makes it possible for communist positions to have an impact

19. *The Italian Communist Left*, Chapter I.

20. *Ibid.*

21. *Ibid.*

22. Bordiga, quoted in *The Italian Communist Left*.

throughout the proletariat.

*“The Left Fraction is formed as the proletarian Party is degenerating under the influence of opportunism, in other words its penetration by bourgeois ideology. It is the responsibility of the minority which upholds the revolutionary programme, to conduct an organised struggle for its victory within the Party. Either the Fraction succeeds, its principles triumph, and the Party is saved, or the Party continues to degenerate and ends up passing arms and baggage into the bourgeois camp. The moment where the proletarian Party passes into the bourgeois camp is not easy to determine. However, one of the most important signs of this passage is the fact that no proletarian political life any longer appears within the Party. It is the responsibility of the Left Fraction to continue the fight within the Party as long as there remains any hope of redressing it: this is why, during the late 1920’s and early ‘30’s, the left currents did not leave the parties of the CI, but were excluded, often by means of sordid manoeuvres. That being said, once a proletarian Party has passed over to the bourgeois camp, no return is possible. The proletariat must then produce a new party, to return to the road towards revolution, and the role of the Fraction is to be a “bridge” between the old Party gone over to the enemy and the future Party, for which it must build a programmatic foundation, and whose skeleton it must become. The fact that once the Party has passed over into the bourgeois camp, there can no longer exist any proletarian life within it means that it is both useless and dangerous for revolutionaries to undertake “entryism”, which has always been one of Trotskyism’s ‘tactics’, and which the Fraction always rejected. Attempts to maintain a proletarian life within a bourgeois party, in other words one which is sterile as far as class positions are concerned, has never had any result other than to accelerate the opportunist degeneration of those organisations which have attempted it, without redressing the Party in the slightest. As for any ‘recruitment’ gained by such methods, it has always been particularly confused, and gangrened by opportunism, and has never been able to form a vanguard for the working class.*

*“In fact, one of the fundamental differences between the Italian Fraction and Trotskyism was that when it came to regrouping revolutionary forces, the Fraction always put forward the need for the greatest clarity and programmatic rigour, although being open to discussion with all the other currents that had committed themselves to struggle against the degeneration of the CI. The Trotskyist current, by contrast, tried to form organisations in haste, without any serious discussion or decantation of political*

*positions beforehand, relying essentially on agreements between ‘personalities’ and the authority of Trotsky as one of the most important leaders of the 1917 revolution, and of the early CI.”*<sup>23</sup>

Another question that opposed Trotskyism to the Italian Fraction concerned the moment for the formation of a new party. For Trotsky and his comrades, the question of the foundation of the new party was immediately on the agenda from the moment the old parties had been lost for the proletariat. For the Fraction, the question was very clear: *“The transformation of the fraction into a party is conditioned by two closely dependent elements”*.

This paragraph evokes the methods of the Trotskyist current that, for lack of place, we have not mentioned above. But it is significant that two of the characteristics of this current, before it joined the bourgeois camp, were the following:

- At no moment did it integrate the notion of Fraction into its conception; for Trotskyism you passed from one party to another, and so during the time of retreat of the class, when revolutionaries were a small minority, their organisation had to be seen as a “mini-party”, a concept which had appeared within the Italian Fraction itself, in the mid-1930s, and which is that of the ICT today, since its main component is called the Partito Comunista Internazionale.
- Trotsky (but he was not the only one) had absolutely not understood the extent of the counter-revolution. His incomprehension was such that he considered the strikes from May-June 1936 in France as the “beginning of the revolution”. In this sense, the concept of the historic course (also rejected by the ICT) is fundamental for the Fraction.

The will to clarify, which has always animated the Italian left as a fundamental precondition for the fulfilment of its role, can evidently not be separated from the preoccupation for theory and the permanent need to call into question analyses and positions that once seemed to be definitive.

### By way of a conclusion

To conclude this part of the report: we must very briefly come back to the later trajectory of the currents which left the CI. The current emerging from the German-Dutch Left remained even after the disappearance of the KAPD and the KAPN. Its principal representative was the GIC (Group of Internationalist Communists) in Holland, a group which had an influence outside

<sup>23</sup>. “The Italian Fraction and the French Communist Left”; *International Review* n°90.

this country (for instance *Living Marxism*, animated by Paul Mattick in the United States). During one of the most tragic and critical moments of the 1930s, the Spanish Civil War, this group defended a basically internationalist position, without any concession towards antifascism. It stimulated the reflection within the Communist Left, including *Bilan* (which took up the position of Rosa Luxemburg and the German Left on the national question) as well as that of the Gauche Communiste de France, which rejected the Italian Left’s traditional position on the trade unions, adopting instead the position of the German-Dutch Left.

However, this current adopted two positions which proved to be fatal (and which would have been foreign to the KAPD):

- analysis of the Revolution of 1917 as bourgeois;
- the rejection of the need for the Party.

This led it to categorise as bourgeois a whole series of proletarian organisations of the past, to reject, in the final analysis, the history of the workers’ movement and the lessons which it could bring for the future.

This also led it to deny any role to the fraction since the task of the latter is to prepare an organisation the councilist current does not want, the Party.

As a consequence of these two weaknesses, it has prevented itself from playing a significant part in the process which will lead to the future Party, and thus to the communist revolution, even if councilist ideas continue to have an influence on the proletariat.

A last introductory point to the 2nd part of the Report: can the ICC be considered as a fraction? Obviously not, since our organisation was not formed within a proletarian party. But this answer had already been given at the beginning of the fifties by comrade MC in a letter to the other members of the *Internationalisme* group:

*“The Fraction was in a direct organic continuity with the old organisation since its existence was relatively brief. Often it remained within the old organisation up to the moment of the split. The split was often identical with the Fraction’s transformation into the new Party (eg the Bolshevik fraction and the Spartakusbund, like almost all the left fractions of the old International). Today, this organic continuity is all but non-existent (...) Because the Fraction did not have to confront fundamentally new problems such as those posed by our period of permanent crisis and evolution towards state capitalism, and was not shattered into the dust of tiny tendencies,*

*it was more firmly anchored in its acquired revolutionary principles than called upon to formulate new principles; it had more to maintain than to build. Thanks to this, and to its direct organic continuity over a relatively short space of time, it was the new Party in gestation.*

*“[Our group], though it has in part the tasks of the Fraction – ie the re-examination of past experience and the formation of militants – must also undertake the analysis of the newly evolving situation and the new perspective, but does not have to rebuild the programme of the future Party. It is only an element in this reconstruction, just as it is only an element of the future Party. Because of its organisational nature, its function of programmatic contribution can only be partial.”*

Today, after 40 years existence of the ICC, we must have the same approach as when it was 30 years old, by pointing out: *“We thus owe the ICC’s ability to live up to its responsibilities during its 30 years of existence largely to the contributions of the Italian Fraction of the Communist Left. The secret of the positive balance sheets that we can draw of activity during this period lies in our fidelity to the teachings of the Fraction and, more generally, to the method and the spirit of Marxism which it had learnt so well.”*<sup>24</sup>

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24. “30 years of the ICC: Learning from the past to build the future”, *International Review* n°123.

# Resolution on the international situation

## Basing ourselves on the history of the workers' movement

1. In making a balance sheet of the last 40 years of its analyses of the international situation, the ICC can take inspiration from the example of the 1848 *Communist Manifesto*, the first open declaration of the marxist current in the workers' movement. The achievements of the Manifesto are well-known: the application of the materialist method to the historical process, showing the transient nature of all hitherto existing social formations; the recognition that while capitalism was still playing a revolutionary role in unifying the world market and developing the productive forces, its inherent contradictions, manifested in the repeated crises of overproduction, indicated that it too was only a passing stage in human history; the identification of the working class as the gravedigger of the bourgeois mode of production; the necessity for the working class to raise its struggle to the level of taking political power in order to lay the foundations of a communist society; the necessary role of the communist minority as a product and active factor in the class struggle of the proletariat.

2. These steps forward are still a fundamental part of the communist programme today. But Marx and Engels, faithful to a method which is both historical and self-critical, were later able to recognise that some parts of the *Manifesto* had been surpassed or proved erroneous by historical experience. Thus, following the events of the Paris Commune in 1871, they concluded that the seizure of power by the working class would entail the destruction and not the seizure of the existing bourgeois state. And long before this, in the debates in the Communist League that followed the defeat of the 1848 revolutions, they realised that the *Manifesto* had been mistaken in its view that capitalism had already reached a fundamental dead-end, and that there could be a rapid transition from the bourgeois to the proletarian revolution. Against the hyper-activist tendency around Willich and Schapper, they insisted on the need for revolutionaries to undertake a far deeper reflection on the perspectives of a still ascendant capitalist society. However, in recognising these errors, they did not call into question their underlying method – rather they returned to it to give the movement's programmatic gains a more

solid foundation.

