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International Review

Presenting the *Review*

Revolution in Germany
100 years ago the proletariat made the bourgeoisie tremble

**Report on imperialist tensions
(June 2018)**

Fifty years since May 1968
The advances and retreats in the class struggle since 1968

ICC public meetings on May 68
Did May 68 really mark the end of almost 50 years of counter-revolution?

Communism is on the agenda of history
Castoriadis, Munis and the problem of breaking with Trotskyism (part I)

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Presenting the *Review*

A hundred years ago, we were at the height of the world revolutionary wave, more precisely of the revolution in Germany, a year after the proletariat took political power in Russia, in October 1917. In the same way as we paid tribute to the latter in our press, in particular by devoting a manifesto to it, we want to draw our readers' attention to the revolution in Germany, on which we are publishing an article in this issue of the *International Review*: "Revolution in Germany: a hundred years ago, the proletariat made the bourgeoisie tremble".

It was the turn of this fraction of the world proletariat to storm the heavens, as its heroic class struggle and solidarity cleansed the dirt and infamy of the imperialist butchery and aimed at bringing capitalist barbarism to an end. As in Russia, the working class in Germany gave rise to workers' councils, organs for unifying all workers and for the eventual taking of political power. Because it took place in the most industrialised country in the capitalist world, with the most numerous working class, the revolution in Germany had the potential to break the isolation of the proletarian power in Russia and to extend the revolution across Europe. The bourgeoisie was aware of this and it brought the imperialist war to an end, signing the armistice of 11 November 1918, because continuing the war would have further radicalised the masses and discredited all factions of the bourgeoisie, especially its most "left" factions, which is what had happened in Russia in the months following the February 1917 revolution. Furthermore, although most of the right wing factions of the state apparatus were in total disarray as a result of the military disaster, the German bourgeoisie was able to rely on the social democratic traitors to weaken and then crush the working class and its revolution in Germany. This is a fundamental lesson for the revolution of the future, since it will again run up against all the left and extreme left factions of capital working overtime to undo the class struggle. The ICC has devoted numerous articles to the revolution in Germany, including two series which we recommend to our readers.

The failure of the revolution in Germany also meant the defeat of the world revolutionary wave of 1917-23. It opened up a period of profound counter-revolution that gave free rein to the unleashing of capitalist barbarism, in particular the Second World War which broke all the sinister records of barbarism set by the First. But in contrast to the latter, the proletariat, crushed physically and ideologically, was not able to rise up on its class terrain and pose the question

of revolution. So much so that the retreat in its consciousness deepened even further during the next two decades, until the events of May 1968 bore testimony to a real change in the social atmosphere. New generations of proletarians, who unlike their elders had not been subjected to the steam-roller of the counter-revolution and were spurred on by the first expressions of the open crisis of capitalism, did not hesitate to call into question the control of struggles by the Stalinists and the trade unions. Thus the proletariat finally returned to a path that allowed the development of its struggle and its consciousness. In this issue, we are publishing "On our public meetings on May 68: did May 68 really signify the end of nearly 50 years of counter-revolution?" Here we respond in the affirmative to this question. Writing this article was motivated in particular by a dual difficulty we noted in many who took part in ICC public meetings on the 50th anniversary of May 68. On the one hand: "*an insufficient knowledge of the period of counter-revolution opened up by the defeat of the first revolutionary wave, and from this fact a difficulty in really grasping the meaning of such a period for the working class and its struggle*". On the other hand, a difficulty to understand the whole dynamic of the period opened up by May 68, given the very real development of barbarism in present day capitalism, which sometimes makes it difficult to see the persistence of the class struggle and its future potential.

This *Review* thus also carries on with the balance sheet of the evolution of society since May 68 which we began with the previous issue, where we published an article focusing on the aggravation of the economic crisis since 1968, "50 years since May 1968, sinking into the economic crisis". As we underlined in the conclusion to this article, "*it is one thing to show that we were right to predict the reappearance of the open economic crisis in 1969, and to offer a framework to explain why this crisis would be long drawn out affair. It is a more difficult task to show that our prediction of a resurgence of the international class*

struggle has also been vindicated". This is the task we attempt in the second article in the series, "50 years since May 68, the advances and retreats in the class struggle", published in this issue. For the period between May 68 and the end of the 80s, with regard to the evolution of the balance of forces between the classes, the article points to the fact that "*the working class, despite 20 years of struggle, which had held back the drive towards war, and which had indeed seen important developments in class consciousness, had been unable to develop the perspective of revolution, to raise its own political alternative to the crisis of the system*". At the same time, during these twenty years, "*the bourgeoisie had not inflicted a decisive historic defeat on the working class and was not able to mobilise it for a new world war*". The result was a kind of historic blockage between the classes in which, deprived of any way out yet still stuck in a long drawn-out economic crisis, capitalism was beginning to rot on its feet, and this decay was affecting capitalist society at all levels. This diagnosis was powerfully confirmed by the collapse of the eastern bloc which, in turn, considerably accelerated the process of decomposition on a world scale.

In its wake, the campaigns of the world bourgeoisie about the death of communism, about the impossibility of the working class proposing a viable alternative to capitalism, brought further blows to the capacity of the international working class – in particular in the central countries of the system – to develop a political perspective. The result was a serious reflux in the class struggle. In the last three decades, this reflux in the consciousness of the working class has not only continued, but has got deeper, causing a kind of amnesia about the advances of the period 1968-89, while the social atmosphere of decomposition and the spread of military chaos across the planet creates a very unfavourable context. The dangers facing humanity have never been so great: "*capitalism's decline and decomposition certainly magnify the threat that the objective basis of a new society will be definitively destroyed if decomposition advances beyond a certain point*". This is something that has to be faced in a lucid manner: "*we have to face the reality of all these difficulties and to draw their political consequences for the struggle to change society*". And yet the working class has not

spoken its last word: “in our view, while the proletariat cannot avoid the harsh school of defeat, growing difficulties and even partial defeats do not yet add up to a historic defeat for the class and to the obliteration of the possibility of communism... even in its last phase, capitalism still produces the forces that can be used to overthrow it – in the words of the Communist Manifesto of 1848, ‘what the bourgeoisie produces, above all, is its own gravediggers.’”

In the framework of following the evolution of imperialist tensions, we are publishing a report on the imperialist situation adopted in June 2018. Since then, events have very clearly confirmed a central idea of this report, which is that the USA has become the main propagator of the tendency towards “every man for himself” on a world scale. To the point where it is now destroying the instruments of its own “world order”. An expression of this was Trump’s visit to Europe for the June 2018 NATO summit. On this occasion he made threats which put him in conflict with those who, up till now, have defended the global imperialist interests of American capital. He insisted that if the European “allies” didn’t increase their military budgets in line with American requirements, the US could act as a Lone Ranger, and even leave NATO. At the same time the results of the NATO summit could only strengthen the determination of its European member countries to increase their military budgets and thus gain a wider margin of manoeuvre outside of US control. Trump’s ultimatum was in fact a welcome pretext for accelerating this process, strengthening European ambitions to develop new military structures either within the EU or outside it, in particular between France and Germany, but also with Britain, in spite of Brexit. In this same report, we also write with regard to the US: “Its seemingly paradoxical alliance with Israel and Saudi Arabia leads to a new configuration of forces in the Middle East (with a growing rapprochement between Turkey, Iran and Russia) and increases the danger of a general destabilisation of the region, of more confrontations between the main sharks, and more extensive bloody wars”. This has been strikingly confirmed by the crisis opened by the murder of the Saudi consulate in Istanbul of the journalist Amal Khashoggi. The French, the Germans, the Americans, all have their own particular imperialist reasons for rushing to support Ankara in the affair. At the same time, “the rise of strong leaders and bellicose rhetoric” mentioned in the report has also seen a new expression in the election of an extreme right wing president, Bolsonaro, in Brazil.

We also publish the article “Welcome to *Socialisme ou Barbarie*” from number 43

of *Internationalisme* in June 1949, which is the statement of position adopted by the group in response to the first issue of the review *Socialisme ou Barbarie*. This is the first part of an article “Castoriadis, Munis and the problem of breaking with Trotskyism” in the series “Communism is on the agenda of history”. The French Fraction of the Communist Left, and then the Gauche Communiste de France, were extremely interested in discussing with all the internationalist proletarian groups which had survived the war. Despite characterising official Trotskyism as an appendage to Stalinism, *Internationalisme* was open to the possibility that groups coming out of Trotskyism – on condition of breaking totally with its counter-revolutionary positions and practices (its abandoning of internationalism, but also the fact that its vision of social transformation remained firmly within the limits of capitalism) – could evolve in a positive direction.

This article by *Internationalisme* is a good example of the method employed by the GCF in its relations with those who had escaped the shipwreck of Trotskyism in the wake of the Second World War: a fraternal welcome towards a new group which the GCF recognised as belonging to the revolutionary camp, in spite of numerous differences in the method and vision of the two groups. It is an approach without any illusions and with a clear awareness that the heavy legacy of Trotskyism would weigh for a long time on such elements, and could even prove fatal if there was not an in-depth questioning of their origins. This approach, which remains valid to this day, is the same as that of the ICC. The second part of this article can already be read on our site. It deals specifically with the scars left by Trotskyism on those who, after leaving it, genuinely side with the proletarian revolution, as was the case with Castoriadis for a certain time only, and for Munis his whole life.

The Editors 2.11.18

Revolution in Germany

100 years ago the proletariat made the ruling class tremble

“100 Years ago, the proletariat made the ruling class tremble”. This title may sound odd today because this immense historical event has more or less been consigned to oblivion. The bourgeoisie has succeeded in erasing it from the memory of the working class. And yet in 1918, all eyes were on Germany – a source of hope for the proletariat, and of fear for the bourgeoisie.

The working class had just taken power in Russia. 1917. The Bolsheviks. The soviets. The insurrection. Or as Lenin put it: *“The Russian revolution is only one of the contingents of the international socialist army, on the action of which the success and triumph of our revolution depends. This is a fact which none of us lose sight of. We likewise bear in mind that the vanguard role of the Russian proletariat in the working-class movement is not due to the economic development of the country. On the contrary, it is the backwardness of Russia, the inability of what is called our native bourgeoisie to cope with the enormous problems connected with the war and its cessation that have led the proletariat to seize political power and establish its own class dictatorship”* (Speech to the conference of factory committees in the Moscow province, July 23 1918)

Germany was the bolt on the door between East and West. A victorious revolution here would open the way to the revolutionary class struggle throughout the old continent of Europe. None of the bourgeoisies wanted to see this door unbolted. This is why the bourgeoisie was to direct all its hatred, and all its most sophisticated manoeuvres, against it. The revolution in Germany would determine the success or failure of the world revolution which had begun in Russia.

The power of the working class

1914: The world war breaks out. It brought 4 years in which the working class was subjected to the worst butchery in the history of humanity. The trenches. Poison gas. Famine. Millions of dead. Four years in which the trade unions and the social democratic parties took advantage of their glorious proletarian past – which they betrayed in 1914 by supporting the bourgeoisie’s war effort - and the confidence they were accorded by the workers to impose all kinds of sacrifices and to justify the war. But during

these four years the working class, little by little, began to fight back. Strikes in a succession of cities. Unrest in the army. And of course, faced with this, the bourgeoisie did not remain inert. It reacted ferociously. “Ringleaders” in the factories, fingered by the unions, were arrested. Soldiers were shot for indiscipline or desertion.

1916: On the First of May Karl Liebknecht¹ raised the cry: “Down with the war! Down with the government!” Rosa Luxemburg was jailed, alongside other revolutionary socialists - Meyer, Eberlein, Mehring (who was then 70 years old).² Karl Liebknecht was sent to the front. But the repression wasn’t enough to silence the discontent. On the contrary: it gave rise to growing agitation in the factories.

1917: the unions came under more and more criticism. The “Obleute” appeared in the factories – the “Men of Confidence”, essentially rank and file union delegates who had broken with the union leadership. Above all, the workers of Germany were inspired by the courage of their class brothers and sisters in the East. The echo of the October revolution was being heard far and wide.

1918: The German bourgeoisie was becoming aware of the danger and it realised that it needed to extricate itself from the war. But the most backward part of the ruling class, linked to the old aristocracy, and especially the military aristocracy, didn’t understand what was at stake and rejected any idea of peace or any talk of defeat. Concretely, in November, the naval command based in Kiel insisted on one final battle to save its “honour” – using the rank and file sailors as cannon fodder of course. But on several ships the sailors mutinied and raised the red flag. The order was given

1. Along with Rosa Luxemburg, one of the two best known and most persecuted leaders of the Spartacist League.

2. All three were part of the minority of the SPD which refused to vote for war credits and joined the Spartacist League

to the ships that hadn’t been “infected” to fire on them. The mutineers surrendered, refusing to fire on their own class comrades. As a result, they faced the death penalty. But in solidarity with those who had been condemned, a wave of strikes broke out among the workers of Kiel. Inspired by the October revolution, the working class took charge of its struggle and created the first workers’ and soldiers’ councils. The bourgeoisie then called in one of its most loyal guard-dogs: social democracy. The SPD leader Gustav Noske, the specialist in military matters and in “maintaining troop morale” was dispatched to the spot to stifle the danger. But he arrived too late. The workers’ and soldiers’ councils were already spreading to other ports and the great working class centres of the Ruhr and Bavaria. Faced with this geographic extension of the movement, Noske could not attack it head on. On 7 November the Kiel workers’ council called for revolution, proclaiming “power is in our hands”. On 8 November, practically the whole of north-west Germany was under the control of the councils. In Bavaria, Saxony, local princes abdicated. Workers’ councils spread to all the cities of the Empire, from Metz to Berlin.

It was precisely the generalisation of this mode of political organisation that made the bourgeoisie tremble. The unification of the class in workers’ councils, with delegates elected by assemblies and revocable at any moment, is an extremely dynamic form of organisation. The councils are a real expression of the revolutionary process, the place where the working class comes together, debates the goals of its struggle, takes control of social life. After the experience of 1917, the bourgeoisie understood this very well. This is why it focused on undermining the councils from within, taking advantage of the considerable illusions the working class still had in its old party, the SPD. Thus Noske was elected to the head of the workers’ council in Kiel. This weakness of our class would have tragic consequences in the weeks that followed. We will come back to this. But for now, on the morning of 9 November, the struggle was still developing. In Berlin, the workers demonstrated outside the barracks to



Wilhelmshaven, 6th November 1918

rally the soldiers to their cause and freed their class comrades from prison. The bourgeoisie then understood that the war had to end right away and that the Kaiser had to go. It was drawing the lessons from the mistakes made by the Russian bourgeoisie. On 9 November 1918 Kaiser Wilhelm abdicated. On 11 November, the armistice was signed.

The struggle of the workers of Germany had hastened the end of the war, but it was the bourgeoisie which signed the peace treaty and was to use this event to act against the revolution.

The Machiavellianism of the bourgeoisie

A brief summary of the balance of forces at the beginning of the civil war in November 1918:

- On the one hand, an extremely combative working class. It had spread the workers' councils across the whole country and with great rapidity. But it held on to major illusions in its former party, the SPD. It allowed these traitors to assume the highest responsibilities within the councils, as in the case of Noske in Kiel. The revolutionary organisations, the Spartacists and other groups of the left were engaged in a political battle, carrying out the role of providing an orientation for the struggle. They put forward the necessity to create a bridge to the working class in Russia; they unmasked the manoeuvres and sabotage of the bourgeoisie, they understood the fundamental role of the workers' councils.
- On the other hand, the German bour-

geoisie, an extremely experienced and organised ruling class, conscious of the efficacy of its major anti-working class weapon, the SPD. Heeding the warning of the events in Russia, it clearly identified the danger of continuing the war and the threat posed by the workers' councils. The whole work of sabotage carried out by the SPD was aimed at diverting the revolutionary process towards the cage of bourgeois democracy. To achieve this, the bourgeoisie was to attack on all fronts: from the most slanderous propaganda to the most savage repression, via a whole series of provocations.

The SPD thus took up one of the slogans of the revolution "end the war" while at the same time speaking up for "party unity" and wiping out the memory of its key role in the march to war. By signing the peace treaty, the SPD removed what was most unbearable from the workers, while at the same time injecting it with democratic poison. And to justify all this it found a useful scapegoat for the war and the famine: the monarchy and the military aristocracy.

Recuperating the councils

But the greatest danger for the bourgeoisie remained the councils and the slogan "all power to the soviets" which had come from Russia. The revocability of the delegates posed a real problem for the bourgeoisie, since it made it possible for the councils to constantly renew and radicalise themselves. This is why the councils were assailed by faithful representatives of the SPD, whether or not they were well-known figures like Noske in Kiel or Ebert in Berlin. The councils were gangrened from the in-

side, emptied of their substance. The whole aim of this manoeuvre was to convince the councils to renounce their own power in favour of the newly formed constituent assembly. The national congress of councils held in Berlin on 16 December 1918 was the clearest example of this.

- The soldiers' delegates were over-represented in relation to workers' delegates (1 for every 100,000 soldiers, 1 for every 200,000 workers), since the workers tended to be well to the left of the soldiers.
- Access to the congress was forbidden to the Russian delegation. Exit internationalism!
- Access to the congress was forbidden to non-workers, i.e. every member appeared on the basis of their job. Thus members of the Spartacist League including Luxemburg and Liebknecht were denied entry. Exit the revolutionary left! Even under the pressure of 250,000 demonstrators outside the doors, the congress did not budge
- In the same logic, the SPD got the Congress to vote the call for the election of a constituent assembly for the 19 January 1919.

The system of councils is an affront to capitalism and its democratic apparatus. The bourgeoisie was well aware of this. But it also knew that time was not on its side and that the image of the SPD as a workers' party was getting very thin. It thus had to precipitate events, while the proletariat needed time to mature, to grow politically.

Parallel to these ideological manoeuvres, from 9 November on, Ebert and the SPD were making secret agreements with the army to crush the revolution. They multiplied provocations, lies and slanders to pave the way to a military confrontation. Their calumnies were directed against the Spartakusbund in particular, accusing it of "assassinations, pillage, calling on the workers to shed their blood again". They called for a pogrom against Liebknecht and Luxemburg. They created a "White Army" – the Freikorps, composed of soldiers traumatised by the war and motivated by blind hatred.

Beginning 6 December, a huge counter-revolutionary offensive was launched:

- Attack on the headquarter of the Spartacist paper, *Die Rote Fahne*.
- Attempts to arrest members of the executive organ of the workers' councils.
- An attempted assassination of Liebknecht.

- Systematic skirmishes during workers' demonstrations.
- A media campaign and military offensive against the People's Naval Division, composed of armed sailors who had played an important role in spreading the revolution and acting in its defence.

But far from scaring off the proletariat, such actions only increased its anger. Demonstrations were armed to defend themselves against provocations. This class solidarity culminated in the biggest demonstration since 9 November being held on December 25. Five days later, the KPD, the Communist Party of Germany, was founded in Berlin.



Karl Liebknecht, November 9th, 1918

Again the bourgeoisie learned quickly and acted fast. By the end of December 1918 it had realised that frontally attacking the great figures of the revolution only strengthened class solidarity. It then decided to accentuate the rumours and the calumnies, while avoiding direct armed confrontations and manoeuvre around less well-known personalities. So it targeted Eichhorn, who had been elected to the head of a soldiers' committee in Berlin and had been put in charge of the local police forces. He was removed from his post and the provocation worked very well. This was immediately perceived by the Berlin workers as an act of aggression. The Berlin workers responded massively: on 5 January 1919, 150,000 were in the street, which surprised even the bourgeoisie. But this would not prevent the working class from falling into the trap of a premature insurrection. Even though the movement had not been followed elsewhere in Germany where Eichhorn was not so well-known, revolutionary leaders like Pieck and Liebknecht, pulled along by the excitement of the moment, decided that evening to launch the armed insurrection. This went against the decisions of the KPD Congress, and

the consequences of this improvisation were dramatic: having come out onto the streets, the workers remained there without any precise objective and in the greatest confusion. Worse still, the soldiers refused to take part in the insurrection, which ensured its defeat. Facing this error in analysis and the dangerous situation that resulted from it, Rosa Luxemburg and Leo Jogiches defended the only possible position that could avoid a blood-bath: continue the mobilisation by arming the workers and calling on them to encircle the barracks until the soldiers came out in favour of the revolution. This position was argued by the correct analysis that while the political balance of forces was not in the proletariat's favour at the beginning of January 1919, the military balance of forces was, at least in Berlin.

But instead of trying to arm the workers, the "Revolutionary Committee" began to negotiate with the government which it had just declared overthrown. From now on time was no longer on the side of the proletariat, but of the counter-revolution.

On 10 January 1919 the KPD called for the resignation of Liebknecht and Pieck from the Revolutionary Committee. But the damage had been done. There followed the bloody week, the so-called "Spartacist Week". The "Communist putsch" was put down by the "heroes of freedom and democracy". The White Terror was unleashed. The Freikorps hunted down revolutionaries all over the town and summary executions became systematic. On the evening of 15 January, Luxemburg and Liebknecht were kidnapped and then assassinated. In March 1919 it would be the turn of Leo Jogiches and hundreds of other militants of the revolutionary left.

The democratic illusions of the working class and the weaknesses of the KPD

What was the cause of this dramatic failure? The events of January 1919 contained all the elements which had led to the defeat of the revolution: on the one hand an intelligent bourgeoisie, manoeuvring very skilfully, and on the other hand a working class still weighed down by illusions in social democracy and a communist party that was insufficiently organised, lacking a solid programmatic base upon which it could develop a clear analysis of the situation. The KPD was somewhat disorientated, it was young and inexperienced (it was made up of many young comrades, since a lot of the older ones had died in the war or the repression). It lacked unity and was unable to give a clear orientation to the working class.

Unlike the Bolsheviks who had maintained an organisational continuity since 1903, and had been through the experience of the 1905 revolution and the soviets, the revolutionary left in Germany, after the betrayal of the SPD in August 1914, had to reconstruct itself hastily, in the heat of the events. The KPD was founded on 30 December 1918 with the fusion of the Spartakusbund and the International Communists of Germany, the IKD. During this conference, the majority of delegates took a clear position against participation in bourgeois elections and rejected the trade unions. But the organisational question was largely underestimated and pushed to the bottom of the list. The question of the party was not grasped at the level demanded by what was at stake.

This underestimation of programmatic questions would result in the decision by Liebknecht and others to call for the insurrection without waiting for a new analysis by the party, without a lucid method for assessing the balance of forces between the classes. The centralisation of decisions was not seen as a priority. It was these weaknesses of the party that would have such dramatic results. At one moment time was on the side of the proletariat. In a few hours the balance had changed and now the bourgeoisie was able to unleash the white terror.

All the same, strikes continued. From January to March 1919, the mass strike emerged in a spectacular manner. But the bourgeoisie also continued its work: executions, slanders, rumours... little by little the terror overwhelmed the proletariat. In February, while massive strikes were breaking out all over Germany, the Berlin proletariat, the heart of the revolution, was no longer able to take part, having been crushed by the January defeat. When it finally returned to the struggle, it was too late. The struggles in Berlin and the rest of Germany didn't manage to unite. At the same time, the KPD had been "decapitated" and had been forced into illegality. In the wave of strikes between February and April, it was not able to play a decisive role. Its voice had been more or less smothered by capital. If the KPD had been able to unmask the provocation of the bourgeoisie and prevent the workers from falling into the trap, the movement would surely have had a different outcome. The working class thus paid the price for the organisational weaknesses of the party, which now became the target for the most brutal repression. Everywhere communists were being hunted down. The lines of communication between what was left of the central organs and the local or regional delegates were continually being broken. At the national conference of 29 March 1919, it was pointed out that "the

local organisations are stuffed with agents provocateurs”.

In conclusion

The German revolution was above all the mass strike movement of the working class, extending geographically, countering capitalist barbarism with class solidarity, re-appropriating the lessons of October 1917 through the formation of workers' councils. The German revolution was also the lesson about the necessity for an internationally centralised party, built on clear organisational and programmatic foundations. Without such an organ the working class will not be able to expose the Machiavellian tricks of the bourgeoisie. But the German revolution was also the capacity of the bourgeoisie to unite against the proletariat, to use manoeuvres, lies and manipulations of all kinds. It was the noxious stench of a dying order which refuses to give up. It was the deadly trap of illusions in democracy and the destruction of the workers' councils from within.

Even though the events of 1919 proved decisive, the flames of the revolution in Germany were not extinguished for several years. But on the scale of history, the consequences of this defeat would be very grave for humanity as a whole: the rise of Nazism in Germany, of Stalinism in Russia, the march towards the second world war under the banners of anti-fascism – these nightmarish events can all be traced to the failure of the revolutionary wave which, between 1917 and 1923, shook the bourgeois order without being able to topple it once and for all.

And yet the revolution in Germany in 1918 remains a source of inspiration and lessons for the future struggles of the proletariat. As Rosa Luxemburg wrote on the eve of her murder by troops dispatched by social democracy:

“What does the entire history of socialism and of all modern revolutions show us? The first spark of class struggle in Europe, the revolt of the silk weavers in Lyon in 1831, ended with a heavy defeat; the Chartist movement in Britain ended in defeat; the uprising of the Parisian proletariat in the June days of 1848 ended with a crushing defeat; and the Paris commune ended with a terrible defeat. The whole road of socialism – so far as revolutionary struggles are concerned – is paved with nothing but thunderous defeats... Where would we be today without those ‘defeats’, from which we draw historical experience, understanding, power and idealism? Today...we stand on the foundation of those very defeats; and we can't do without any of them, because each one contributes to

our strength and understanding...

“To date, revolutions have given us nothing but defeats. Yet these unavoidable defeats pile up guarantee upon guarantee of the future final victory.

“There is but one condition. The question of why each defeat occurred must be answered...

“‘Order prevails in Berlin!’ You foolish lackeys! Your ‘order’ is built on sand. Tomorrow the revolution will ‘rise up again, clashing its weapons,’ and to your horror it will proclaim with trumpets blazing:

“‘I am, I am, I shall be!’”³

ICC, 1 November 2018

ICC Publications



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.

Order *The Dutch and German Communist Left* by writing to World Revolution in Britain.

3. *Rote Fahne*, 14 January 1919

Report on imperialist tensions (June 2018)

We publish here a report on the imperialist situation adopted by the central organ of the ICC at a meeting in June 2018. Since then, events around Trump's visit to Europe have very clearly confirmed the main ideas of this report, in particular the idea that the USA has become the main propagator of the tendency towards "each for themselves" on a world scale, to the point where it is destroying the instruments of its own "world order" (see our article "Trump in Europe", currently available in French on our website as a supplement to the *International Review*)

The main orientations of the November 2017 report on imperialist tensions¹ provide us with the essential framework to understand current developments:

- the end of the two Cold War blocs did not mean the disappearance of imperialism and militarism. Although the composition of new blocs and the outbreak of a new Cold War is not on the agenda, conflicts broke out all over the world. The development of decomposition has led to a bloody and chaotic unchaining of imperialism and militarism;
- the explosion of the tendency of each for himself has led to the rise of the imperialist ambitions of second and third level powers, as well as to the growing weakening of the USA's dominant position in the world;
- the current situation is characterised by imperialist tensions all over the place and by a chaos that is less and less controllable; but above all, by its highly irrational and unpredictable character, linked to the impact of populist pressures, in particular to the fact that the world's strongest power is led today by a populist president with temperamental reactions.

In the recent period, the weight of populism is becoming more and more tangible, exacerbating the tendency of "each for himself" and the growing unpredictability of imperialist conflicts:

- the questioning of international agreements, of supra-national structures (in particular the EU), of any global approach, makes imperialist relations more chaotic and accentuates the danger of military confrontations between the imperialist sharks (Iran and Middle East, North Korea and Far East);
- the rejection of the traditional globalised political elites in a lot of countries goes

together with the reinforcement of an aggressive nationalist rhetoric all over the world (not only in the US with Trump's "America First" slogan and in Europe but also in Turkey or Russia for instance).

These general characteristics of the period find their concretisation today in a series of particularly significant tendencies.

US imperialist policy: from world cop to main propagator of each for himself

The evolution of US imperialist policy over the last thirty years is one of the most significant phenomena of the period of decomposition: after promising a new age of peace and prosperity (Bush Senior) in the aftermath of the implosion of the Soviet bloc, after then struggling against the tendency towards each for himself, it has today become the main propagator of this tendency in the world. The former bloc leader and only remaining major imperialist superpower after the implosion of the Eastern bloc, which for around 25 years has been acting as the world cop, fighting against the spreading of each for himself on the imperialist level, is now rejecting international negotiations and global agreements in favour of a policy of "bilateralism".