3. The passion for communism, the burning desire to see the end of capitalist exploitation, has frequently led communists to fall into similar errors as Marx and Engels in 1848. The outbreak of the First World War, and the immense revolutionary upsurge it provoked in the years 1917-20, was correctly seen by the communists as definitive proof that capitalism had now entered a new epoch, the epoch of its decline, and thus the epoch of the proletarian revolution. And indeed world revolution had been placed on the agenda by the seizure of power by the proletariat of Russia in October 1917. But the communist vanguard of the day also tended to underestimate the huge difficulties facing a proletariat whose self-confidence and moral compass had been dealt a severe blow by the betrayal of its old organisations; a proletariat which had been exhausted by years of imperialist slaughter, and which was still weighed down by the reformist and opportunist influences that had grown up in the workers' movement during the previous three decades. The response to these difficulties by the leadership of the Communist International was to fall into new versions of opportunism aimed at gaining influence within the masses, such as the "tactic" of the United Front with the proven agents of the bourgeoisie active in the working class. This opportunist turn gave rise to healthy reactions from the left currents within the International, notably the German and Italian Lefts, but they themselves still faced considerable obstacles to understanding the new historical conditions. In the German Left, those tendencies who adopted the theory of the "death crisis" mistakenly saw the onset of capitalism's decadence – which would reveal itself as a whole period of crises and wars – as indicating that the system had come up against a brick wall and would be totally unable to recover. One result of this was the launching of adventurist actions aimed at provoking the proletariat into giving capitalism its death blow; another was the launching of an ephemeral Communist Workers' International followed by the "councilist" phase, a growing abandonment of the very notion of the class party.

4. The inability of the majority of the German Left to respond to the reflux of the revolutionary wave was a crucial element in the disintegration of most of its organised expressions. By contrast, the Italian

Left was able to recognise the profound defeat suffered by the world proletariat by the late 20s and to develop the theoretical and organisational responses demanded by the new phase in the class struggle, encapsulated in the concept of a change in the course of history; in the formation of the Fraction; and in the idea of drawing a '*Bilan*'<sup>1</sup> (balance sheet) of the revolutionary wave and the programmatic positions of the Communist International. This clarity enabled the Italian Fraction to make priceless theoretical advances, at the same time defending internationalist positions when all around were succumbing to anti-fascism and the march towards war. And yet even the Fraction was not immune from crises and theoretical regressions; by 1938 the review *Bilan* had been renamed *Octobre* in anticipation of a new revolutionary wave resulting from the impending war and its ensuing "crisis of the war economy". And in the post-war period, the Gauche Communiste de France – which was born in reaction to the crisis in the Fraction during the war and the immediatist rush to form the Internationalist Communist Party in 1943, and was able in a very fruitful period between 1946 and 1952 to synthesise the best contributions of the Italian and German lefts and to develop a deep understanding of capitalism's adoption of totalitarian and statified forms – was itself undone by a faulty understanding of the post-war period, wrongly foreseeing the imminent outbreak of a third world war.

5. Despite these serious mistakes, the fundamental approach of *Bilan* and the GCF remained valid and was indispensable to the formation of the ICC in the early 1970s. The ICC was formed on the basis of a whole number of the key acquisitions of the communist left: not only fundamental class positions such as opposition to national liberation struggles and all capitalist wars, the critique of trade unions and of parliamentarism, the recognition of the capitalist nature of the "workers" parties and the "socialist" countries, but also:

- the organisational heritage developed by *Bilan* and the GCF, in particular, their distinction between the fraction and the party, and the critique of both councilist and substitutionist conceptions of the role of the organisation; in addition, the recognition of the questions of functioning and of militant behaviour as political

1. *Bilan* was the name of the journal published from 1926 by Italian Left in exile in France.

questions in their own right;

- a number of indispensable elements for providing the new organisation with a clear perspective for the period opening up before it, in particular: the notion of the historic course and the analysis of the global balance of forces between the classes; the concept of capitalist decadence and the deepening economic contradictions of the system; the drive towards war and the constitution of imperialist blocs; the essential role of state capitalism in the system's ability to maintain its existence despite its historical obsolescence.

### Understanding the historic period

6. The focus of this resolution is the elements guiding our analysis of the international situation since our inception. And here it is clear that the ICC did not merely inherit the acquisitions of the past but was able to develop them in a number of ways:

- Armed with the concept of the historic course, the ICC was able to recognise that the May-June events in France in 1968, and the subsequent international wave of struggles, announced the end of the period of counter-revolution and the opening up of a new course towards massive class confrontations; it was therefore able to continue analysing the evolution of the balance of forces between the classes, the real advances and retreats of the class movement, in this global and historical framework, thus avoiding a purely empirical response to each episode in the international class struggle.
- On the foundations of its theory of capitalist decadence, the groups that came together to form the ICC had also understood that this wave of struggles was not, contrary to the theory of the Situationists, provoked by boredom with the consumer society, but by the return of the open crisis of the capitalist system. Throughout its existence, the ICC therefore continued to follow the course of this economic crisis and point to its inexorable deepening.
- Understanding that the resurfacing of the economic crisis would push the capitalist world powers towards new conflicts and preparations for a new world war, the ICC recognised the need to continue with its analysis of the balance of forces between the imperialist blocs, and between the bourgeoisie and the working class, whose resistance to the economic crisis erected a barrier to the system's capacity to launch a

generalised holocaust.

- With its conception of state capitalism, the ICC was able to offer a coherent explanation of the long-drawn out nature of the crisis that emerged in the late 60s, which has seen the bourgeoisie use all kinds of mechanisms (nationalisations, privatisations, massive recourse to credit, etc) to distort the functioning of the law of value and thus to mitigate or postpone the most explosive effects of the economic crisis. By the same token, the ICC has been able to see how the bourgeoisie in its decadent phase has used its position in the state to carry out all kinds of manoeuvres (on the terrain of elections, trade union actions, ideological campaigns etc) to derail the class struggle and hinder the development of class consciousness. And it was this same theoretical framework which enabled the ICC to show the underlying reasons for the crisis in the so-called "socialist" countries and the collapse of the Russian bloc after 1989.

- Drawing together its concept of the historic course and its analysis of the evolution of imperialist conflicts and of the class struggle, the ICC has been the only proletarian organisation to understand that the collapse of the old bloc system was the product of a historic stalemate between the classes and that it marked capitalism's entry into a new and final phase of its decadence – the phase of decomposition, which in turn has brought new difficulties for the proletariat and new dangers for humanity.

7. Alongside its ability to incorporate and take forward the gains of the past workers' movement, the ICC, like all previous revolutionary organisations, is also subject to the multiple pressures emanating from the dominant social order, and therefore to the ideological forms these pressures generate – above all, opportunism, centrism, and vulgar materialism. In particular, in its analyses of the world situation, it has fallen prey to the impatience and immediatism which we identified in the organisations of the past (...). These weaknesses have been aggravated in the history of the ICC by the conditions in which it was born, since it suffered from an organic break with the organisations of the past, from the impact of the Stalinist counter-revolution which introduced a false vision of the struggle and of proletarian morality, and from the powerful influence of the petty bourgeois rebellion of the 1960s – the petty bourgeoisie, as a class with no historic future, being almost by definition the embodiment of immediatism. Furthermore, these tendencies have been exacerbated in the period of decomposition which is both the

product of and an active factor in the loss of perspectives about the future.

### The class struggle

8. From the beginning, the danger of immediatism expressed itself in the ICC's evaluation of the balance of forces between the classes. While correctly identifying the period after 1968 as the end of the counter-revolution, its characterisation of the new historic course as a "course towards revolution" implied a linear and rapid ascent from the immediate struggles to the overthrow of capitalism; and even after this formulation was corrected, the ICC maintained the view that the ensuing waves of struggle between 1978 and 1989, despite temporary retreats, amounted to a semi-permanent proletarian offensive. The immense difficulties of the class in moving from defensive movements to the politicisation of its struggles and the development of a revolutionary perspective were not sufficiently emphasised and analysed. Even though the ICC was able to recognise that the onset of decomposition and the collapse of the blocs would involve a profound retreat in the class struggle, we were still strongly influenced by the hope that the continued deepening of the economic crisis would bring back the "waves" of struggle of the 70s and 80s; and while we were right in seeing that there was a turning point in the reflux after 2003, we often underestimated the huge problems facing the new generation of the working class in developing a clear perspective for its struggles, a factor affecting both the class as a whole and its politicised minorities. These errors of analysis have also fed some false and even opportunist approaches to intervention in the struggle and the construction of the organisation.

9. Thus if the theory of decomposition (which in fact was the last legacy to the ICC from comrade MC) has been a unique and indispensable guide to understanding the present period, the ICC has not always taken on board all its implications. This is particularly true when it has come to recognising and explaining the difficulties of the working class since the 1990s. While we were able to see how the bourgeoisie had used the effects of decomposition to mount huge ideological campaigns against the working class – most notably the barrage of noise about the "death of communism" after the collapse of the eastern bloc – we did not go deeply enough into examining how the very process of decomposition tended to undermine the proletariat's self-confidence and solidarity. In addition, we struggled to understand the impact on class identity of the break-up of old proletarian concentrations in some of the old capital-

ist heartlands and their re-location to the formerly “underdeveloped” nations. And while we have had at least a partial understanding of the necessity for the proletariat to politicise its struggles if it is to resist the weight of decomposition, it has only been late in the day that we have begun to grasp that for the proletariat the recovery of its class identity and its adoption of a political perspective has a vital cultural and moral dimension.

### The economic crisis

**10.** It’s probably in the area of following the economic crisis that the most obvious difficulties of the ICC have been expressed. In particular:

- At the more general level, a tendency to fall into a reified view of the capitalist economy as a machine governed solely by objective laws, obscuring the reality that capital is first and foremost a social relation and that the actions of human beings – in the form of social classes – can never be entirely abstracted from an analysis of the course of the economic crisis. This is particularly true in the epoch of state capitalism where the ruling class is permanently faced with the need to intervene in the economy and even to counter its “immanent” laws, while at the same time being compelled to factor in the danger of the class struggle as an element in its economic policies.
- A reductionist understanding of the economic theory of Rosa Luxemburg, coming to the false extrapolation that capitalism had already exhausted all possibilities of expansion by 1914 (or even by the 1960s). In reality when she formulated her theory in 1913 she recognised that there were still major areas of non-capitalist economy remaining to be exploited, even if it was less and less possible for this to take place without direct conflict between the imperialist powers.
- While recognising that with the reduction of these fields for its expansion, capitalism was more and more compelled to resort to the palliative of debt, this formula has sometimes become a catch-all explanation which did not go back to the underlying question of credit in the accumulation of capital; more seriously, the organisation has repeatedly predicted that the limits to debt had already been reached.
- All these elements were part of a view of the automatic collapse of capitalism, which became particularly prevalent in the wake of the 2008 “credit crunch”. More than one internal report

or article in our press proclaimed that capitalism had already run out of options and was heading towards a kind of economic paralysis, an overnight collapse. In reality, as Rosa herself insisted, the real catastrophe of capitalism is that it subjects humanity to a long drawn out agonising decline, plunging society into an increasing barbarism, so that the “end” of capitalism will not be a purely economic seizure but will inevitably be played out on the terrain of militarism and war, unless it is consciously brought about by the proletarian revolution (and to Rosa’s prognosis we must also add the increasing threat of ecological devastation, which will certainly accelerate the drive towards war). This idea of a sudden and complete collapse also forgets our own analysis of the capacity of the ruling class, through state capitalism, to prolong its system through all kinds of political and financial manipulations.

- The denial, in some of our key texts, of any possibilities of expansion for capitalism in its decadent phase also made it difficult for the organisation to explain the dizzying growth of China and other “new economies” in the period since the downfall of the old blocs. While these developments do not, as many have argued, call into question the decadence of capitalism, and indeed are a clear expression of it, they have disproved the assertion that in the decadent period there is strictly no possibility of industrial take-off in any of the “peripheral” regions. While we were able to refute some of the more facile myths about “globalisation” in the phase following the collapse of the blocs (from the right seeing it as a new and glorious chapter in the ascent of capitalism, from the left as a basis for reviving old nationalist and state capitalist solutions), we were not able to discern the kernel of truth in the globalisation mythology: that the removal of the old autarkic model did open up new spheres for capital investment, including the exploitation of a huge new fund of labour power reared outside of directly capitalist social relations.
- These errors of analysis are coupled to the fact that the organisation has found considerable difficulty in developing its understanding of the economic question in a genuinely associated manner. A tendency towards economic questions being the sphere of “experts” became apparent in the debate about the “30 glorious years” in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Although the ICC certainly needed to understand and explain why it had rejected the idea that the reconstruction of war-shattered economies in itself explains the survival of the system in

decadence, in practice this debate was a failed attempt to grapple with the problem. It was not well understood inside and outside the organisation and has left us theoretically rudderless. It needs to be re-framed in relation to the whole period of decadence, with the aim of clarifying the role of the war economy and the meaning of the irrationality of war in decadence.

### Imperialist tensions

**11.** In the sphere of imperialist tensions, the ICC has in general had a very solid framework of analysis, showing the different phases of the confrontation between the blocs in the 70s and 80s; and, despite being somewhat “surprised” by the sudden collapse of the Eastern bloc and the USSR after 1989, it had already developed the theoretical tools for analysing the inherent weaknesses of the Stalinist regimes; linking this to its understanding of the question of militarism and to the concept of decomposition that it had begun to elaborate in the latter half of the 80s, the ICC was the first in the proletarian milieu to predict the end of the bloc system, the decline of US hegemony, and the very rapid development of “each for themselves” at the imperialist level. While remaining aware that the tendency towards the formation of imperialist blocs had not disappeared after 1989, we showed the difficulties facing even the most likely candidate for the role of bloc leader against the US, the newly reunified Germany, in ever being able to fulfill this imperialist ambition. However, we were less able to foresee the capacity of Russia to re-emerge as a force to be reckoned with on the world arena, and most importantly, we have been very late in seeing the rise of China as a new and significant player in the great power rivalries which have developed over the past two or three decades – a failure closely connected to our problems in recognising the reality of China’s economic advance.

### A better understanding of still valid perspectives

**12.** Taken as a whole, the existence of all these weaknesses should not be a factor of discouragement, but a stimulus for undertaking a programme of theoretical development which will enable the ICC to deepen its grasp of all aspects of the world situation. The beginnings of a critical balance sheet of the last 40 years undertaken in the congress reports, the discussion on the “Theses on morality”<sup>2</sup> the attempts to go to the root of our method for analysing the

2. An internal text currently under discussion in the organisation.

class struggle and the economic crisis, the redefinition of our role as an organisation in the period of capitalist decomposition – all these are signposts pointing towards a real cultural renaissance in the ICC. In the coming period, the ICC will also have to return to such fundamental theoretical questions as the nature of imperialism and decadence in order to provide the most solid framework for our analyses of the international situation.

**13.** The first step in the critical balance sheet of 40 years of analysis of the world situation is to recognise our errors and to begin digging down to their origins. It would therefore be premature to try to apply all their implications to the current world situation and to the perspectives for the future. Nevertheless, we can say that despite our weaknesses, the fundamentals of our perspectives remain valid:

- At the level of the economy, there is every reason to expect that the economic crisis will continue to deepen and that, while there will be no final economic apocalypse, there will be phases marked by severe convulsions that shake the system to the core, as well as the continuation of the situation of precarity and endemic unemployment that already weigh heavily on the working class. Certainly we cannot underestimate the resilience of this system and the determination of the ruling class to keep it going despite its historical obsolescence, but as we have always said, the very remedies that capital applies to its mortal sickness, while bringing some short term relief, tend to make the patient even more sick in the long run.
- At the level of imperialist tensions, we are currently seeing a real acceleration of military chaos, most notably in Ukraine, the Middle East, Africa and the China sea, bringing with them an increasing threat of “blow back” to the central countries (as with the recent killings in Paris and Copenhagen). The stage of imperialist conflict is growing larger and so are the alliances being forged to wage them, as we can see in the case of the conflict between Russia and the “west” over Ukraine, or in the growing co-operation between Russia and China over the conflicts in the Middle East and elsewhere. But these alliances remain very contingent and lack the conditions for evolving into stable blocs. The primary danger facing humanity is not from a classic world war but from a degeneration of regional conflicts into an uncontrollable spiral of destruction.
- The premises of this spiral are already discernible and they have the most negative consequences for the proletariat,

whose “peripheral” fractions are being directly mobilised or massacred in the present conflicts, and whose central fractions find themselves incapable of reacting to the growing barbarism, reinforcing the tendency to fall into atomisation and despair. But despite all the very real dangers posed by the advancing tide of decomposition, the potential for the working class to respond to this unprecedented crisis of humanity have not been exhausted, as indicated by the best moments of the student movement in France in 2006 or the social revolts of 2011, where the proletariat, even without clearly recognising itself as a class, showed evidence of its capacity to unify across all its divisions, in the streets and in the general assemblies. Above all, the young proletarians engaged in these movements, insofar as they have begun to challenge the brutality of capitalist social relations and to pose the question of a new society, have taken the first timid steps towards reaffirming that the class struggle is not only an economic struggle, but a political struggle; and that its ultimate aim remains what was outlined so audaciously in the *Manifesto* of 1848: the establishment of the dictatorship of the proletariat and the inauguration of a new human culture and a new morality.

# Report on the class struggle

From its inception, the ICC has always attempted to analyse the class struggle in its historical context. Our organisation recognised that it owed its very existence not only to the efforts of past revolutionaries, and of those who had acted as a bridge from one generation of revolutionaries to another, but also to a change in the course of history inaugurated by the world wide resurgence of the proletariat after 1968, ending “forty years of counter-revolution” since the last ripples of the great revolutionary wave of 1917-27. But today, a further 40 years after its foundation, the ICC is confronted with the task of re-examining the whole corpus of the very considerable work it has carried out in relation to this historic re-appearance of the working class and the immense difficulties it has encountered on the road to its emancipation.