A shared principle, aimed at overcoming chaos in international relations, is summarised in the following Latin sentence: "pacta sunt servanda" - treaties, agreements, must be honoured. If someone signs a global agreement - or a multilateral one - he is supposed to respect it, at least ostensibly. But the US under Trump abolished this conception: "I sign a treaty, but I can scrap it tomorrow". This has already happened with the Trans-Pacific Pact (TPP), the Paris agreement on climate change, the nuclear treaty with Iran, the final agreement on

the G7 meeting in Québec. The US today rejects international agreements in favour of a negotiation between states, in which the US bourgeoisie will bluntly impose its interests through economic, political and military blackmail (as we can see today for instance with Canada before and after the G7 with regard to NAFTA or with the threat of retaliation against European companies investing in Iran). This will have tremendous and unpredictable consequences for the development of imperialist tensions and conflicts (but also for the economic situation of the world) in the coming period. We will illustrate this with three "hot spots" in the imperialist confrontations today:

- (1) The Middle East: in denouncing the nuclear deal with Iran, the US is opposing not only China and Russia but also the EU and even Britain. Its seemingly paradoxical alliance with Israel and Saudi Arabia leads to a new configuration of forces in the Middle East (with a growing rapprochement between Turkey, Iran and Russia) and increases the danger of a general destabilisation of the region, of more confrontations between the main sharks, and more extensive bloody wars.
- (2) The relations with Russia: what is the USA's position towards Putin? For historical reasons (the impact of the "Cold War" period and the Rus-siagate affair that began with the last presidential elections), there are strong forces in the US bourgeoisie pushing for stronger confrontations with Russia, but the Trump administration, despite the imperialist confrontation in the Middle East, still does not seem to rule out an improvement of the cooperation with Russia: for example at the last G7, Trump suggested reintegrating Russia into the Forum of Industrial Countries.
- (3) The Far East: the unpredictability of agreements weighs particularly heavily on the negotiations with North Korea: (a) what are the implications of an agreement between Trump and Kim, if China, Russia, Japan and South Korea are not directly involved in negotiating this agreement? This has already come to the surface when Trump revealed in Singapore to the dismay of his Asian

1. See *International Review* n° 160.

“allies” that he had promised to stop joint military exercises in South Korea (b) if any deal can be put into question at any moment by the US, how far can Kim trust it? (c) will North and South Korea in this context totally rely on their “natural ally” and are they considering an alternative strategy?

Although this policy implies a tremendous growth of chaos and of each for himself, and also ultimately a further decline of the global positions of the world’s leading power, there is no tangible alternative approach in the US. After one and a half year of Mueller’s investigation and other kinds of pressures against Trump, it does not look likely that Trump will be pushed out of office, amongst other reasons because there is no alternative force in sight. The quagmire within the US bourgeoisie continues.

China: a policy of avoiding too much direct confrontation

The contradiction could not be more striking. At the same time that Trump’s US denounces globalisation and falls back on “bilateral” agreements, China announces a huge global project, the “New Silk Road”, that involves around 65 countries over three continents, representing 60% of the world population and about a third of world GDP, with investments over a period of the next 30 years (2050!) of up to 1.2 trillion dollars.

Since the beginning of its re-emergence, which was planned in the most systematic, long-term way, China has been modernising its army, building a “string of pearls” – beginning with the occupation of Coral Reefs in the South China Sea and the establishment of a chain of military bases in the Indian Ocean. For now however, China is not looking for direct confrontation with the US; on the contrary, it plans to become the most powerful economy in the world by 2050 and aims at developing its links with the rest of the world while trying to avoid direct clashes. China’s policy is a long-term one, contrary to the short-term deals favoured by Trump. It seeks to expand its industrial, technological and, above all, military expertise and power. On this last level, the US still has a considerable lead over China.

At the same moment of the failed G7 summit in Canada (9-10.6.18), China organised, in Qingdao a conference of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation with the assistance of the presidents of Russia (Putin), India (Modi), Iran (Rohani), and the leaders of Belarus, Uzbekistan, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Tajikistan and Kirgizia (20% of world trade, 40% of the world population). China’s current focus is clearly the

Silk Road project – the goal is to spread its influence. It is a long-term project and a direct confrontation with the US would counter-act these plans.

In this perspective, China will use its influence to push for a deal leading to the neutralisation of all nuclear weapons in the Korean region (US weapons included), which – provided the US were to accept this – would push back US forces to Japan and reduce the immediate threat to Northern China.

However, China’s ambitions will inevitably lead to a confrontation with the imperialist aims not only of the US but also of other powers, like India or Russia:

- a growing confrontation with India, the other big power in Asia, is inevitable. Both powers have begun a massive strengthening of their armies and are preparing for a sharpening of tensions in the medium term;
- in this perspective Russia is in a difficult situation: both countries are cooperating but in the long run China’s policy can only lead to a confrontation with Russia. Russia has regained power in recent years at the military and imperialist level, but its economic backwardness has not been overcome, on the contrary: in 2017, the Russian GDP (Gross Domestic Product) was only 10% higher than the GDP of the Benelux!
- Finally, it is likely that Trump’s economic sanctions and political and military provocations will force China to confront the US more directly in the short term.

The rise of strong leaders and bellicose rhetoric

The exacerbation of the tendency of each for himself on the imperialist level and the growing competition between the imperialist sharks give rise to another significant phenomenon of this phase of decomposition: the coming to power of “strong leaders” with a radical language, and an aggressive, nationalist rhetoric.

The coming to power of a “strong leader” and a radical rhetoric about the defence of national identity (often combined with social programmes in favour of families, children, pensioners) is typical of populist regimes (Trump, of course, but also Salvini in Italy, Orbán in Hungary, Kaczynski in Poland, Babiš in the Czech Republic, ...) but it is also a more general tendency all over the world, not only in the strongest powers (Putin in Russia) but also in secondary imperialist countries like Turkey (Erdogan), Iran, Saudi-Arabia (with the

“soft coup” of crown prince Mohammed bin Salman). In China, the limitation of the presidency of the state to two five-year periods has been removed from the constitution, so that Xi Jinping is imposing himself as a “leader for life”, the new Chinese emperor (being president, head of the party and of the central military commission, which has never happened since Deng Xiaoping). “Democratic” slogans or keeping up democratic appearances (human rights) are no longer the dominant discourse (as the talks between the Donald and Kim have shown), unlike at the time of the fall of the Soviet bloc and at the beginning of the 21st century. They have given way to a combination of very aggressive speeches and pragmatic imperialist deals.

The strongest example is the Korean crisis. Trump and Kim first used both strong military pressure (with even the threat of a nuclear confrontation) and very aggressive language before meeting in Singapore to haggle. Trump offered gigantic economic and political advantages (the Burmese model) with the aim of eventually pulling Kim into the US camp. This is not totally inconceivable as the North Koreans have an ambiguous relationship with and even distrust towards China. However, the reference to Libya by US officials (National Security Adviser John Bolton) – North Korea might have the same fate as Libya, when Gaddafi was urged to abandon his weapons, and then forcefully deposed and killed – makes the North Koreans particularly suspicious of American proposals.

This political strategy is a more general tendency in the current imperialist confrontations, as shown by Trump’s aggressive tweets against Canada’s Prime Minister Trudeau, “a false and weak leader” because he refused to accept higher import taxes brought in by the US. There was also the brutal ultimatum of Saudi Arabia against Qatar, accused of “centrism” towards Iran, or Erdogan’s bellicose statements against the West and NATO about the Kurds. Finally, we will mention Putin’s very aggressive “State of the Union” speech, which was a presentation of Russia’s most sophisticated weapons systems with the message: “You’d better take us seriously”!

These tendencies strengthen the general characteristics of the period, such as the intensification of militarisation (despite the strong economic burden linked to this) amongst the three biggest imperialist sharks, but also as a global trend and in a context of a changing imperialist landscape in the world and in Europe. In this context of aggressive policies, the danger of limited nuclear strikes is very real, as there are a lot of unpredictable elements in the conflicts around North Korea and Iran.

The tendency towards the fragmentation of the EU

All the trends in Europe during the past period – Brexit, the rise of an important populist party in Germany (AfD), the coming to power of populists in Eastern Europe, where most of the countries are run by populist governments, are being accentuated by two major events:

- the formation of a 100% populist government in Italy (composed of the 5 Star movement and the Lega), which will lead to a direct confrontation between the “bureaucrats from Brussels” (the EU), the “champions” of globalisation (backed by the Eurogroup) and the financial markets on one side, and on the other side the people’s “populist front”;
- the fall of Rajoy and the Partido Popular in Spain and the coming to power of a Socialist Party minority government backed by the Catalan and Basque nationalists and Podemos, which will accentuate the centrifugal tensions inside Spain and in Europe.

This will have huge consequences for the cohesion of the EU, the stability of the Euro, and the weight of the European countries on the imperialist scene.

- (a) The EU is unprepared for and largely powerless to oppose Trump’s policy of a US embargo on Iran: European multinationals are already complying with US dictates (Total, Lafarge). This is especially true since various European states support Trump’s populist approach and his policy in the Middle East (Austria, Hungary, the Czech Republic and Romania were represented at the inauguration of the US Embassy in Jerusalem, against the official policy of the EU). Concerning the raising of import taxes, it is far from sure that there will be an agreement within the EU to respond systematically to the higher import tariffs imposed by Trump.
- (b) The project of a European military pole remains largely hypothetical in the sense that more and more countries, under the impetus of populist forces in power or putting pressure on the government, do not want to submit to the Franco-German axis. On the other hand, while the EU’s political leadership is made up of the Franco-German axis, France has traditionally developed its military technological cooperation with Britain, which is about to leave the EU.
- (c) Tensions around the reception of refugees not only pits the coalition of

populist governments in the East against those of Western Europe, but increasingly Western countries against each other, as shown by the strong tensions that have developed between Macron’s France and the Italian populist government, while Germany is increasingly divided on the subject (pressure from the CSU).

- (d) the economic and political weight of Italy (the third economy of the EU) is considerable, in no way comparable with the weight of Greece. The Italian populist government intends, among other things, to reduce taxes and to introduce a basic income, which will cost more than one hundred billion euros. At the same time the government’s programme includes asking the European Central Bank to skip 250 billion euros of the Italian debt!
- (e) On the economic but also imperialist level, Greece had already advanced the idea of appealing to China to support its ailing economy. Again, Italy plans to call China or Russia for help to support and finance an economic recovery. Such an orientation could have a major impact at the imperialist level. Italy already opposes the continuation of EU embargo measures against Russia following the annexation of Crimea.

All these orientations strongly accentuate the crisis within the EU and the tendencies towards fragmentation. It will ultimately affect the policy of Germany as the most influential country in the EU, as it is internally divided (weight of AfD and CSU), confronted with political opposition by the populist leaders of Eastern Europe, economic opposition by Mediterranean countries (Italy, Greece...), and quarrels with Turkey, while at the same time being directly targeted by Trump’s import tariffs. The growing fragmentation of Europe under the blows of populism and the “America First” policy will also present a huge problem for the policy of France, because these trends are in total opposition to Macron’s programme, which is essentially based on the strengthening of Europe and on the full assimilation of globalisation.

ICC, June 2018

Fifty years since May 1968

The advances and retreats in the class struggle since 1968

Without the events of May 1968, the ICC would not exist. Marc Chirik had already helped to form a group in Venezuela, *Internacionalismo*, which from 1964 onwards had defended all the basic positions which were to be taken up a decade later by the ICC. But Marc was aware from the start that it was the revival of the class struggle in the centres of world capitalism that would be decisive in inaugurating a change in the course of history. It was this understanding that propelled him to return to France and to play an active role in the movement of May-June, and this included seeking out contacts among its politicised avant-garde. Two young members of the Venezuelan group had already moved to France to study at Toulouse University, and it was alongside these comrades and a handful of others that Marc became a founder member of *Révolution Internationale* in October 1968 – the group that would play a central part in the formation of the ICC seven years later.

Since that time the ICC has never wavered from its conviction concerning the historic significance of May 68, and we have returned to the subject again and again. Every ten years or so we have published retrospective articles in our theoretical organ, the *International Review*, as well as material in our territorial press. We have held public meetings to mark its 40th and 50th anniversaries and intervened at events organised by others.¹ In this article, we begin by looking back at one of these articles, written at an anniversary which now has a definite symbolic value: 1988

In the first part of this new series,² we concluded that the initial assessment made by RI – “Understanding May”, written in 1969, according to which May 68 represented the first major reaction of the world working class to the resurfacing of capitalism’s historic economic crisis – had been entirely validated: despite capital’s often astonishing capacity to adapt to its sharpening contradictions, the crisis which at the end of the 60s could only be detected from its first symptoms has become both increasingly evident and to all intents and purposes permanent.

But what of our insistence that May 68 signalled the end of the previous decades of counter-revolution and the opening up of a new period, in which an undefeated working class would move towards massive and decisive struggles; and that in

turn the outcome of these struggles would resolve the historical dilemma posed by the irresolvable economic crisis: world war, in the event of a new defeat for the working class, or world revolution and the construction of a new, communist society?

The 1988 article, “20 years after May 1968 - Class struggle: the maturation of the conditions for revolution”³ began by arguing against the dominant scepticism of the day – the idea, very widespread in the bourgeois media and among a whole layer of the intellectual strata, that May 68 had at best been a beautiful utopian dream which harsh reality had caused to fade and die. Elsewhere in our press around the same time,⁴ we had also criticised the scepticism which affected large parts of the revolutionary milieu, and had done so since the events of 68 themselves – a tendency notably expressed by the refusal of the main heirs of the tradition of the Italian communist left to see in May 68 anything more than a wave of petty bourgeois agitation which had done nothing to lift the dead-weight of the counter-revolution.

Both the Bordigist and Damenist wings⁵ of the post-war Italian left tradition responded in this manner. Both tend to see the party as something outside of history, since

3. *International Review* n° 53, second quarter 1988. The article is signed RV, one of the young “Venezuelans” who helped to form RI in 1968.

4. See in particular “Confusion of communist groups over the present period: Underestimating the class struggle” in *International Review* n° 54, third quarter 1988.

5. See in particular “The 1950s and 60s: Damen, Bordiga, and the passion for communism”, *International Review* n° 158.

they consider that it is possible to maintain it whatever the balance of forces between the classes. They thus tend to see the struggle of the workers as essentially circular in nature, since it can only be transformed in a revolutionary sense by the intervention of the party, which begs the question of where the party itself comes from. The Bordigists in particular offered a caricature of this approach in 68, when they issued leaflets insisting that the movement would only go anywhere if it put itself behind the banners of The Party (i.e., their own small political group). Our current, on the other hand, has always countered that this is an essentially idealist approach which divorces the party from its material roots in the class struggle. We considered ourselves to be carrying on the real acquisitions of the Italian communist left, in its most fruitful period theoretically – the period of the Fraction in the 1930s and 40s, when it recognised that its own diminution from the preceding stage of the party was a product of the defeat of the working class, and that only a revival of the class struggle could provide the conditions for the transformation of the existing communist fractions into a real class party.