## The historic resurgence of the proletariat

Before the ICC, before May 1968, the signs of a crisis in capitalist society were already growing: at the economic level, the problems of the US and British currencies; at the social-political level, protests in the USA against the Vietnam war and racial segregation; in the class struggle, Chinese workers rebelling against the so-called “cultural revolution”, wildcats by US car workers, etc (see for example the article from *Accion Proletaria* published in in *World Revolution* n°s 15 and 16, which actually talks about a wave of struggles from 1965 onwards). This was the context in which Marc Chirik<sup>1</sup> (MC) and his young comrades in Venezuela made their oft-quoted (by us at least) prognosis: “*We are not prophets, nor can we claim to predict when and how events will unfold in the future. But of one thing we are conscious and certain: the process in which capitalism is plunged today cannot be stopped and it leads directly to the crisis. And we are equally certain that the inverse process of developing class combativity which we are witnessing today will lead the working class to a bloody and direct struggle for the destruction of the bourgeois state.*”

Here are all the strengths of the marxist method inherited from the communist left: a capacity to discern major shifts in the trajectory of capitalist society long before they become too obvious to deny. And so MC, most of whose militant life had been played out under the shadow of the counter-revolution, was able to announce a change in the historic course: the counter-revolution was at last over, the post-war boom was drawing to a close,

1. For a presentation on Marc Chirik, see the footnote in the article “What balance sheet and perspectives for our activity” in this issue

This report can only be the beginning of such a re-examination. It is not possible to go back in any detail to the struggles themselves and the various analyses that have been made of them, whether by mainstream historians or other elements in the proletarian movement. Instead we will have to restrict ourselves to what is already a rather daunting task: to look at the way the ICC itself has analysed the development of the class struggle through its own publications, principally its international theoretical organ, the *International Review*, which by and large contains the synthesis of all the discussions and debates which have animated our organisation throughout its life.

and the perspective was a new crisis of the world capitalist system and a resurgence of the proletarian class struggle.

But there is a key weakness in the formulation, which could give the impression that we were already entering a revolutionary period – in other words, a period where the world revolution is on the short-term agenda, as it was in 1917. The article does not of course claim that revolution is just around the corner, and MC had learned the virtue of patience in the most trying of circumstances. Nor did he subsequently make the mistake of the Situationists who actually thought May ‘68 was the beginning of the revolution. But such an ambiguity was to have its consequences for the new generation of revolutionaries who were to make up the ICC. For much of its subsequent history, even after it recognised the inadequacy of the formulation “course towards revolution” and replaced it with “course towards class confrontations” at the 5<sup>th</sup> Congress, the ICC would be plagued by the tendency to underestimate both the capacity of capitalism to maintain itself despite its decadence and its open crisis, and the difficulty of the working class to overcome the weight of the dominant ideology, to forge itself into a social class with its own autonomous perspective.

The ICC was formed in 1975 on the basis of an understanding that a new era of workers’ struggles had opened up, engendering also a new generation of revolutionaries whose first task was to re-appropriate the political and organisational acquisitions of the communist left and work towards regroupment on a world scale. The ICC was convinced that it had a unique role to play in this process, defining itself as the “pivot” of the future world communist party (“The question of the organisation of our International Communist Current”, *International Review* n°1).

However, the wave of struggles inaugurated by the massive movement in France May-June ‘68 was more or less over before the ICC was formed, since it is generally seen as running between 1968 and 1974, although there were important struggles in Spain, Portugal, Holland etc in 1976-77. As there is no mechanical link between the immediate struggle and the development of the revolutionary organisation, the relatively rapid growth of the ICC in its early days continued despite the reflux. But this expansion was still profoundly influenced by the atmosphere of May ‘68, when the revolution had *seemed* to many to be almost within reach. Joining an organisation which was openly for world revolution did not seem such a big wager at that time.

This feeling that we were already in the last days of capitalism, that the working class was gaining strength in an almost exponential manner, was reinforced by a characteristic of the class movement at that time, where there were only short pauses between what we identified as “waves” of international class struggle.

## The second wave, 1978-81

Among the factors that the ICC analysed in the retreat of the first wave was the counter-offensive of the bourgeoisie, which had been taken by surprise in 1968 but soon developed a political strategy aimed at derailing the class and providing it with a false perspective. This was summarised in the strategy of the “left in power”, promising a rapid end to the economic difficulties which were still comparatively mild at the time.

The end of the first wave in fact more or less coincided with the more open development of the economic crisis after 1973, but it was this development which created the



conditions for fresh outbreaks of the class movement. The ICC saw the “second wave” beginning in 1978 with the struggles of the lorry drivers, the “Winter of Discontent” and the steel workers’ strike in Britain, the oil workers’ strike in Iran which was organised through “shoras”, large-scale strike movements in Brazil, the Rotterdam dockers’ strike with its independent strike committee, the militant steelworkers’ movement in Longwy-Denain in France, and above all the huge strike movement in Poland 1980.

The movement that began in the Gdansk shipyards was a clear expression of the phenomenon of the mass strike, and enabled us to deepen our understanding of this phenomenon by returning to the original analysis of Rosa Luxemburg following the mass strikes in Russia that culminated in the 1905 revolution (see for example the article “Notes on the mass strike” in *International Review* n°27). We saw the reappearance of the mass strike as the highest point of struggle since ‘68, answering many of the questions posed in previous struggles, especially about self-organisation and extension. We thus argued - against the vision of a class movement that must always go round in circles until the “party” is able to direct it towards a revolutionary overthrow - that the workers’ struggles had a trajectory, that there was a tendency to advance, to draw lessons, to answer questions posed in previous struggles. On the other hand, we were able to see that the political awareness of the Polish workers lagged behind the real level of struggle. They formulated some general demands that posed more than just economic issues, but the domination of trade unionism, democracy and religion were very strong and tended to deform any attempt to advance onto the explicitly political terrain. We also saw the capacity of the world bourgeoisie to unite against the mass strikes, especially through the creation of Solidarnosc.

But our efforts to analyse the manoeuvres of the bourgeoisie against the working class also gave rise to a very strong empiricist, “common sense” tendency, expressed most clearly by the “Chenier” clan (see note 3). When we observed a new political strategy of the bourgeoisie at the end of the ‘70s - the line-up of right in power, left in opposition in the central capitalist countries - we found ourselves having to go deeper into the question of the Machiavellianism of the bourgeoisie. The article in *International Review* n°31 on the consciousness and organisation of the bourgeoisie examined how the evolution of state capitalism enabled this class to develop active strategies against the working class. To a large extent the majority of the revolutionary movement had

forgotten that the marxist analysis of the class struggle is an analysis of *both* major classes in society, not only of the advances and retreats of the proletariat. The latter is not engaged in shadow boxing but is taking on the most sophisticated ruling class in history, which despite its false consciousness has shown a capacity to learn from historical events, above all when it comes to dealing with its mortal enemy, and is capable of no end of manipulations and deceptions. Examining the strategies of the enemy class was a given for Marx and Engels, but our attempts to continue this tradition have often been dismissed as “conspiracy theory” by many elements who are bewitched by the appearance of democratic freedoms.

Analysing the balance of forces between the classes also takes us to the question of the historic course. In the same *International Review* as the first major text on the left in opposition (*International Review* n°18, third quarter 1979, which contains the texts from the third ICC congress), and in response to confusions in the international conferences and within our own ranks (for example the RC/GCI tendency<sup>2</sup> which announced a course towards war), we published a crucial contribution on the question of the historic course, which was an expression of our ability to continue and to develop the heritage of the communist left. This text set about refuting some of the most common misconceptions in the revolutionary milieu, in particular the idea, rooted in empiricism, that it is not possible for revolutionaries to make general predictions about the course of the class struggle. Against this notion, the text reaffirms the fact that its capacity to define a perspective for the future - and not only the general alternative between socialism and barbarism - is one of marxism’s defining characteristics and always has been. More specifically, the text insists that marxists have always based their work on their ability to grasp the particular balance of class forces within a given period, as we saw again in the first part of this report. By the same token, the text shows that an inability to grasp the nature of the course had led past revolutionaries into serious errors (for example, Trotsky’s disastrous adventures in the 1930s).

An extension of this agnostic view of the historic course was the concept, defended in particular by the IBRP (International Bureau for the Revolutionary Party, later to become the International Communist Tendency, to which we shall return below), of a “parallel” course towards war and

revolution...

Although it would be four years before we formally changed our formula “course towards revolution”, above all because it contained the implication of a kind of inevitable and even linear progress towards revolutionary confrontations, we already understood that the historic course was neither static nor predetermined but was subject to changes in the evolution of the balance of force between the classes. Hence our “slogan” at the beginning of the 80s, and in response to the tangible acceleration of inter-imperialist tensions (especially the Russian invasion of Afghanistan and the response it provoked in the west): the Years of Truth. Truth not only in the brutal language of the bourgeoisie with its new right wing teams, but truth also in terms of deciding the very future of humanity. There were certainly errors in this text: in particular the idea of the “total failure” of the economy and of an already-existing proletarian “offensive” when the workers’ struggles were still of necessity on a fundamentally defensive terrain. But the text also had a real predictive power: not only because the Polish workers rapidly offered us clear proof that the course towards war was not open and that the proletariat was capable of providing an alternative, but also because the events of the 80s did prove decisive, even though not in the way we had initially envisaged. The struggles in Poland were a key moment in a process leading to the collapse of the eastern bloc and the definitive opening of the phase of decomposition, the expression of a social stalemate in which neither class was able to put forward its historic alternative.

We saw the second wave coming to an end with the repression in Poland and this also accelerated a crisis in the revolutionary milieu (the break-up of the international conferences, the split in the ICC<sup>3</sup>, the collapse of the PCI: see *International Review* n°s 28 and 32). But we continued to develop our theoretical understanding, in particular by raising the problem of international generalisation as the next step in the struggle, and through the debate on the critique of the theory of the weak link (see *International Review* n°s 31 and 37). These two interconnected issues were part

2. For more on this tendency, see “The question of organisational functioning in the ICC” in *International Review* n°109 ([http://en.internationalism.org/ir/109\\_functioning](http://en.internationalism.org/ir/109_functioning))

3. For more on this split, see the article in *International Review* n°109, “The question of organisational functioning in the ICC”, which contains the following passage: “At the time of the crisis of 1981, a vision developed (with the contribution of the suspicious element Chenier, but not just him) which considered that each local section could have its own policy as far as intervention was concerned, which violently contested the IB and the IS (reproaching them with their position on the left in opposition and of provoking a Stalinist degeneration) and who, while defending the necessity of central organs, attributed to them the role of a mere post box.” ([http://en.internationalism.org/ir/109\\_functioning](http://en.internationalism.org/ir/109_functioning))

of our effort to understand the significance of the defeat in Poland. Through these discussions we recognised that the key to the next major development of the world-wide class struggle – which we defined not only in terms of self-organisation and extension but of international generalisation and politicisation – remained in Western Europe. The texts on generalisation and other polemics also reaffirmed that the best conditions for the proletarian revolution were provided not by war, as most groups from the Italian left tradition continued to argue, but from an open economic crisis, and that this was precisely the perspective that had been opened up after 1968. Finally, in the wake of the defeat in Poland some very far-sighted analyses of the underlying rigidity of the Stalinist regimes were put forward in articles such as “Eastern Europe: Economic crisis and the bourgeoisie’s weapons against the proletariat” in *International Review* n°34. These analyses were the basis for our understanding of the mechanisms of the collapse of the eastern bloc after 1989.

### 1983-88: the third wave

A new wave of struggles was announced by the public sector strikes in Belgium and this was confirmed over the next few years via the British miners’ strike, the struggles of the railway and health workers in France, rail and education sectors in Italy, massive struggles in Scandinavia, in Belgium again in 1986, etc. Nearly every issue of the *International Review* during this period had an editorial article about the class struggle and we published various congress resolutions on the question. There was certainly an attempt to situate these struggles in a more general historical context. In *International Review* n°39 and *International Review* n°41 we carried articles about the *method* needed to analyse the class struggle, responding to the dominant empiricism and lack of framework in the milieu, which could go from severe underestimation to sudden and absurd exaggerations. The text in *International Review* n°41 in particular reaffirmed some basic elements about the dynamic of the class struggle – its uneven, “wave like” character, deriving from the underlying fact that the working class is the first revolutionary class to be an exploited class and cannot march from victory to victory like the bourgeoisie, but must go through a process of painful defeats which can be the springboard for future advances in consciousness. This jagged contour of the class struggle is even more pronounced in the decadent period, so that to understand the significance of a particular outbreak of the class struggle we cannot merely “photograph” it in isolation: it must be

located within a more general trajectory, which leads us back to the question of the balance of forces between the classes, the question of the historic course.

Alongside this was the development of the debate on centrism towards councilism, which first manifested itself on the theoretical level – the relationship between consciousness and struggle and the question of subterranean maturation (see the article on this in *International Review* n°43). These debates enabled the ICC to make an important critique of the councilist view that consciousness only develops through the open struggle, and to elaborate the distinction between the dimensions of extent and depth (“consciousness of the class and class consciousness”, a distinction instantly seen as “Leninist” by the future EFICC tendency). The polemic with the CWO on the question of subterranean maturation noted the similarities between the councilist views of our “tendency” and those of the CWO, which at that point openly advocated the Kautskyst theory of class consciousness (understood as something brought to the proletariat from the outside, by bourgeois intellectuals). The article tried to go further into the marxist view of the relationship between the unconscious and the conscious while making a critique of the vulgar “common sense” vision of the CWO.

There is another area in which the struggle against councilism has not been taken to its conclusion: while recognising in theory that class consciousness can indeed develop outside periods of open struggle, there is a long-standing tendency to hope that, nonetheless, given that we were no longer living in a period of counter-revolution, the economic crisis would bring about sudden leaps in the class struggle and class consciousness. This smuggled the councilist conception of an automatic link between crisis and class struggle back in through the window, and it has frequently returned to haunt us, not least in the period following the 2008 crash.

### A proletariat on the offensive? The difficulties of politicisation

Applying the analysis we had developed through the debate on the weak link, our principal texts on the class struggle in the period recognised the importance of a new development of the class struggle in the central countries of Europe. The “Theses on the Class Struggle” (1984) published in *International Review* n°37, outlined the features of this wave:

*“The characteristics of the present wave, as have already been manifested and which will become more and more discernible*

*are as follows:*

- *a tendency towards very broad movements involving large numbers of workers, hitting entire sectors or several sectors simultaneously in one country, thus posing the basis for the geographical extension of the struggle;*
- *a tendency towards the outbreak of spontaneous movements, showing, especially at the beginning, a certain bypassing of the unions;*
- *the growing simultaneity of struggles at an international level, laying the basis for the world generalisation of struggles in the future;*
- *a progressive development, within the whole proletariat, of its confidence in itself, of its awareness of its strength, its capacity to oppose itself as a class to the attacks of the capitalists;*
- *the slow rhythm of the development of struggles in the central countries and notably of their capacity for self-organisation, a phenomenon which results from the deployment by the bourgeoisie of these countries of a whole arsenal of traps and mystifications, and which has been shown again in the most recent confrontations”.*

Most important of these “traps and mystifications” was the deployment of rank and file unionism against the real tendencies towards workers’ self-organisation, a tactic which was sophisticated enough to produce allegedly anti-union co-ordinations which actually functioned as a last rampart of trade unionism. But while by no means blind to the dangers facing the class struggle, the Theses, like the text on the Years of Truth, still contained the notion of an *offensive* of the proletariat, and predicted that the third wave would reach a higher level than the previous two, which implied that it would reach the necessary stage of international generalisation.

The fact that the course is towards class confrontations doesn’t imply that the proletariat is already on the offensive: until the eve of revolution, its struggles will be essentially defensive faced with the relentless attacks of the ruling class. Such errors were the product of a long-standing tendency to overestimate the immediate level of the class struggle. This was often in reaction to the failure of the proletarian milieu to see beyond its noses, a theme often developed in our polemics, and also in the resolution on the international situation from the 1985 6<sup>th</sup> ICC congress, published in *International Review* n°44, which contains a long section on the class struggle. This section is an excellent demonstration of the ICC’s historical method

for analysing the class struggle, a further critique of the scepticism and empiricism which dominated the milieu, and it also identifies the loss of historical traditions and the rupture between the class and its political organisations as key weaknesses of the proletariat. But in retrospect it places too much emphasis on disillusionment with the left and especially the unions, and the growth of unemployment, as potential factors in the radicalisation of the class struggle. It does not ignore the negative sides of these phenomena, but could not yet see how, in the approaching phase of decomposition, both passive disillusionment with the old “workers” organisations, and the generalisation of unemployment, especially among the young, could become powerful elements in the demoralisation of the proletariat and the undermining of its class identity. It’s also telling, for example, that as late as 1988 (*International Review* n°54) we were still publishing a polemic on the underestimation of the class struggle in the proletarian camp. Its arguments were generally correct but it also showed a lack of awareness of what was just around the corner – the collapse of the blocs and the most drawn-out reflux we had ever experienced.

But towards the end of the 80s it became clear to a minority at least that the forward movement of the class struggle, which we had analysed in many of the articles and resolutions during this period, was getting bogged down. There was a debate about this at the 8<sup>th</sup> congress of the ICC (*International Review* n°59), in particular in relation to the question of decomposition and its negative effects on the class struggle. A considerable part of the organisation saw the “third wave” going from strength to strength, and the impact of certain defeats was underestimated. This had been especially true of the UK miners’ strike, whose defeat didn’t stop the wave but had a longer-term effect on working class self-confidence and not only in the UK, while reinforcing the bourgeoisie’s commitment to going ahead with the dismantling of “old” industries. The 8<sup>th</sup> congress was also the one where the idea was mooted that bourgeois mystifications now “lasted no longer than three weeks”.

The discussion on centrism towards councilism had raised the problem of the proletariat’s flight from politics, but we weren’t able to apply this to the dynamic of the class movement – in particular its lack of politicisation, its difficulty in developing a perspective, even when struggles were self-organised and showed a tendency to extend. We can even say that the ICC has never made an adequate critique of the impact of economism and workerism in its own ranks, leading it to underestimate the

importance of factors which take the proletariat beyond the limits of the workplace and of immediate economic demands

It wasn’t until the collapse of the Eastern bloc that the full weight of decomposition could really be grasped, and we then correctly foresaw a period of new difficulties for the proletariat (see *International Review* n°60). These difficulties derived precisely from the inability of the working class to develop its perspective, but were also to be actively reinforced by the vast ideological offensive of the ruling class around the theme of the “death of communism” and the end of the class struggle.