These conditions were indeed developing after 1968, not only at the level of politicised minorities, which went through an important phase of growth in the wake of the 68 events and subsequent upsurges of the working class, but also at a more general level. The class struggle that erupted in May 68 was not a flash in the pan but the starting signal of a powerful dynamic which would quickly come to the fore on a world wide scale.

The advances in the class struggle between 1968 and 1988

Consistent with the marxist view that has long noted the wave-like process of the class movement, the article analyses three different international waves of struggle in the two decades after 68: the first, undoubtedly the most spectacular, encompassed the Italian Hot Autumn of 69, the violent uprisings in Cordoba, Argentina, in 69 and in

1. See for example *World Revolution* n° 315, “ICC meeting at ‘1968 and all that’: the perspective opened 40 years ago has not gone away.”

2. “Fifty years ago. May 68, part 1: Sinking into the economic crisis”, *International Review* n° 160.

Poland in 1970, and important movements in Spain and Britain in 1972. In Spain in particular the workers began to organise through mass assemblies, a process which reached its high point in Vitoria in 1976. The international dimension of the wave was demonstrated by its echoes in Israel (1969) and Egypt (1972) and, later on, by the uprisings in the townships of South Africa which were led by committees of struggle (the Civics).

After a short-pause in the mid-70s, there was a second wave, which included the strikes of the Iranian oil workers and the steel-workers of France in 1978, the 'Winter of Discontent' in Britain, the Rotterdam dock strike, led by an independent strike committee, and the steelworkers' strikes in Brazil in 1979 which also challenged the control of the trade unions. This global movement culminated in the mass strike in Poland in 1980, whose level of self-organisation and unification marked it as the most important single episode in the world class struggle since 1968, and even since the 1920s. And although the severe repression of the Polish workers brought this wave to a halt, it was not long before a new upswing which took in the struggles in Belgium in 1983 and 1986, the general strike in Denmark in 1985, the miners' strike in Britain in 1984-5, the struggles of rail and then health workers in France in 1986 and 1988, and the movement of education workers in Italy in 1987. The struggles in France and Italy in particular – like the mass strike in Poland – displayed a real capacity for self-organisation through general assemblies and strike committees.

This was not a simple list of strikes. The article also highlights the fact that this wave-like movement was not going round in circles but was generating real advances in class consciousness:

- *“A simple comparison of the characteristics of the struggles of 20 years ago with those of today will allow us to see the extent of the evolution which has slowly taken place in the working class. Its own experience, added to the catastrophic evolution of the capitalist system, has enabled it to acquire a much more lucid view of the reality of its struggle. This has been expressed by:*
- *a loss of illusions in the political forces of the left of capital and first and foremost in the unions, towards which illusions have given way to distrust and, increasingly, an open hostility;*
- *the growing tendency to abandon ineffective forms of mobilisation, the dead-ends which the unions have used so many times to bury the combativity of the workers, such as days of action,*

token demonstrations, long and isolated strikes ...

“But the experience of these 20 years of struggle hasn't only produced negative lessons for the working class (what should not be done). It has also produced lessons on what is to be done:

- *the attempt to extend the struggle (especially Belgium '86);*
- *the attempt by workers to take the struggle into their own hands, by organising general assemblies and elected, revocable strike committees (France '86, Italy '87 in particular).”*

At the same time, the article did not neglect the bourgeoisie's responses to the danger of the class struggle: although it had been surprised by the outbreak of the May 68 movement, resorting to crude forms of repression which acted as a catalyst for the extension of the struggle, it had subsequently learned or re-learned a great deal in how to manage the resistance of its class enemy. It did not renounce the use of repression, of course, but it found more subtle means to present and justify its use, such as the scarecrow of terrorism; meanwhile, it developed its arsenal of democratic mystifications to derail struggles – particularly in countries which were still ruled by overt dictatorships – towards bourgeois political goals. At the level of the struggles themselves, it countered workers' growing disenchantment with the official unions and the threat of self-organisation by developing more radical forms of trade unionism, which could even include 'extra-union' forms (the 'coordinations' set up by the extreme left in France for example).

The article had begun by recognising that much of the optimistic talk about revolution in 1968 had indeed been utopian. This was partly because the whole discussion about the possibility of revolution was distorted by leftist notions that what was happening in Vietnam or Cuba were indeed socialist revolutions to be actively supported by the working class in the central countries; but also, even when revolution was understood as something that really involved the transformation of social relations, because in 1968 the objective conditions, above all the economic crisis, had only just begun to provide the material basis for a revolutionary challenge to capital. Since then, things had become more difficult, but more profound:

“Perhaps it is less easy to talk about revolution in 1988 than in 1968. But when today the word is shouted out in a demonstration in Rome where workers are denouncing the bourgeois nature of the unions, or at an unemployed workers demonstration in Bilbao, it has a much more profound and

more concrete meaning than when it was banded about in the feverish assemblies, so full of illusions, of 1968. 1968 affirmed the return of the revolutionary objective. For 20 years the conditions for its realisation haven't stopped maturing. Capitalism's descent into an impasse, the increasingly unbearable situation this creates for all the exploited and oppressed classes, the experience accumulated through the fighting spirit of the workers, all this is leading to that situation of which Marx spoke, "in which any retreat is impossible".”

The turning point of 1989

There is much in this analysis that we can still stand by today. And yet, we cannot help but be struck by a phrase which sums up the article's assessment of the third wave of struggles:

“Finally, the recent mobilisation of the workers of the Ruhr in Germany and the resurgence of strikes in Britain in 1988 (see editorial in this issue) confirmed that this third international wave of workers struggles, which has now lasted for more than four years, is far from over”.

In fact, the third wave, and indeed the entire period of struggles since 1968, was to come to a sudden halt with the collapse of the eastern bloc in 1989-91 and the accompanying tide of campaigns about the death of communism. This historic change in the world situation marked the definitive onset of a new phase in the decline of capitalism – the phase of decomposition.

The ICC had noted the symptoms of decomposition earlier on in the 80s, and a discussion about its implications for the class struggle was already underway in the organisation. However, the article about May 68 in *International Review* n° 53, as well as the editorial in the same issue, provide evidence that its deeper significance had not been grasped. The article on 68 has a sub-heading “20 years of decomposition” without providing an explanation for the term, while the editorial only applies it to its manifestations at the level of imperialist conflicts – the phenomenon which was then termed “Lebanonisation”, the tendency for entire nation states to disintegrate under the weight of increasingly irrational imperialist rivalries. It's probable that these imprecisions reflected real differences which had appeared at the 8th Congress of the ICC towards the end of 1988.

The dominant mood at this Congress had been one of over-optimism and even a kind of euphoria. Partly this reflected the understandable enthusiasm created by integration of two new sections of the ICC at the Congress, in Mexico and India. But it

was expressed above all in certain analyses of the class struggle that were being put forward: the idea that new bourgeois mystifications were wearing out in a matter of months; exaggerated hopes in the struggles then taking place in Russia; the conception of a third wave that was marching ever onwards and upwards; and above all a reluctance to accept the idea that, in the face of growing social decomposition, the class struggle seemed to be “marking time” or stagnating (which, given the seriousness of the stakes involved, could only imply a tendency towards retreat or regression). This viewpoint was defended by Marc Chirik and a minority of comrades at the Congress. It was based on a clear awareness that the development of decomposition expressed a kind of historic stalemate between the classes. The bourgeoisie had not inflicted a decisive historic defeat on the working class and was not able to mobilise it for a new world war; but the working class, despite 20 years of struggle, which had held back the drive towards war, and which had indeed seen important developments in class consciousness, had been unable to develop the perspective of revolution, to raise its own political alternative to the crisis of the system. Deprived of any way forward, but still sunk in a very long-drawn out economic crisis, capitalism was beginning to rot on its feet, and this putrefaction was affecting capitalist society at every level.⁶

This diagnosis was powerfully confirmed by the collapse of the eastern bloc. On the one hand, this momentous event was a product of decomposition. It highlighted the profound impasse of the Stalinist bourgeoisie, which was stuck in an economic mire but patently unable to mobilise its workers for a military solution to the bankruptcy of its economy (the struggles in Poland in 1980 had clearly demonstrated that to the Stalinist ruling class). At the same time, it exposed the severe political failings of this section of the world working class. The proletariat of the Russian bloc had certainly demonstrated its ability to fight on the defensive economic terrain, but faced with an enormous historical event which expressed itself largely at the political level, it was completely unable to offer its own alternative and as a class it was drowned in the democratic upsurge falsely described as a series of “people’s revolutions”

In turn, these events dramatically accelerated the process of decomposition on a world scale. This was most evident at the

imperialist level, where the rapid break-up of the old bloc system allowed the tendency for “every man for himself” to increasingly dominate diplomatic and military rivalries. But this was also true in relation to the balance of class forces. In the wake of the debacle in the eastern bloc, the world bourgeoisie’s campaigns about the death of communism, about the impossibility of any working class alternative to capitalism, rained further blows on the ability of the international working class - notably in the central countries of the system - to generate a political perspective.

The ICC had not foreseen the events of 89-91, but we were able to respond to them with a coherent analysis based on previous theoretical work. This was true with regard both to understanding the economic factors involved in the downfall of Stalinism,⁷ and to predicting the growing chaos that, in the absence of blocs, would now be unleashed in the sphere of imperialist conflicts.⁸ And on the level of the class struggle, we were able to see that the proletariat now faced a particularly difficult period:

“The identification which is systematically established between Stalinism and communism, the lie repeated a thousand times, and today being wielded more than ever, according to which the proletarian revolution can only end in disaster; will for a whole period gain an added impact within the ranks of the working class. We thus have to expect a momentary retreat in the consciousness of the proletariat; the signs of this can already be seen in the unions’ return to strength. While the incessant and increasingly brutal attacks which capitalism can’t help but mount on the proletariat will oblige the workers to enter the struggle, in an initial period, this won’t result in a greater capacity in the class to develop its consciousness. In particular, reformist ideology will weigh very heavily on the struggle in the period ahead, greatly facilitating the action of the unions. Given the historic importance of the events that are determining it, the present retreat of the proletariat – although it doesn’t call into question the historic course, the general perspective of class confrontations – is going to be much deeper than the one which accompanied the defeat of 1981 in Poland. Having said this, we cannot foresee in advance its breadth or its length. In particular, the rhythm of the collapse of western capitalism – which at present we can see accelerating, with the perspective of a new and open recession

– will constitute a decisive factor in establishing the moment when the proletariat will be able to resume its march towards revolutionary consciousness.”⁹

This passage is very clear about the profoundly negative impact of the collapse of Stalinism, but it still contains a certain underestimation of the depth of the retreat. The estimate that this would be “momentary” already weakens the ensuing statement that the reflux will be “much deeper than the one which accompanied the defeat of 1981 in Poland”, and this problem was to manifest itself in our analyses in the years that followed, notably in the idea that certain struggles in the 90s – in 92, and again in 98 – heralded the end of the retreat. In reality, looking back over the past three decades, we can say that the retreat in class consciousness has not only continued, but has got deeper, resulting in a kind of amnesia about the acquisitions and advances of the 1968-89 period.

What are the main indicators of this trajectory?

- The impact of the economic crisis in the West has not been as straightforward as the above passage implies. The repeated convulsions of the economy have certainly weakened the boasts of the ruling class in the early 90s that, with the end of the eastern bloc, we would now enter a period of unmitigated prosperity. But the bourgeoisie has been able to develop new forms of state capitalism and economic manipulation (typified in the concept of “neo-liberalism”) that have maintained at least an illusion of growth, while the real development of the Chinese economy in particular has convinced many that capitalism is infinitely adaptable and can always find new ways of extricating itself from its crisis. And when the underlying contradictions returned to the surface, as they did with the great financial crash of 2008, they may have stimulated certain proletarian reactions (in the period 2010-2013 for example); but at the same time, the very form this crisis took, a “credit crunch” involving a massive loss of savings for millions of workers, made it harder to respond to it on a class terrain, since the impact seemed to be more on individual householders than on an associated class.¹⁰
- Decomposition undermines this self-awareness of the proletariat as a distinct social force in a number of ways, all of which exacerbate the atomisation and

6. For a more developed balance sheet of the struggles of the last few decades, which takes into account tendencies in our analysis to overestimate the immediate potential of the class struggle, see “Report on the Class struggle” from the 21st ICC Congress, *International Review* n° 156, Winter 2016.

7. See “Theses on the economic and political crisis in the eastern countries”, *International Review* n° 60, first quarter 1990.

8. See in particular “Orientation text: Militarism and decomposition”, *International Review* n° 64, first quarter 1991.

9. “Theses on the economic and political crisis in the eastern countries.”

10. See point 15 in “22nd ICC Congress: resolution on the international class struggle”, *International Review* n° 159.

individualism inherent in bourgeois society. We can see this, for example, in the tendency towards the formation of gangs in the urban centres, expressing both a lack of any economic prospects for a considerable part of the proletarian youth, and a desperate search for a replacement community which ends up creating murderous divisions between young people based on rivalries between different neighbourhoods and estates, on competition for control of the local drug economy, or on racial and religious differences. But the economic policies of the ruling class have also deliberately attacked any sense of class identity – both through breaking up old industrial centres of working class resistance and through introducing much more atomised forms of labour, as in the so-called “gig economy” where workers are routinely treated as self-employed “entrepreneurs”.

- The mounting number of bloody and chaotic wars that characterise this period, while again flatly disproving the assertion that the end of Stalinism would gift humanity with a “peace dividend”, do not provide the basis for a general development of class consciousness as they did, for example, during World War One when the proletariat of the central countries was directly mobilised for the slaughter. The bourgeoisie has learned the lesson of past social conflicts provoked by war (including the resistance against the Vietnam war) and, in the key countries of the West, has done its best to avoid the use of conscript armies and to quarantine its wars in the peripheries of the system. This has not prevented these military confrontations from having a very real impact on the central countries, but this has mainly taken forms which tend to reinforce nationalism and reliance on the “protection” of the state: the enormous increase in the number of refugees fleeing the war zones, and the action of terrorist groups aiming to hit back at the populations of the most developed countries.¹¹
- At the political level, in the absence of a clear proletarian perspective, we have seen different parts of the working class being influenced by the phoney critiques of the system offered by populism on the one hand and jihadism on the other. And the growing influence of “identity politics” among more educated layers of the working class is a further expression of this dynamic: the lack of class identity is made worse by the move towards fragmentation into racial, sexual and other identities, reinforcing exclusion and division, when only the proletariat

11. See points 16 and 17 of the above resolution.

fighting for its own interests can be truly inclusive.