### The period of decomposition

The subsequent reflux in the class struggle, faced with the weight of decomposition and the anti-communist campaigns of the ruling class, proved to be very deep, and although we saw some tentative expressions of militancy in the early 90s and again towards the end of the decade, it was to persist into the next century while decomposition advanced visibly (expressed most clearly in the attack on the Twin Towers and the subsequent invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq). In the face of this advancing decomposition we were obliged to re-examine the whole question of the historic course in a report to the 14<sup>th</sup> Congress (published in *International Review* n°107. Other texts of note on this theme included “Why the proletariat has not yet overthrown capitalism” in *International Review* n°s 103 and 104 and the resolution on the international situation from the 15<sup>th</sup> ICC congress, *International Review* n°113).

The 2001 report on the historic course, after reaffirming the theoretical acquisitions of past revolutionaries and our own framework as developed in the document from the 3<sup>rd</sup> Congress, focused on the definite modifications brought about by the entry of capitalism into its phase of decomposition, where the tendency towards world war was obstructed not only by the inability of the bourgeoisie to mobilise the proletariat, but also by the centrifugal dynamic of “every man for himself”, which meant that the re-formation of imperialist blocs met with increasing difficulties. However, since decomposition contains the risk of a gradual descent into chaos and irrational destruction, it creates immense dangers for the working class, and the text reaffirms the view of the original theses that the class could be gradually ground down by the whole process to the point where it would no longer be able to stand against the advancing tide of barbarism. The text also tentatively distinguished between the material and ideological elements involved

in the “grinding down” process: the ideological elements emerging spontaneously from the soil of capitalist decay, and the conscious campaigns orchestrated by the ruling class, such as the endless propaganda about the death of communism; at the same time, the text identified more directly material elements like the dismantling of the old industrial centres which had often been the centres of militancy in the previous waves of class struggles (mines, steel, docks, car plants etc). But while the new report did not attempt to mask the difficulties facing the class, it examined signs of the class regaining its fighting spirit and the continuing difficulties of the ruling class in enlisting the working class for its war campaigns, and concluded that the potential for a revival of the class struggle was still largely intact, and this was to be confirmed two years later by the movements around “pension reform” in Austria and France.

In the “Report on the class struggle” in *International Review* n°117 we identified a turning point, a revival of the struggle, manifested in these movements around pensions and other expressions. This was confirmed by further movements in 2006 and 2007, such as the movement against the CPE in France and massive struggles in the textile and other sectors in Egypt. The students’ movement in France was particularly eloquent testimony of a new generation of proletarians facing a very uncertain future (see “Theses on the Students’ Movement in France”, *International Review* n°125, and also the editorial from the same issue). This tendency was further confirmed by the “youth” struggles in Greece in 2008-9, the student revolt in the UK in 2010, and above all by the Arab Spring and movements of the Indignados and Occupy in 2011-2013, which gave rise to a number of articles in the *International Review*, in particular the one in *International Review* n°147. There were definite gains in these movements – the affirmation of the assembly form, a more direct engagement with political and moral issues, a clear sense of internationalism, elements whose significance we will return to later. In our report to the October 13 plenary session of the International Bureau we criticised the workerist and economist dismissal of these movements and a temptation to shift the focus of the world class struggle to the new industrial concentrations in the Far East. But we did not hide the basic problem revealed in these revolts: the difficulty of their young protagonists in seeing themselves as part of the working class, the immense weight of the ideology of the citizen and thus of democratism. The fragility of these movements was indicated very clearly in the Middle East where we could see clear regressions in consciousness (eg in Egypt

and Israel) and, in Libya and Syria, an almost immediate collapse into imperialist war. There had indeed been a genuine tendency towards politicisation in these movements since they posed deep questions about the very nature of the existing social system, and like previous upsurges in the 2000s, they gave rise to a tiny minority of searching elements, but within this minority there was a huge difficulty in advancing towards revolutionary militant commitment. Even when these minorities seemed to have escaped the more obvious chains of decomposing bourgeois ideology, they very often encountered them in the more subtle or radical forms that are crystallised in anarchism, “communisation” theory, and similar tendencies, all of which furnish additional evidence that we had been very much on the right track when we saw “councilism as the main danger” in the 80s, since all these currents founder precisely on the question of the political instruments of the class struggle, above all the revolutionary organisation.

A proper balance sheet of these movements (and of our discussions about them) has not been drawn and can't be attempted here. But it seems that the cycle of 2003-2013 has come to an end and we are facing a new period of difficulties.<sup>4</sup> This is most obvious in the Middle East, where social protest has given way to ruthless state repression and imperialist barbarism; and this horrible involution can only have a depressive effect on workers all over the world. In any case, if we recall our analysis of the uneven development of the class struggle, the reflux from these upsurges is unavoidable and for some time this will tend to further expose the class to the noxious impact of decomposition.

### Underestimating the enemy

Most of our errors over the past 40 years seem to be in the direction of underestimating the bourgeoisie, the capacity of this class to maintain its rotting system, and thus the enormity of the obstacles facing the working class in assuming its revolutionary tasks. In drawing up a balance sheet of the struggles between 2003 and 2013, this has to be a key element.

The report to the 2014 Congress of the section in France reasserts the analysis of the turning point: the 2003 struggles raised the key issue of solidarity and the anti-CPE 2006 in France was a profound movement which took the bourgeoisie by surprise and forced it to retreat as it posed the real danger of an extension to the employed workers. But following this there was a tendency

to forget the capacity of the ruling class to recover from such shocks and to renew its ideological offensive and manoeuvres, particularly when it comes to restoring the influence of the unions. We had seen this in France in the 80s with the development of the co-ordinations and we again recognised it in 1995, but, as the report on the class struggle to the last Congress of *Révolution Internationale* points out, we forgot it in our analyses of the movements in Guadeloupe and the pensions struggle in 2010, which effectively exhausted the French proletariat and prevented any serious contagion from the movement in Spain a year later. And again, despite our past emphasis on the enormous impact of the anti-communist campaigns, the report to the French section's congress also suggests that we have been too quick to forget that the campaigns against marxism and communism still have a considerable weight on the new generation that has appeared in the last decade.

Some of the other weaknesses in our analysis during this period are only beginning to be recognised.

In our criticisms of the ideology of the “anti-capitalists” of the 1990s, with their emphasis on globalisation as a totally new phase on the life of capitalism – and of the concessions made within the proletarian movement to this ideology, especially in the case of the IBRP which seemed to be putting the decadence of capitalism into question – we didn't recognise the truth at the heart of this mythology: that the new strategy of “globalisation” and neo-liberalism enabled the ruling class to weather the recessions of the 80s and even opened up real possibilities for expansion in areas where the old bloc divisions and semi-autarkic economic models had erected considerable barriers to the movement of capital. The most obvious example of this development is of course China, whose rise to “super-power” status we didn't fully anticipate, although ever since the 1970s and the Sino-Russian split we had recognised that it was a kind of exception to the rule of the impossibility of “independence” from the domination of the two blocs. We have thus been late in assessing the impact that the emergence of huge new industrial concentrations in some of these regions will have on the global development of the class struggle. The underlying theoretical reasons for our failure to predict the rise of the New China will have to be investigated in more depth in the discussions around our analysis of the economic crisis.

Perhaps most significantly, we have not adequately investigated the role played by the break-up of many of the old centres of class militancy in the heartlands in under-

mining class identity. We have rightly been sceptical of purely sociological analyses of class consciousness, but the changing composition of the working class in the heartlands, the loss of traditions of struggle, the development of much more atomised forms of labour, have certainly contributed to the appearance of generations of proletarians who no longer see themselves as part of the working class, even when they are engaged in struggle against the attacks of the state, as we saw during the Occupy and Indignados movements of 2011-13. Particularly important is the fact that the whole scale “relocations” that have taken place in the Western countries often resulted from major defeats – the UK miners and French steelworkers being cases in point. These issues, though posed in the 2001 report on the historic course, were not really taken up and had to be re-affirmed in the 2013 report on the class struggle. This is a very long delay, and we have still not really incorporated this phenomenon into our own framework, which would certainly require a response to the flawed efforts of currents like the autonomists and the ICT to theorise about the “recomposition” of the working class.

At the same time, the prevalence of long term unemployment or precarious employment has exacerbated the tendency towards atomisation and loss of class identity. The autonomous struggles of the unemployed, able to link up with the struggles of the employed workers, were much less significant than we had foreseen in the 70s and 80s (cf the theses on unemployment, *International Review* n° 14, or the resolution on the international situation from the 6<sup>th</sup> ICC Congress, referred to in the previous section) and large numbers of the unemployed or precariously employed have fallen into lumpenisation, gang culture, or reactionary political ideologies. The students' movement in France in 2006, and the social revolts towards the end of the first decade of the new century, began to supply answers to these problems, offering the possibility of encompassing the unemployed in mass demonstrations and street assemblies, but this was still in a context where class identity remained very weak.