We have to face the reality of all these difficulties and to draw their political consequences for the struggle to change society. But in our view, while the proletariat cannot avoid the harsh school of defeat, growing difficulties and even partial defeats do not yet add up to a historic defeat for the class and to the obliteration of the possibility of communism.

In the last decade or so, there have been a number of important movements which provide support for this conclusion. In 2006, we saw the massive mobilisation of educated youth in France against the CPE.¹² The ruling class media often describes struggles in France, even when they are tightly controlled by the unions as in the most recent case,¹³ as raising the spectre of a “new May 68”, the better to distort the real lessons of May. But the 2006 movement did, in a sense, revive the genuine spirit of 68: on the one hand, because its protagonists rediscovered forms of struggle that had appeared at that time, notably general assemblies where real discussions could take place and where the young participants were eager to hear the testimony of older comrades who had taken part in the events of 68. But at the same time, this student movement, which had outflanked the trade unions, contained the real risk of drawing in the employed workers in a similarly “uncontrolled” way, precisely as in May 1968, and this is why the government withdrew the CPE legislation which had provoked the revolt in the first place.

Also in May 2006, 23,000 metal workers in Vigo, in the Galician province of Spain, came out on strike against new labour rules in this sector, and instead of remaining shut up in the factories went to look for solidarity from other enterprises, in particular the shipyards and Citroën factories, organising demonstrations in the town to rally the whole population, and above all creating daily public general assemblies completely open to other workers, employed, unemployed and pensioners. These proletarian assemblies were the lungs of an exemplary struggle for a week, until the movement was caught between violent repression on the one hand and the negotiating manoeuvres of the unions and bosses.

In 2011, we saw the wave of social revolts in the Middle East and Greece, culminating in the Indignados movement in Spain and “Occupy” in the USA. The

12. See points 16 and 17 of the resolution cited above.

13. See “France: rail rolling strikes and go-slows - Union manoeuvres are aimed at dividing us!”, April 2018, on our website.

proletarian element in these movements varied from country to country, but it was at its strongest in Spain, where we saw in the widespread adoption of the assembly form; a powerful internationalist impulse which welcomed expressions of solidarity by participants from all round the world and where the slogan of “world revolution” was taken seriously, perhaps for the first time since the 1917 revolutionary wave; a recognition that “the system is obsolete” and a strong will to discuss the possibility of a new form of social organisation. In the many animated discussions that took place in the assemblies and commissions about questions of morality, science and culture, in the ubiquitous questioning of the dogma that capitalist relations are eternal - here again we saw the real spirit of May 68 taking shape.

Of course, most of these movements had many weaknesses, which we have analysed elsewhere,¹⁴ not least a tendency for the participants to see themselves as “citizens” rather than proletarians, and thus a real vulnerability to democratic ideology, which would enable bourgeois parties like Syriza in Greece and Podemos in Spain to present themselves as the true heirs of these revolts. And in some ways, as with any proletarian defeat, the higher you climb, the further you fall: the reflux of these movements further deepened the general retreat in class consciousness. In Egypt, where the movement of the squares inspired the movement in Spain and Greece, illusions in democracy have prepared the way to the restoration of the same kind of authoritarian rule which was the initial catalyst of the “Arab spring”; in Israel, where mass demonstrations once raised the internationalist slogan “Netanyahu, Mubarak, Assad, same enemy”, the brutal militarist policies of Netanyahu’s government have now regained the upper hand. And most serious of all, in Spain, many of the young people who took part in the Indignados movement have been dragged towards the absolute dead-ends of Catalan or Spanish nationalism.

The appearance of this new proletarian generation in the movements of 2006 and 2011 also gave rise to a new search for communist politics among a minority, but the hopes that this would give rise to a whole new influx of revolutionary forces have not, for the present at least, been realised. The communist left remains largely isolated and disunited; among the anarchists, where some interesting new developments began to take place, the search for class positions is being undermined by the influence of identity politics and even nationalism.

14. See “The Indignados in Spain, Greece and Israel: From indignation to the preparation of class struggles”, *International Review* n° 147, first quarter 2011.

In a third article in this series, we will look in more detail at the evolution of the proletarian political camp and its environs since 1968.

But if May 1968 teaches us anything, it shows that the working class can arise again from the worst of defeats, return from the deepest of retreats. The moments of proletarian revolt which have taken place despite the advancing threat of capitalist decomposition reveal the possibility that new movements will arise which, by regaining the perspective of revolution, can forestall the multiple dangers that decomposition poses for the future of the species.

These dangers – the spread of military chaos, of ecological catastrophe, of starvation and disease on an unprecedented scale – prove that revolution is more than ever a necessity for the human race. Capitalism's decline and decomposition certainly magnify the threat that the objective basis of a new society will be definitively destroyed if decomposition advances beyond a certain point. But even in its last phase, capitalism still produces the forces that can be used to overthrow it – in the words of the Communist manifesto of 1848, "what the bourgeoisie produces, above all, is its own gravediggers". Capitalism, its means of production and communication are more global than ever – but then so is the proletariat more international, more capable of communicating with itself on a world wide scale. Capitalism has become increasingly advanced technologically – but then it must educate the proletariat in the use of its science and technology which can be taken in hand in a future society for human needs rather than for profit. This more educated, internationally minded layer of the class made its appearance again and again in recent social movement, above all in the central countries of the system, and will certainly play a key role in any future resurgence of the class struggle, as will the new proletarian armies created by capitalism's dizzying but diseased growth in Asia and other previously "underdeveloped" regions. We have not seen the last of the spirit of May 68.

Amos, June 2018

ICC public meetings on May 68

Did May 68 really mark the end of almost 50 years of counter-revolution?

The ICC held public meetings in a number of cities across several countries to coincide with the 50th anniversary of May 1968. Generally speaking, those present broadly supported the way in which we characterised the movement:

- the historical significance of these events was expressed by the renewal of the class struggle, with the most massive workers' strike that ever existed until then – 10 million workers on strike – a movement that owed nothing to the actions of the trade unions but was a spontaneous outbreak of struggle arising purely from the initiative of the workers themselves;
- this working class movement, while in no way inspired by the major student unrest of the time, was partly catalysed by the brutal police attacks on the students that caused real outrage inside the working class;
- this historical episode gave rise to an unprecedented atmosphere such as exists only during major working class movements: in the streets, in universities and in some occupied factories people spoke openly and there were intense political discussions;
- this huge movement was the product of the return of the open economic crisis and its effect on the working class, and it freed the younger generation from the crushing weight of the of counter-revolutionary period;
- this movement was therefore able to bring an end to an important blockage to the class struggle and to the overwhelming grip of Stalinism through its union transmission belts.

The idea that May 68 had signalled the development of a wave of struggles internationally was generally of no surprise to those present. But paradoxically, it was still not considered the case that May 68 marked the end of the long period of counter-revolution that resulted from the defeat of the first world revolutionary wave and which, at the same time, opened a new course towards class confrontations between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. In particular, a number of characteristics of the current period, like the development of fundamentalism, the spread of wars across the planet, etc., tended to be seen as indicating that we are still in a counter-revolutionary period.

For us, this is a mistake which has its source in a twofold problem.

On the one hand, there is insufficient knowledge of what the period opening up the world counter-revolution was like following the defeat of the first revolutionary wave, and thus a difficulty to really grasp what such a period meant for the working class and its struggle, but also for humanity insofar as the barbarism inherent in capitalism in crisis was no longer bound by any limits. This is why in this article we have chosen to go back to examine this period in detail. On the other hand, with the period that opened with May 68, although it may seem more familiar to the generations who – directly or indirectly – know about May 68, grasping its underlying dynamic is not something that comes spontaneously. In particular, it may be obscured by events

and situations which, although important, do not constitute the decisive factors. This is why we will also return to this period by highlighting its fundamental differences with the period of counter-revolution.

The history of class struggle comprises advances and retreats

Everyone was in agreement that, at an immediate level, after a struggle, a workers' mobilisation tends to fall back and often with it the will to fight, and this also exists at a deeper level throughout history. In fact, this gives validity to what Marx had pointed out on this subject in the *18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, that the proletarian struggle alternates between advances, often very dynamic and dazzling (1848-49, 1864-71, 1917-23) and retreats (in 1850, 1872, and

1923) which, moreover, have each time led to the disappearance or degeneration of the political organisations that the class had given itself during the period of rising struggles (Communist League: established in 1847, dissolved in 1852; International Workers' Association: founded in 1864, dissolved in 1876; Communist International: founded in 1919, degenerated and died in the mid 1920s; the life of the Socialist International 1889-1914, having followed a broadly similar course but with less clarity¹).

The defeat of the first international revolutionary wave of 1917-23 would open the longest, deepest and most terrible period of counter-revolution suffered by the proletariat, with the working class as a whole losing its bearings, with the few remaining organisations loyal to the revolution being reduced to tiny minorities. But it also opened the door to an unleashing of barbarism that would surpass the horrors of the First World War. On the other hand, since 1968 the opposite dynamic has developed and there is no reason to say that it has now been exhausted, despite the major difficulties experienced by the proletariat since the early 1990s and with the extension and deepening of barbarism across the planet.

The period 1924 - 1967: the deepest ever counter-revolution suffered by the working class

The expression "*It is midnight in the century*", from the title of a book by Victor Serge,² applies perfectly to the reality of this nightmare that lasted nearly half a century.

The terrible blows struck early on against the world revolutionary wave that had opened with the Russian revolution in 1917 already constituted the antechamber to the long series of bourgeois offensives against the working class that would plunge the workers' movement into the depths of the

1. See "The Historic Course", *International Review* n° 18.

2. Victor Serge is known chiefly for his famous narrative of the history of the Russian revolution, *Year One of the Russian Revolution*.

counter-revolution. For the bourgeoisie, it would not only be a question of defeating the revolution but also of delivering blows against the working class that it would not be able to recover from. Faced with a world revolutionary wave that had threatened the global capitalist order, and this was indeed its conscious and stated objective,³ the bourgeoisie could not simply be content with driving the proletariat back; it had to do everything in its power to ensure that this experience would leave such an image to the future world proletariat that it would never want to do it again. Above all, it had to try to discredit forever the idea of communist revolution and the possibility of establishing a society without war, without classes and without exploitation. For this reason, it was able to benefit from political circumstances that were considerably favourable to it: the loss of the revolutionary stronghold in Russia was not the result of its defeat in the military confrontation with the white armies that tried to invade Russia, but came from its own internal degeneration (to which, of course, the considerable war effort contributed greatly). So much so that it would be easy for the bourgeoisie to make the monstrosity that emerged from the political defeat of the revolution, the “Socialist” USSR, look like communism. At the same time, the latter had to be perceived as the inevitable destiny of any struggle of the proletariat for its emancipation. All fractions of the world bourgeoisie, in all countries, from the far right to the Trotskyist far left, would participate in this lie.⁴

When the World War was ended by the main bourgeoisies involved in it in November 1918, it was with the obvious aim of preventing new centres of revolutionary activity from swelling the tide of the revolution that had been victorious in Russia and was threatening in Germany, where the bourgeoisie had been weakened by the military defeat. This sought to prevent the revolutionary fever, incited by the barbarism of the battlefields and by the unbearable exploitation and misery behind the front lines, from also seizing hold in other countries such as France and Great Britain. And this goal was generally achieved: in the victorious countries, the proletariat, while it had fervently acclaimed

the Russian revolution, did not show a massive commitment to the flag of revolution for the overthrow of capitalism in order to put an end forever to the horrors of war. Exhausted by four years of suffering in the trenches or in the arms factories, it sought instead to seek rest, “taking advantage” of the peace that the imperialist bandits had just delivered. And since, in the final analysis, in all wars the defeated parties get the blame, the Entente countries (France, United Kingdom, Russia) removed all the responsibility from capitalism as a whole, and laid all the blame onto the Central Powers (Germany, Austria, Hungary). Even worse, the bourgeoisie in France promised workers a new era of prosperity on the basis of the reparations that would be imposed on Germany. In this way, the proletariat in Germany and in Russia would be all the more isolated.

But what would really happen, in both victorious and defeated countries, was the future that Rosa Luxemburg had outlined in her *Junius Pamphlet*: if the world proletariat did not succeed through its revolutionary struggle in building a new society on the smoking ruins of capitalism, then inevitably the latter would inflict even worse disasters on humanity.

The story of this new descent into hell, which culminated in the horrors of the Second World War, is tied up in many ways with that of the counter-revolution that reached its peak at the end of this conflict.

The white armies’ offensive against Soviet Russia and the failure of revolutionary attempts in Germany and Hungary

Very soon after October 1917, Soviet power was confronted with the military offensives of German imperialism, which was not going to listen to any talk about peace.⁵ The white armies, with economic support from abroad, were being formed in several parts of the country. And then, new white armies, directly set up abroad, were unleashed against the revolution until 1920. The country was surrounded, hemmed in by the white armies, and was being suffocated economically. The civil war would leave the country totally devastated. Nearly 980,000 Red Army soldiers died and around 3 million from among the civilian population.⁶

In Germany, the axis of the counter-revolution was constituted by the alliance between two major forces: the traitorous

SPD (Social Democratic Party) and the army. They contributed in setting up a new force, the Freikorps, the mercenaries of the counter-revolution, the nucleus of which would become the Nazi movement. The bourgeoisie would inflict a terrible blow on the Berlin proletariat by drawing it into a premature insurrection in Berlin, which was brutally suppressed in January 1919. Thousands of Berlin workers and communists – the majority of whom were also workers – were slaughtered (1200 workers were executed by firing squad), tortured and thrown into prison. Rosa Luxemburg, Karl Liebknecht and then Leo Jogisches were murdered. The working class was losing a part of its vanguard and its most perceptive leader in the person of Rosa Luxemburg who would have been a valuable compass in the face of the looming turmoil.

In addition to the inability of the workers’ movement in Germany to thwart this manoeuvre, it would also suffer from a glaring lack of coordination between the various centres of the movement: after the Berlin uprising, defensive struggles broke out in the Ruhr involving millions of miners, steel workers, textile workers from the industrial regions of the Lower Rhine and Westphalia (1st quarter of 1919), followed (at the end of March) by struggles in central Germany and again in Berlin. The Executive Council of the Republic of the councils of Bavaria was proclaimed in Munich and then overthrown, opening the door to brutal repression. Berlin, the Ruhr, Berlin again, Hamburg, Bremen, Central Germany, Bavaria, everywhere the proletariat was crushed, everywhere sector by sector. All the ferocity, the barbarism, the cunning, the calls of denunciation and the military technology were put at the service of repression. For example, “*to take back Alexanderplatz in Berlin, battlefield weapons were used for the first time in the history of revolutions: namely, light and heavy artillery, bombs weighing up to one hundredweight, aerial reconnaissance and aerial bombardment*”.⁷ Thousands of workers were shot or killed in the fighting; communists were hunted down and many were sentenced to death.

In March the workers in Hungary also engaged capital in revolutionary clashes. On March 21, 1919, the Republic of Councils was proclaimed but it was crushed during the summer by counter-revolutionary troops. For more information, read our articles in the *International Review*.⁸

3. “*A new era is born: the era of the disintegration of capitalism, of its internal collapse. The epoch of the proletarian communist revolution*”. Letter of invitation to the First Congress of the Communist International. On this subject, read our article “Communism is not a nice idea, its on the historical agenda, iv: The Platform of the Communist International”. *International Review* n° 94.

4. The Fourth International, by supporting imperialist Russia (after Trotsky’s death), in turn betrayed proletarian internationalism. See our article “Le trotskisme et la deuxième guerre mondiale” in our pamphlet *Le Trotskisme contre la classe ouvrière*.

5. This would lead to the need for the government in Russia to sign the Brest-Litovsk agreement in order to avoid the worst.

6. Read our article “The world bourgeoisie against the October Revolution (Part I)”, in *International Review* n° 160.

7. Paul Frölich, Rudolf Lindau, Albert Schreiner, Jakob Walcher, *Revolution and Counterrevolution in Germany 1918-1920*, Marxist Science eds, 2013.

8. Read our articles “German Revolution (iii): The premature insurrection” in *International Review* n° 83, and “Germany 1918-19: civil war” in *International Review* n° 136.

Despite the subsequent heroic attempts of the proletariat in Germany, in 1920 (in the face of the Kapp putsch) and 1921 (the March Action),⁹ which testify to the persistence of a strong fighting spirit, the momentum was no longer towards the political reinforcement of the German proletariat as a whole, but the opposite.

The degeneration of the revolution in Russia

The ravages of the war against the offensives of the international bourgeoisie, including the considerable losses suffered by the proletariat, its political weakening with the loss of political power by the workers' councils and the dissolution of the Red Guard, and the political isolation of the revolution – all this constituted a favourable ground for the development of opportunism within the Bolshevik party and the Communist International.¹⁰ The repression of the Kronstadt insurrection in 1921, which took place in reaction to the loss of power by the Soviets, was ordained by the Bolshevik party. From being the vanguard of the revolution at the time of the seizure of power, it was to become the vanguard of counter-revolution at the end of an internal degeneration that could not be prevented by the fractions that emerged within this party to fight specifically against growing opportunism.¹¹

The broad masses that in Russia, Germany and Hungary had stormed the heavens were no longer present. They were blooded, exhausted, defeated, and could not take anymore. Within the victorious countries of the war, the proletariat had been unable to strike an effective blow. All this would signal the political defeat of the proletariat everywhere in the world.

Stalinism becomes the spearhead of the world bourgeoisie against the revolution

The process of the degeneration of the Russian revolution accelerated when Stalin took control of the Bolshevik party. The adoption in 1925 of the thesis of “socialism in one country”, which became the doctrine

9. Read our article “The March Action 1921, the danger of petty bourgeois impatience” in *International Review* n° 93.

10. “Attempts to gain support of the masses in a phase of the declining activity of these masses led to opportunistic ‘solutions’ - the growing insistence on work in parliament and the trade unions, calls for the ‘Eastern Peoples’ to stand up against imperialism and, above all, the policy of the United Front with the socialist and social democratic parties that threw overboard all the hard-earned clarity about the capitalist nature of those who had become social patriots.” “The Communist Left and the Continuity of Marxism” available on our website.

11. See our article “Communism is not just a nice idea, it’s a material necessity, ix: 1922-23: The communist fractions against the rising counter-revolution” in *International Review* n° 101.

of the Bolshevik Party and the Communist International, constituted a breaking point with no return. This betrayal of proletarian internationalism, the basic principle of the proletarian struggle and the communist revolution, would now be adopted and defended by all the Communist Parties of the world,¹² which was totally opposed to the historic project of the working class. And just as it signals the abandonment of the whole proletarian project, the thesis of socialism in one country corresponded with Russia’s growing integration into world capitalism.

From the mid-1920s, Stalin would pursue a policy of merciless liquidation of all Lenin’s former companions by making maximum use of the repressive bodies that the Bolshevik Party had set up to resist the white armies (notably the political police, the Cheka).¹³ The whole capitalist world had recognised in Stalin the right man for the job, the one who would eradicate the last vestiges of the October Revolution and to whom it was necessary to give all the necessary support to smash and exterminate the generation of proletarians and revolutionaries who, in the middle of the world war, had dared to engage in a struggle to the death against the capitalist order.¹⁴

Revolutionaries were hunted down and suppressed by Stalinism, wherever they were, and this with the help of the great democracies, the same people who had sent their white armies to starve and try to overthrow the power of the soviets.

From this point, Stalin’s USSR is seen as socialism, while any consciousness of the real proletarian project starts to disappear

Stalin’s Russia was presented by the Stalinist bourgeoisie, as well as by the world bourgeoisie, as the realisation of the ultimate goal of the proletariat, the establishment of socialism. In this endeavour, all the factions of the world bourgeoisie collaborated, both the democratic factions and the various national Communist Parties.

The vast majority of those who still believed in the revolution would identify its purpose as the establishment of a regime like the USSR in other countries. The more

12. Here again this was opposed by the left fractions. See the article “The Communist Left and the continuity of Marxism” on our website.

13. Read our article “How Stalin wiped out the militants of the October 1917 revolution”, in *World Revolution* n° 312.

14. Thus, for example, from 1925 onwards Stalin received the full support of the world bourgeoisie for his struggle against the left-wing opposition within the Bolshevik party, which tried to maintain an internationalist position against the thesis of “building socialism in one country”. Read our article “Quand les démocraties soutenaient Staline pour écraser le prolétariat” on our website.

the light was shed on the reality of the situation of the working class in the USSR, the deeper would be the division in the world proletariat: those who would continue to defend its “progressive” character (despite all its shortcomings), with the idea that there was “no bourgeoisie” in the Soviet Union; those for whom, on the contrary, the situation in the USSR was seen as a monstrosity, but against which they felt powerless to pose the alternative. Only a smaller and smaller minority of revolutionaries supported the proletarian project and stayed loyal to it.

The proletariat confronted with the crisis of 1929 and the 1930s

The years following the 1929 crisis dramatically affected the living conditions of the world proletariat, especially in Europe and the United States. But generally speaking its reactions to this situation did not provide a sufficiently dynamic class response that could challenge the established order. Far from it. Worse still, notable reactions in France and Spain were diverted into the impasse of the antifascist struggle.

In France, the great wave of strikes that followed the arrival of the Popular Front government in 1936 clearly demonstrated the limitations imposed on the working class by the leaden yoke of the counter-revolution. The wave of strikes had begun with spontaneous occupations of factories and did show a certain combativity of the workers. But, from the very first days, the left would use this gigantic mass to manoeuvre and to impose the measures of state capitalism on the whole French bourgeoisie, measures needed for dealing with the economic crisis and preparing for war. While it was true that for the first time in France there were factory occupations, it was also the first time that we would see the workers singing both the International and the Marseillaise and marching behind both the red flag and the Tricolour.¹⁵ The apparatus constituted by the Communist Party and the unions was in control of the situation, managing to lock up the workers, who had let themselves be lulled by the sound of the accordion inside the factories.

The Spanish proletariat had stayed somewhat isolated from the First World

15. As our comrade Marc Chirik himself said: “To go through these years of terrible isolation, to see the French proletariat flying the Tricolour, the flag of the Versailles and singing the Marseillaise, all this in the name of communism, was, for all the generations that had remained revolutionary, a source of terrible sadness”. And it was precisely at the time of the war in Spain that this feeling of isolation reached one of its culminating points when many organisations that had managed to maintain class positions were dragged along by the “antifascist” wave. See our article “Marc: From the October 1917 revolution to the Second World War”, *International Review* n° 65

War and the revolutionary wave,¹⁶ so its physical forces remained relatively intact in dealing with the attacks that rained on it throughout the 1930s. There were nevertheless more than a million deaths between 1931 and 1939, of which the most important part would be a consequence of the civil war between the Republican camp and that of General Franco, which had absolutely nothing to do with the class struggle of the proletariat but was on the contrary made possible through its weakening. The situation was precipitated in 1936 with the coup d'état by General Franco. There was an immediate response from the workers: on 19 July 1936, the workers took strike action and went en masse to the army barracks to disarm the coup, without worrying about the contrary directives of the Popular Front and the Republican government. Uniting the struggle for demands with the political struggle, the workers held back Franco's murderous hand, but not that of the bourgeois faction organised in the Popular Front. Barely a year later, in May 1937, the Barcelona proletariat rose up again, but out of desperation, and it was massacred by the Popular Front government, the Spanish Communist Party with its Catalan branch of the PSUC at the helm, while the Francoist troops willingly halted their advance to allow the Stalinist executioners to crush the workers.

This terrible working class tragedy, which is still misrepresented today as "a Spanish social revolution" or "a great revolutionary adventure", is a mark, on the contrary, of the triumph of the counter-revolution, with the ideological and physical crushing of the last living forces of the European proletariat. This massacre would be a dress rehearsal that paved the royal way to the unleashing of the imperialist war.¹⁷

The 1930s: the bourgeoisie has its hands free once again to impose its solution to the crisis

The Weimar Republic in Germany had distinguished itself with the introduction of extreme measures to exploit the working class alongside others that gave workers some representation in the company they worked for, with the sole intent of mystifying them.

In Germany, there was no real opposition between the Weimar Republic (1923) and fascism (1933): the former had permitted the revolutionary threat to be crushed, dispersing the proletariat, and clouding its

consciousness; the latter, Nazism, would finish the process off, uniting capitalist society by using the iron fist to smash any remaining proletarian threat.¹⁸

Parties appeared in all the European countries claiming to be either pro-Hitler or pro-Mussolini and they all supported a programme of strengthening and concentrating political and economic power in the hands of a single party state. Their influence grew alongside a widespread anti-working class offensive by the repressive state apparatus reinforced by the army, and by the fascist troops where needed. From Romania to Greece, we saw the development of fascist-type organisations charged with preventing any working class reaction and with the collusion of the national state. The capitalist dictatorship became overt, and most often took the form of the Mussolini or Hitler model.

However, in the industrialised countries least affected by the crisis, retaining the framework of democracy was still possible. Indeed, this was necessary to mystify the proletariat. Fascism, having given rise to "antifascism", had strengthened the ability of the "democratic powers" to use this mystification. The ideology of the Popular Fronts¹⁹ made it possible to keep the workers disoriented behind the programmes of national unity and preparation for imperialist war; and, in collusion with the Russian bourgeoisie, most of the Communist Parties subservient to the new imperialist order organised a vast campaign on the rise of the fascist peril.²⁰ The bourgeoisie would only be able to wage war by deceiving the proletariat and making it believe that it was *its* war too: "*With the halt to the class struggle, or more precisely the destruction of the class power of the proletariat, the destruction of its consciousness and the diversion of its struggles, the bourgeoisie used its intermediaries inside the proletariat to empty the class struggles of their revolutionary content and to derail them onto the paths of reformism and nationalism, which was the ultimate and conclusive condition for the outbreak of the imperialist war.*"²¹

18. On this subject see "The Crushing of the German Proletariat and the Rise of Fascism" in *Bilan* n° 16 (March 1935), republished in *International Review* n° 71.

19. For more information, see "1936: The Popular Fronts in France and Spain: How the bourgeoisie mobilised the working class for war", *International Review* n° 126.

20. On this subject see "The 1944 Commemorations: 50 Years of Imperialist Lies (Part I)" published in *International Review* n° 78.

21. "Report on the international situation of the July 1945 conference of the Gauche Communiste de France", republished in *International Review* n° 59.

16. However, it should be noted that a large minority within the CNT had declared itself in favour of joining the Communist International when it was founded.

17. See "The events of 19 July", *Bilan* n° 36, October-November 1936, republished in *International Review* n° 6.

The massacres of the Second World War

The majority of the soldiers enrolled by both camps did not set out with much enthusiasm, still mindful of the deaths of their fathers just 25 years earlier. And what they were confronted with would not do much to raise their mood: the "*Blitzkrieg*" caused 90,000 deaths and 120,000 wounded on the French side, 27,000 dead on the German side. The debacle in France would see ten million people die under appalling conditions. One and a half million prisoners were sent to Germany. The conditions for the survivors were totally inhuman: the massive exodus of the people in France and the Nazi state terror bearing down on the German population.

In France as in Italy, many workers joined the maquis at that time. The Stalinist party and the Trotskyists had sold them a fraudulently distorted view of the Paris Commune (shouldn't the workers take a stand against their own bourgeoisie led by Pétain – the new Thiers – when the Germans were occupying France?) With the outbreak of the war and the population terrified and powerless, many French and European workers were recruited into the resistance groups and would now be killed believing they were fighting for the "socialist liberation" of France, Italy... The Stalinist and Trotskyist resistance groups were directing their odious propaganda around the idea that the workers would be "*at the forefront of the struggle for a people's independence*".

While the First World War killed 20 million people, the Second World War would kill 50 million, 20 million of whom were Russians killed on the European front. 10 million people died in the concentration camps, 6 million of them as a result of the Nazi policy of exterminating the Jews. Although none of the macabre abuses of Nazism are now unknown to the general public, unlike the crimes committed by the great democracies, the Nazi crimes remain an irrefutable illustration of the boundless barbarism of decadent capitalism, and the heinous hypocrisy of the Allied camp. Indeed, during the liberation, the Allies pretended to have just discovered the concentration camps. This was a pure masquerade to conceal their own barbarity by exposing that of the defeated enemy. In fact, the bourgeoisie, both English and American, had known perfectly well of the existence of the camps and what was happening in them. And yet, strange as it may appear, it did not talk about it throughout most of the war and did not make it a central theme of its propaganda. In fact, the governments of Churchill and Roosevelt feared like the plague that the Nazis would

empty the camps and massively expel the Jews. And so, they refused offers of an exchange of one million Jews; even in exchange for nothing.²²

In the final year of the war, the bombardments were directly targeted on areas where the workers were concentrated, in order to weaken the working class as much as possible by decimating and terrorising it.

The world bourgeoisie takes steps to prevent the possibility of a proletarian recovery

The objective was to prevent the repeat of a proletarian uprising like the ones in 1917 and 1918 in response to the horrors of the war. This is why the Anglo-American bombings – mainly in Germany but also in France – were purposely barbaric. The toll of what was undoubtedly one of the greatest war crimes, in the course of the Second World War, was around 200,000 dead,²³ almost all civilians. For example, the bombing in 1945 of Dresden, a hospital town with no strategic interest had no other purpose than terrorising the civilian populations.²⁴ By comparison, Hiroshima, another heinous crime, killed 75,000 people and the horrific American bombings of Tokyo in March 1945 caused 85,000 deaths!