Our main emphasis on explaining the loss of class identity has been at the ideological level, whether we are talking about the immediate products of decomposition (every man for himself, gang culture, flight into irrationality, etc) or about the deliberate use of the effects of decomposition by the ruling class – most obviously the campaigns around the death of communism, but also the more day to day ideological onslaught of the media and of advertising packaging false revolt, obsession with consumerism

4. This question is still under discussion in the ICC.

and celebrity, etc. This is of course vital but we have in some ways only begun to investigate how these ideological mechanisms operate at the deepest level – a theoretical task clearly posed by the Theses on Morality<sup>5</sup> and our efforts to develop and apply the marxist theory of alienation.

Class identity is not, as the ICT has sometimes argued, a kind of merely instinctive or semi-conscious feeling held by the workers, to be distinguished from the true class consciousness preserved by the party. It is itself an integral aspect of class consciousness, part of the process whereby the proletariat recognises itself as a distinct class with a unique role and potential in capitalist society. Furthermore, it is not limited to the purely economic domain but from the beginning had a powerfully cultural and moral element: as Rosa Luxemburg put it, the workers' movement is not limited to "*bread and butter issues*" but is a "*great cultural movement*" The workers' movement of the 19<sup>th</sup> century thus encompassed not only struggles for immediate economic or political demands, but the organisation of education, of debates about art and science, of sport and leisure activities and so on. The movement provided a whole milieu in which proletarians and their families could associate outside the workplace, strengthening the conviction that the working class was the true heir of all that was healthy in previous expressions of human culture. This kind of working class movement reached its peak in the period of Social-Democracy but this was also the prelude to its demise. What was lost in the great betrayal of 1914 was not only the International and the old forms of political and economic organisation but also this wider cultural milieu, which only survived as a kind of caricature in the "fêtes" of the Stalinist and leftist parties. 1914 was thus the first of a series of blows against class identity over the past century: the political dissolution of the class in democracy and anti-fascism in the 30s and 40s, the assimilation of communism with Stalinism, the break in organic continuity with the organisations and traditions of the past brought about by the counter-revolution: long before the unfolding of the phase of decomposition these traumas already lay heavily on the proletariat's capacity to constitute itself into a class with a real sense of itself as the social force bearing within itself the "dissolution of all classes". Thus any investigation into the problem of loss of class identity will have to go back over the whole history of the workers' movement and not restrict itself to the last few decades. Even if it is in the last few decades that the problem

has become so acute and so threatening to the future of the class struggle, it is only the concentrated expression of processes which have a much longer history.

To return to the problem of our underestimation of the ruling class: the culmination of our long-standing underestimation of the enemy – and which is also the greatest weakness in our analyses – was reached after the financial crash of 2007-8, when an old tendency to see that the ruling class in the centres of the system had more or less run out of options, that the economy had reached a total impasse, came to a head. This could only increase feelings of panic, the often unstated notion that the working class and the tiny revolutionary movement were either at the last chance saloon or had already "missed the boat". Certain formulations about the dynamic of the mass strike fed into this immediatism. In fact, we were not wrong to see the "germs" of the mass strike in the student movement in France in 2006 or struggles like those of the steel workers in Spain in the same year, in Egypt in 2007, in Bangladesh and elsewhere. Our mistake lay in seeing the seed as the flower, and in not understanding that the period of germination could be a very long one. Clearly these errors of analyses were closely linked to the activist and opportunist deformations of our intervention during this period, although these errors must also be understood in the broader discussion of our role as an organisation (see the text on the work of the fraction in this issue).

### The moral dimension of class consciousness

*"If the owner of labour-power works to-day, to-morrow he must again be able to repeat the same process in the same conditions as regards health and strength. His means of subsistence must therefore be sufficient to maintain him in his normal state as a labouring individual. His natural wants, such as food, clothing, fuel, and housing, vary according to the climatic and other physical conditions of his country. On the other hand, the number and extent of his so-called necessary wants, as also the modes of satisfying them, are themselves the product of historical development, and depend therefore to a great extent on the degree of civilisation of a country, more particularly on the conditions under which, and consequently on the habits and degree of comfort in which, the class of free labourers has been formed. In contradistinction therefore to the case of other commodities, there enters into the determination of the value of labour-power a historical and moral element."*<sup>6</sup>

To approach *Capital* without really grasping that Marx is seeking to understand the workings of a particular *social relation* which has been the product of thousands of years of history, and which like other social relations is doomed to disappear, is to end up being bewitched by the reified view of the world which Marx's study aims to combat. This includes all the academic marxologists, whether they see themselves as comfortable professors or ultra-radical communists, who tend to analyse capitalism as a self-sufficient system of eternal laws which operate in precisely the same way in all historical conditions, in the decadence of the system as in its ascent. But Marx's remarks about the value of labour power take us away from this purely economic view of capitalism towards an understanding that "historical and moral" factors play a crucial role in determining a central "economic" foundation of this society: the value of labour power. In other words, contrary to the assertions of Paul Cardan (alias Castoriadis, the founder of the *Socialisme ou Barbarie* group) for whom *Capital* was a book without class struggle, Marx argues that the assertion of human dignity by the exploited class – the moral dimension par excellence – cannot by definition be removed from a scientific examination of the operations of the capitalist system. In the same sentence Marx also answers those who see him as a moral relativist, as a thinker who rejects all morality as being the hypocritical cant of one ruling class or another.

Today the ICC is being obliged to deepen its understanding of the "historical and moral element" in the situation of the working class – historical not only in the sense of the struggles of the last 40, or 80, or 100 years, or even since the first workers' movements at the dawn of capitalism, but in the sense of the continuity and rupture between the struggles of the working class and those of previous exploited classes, and beyond that, its continuity and rupture with all previous attempts of the human species to overcome the barriers to the realisation of its true potentialities, to "unlock its slumbering powers" as Marx defined the central characteristic of human labour per se. This is where history and anthropology come together, and to talk of anthropology is to talk of the history of morality. Hence the importance of the "Theses on Morality" and our discussions around them...

Extrapolating from the Theses, we can note certain key moments marking the tendency towards the unification of the human species: the passage from the horde to a wider primitive communism; the advent of the "axial age", connected to an incipient generalisation of commodity relations, which saw the emergence of most of the

5. An internal document currently under discussion in the organisation.

6. Marx, *Capital* vol 1 chapter 6

world religions, expressions in “spirit” of the unification of a humanity which could not yet be united in reality; the global expansion of ascendant capitalism which for the first time tended to unite humanity under the admittedly brutal reign of a single mode of production; the first world revolutionary wave which contained the promise of the material human community. This tendency was dealt a terrible blow by the triumph of the counter-revolution and it is no accident that, on the verge of the most barbaric war in history, Trotsky in 1938 could already talk of the “crisis of humanity”. No doubt he had in mind, as evidence of this crisis, World War I, Stalinist Russia, the world economic depression and the march towards a second world war, but it was perhaps above all the image of Nazi Germany (even though he did not live to witness the most horrific expressions of this barbaric regime), which confirmed this notion, this idea of humanity itself being put the test, because here was an unprecedented process of *regression* in one of the cradles of bourgeois civilisation: the national culture that had given birth to Hegel, Beethoven, Goethe was now succumbing to the rule of thugs, occultists and nihilists, driven by a programme which sought to drive a final nail in the possibility of a united humanity.

In decomposition, this tendency towards regression, these signs of the whole of human progress up till now collapsing in on itself, is becoming “normalised” across the planet. This is expressed above all in the process of fragmentation and every man for himself: humanity, at a stage where production and communication is more unified than ever, is in danger of being divided and subdivided into nations, regions, religions, races, gangs, all of this accompanied by an equally destructive regression at the intellectual level with the rise of numerous forms of religious fundamentalism, nationalism and racism. The rise of Islamic State provides a summary of this process on a historic scale: where once Islam was the product of a moral and intellectual advance across and beyond the entire region, today Islamism, both in its Sunni and Shia forms, is a pure expression of the negation of humanity - of pogromism, misogyny and the worship of death.

Clearly this danger of regression infects the proletariat itself. Sections of the working class in Europe, for example, having seen the defeat of all the struggles of the 70s and 80s against the decimation of industry and jobs, are being targeted with some success by racist parties who have found new scapegoats to blame for their misery – the waves of immigrants into the central countries, fleeing economic, ecological or military disaster in their own

regions. These immigrants are generally more “noticeable” than were the Jews in 1930s Europe, and those of them who espouse the Muslim religion can be directly linked to forces engaged in imperialist conflicts against the “host” countries. This capacity of the right rather than the left to penetrate parts of the working class (in France for example, previous “bastions” of the CP have fallen to the Front National) is a significant expression of a loss of class identity: where once we could point to workers losing their illusions in the left because of their experience of its sabotaging role in the struggle, today the declining influence of the left is more of a reflection of the fact that the bourgeoisie has less need of forces of mystification which claim to act on behalf of the working class because the latter is less able to see itself as a class at all. It also reflects one of the most significant products of the global process of decomposition and the uneven development of the world economic crisis: the tendency for Europe and North America to become islands of relative “sanity” in a world gone mad. Europe in particular looks increasingly like a well-stocked bunker holding out against the desperate masses looking for shelter from a global apocalypse. The “common sense” response of all the besieged, no matter how ruthless the regime inside the bunker, would be to close ranks and make sure that the doors to the bunker remain tight shut. The instinct to survive then becomes totally divorced from any moral feelings and impulses.

The crises of the “vanguard” must also be located in this overall process: the influence of anarchism on the politicised minorities that were generated by the struggles of 2003-13, with its fixation on the immediate, the particular workplace, the “community”; the growth of workerism *à la* Mouvement Communiste and its opposing pole, the “communisation” tendency which rejects the working class a subject of the revolution; the slide towards moral bankruptcy within the communist left itself, which we will be analysing in other reports. In sum, the incapacity of the revolutionary vanguard both to grasp the reality of the moral and intellectual regression sweeping the world and to fight against it.

This report argues not only that the cycle of struggles which went from 1968-1989 came to a halt because the proletariat was unable to offer an alternative to capitalism, definitively opening the phase of decomposition, but also that the first important cycle of struggles in the phase of decomposition also seems to have drawn to an end, and largely for the same reasons.

## The historic course

The situation looks very grave indeed. Does it still make sense to talk about a historic course towards class confrontations? The working class today is as distant from 1968 as 1968 was from the beginnings of the counter-revolution, and in addition its loss of class identity means that its capacity for re-appropriating the lessons of struggles that may have taken place decades ago has diminished. At the same time the dangers inherent in the process of decomposition – of a gradual exhaustion of the proletariat’s ability to resist capitalist barbarism – do not remain static but tend to amplify as the capitalist social system falls deeper into decay.

The historic course has never been fixed in perpetuity and the possibility of massive class confrontations in the key countries of capitalism is not a pre-arranged staging post in the journey into the future.

Nevertheless, we continue to think that the proletariat has not spoken the last word, even when those who have spoken have little awareness of speaking for the proletariat.

In our analysis of the class movements of 68-89, we noted the existence of certain high points which provided an inspiration for future struggles and a yardstick to measure their progress. Thus: the importance of 68 in France in raising the question of a new society; of the Polish struggles of 1980 for reaffirming the methods of the mass strike, of the extension and self-organisation of the struggle, and so on. To a large extent these were questions that remained unanswered. But we can also say that the struggles of the last decade or so have also had their high points, above all because they began to raise the key question of politicisation which we have identified as a central weakness of the struggles in the previous cycle. What’s more the most important of these movements – such as the student struggle in France in 2006 and the revolt of the Indignados in Spain - posed many questions which demonstrated that for the proletariat politics is not about whether to keep or dump the governing bourgeois team but about changing social relations, that proletarian politics is about creating a new morality opposed to the dog-eat-dog world of capitalism. In their “indignation” against the waste of human potential and destructiveness of the current system, in their efforts to win over the most alienated sectors of the working class (the appeal of the French students to the “*banlieue*” youth), in the leading role played by young women, in their approach to the question of violence and police provocation, in the desire for passionate debate in the

assemblies, and in the incipient internationalism of so many of the movements' slogans,<sup>7</sup> these movements shook a fist at the advancing tide of decomposition and affirmed that passively yielding to this tide is not at all the only possibility, that it is still possible to respond to the no-future of the bourgeoisie, with its incessant attacks on the perspective of the proletariat, with reflection and debate about the possibility of a different kind of social relationship. And in so far as these movements were forced to raise themselves to the general level, to pose questions about every aspect of capitalist society, from the economic and the political to the artistic, scientific and environmental, they provided us with a glimpse of how a new "great cultural movement" could reappear in the fires of revolt against the capitalist system.

There were certainly moments when we tended to get carried away with enthusiasm for these movements and to lose sight of their weaknesses, reinforcing our tendencies towards activism and forms of intervention that were not guided by a clear theoretical starting point. But we were not wrong in 2006, for example, to see elements of the mass strike in the movement against the CPE. No doubt we tended to see this in an immediatist rather than a long term perspective, but there is no question that these revolts did reaffirm the underlying nature of the class struggle in decadence: struggles that are not organised by permanent bodies in advance, that tend to spread rapidly throughout society, that pose the problem of new forms of self-organisation, that tend to integrate the political with the economic dimension.

Of course the great weakness of these struggles was that to a large extent they did not see themselves as proletarian, as expressions of the class war. And if this weakness is not overcome, the strong points of such movements will tend to become weak points: a focus on moral concerns will decline into a vague form of petty bourgeois humanism that falls easily into democratic and "citizen" – i.e. openly bourgeois – politics; assemblies will become mere street parliaments where open debate around the most fundamental issues is replaced by the manipulations of political elites and by demands that fix the movement within the horizon of bourgeois politics. And this of course was essentially the fate of the social revolts of 2011-13.

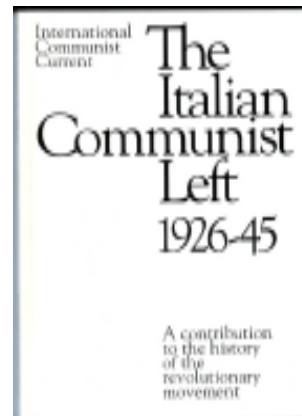
The necessity to link the revolt in the street with the resistance of the employed workers, with all the various products of

the working class movement, and to understand that this synthesis can only be based on a proletarian perspective for the future of society, which in turn implies that the unification of the proletariat must include the restoration of the connection between the working class and the organisations of revolutionaries. This is the unanswered question, the unfulfilled perspective posed by not only by the struggles of the last few years, but by all the expressions of the class struggle since 1968.

Against the common sense of empiricism, which can only see the proletariat when it comes to the surface, Marxists recognise that the proletariat is like Blake's sleeping giant Albion whose wakening will turn the world upside down. On the basis of the theory of the subterranean maturation of consciousness, which the ICC is more or less alone in defending, we recognise that the vast potential of the working class remains for the most part hidden, and even the clearest revolutionaries can easily forget that this "slumbering power" can have a huge impact on social reality even when it has apparently withdrawn from the scene. Marx was able to discern that the working class was the new revolutionary force in society on what seemed like scanty evidence, such as a few strikes by French weavers who had not yet completely gone past the artisan stage of development. And despite all the immense difficulties facing the proletariat, despite all our overestimation of the struggle and underestimation of the enemy, the ICC can still see enough in the class movements over the past 40 years to conclude that the working class has not lost this capacity to offer humanity a new society, a new culture, and a new morality...

7. We can point to the open expression of solidarity between the struggles in the US and Europe and those in the Middle East, especially Egypt, or the slogans of the movement in Israel defining Netanyahu, Mubarak and Assad as the same enemy.

# History of the working class



## The Dutch and German Communist Left

The Dutch communist left is one of the major components of the revolutionary current which broke away from the degenerating Communist International in the 1920s. Well before Trotsky's Left Opposition, and in a more profound way, the communist left had been able to expose the opportunist dangers which threatened the International and its parties and which eventually led to their demise. In the struggle for the intransigent defence of revolutionary principles, this current, represented in particular by the KAPD in Germany, the KAPN in Holland, and the left of the Communist Party of Italy animated by Bordiga, came out against the International's policies on questions like participation in elections and trade unions, the formation of 'united fronts' with social democracy, and support for national liberation struggles. It was against the positions of the communist left that Lenin wrote his pamphlet *Left Wing Communism, An Infantile Disorder*; and this text drew a response in *Reply to Lenin*, written by one of the main figures of the Dutch left, Herman Gorter.

In fact, the Dutch left, like the Italian left, had been formed well before the first world war, as part of the same struggle waged by Luxemburg and Lenin against the opportunism and reformism which was gaining hold of the parties of the Second International. It was no accident that Lenin himself, before reverting to centrist positions at the head of the Communist International, had, in his book *State and Revolution*, leaned heavily on the analyses of Anton Pannekoek, who was the main theoretician of the Dutch left. This document is an indispensable complement to *The Italian Communist Left*, already published by the ICC, for all those who want to know the real history of the communist movement behind all the falsifications which Stalinism and Trotskyism have erected around it.

## The Italian Communist Left

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.

In the midst of this defeat the Italian Communist Left remained faithful to the internationalist principles of the working class, and tried to draw the lessons of a counter-revolution which terminally infected even the Trotskyist Opposition.

The aim of this brief history of the struggle of the Italian Communist Left is to help all those who have thrown in their lot with the revolutionary working class to bridge the gap between their past and their present.

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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 statified 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*.

## ICC postal addresses

Write to the following addresses without mentioning the name:

### Spain, France, Brazil

Mail Boxes 153, 108 rue Damremont  
75018 Paris

### Mexico, Venezuela, Peru, Ecuador

Apartado Postal 15-024,  
CP 02600,  
Distrito Federal, Mexico.

### Belgium, Holland

BP 94, 2600, Berchem, Belgium

### Great Britain, Australia, United States

BM Box 869  
London WC1 N3XX  
Great Britain

### India, Phillipines

POB 25, NIT, Faridabad, 121001,  
Haryana, India

### Italy

CP 469, 80100, Naples, Italy

### Germany, Switzerland, Sweden, Turkey

Postfach 2216  
CH-8026 Zurich, Switzerland