When Mussolini was overthrown in 1943 and replaced by Marshal Badoglio, who was sympathetic to the Allies, the Allies although they already controlled the south of the country, were in no rush to move northwards. It was a case of letting the fascists settle scores with the working masses who were renewing the struggle against their class oppressors in the industrial regions of northern Italy. When asked about his passivity, Churchill replied: “*Let the Italians stew in their own juice*”.

From the end of the war, the Allies favoured Russian occupation, especially in areas where workers’ revolts had occurred. The Red Army was the best equipped to restore order in these countries either by slaughtering the proletariat or by diverting it from its class terrain in the name of “socialism”.

A similar division of labour was established between the Red Army and the German army. When it had already reached the suburbs of Warsaw and Budapest, the “Red Army” didn’t lift a finger. It let the German army crush the insurrections that were poised to drive them out. Thus Stalin

entrusted Hitler with the task of slaughtering tens of thousands of armed workers who could have upset his plans.

Not content with offering Stalin territories where there was a risk of social movements, the “democratic” bourgeoisie of the victorious countries called on the Communist Parties to join the governments in most European countries (notably in France and Italy), allocating them high-ranking positions in various ministries (Thorez – secretary of the French Communist Party – was appointed vice-president of the Council in France in 1944).

Terror was inflicted on the German population immediately after the war

In continuity with the massacres designed to prevent any proletarian uprising in Germany at the end of the war, those that took place after the war were no less barbaric and expeditious.

Germany was transformed into a vast death camp by the occupying powers of Russia, Britain, France and the United States. Many more Germans died after the war than in the battles, bombings and war concentration camps. According to James Bacque, the author of *Crimes et Mercies: Le sort des civils allemands sous occupation alliée, 1944-1950*,²⁵ more than 9 million died as a result of the policy of Allied imperialism between 1945 and 1950.

It was only when this deadly objective had been achieved and American imperialism began to see that the post-war exhaustion of Europe could lead to the domination of Russian imperialism over the whole continent, that the policy of Potsdam was changed. The reconstruction of Western Europe depended on resurrecting the German economy. The Berlin Airlift in 1948 was the symbol of this change of strategy.²⁶ Of course, just like the bombing of Dresden, considered “...*the most beautiful terror raid [that] the victorious Allies carried out in the whole war*”, the democratic bourgeoisie did everything possible to obscure the true reality of the barbarism that was broadly shared by the two sides in the World War.

25. This book is available in English under the title *Crimes and Mercies: The Fate of German Civilians Under Allied Occupation, 1944-1950*. For the author, “*More than 9 million Germans died as a result of an imposed famine of the Allies and the policies of expulsion after the Second World War - a quarter of the country was annexed and about 15 million people were expelled in the greatest act of ethnic cleansing the world has ever seen. More than 2 million of them, including countless children, died on the road or in concentration camps in Poland and elsewhere. Western governments continue to deny that these deaths occurred.*”

26. See our article “Berlin 1948: The Berlin Airlift hides the crimes of Allied imperialism” in *International Review* n° 95.

The proletariat was not able to rise up directly against the war

Despite the fact that struggles broke out from time to time in various places, particularly those in Italy in 1943, the proletariat was not able to visibly hold back the barbarism of the Second World War, as it had done with the First.

The First World War had won millions of workers to internationalism; the Second World War cast them into the depths of the most despicable chauvinism, in the hunting down of the “Boche”²⁷ and the “collabos”.²⁸

The proletariat was at rock bottom. What was presented to it, and what it interpreted as its great “victory”, the triumph of democracy over fascism, was in fact its most complete historical defeat. It made possible the consolidation of the ideological pillars of the capitalist order: the proletariat was overwhelmed by the feeling of victory and euphoria, the belief in the “sacred virtues” of bourgeois democracy – the same democracy that had led it into the butchery of two imperialist wars and crushed its revolution in the early 1920s. Then during the period of reconstruction, and the post-war economic “boom” and with it the short-lived improvement in its living conditions in the West, it was prevented from seeing the extent of the real defeat it had suffered.²⁹

In the Eastern European countries, which were not beneficiaries of the manna of the American Marshall Plan because the Stalinist parties refused it on Moscow’s orders, the situation took considerably longer to improve. The workers were presented with the mystification of “constructing socialism”. This mystification had some degree of success, such as in Czechoslovakia, where the “Prague coup” of February 1948 – i.e. the Stalinist take-over of the government – met with the approval of many workers.

Once this illusion began to wear thin, workers’ uprisings like the one in Hungary in 1956 broke out, but they were severely repressed by Russian soldiers.

The involvement of Russian troops in the repression then became an additional stimulus for nationalism in the Eastern European countries. At the same time, it was used extensively in propaganda

27. Boche is a derogatory term for a German soldier or a person of German origin, whose use by the French Communist Party in particular was intended to stir up chauvinistic hatred against Germans.

28. This refers to those who, during the Second World War, “betrayed” by collaborating with the German enemy.

29. Read our article “At the dawn of the 21st century: Why the proletariat has not yet overthrown capitalism (I)”, *International Review* n° 103.

22. On this subject, see “Let us remember: the massacres and crimes of the ‘great democracies’” in *International Review* n° 66.

23. This is the figure put forward by American estimates made after the war.

24. Read our article “Quand les démocraties soutenaient Staline pour écraser le prolétariat.” Available in French on our website.

by the “democratic” and pro-American sectors of the bourgeoisie of the Western European countries, while the Stalinist parties of these countries used the same propaganda to present the Hungarian workers’ insurrection as a chauvinist, even a “fascist” movement, in the pay of American imperialism.

Moreover, throughout the “Cold War”, and even when it gave way to “peaceful coexistence” after 1956, the division of the world into two blocs was a major instrument for the mystification of the working class.

In the 1950s the working class was still divided and disoriented by the same kind of politics as existed in the 1930s: one part of the working class no longer wanted to know anything about communism (which was identified with the USSR), while the other part continued to suffer under the ideological domination of the Stalinist parties and their unions. Hence, following on from the Korean War, the confrontation between East and West was used to sow divisions inside the working class and to mobilise millions of workers behind the Soviet camp in supporting “the struggle against imperialism”. At the same time, the colonial wars provided an additional opportunity to deflect workers away from their class terrain, once more behind the “struggle against imperialism” (and not the struggle against capitalism) in which the USSR was presented as the champion of the “rights and the freedom of the people”. This kind of campaign continued in many countries throughout the 1950s and 1960s, particularly during the Vietnam War, where the United States began its large-scale intervention in 1961.³⁰

Another consequence of this very long and profound retreat of the working class was the organic rupture with the communist fractions of the past;³¹ with the consequence that the burden of responsibility was passed onto future generations of revolutionaries to critically reclaim the acquisitions of the workers’ movement.

May 68, the end of the counter-revolution

The crisis of 1929 and the 1930s had, at best, provoked a proletarian combativity as in France and Spain, but, as we have seen previously, these movements were diverted from the class terrain into antifascism and the defence of democracy, thanks to the

grip of the Stalinists, Trotskyists and trade unions. This only contributed in a further reinforcing of the counter-revolution.

1968 was only the start of the return of the global economic crisis and yet, the effects in France (rising unemployment, wage freezes, the drive for increased productivity, attacks on social security) explain a large part of the rise in workers’ combativity in that country from 1967 onwards. Far from being channelled by the Stalinists and trade unions, the renewal of workers’ combativity was turning away from union-led strikes and “days of action”. As early as 1967, faced with the violent repression by the employers and police, there were some very fierce confrontations where the unions lost control on several occasions.

The purpose of this article is not to go back over all the important aspects of May 68 in France. For this reason, we refer the reader to the articles, “May 68 and the revolutionary perspective” written on the occasion of the 40th anniversary of these events.³² Nevertheless, recalling certain facts is important to illustrate the change in the dynamics of the class struggle that took place in May 1968.

In May, the social atmosphere changed radically. “*On May 13, every town in the country saw the most important demonstrations since World War II. The working class was massively present alongside the students. (...) At the end of the demonstrations, practically all the universities were occupied, not only by the students but also by many young workers. Everywhere, anyone could speak. Discussions were not limited to questions about universities and repression. They began to confront all the social problems: conditions of work, exploitation, the future of society. (...) On May 14 discussions continued in many firms. After the huge demonstrations the day before, with the enthusiasm and feelings of strength that emanated from them, it was difficult to carry on as if nothing had happened. In Nantes, with the workers of Sud-Aviation carried along by the youngest workers, a spontaneous strike broke out and they decided to occupy the factory. The working class had begun to take up the reins.*”³³

The traditional method of corralling the struggle used by the bourgeoisie wasn’t much use faced with the spontaneity with which the working class entered the struggle. Thus, in the three days following the

demonstration on 13 May, the strike spread spontaneously to workplaces throughout France. The movement overflowed the unions and left them behind. No specific demands were raised, but a common pattern existed: all-out strike, occupations that were not time-limited, management taken captive, red flags raised. In the end, the CGT called for spreading the strike, aiming to “*move things along*”.³⁴ But even before the CGT’s instructions were known, there were already a million workers on strike.

The working class’s growing consciousness of its own power stimulated discussion and especially political discussion. This was to some extent reminiscent of the political life that the working class experienced in the revolutionary ferment of 1917, recorded in the writings of Trotsky and John Reed.

The veil of lies woven for decades by the counter-revolution and its supporters, both Stalinist and democratic, was beginning to get very thin. Amateur videos shot in the occupied Sud-Aviation factory in Nantes showed a passionate discussion among a group of workers about the role of the strike committees under “dual power”. The duality of power in 1917 was the product of the struggle for real power between the bourgeois state and the workers’ councils. In many of the factories on strike in 1968, the workers had elected strike committees. It was very far from being a pre-revolutionary situation, but what was happening was an attempt by the working class to reclaim its own experience, its revolutionary past. Another example bears this out: “*Some workers asked those who defended the idea of the revolution to come and argue their point of view in their occupied factories. In Toulouse, the small nucleus that went on to form the ICC’s section in France was invited to expound its ideas about workers’ councils in the occupied JOB (paper and cardboard) factory. And the most significant thing was that this invitation came from the union militants of the CGT, and those of the French Communist Party. The latter had to negotiate for an hour with the permanent officials of the CGT and the PCF who had come from the big Sud-Aviation factory to ‘reinforce’ the JOB strike picket to get authorisation to allow the ‘leftists’ to enter the factory. For more than six hours, workers and revolutionaries, sitting on rolls of cardboard, discussed the revolution, the history of the workers’ movement, the soviets and even the betrayals... of the PCF and the CGT.*”³⁵

30. Read our article “At the dawn of the 21st century: Why the proletariat has not yet overthrown capitalism (II)”, *International Review* n° 104.

31. Those that emerged from the former workers’ parties that degenerated with the defeat of the world revolutionary wave in 1917-23.

32. These were two successive articles: “The student movement in the world in the 1960s” and “End of counter-revolution, historical revival of the world proletariat” published in *International Reviews* n° 133 and n° 134 respectively.

33. “May 68 and the revolutionary perspective (I): The student movement around the world in the 1960s”.

34. This would allow them to be present in the negotiations and to play a leading role in dividing up the movement to get a resumption of work, and to lead a series of separate negotiations in the various branches.

35. “May 68 and the revolutionary perspective (II):

Such a reflection allowed thousands of workers to rediscover the historical role of workers' councils, as well as the accomplishments of the working class struggle, such as the revolutionary efforts in Germany in 1919. Similarly, there was a growing criticism of the role played by the French Communist Party (which then defined itself as a party of order) not only in relation to the events of 1968 itself, but also since the Russian revolution. This was the first time that Stalinism and the Communist Party as guardians of the established order had been called into question on such a scale. The criticism also affected the unions, which increased when they openly showed themselves to be sowing divisions inside the working class in order to get it to go back to work.³⁶

It was the start of a new era, characterised by a re-awakening of class-consciousness across the working masses. This break with the counter-revolution did not mean that the latter would not continue to weigh negatively on the subsequent development of the class struggle, nor that workers' consciousness was free of very strong illusions, particularly concerning the obstacles to be overcome on the road to revolution, and indeed it was much further away at the time than the great majority imagined.

Such a characterisation of May 68 as an illustration of the end of the counter-revolutionary period was confirmed by the fact that, far from remaining an isolated phenomenon, these events would on the contrary constitute the starting point for the resumption of the class struggle on an international scale, spurred on by the deepening of the economic crisis, whose corollary was the development of a proletarian political milieu on an international scale.³⁷ The founding of "Révolution Internationale" in 1968 was an illustration of this, since this group would play a leading role in the process that would lead to the founding of the ICC in 1975, in which Révolution Internationale became its section in France. Unlike the dark period of the counter-revolution, the bourgeoisie was now confronted with a class that was not ready to accept the sacrifices demanded from the economic war between states. It also obstructed the slide towards world war in opposing the

End of counter-revolution, historical revival of the world proletariat".

36. The emphasis here on challenging the leadership of the Communist Party and the unions should not, however, suggest that they remained inactive. In many occupied factories, unions did their utmost to isolate workers from any outside contact that might have a "harmful" influence on them (from those they called the "leftists"). They kept the workers occupied in the factories playing ping-pong all day long.

37. This question justifies dedicating an article to it alone. We will do this later in an article on the evolution of the proletarian political milieu since 1968.

sacrifices demanded by imperialist war; this would become clearer later, at least as concerned the main bastions of the class in Europe and the United States.

The international recovery of class struggle from 1968

The ICC has just devoted an article to this question, "The advances and retreats in the class struggle since 1968",³⁸ which we recommend to our readers and from which we draw elements necessary to highlight the differences between the counter-revolutionary period and the historical period opened with May 1968. Simply put, the fundamental difference between the period of counter-revolution, starting from a heavy defeat of the working class, and the one that opened with May 68, lies in the fact that since this emergence of the struggle and despite all the difficulties with which the proletariat has been confronted, it has not suffered a decisive defeat.

The deepening of the open economic crisis, which was only in its infancy at the end of the 1960s, has produced a significant development of proletarian combativity and consciousness.

There were three successive waves of struggle over the two decades after 1968.

The first, undoubtedly the most spectacular, gave us the Italian "hot autumn" in 1969, the violent uprising in Cordoba, Argentina, in 1969 and struggles in Poland in 1970, and important movements in Spain and Great Britain in 1972. There was also a "hot autumn" in Germany in 1969 with many wildcat strikes. In Spain in particular, workers began to organise themselves through mass assemblies, a process that culminated in Vitoria in 1976. The international dimension of the wave was demonstrated by echoes in Israel (1969) and Egypt (1972) and, later, by the uprisings in the townships of South Africa, which were led by struggle committees (the Civics).

After a short break in the mid-1970s, there was a second wave with strikes by Iranian oil workers, steel mill workers in France in 1978, the "winter of discontent" in Britain, the dockworkers' strike in Rotterdam, led by an independent strike committee, and steel strikes in Brazil in 1979 which also challenged union control. In Asia there was the Kwangju revolt in South Korea. This wave of struggles culminated in Poland in 1980, certainly the most important episode of class struggle since 1968, and even since the 1920s.

Although the severe repression of the

38. See *International Review* n° 161.

Polish workers brought this wave to a halt, it did not take long before a new movement took place with the struggles in Belgium in 1983 and 1986, the general strike in Denmark in 1985, the miners' strike in Britain in 1984-85, the railway and health workers' struggles in France in 1986 and 1988, and the movement of education workers in Italy in 1987. The struggles in France and Italy, in particular – like the mass strike in Poland – showed a real capacity for self-organisation with general assemblies and strike committees.

This movement of struggles in waves was not going nowhere; it made real advances in class-consciousness expressed in the following characteristics:

- a loss of illusions in the political forces of the left of capital and mainly the unions, with illusions giving way to mistrust and increasingly open hostility;
- the increasing rejection of ineffective forms of mobilisation, dead-ends into which the unions have so often channelled workers' combativity: days of action, demonstrations reduced to tame parades; long and isolated strikes...

But the experience of these 20 years of struggle had not only brought out the "negative" lessons for the working class (of what not to do). It has also provided lessons about what to do:

- seeking to extend the struggle (Belgium 1986 in particular);
- seeking to take the struggle into our own hands, by organising into elected and revocable assemblies and strike committees (France at the end of 1986, Italy mainly in 1987).

Similarly, the more sophisticated manoeuvres developed by the bourgeoisie to deal with the class struggle also showed that there has been some development during this period. Thus, to face up to the growing disenchantment with the official unions and the threat posed by self-organisation, it developed forms of unionism which could even appear to be "outside the unions" (the 'Coordinations' set up by the far left in France, for example).

The proletariat puts a brake on war

During the twenty years after May 1968, the bourgeoisie, unable to inflict a decisive historic defeat on the working class, was incapable of implementing a mobilisation for a new world war, contrary to the situation of the 1930's, as we showed above.

In fact it was out of the question that the bourgeoisie would launch a world war

without being fully assured of the docility of the proletariat, an indispensable condition for it to accept the sacrifices required for a state of war in which the mobilisation of all the living forces of the nation, as much in production as on the fronts, is demanded. Such an objective was totally unrealistic as long as the proletariat wasn't ready to submit itself obediently to the measures of austerity that the bourgeoisie had to take in order to face up to the consequences of the economic crisis. That's why a third world war didn't take place during this period, a time where tensions between the blocs were at their height and the alliances amongst them were already firmly established through the two blocs. Further, in none of the historic concentrations of the proletariat did the bourgeoisie try to mobilise the proletariat as cannon-fodder in the local wars relevant to the east-west rivalry which, during this time, had bloodied the world.

This is particularly true of the working class of the West but equally applies to those of the East, although the latter were weaker politically, in the USSR especially, given the damage done by the steamroller of Stalinism. The Stalinist bourgeoisie, mired in a rapidly deteriorating economic swamp, was manifestly incapable of mobilising its workers in a military solution to its economic bankruptcy, a fact particularly illustrated with the strikes in Poland in 1980.

That being said, even if the working class was an obstacle to world war up to the end of the 1980's, given that it had been capable of developing its combats of resistance against the attacks of capital in the two decades after 1968 without submitting to a decisive defeat that would have overturned a global dynamic of towards confrontation between the classes, that's not to say that it was strong enough to prevent wars across the planet. In fact they never stopped during this period. In the majority of cases they were the expression of imperialist rivalries between East and West, not a direct confrontation between them but through client countries. And in these countries on the periphery of capitalism, the proletariat didn't have the strength to paralyse the armed force of the bourgeoisie.

The proletariat faced with the decomposition of capitalism

Despite the advances made in the class struggle, notably through the development of class consciousness and also the inability of the bourgeoisie to drag on the proletariat into a new world conflict, the working class was nevertheless incapable of developing its perspective of revolution,

of posing its own alternative to the crisis of the system.

Thus, neither of the two fundamental classes could impose their solution to the crisis of capitalism. Deprived of any end result but still sinking into its long-term economic crisis, capitalism began to rot on its feet and this degeneration affected capitalist society at every level. Here capitalism enters into a new phase in its decadence, that of social decomposition. We've often showed how this phase is synonymous with the growing difficulties for the class struggle.³⁹

Looking over the three last decades, we can say that the setback in consciousness has been profound, causing a type of amnesia in relation to the advances of the period 1968-1989. This is fundamentally explained by two factors:

- the enormous impact that the collapse of the Eastern Bloc in 1989-91 had, lyingly identified by the campaigns of the bourgeoisie as the collapse of communism;
- the characteristics of decomposition itself inaugurated by this collapse, particularly "*the constant increase in criminality, insecurity, and urban violence... the development of nihilism, despair, and suicide amongst young people... and of hatred and xenophobia... the profusion of sects, the renewal of the religious spirit including in the advanced countries, the rejection of rational, coherent thought... the invasion of the... media by the spectacle of violence, horror, blood, massacres... the development of terrorism, or the seizure of hostages, as methods of warfare between states...*"⁴⁰

Despite the enormous difficulties that the working has experienced since 1990, two elements should be taken into account in order to get the whole picture:

- the growing difficulties and even its partial defeats are not yet tantamount to a historic defeat of the working class and the disappearance of the possibility of communism;
- subterranean maturation continues because, despite decomposition, capitalism goes on and the two fundamental classes of society continue to face one another.

In fact, in the last decades, there have been a certain number of important movements which tend to support this analysis:

- in 2006, the massive mobilisation of high

39. See: "Decomposition, final phase of the decadence of capitalism". *International Review* n° 62.

40. Ibid.

school and university youth in France against the CPE.⁴¹ Its protagonists rediscovered forms of struggle which appeared in May 68, in particular general assemblies where real discussion took place and where the young were ready to listen to the witnesses of older comrades who had taken part in the events of 68. This movement, which had overflowed containment by the unions, held the real risk of drawing in the workers in a similarly "uncontrolled" way as in 68 and that is why the French government withdrew the law;

- again in May 2006, 23,000 metalworkers in Vigo, in the Galician province of Spain, went on strike against work reforms in the sector and instead of staying bottled up in the factory went out to look for solidarity from other workers notably in the naval shipyard and the Citroen factories, organising demonstrations in the town to rally the whole population and above all organising public and daily general assemblies open to all workers whether active, unemployed or retired;
- in 2011, the wave of social revolts in the Middle East and Greece culminated in the movement of the "Indignados" in Spain. The proletarian element in these movements varied from one country to the other, but it was strongest in Spain where we saw the spread of general assemblies, a powerful internationalist élan which saluted the expressions of solidarity of the participants from all parts of the world and where the slogan "world revolution" was taken seriously, perhaps for the first time since the revolutionary wave of 1917; a recognition that "the system is obsolete" and a strong will to discuss the possibility of a new form of social organisation. In numerous animated discussions which took place in the assemblies and commissions on the questions of morals, science and culture, in the all-present calling into question of the dogmas according to which capitalist relations are eternal – here we see once again the real spirit of May 68 taking shape. Evidently, this movement showed plenty of weaknesses that we have analysed elsewhere,⁴² not least among those who saw themselves as "citizens" rather than proletarians and thus really vulnerable to bourgeois ideology.

41. The CPE was the French state's First Employment Contract whose aim was to make work more precarious for young workers. For an analysis of this movement, see "Theses on the spring 2006 student movement in France", *International Review* n° 125.

42. See: "The Indignados in Spain, Greece and Israel: from indignation to the preparation of class struggle", *International Review* n° 147

The threats that the survival of capitalism holds over humanity shows that revolution is more than ever a necessity for the human race: from the expansion of military chaos to the ecological catastrophe; from famine to the development of unprecedented diseases. The decadence of capitalism, and its decomposition, certainly increases the danger that the objective basis of a new society could be definitively destroyed if decomposition advances beyond a certain point. But even in its latest phase, capital-

ism still produces the forces which can be used to overthrow it - in the words of the *Communist Manifesto* of 1848: “*What the Bourgeoisie therefore produces, above all, are its own grave diggers*”.

Thus, with the entry of capitalism into its phase of decomposition, even if it brings with it greater difficulties for the proletariat, nothing indicates that the latter has suffered a defeat of irreversible consequences and, from this, has accepted all the sacrifices

regarding its living and working conditions that would imply a mobilisation for imperialist war.

We don't know when or with what force the next manifestations of the potentialities of the proletariat will be produced. What we do know is that the determined and appropriate intervention of a revolutionary minority strengthens the future of the class struggle.

Silvio (July 2018)

Continued from page 27

ern economy, posing on a scientific basis the problem of the historical development of the workers' movement and its meaning, defining Stalinism and the "workers" bureaucracy in general, and finally, posing the revolutionary perspective by taking into account the original elements created by our epoch... We think that we represent the living continuation of marxism in the framework of contemporary society. In this sense we have no fear of being confused with all the editors of 'marxist' publications seeking 'clarification', all the men of good will, all the chatterers and gossips. If we pose problems, it's because we think that we can resolve them" (our underlining).

This is a language in which pretension and limitless self-flattery is only equalled by the ignorance shown about the revolutionary movement, its groups and tendencies, its work and its theoretical struggles over the last 30 years. Ignorance explains a lot, but it is not a justification and still less does it entitle you to claim a glorious medal for yourself. What medal authorises the *Socialisme ou Barbarie* group to speak so dismissively of the recent past of the revolutionary movement, its internal struggles, and its groups, whose only fault is to have posed some ten or twenty years in advance the problems which *SouB* in its ignorance claims to have discovered today?

The fact of having come into political life very recently during the course of the war, and even more the fact that it has come from the politically corrupted organisation of Trotskyism, in whose swamp it was floundering up till 1949, should not be invoked as a certificate of honour, as a guarantee of political maturity. The arrogant tone here bears witness to the evident ignorance of this group, which has not yet sufficiently freed itself from ways of thinking and discussing that derive from Trotskyism. If it looked at things in a different way, it would be seen quite easily that the ideas it

announces today, and which it considers to be its original work, are for the most part a more or less happy reproduction of the ideas put forward by the left currents of the Third International (the Russian Workers' Opposition, the Spartacists in Germany, the Council Communists in Holland, the Communist Left of Italy) over the course of the past 25 years.

If, instead of contenting itself with a few bits of knowledge and even of hearsay, the *Socialisme ou Barbarie* group had taken the trouble to make a deeper study of the many, though hard-to-find, documents of these left currents, it might perhaps have lost its pretensions to originality, but it would assuredly have gained in depth.

Communism is on the agenda of history

Castoriadis, Munis and the problem of breaking with Trotskyism (part I)

In September 1945 Marc Chirik wrote a letter from Paris to the writer Jean Malaquais and his wife Gally. Malaquais had worked with Marc in the French fraction of the communist left in Marseille during the war, a period which inspired his great novel *Planet without Visa*, one of whose principal protagonists is a communist revolutionary, an internationalist opposed to the “anti-fascist” war, named “Marc Laverne”.

The letter begins: “*first, the disappeared. Michel, our poor Mitchell, no news of him, he must have ended his life in frightful conditions... Jean was the best element of the Belgian Fraction... the most talented, full of promise (did you know him?). He and his son were deported and died in a concentration camp in Germany*”.

There follows a list of comrades and contacts from the political milieu in Vichy Marseille, as well as members of his own family: those who died, those who came back after suffering appalling tortures, those who managed to avoid the Nazi terror by adopting false names, or by flight. A terror continued by the Stalinist Resistance, as Marc recounts further on:

“*The most critical moment for me, when I could see death in front of me, was a few weeks afterwards when the Stalinists arrested me along with Clara¹ and took all my writings. They were ready to show me what they were made of. It was just by a miracle of luck that Clara had met, among the leading chiefs, a woman with whom she had worked for a while in the UGIF (to help Jewish children) and we were able to save our skins from the hatred of the Stalinists.*”

Such was the situation facing internationalists during and immediately after the second imperialist world war. Mitchell, who was one of them, had written a series of articles on the “Problems of the Period of Transition” in the pages of *Bilan*. We have published them as part of this series² because they offer an authentic marxist framework for discussing some of the most fundamental questions of the communist transformation: the historical

and international context of the proletarian revolution; the dangers emanating from the transitional state; the economic content of the transformation, and so on. These articles must have had a powerful influence on Marc and the French fraction, later the Gauche Communiste de France, as can be seen from their efforts to take Mitchell’s critique of the transitional state to its logical conclusion: the rejection of any identity between the proletariat and this necessary evil in the transformation of social relations.³

Stirrings in the proletarian milieu

The letter to Malaquais asks for news about the political milieu in the western hemisphere – the Paul Mattick group in Chicago, which he linked to the Dutch left, the Oehler group in the same city, the group of the Italian left in New York, the Eiffels group in Mexico. Marc also answers Malaquais’ questions about Victor Serge, who had been with them in the milieu in Marseille but had become a democrat, supporting the allied imperialisms during the war.⁴ Following a review of the counter-revolutionary role being played by the former workers’ parties in the post-war settlement, Marc talks about the proletarian milieu, such as it was, in France, mentioning in passing the French fraction and the divergences around the formation of the party in Italy, but also the groups who had come out of Trotskyism “*L’Union Communiste is dead, but in its place has arisen a group, the Communistes*

3. We have also republished the GCF’s “Theses on the nature of the state and the proletarian revolution” from 1946, with a critical introduction on our website in 2014.

4. This divergence had already appeared in Marseille, judging from the version provided by Malaquais in *Planet without Visa*, which has the fictional Marc arguing against the pro-allied position of the character Stepanoff, a thinly disguised version of Serge.

Revolutionnaires, coming from a split with the Trotskyists, and although confused, it is sincerely revolutionary”. The CR was aligned with the Austrian/German group Revolutionären Kommunisten Deutschlands, which had also broken from Trotskyism over the crucial issues of the defence of the USSR and support for the war. The French fraction had discussed and worked with the RKD during the war, jointly signing an internationalist manifesto at the time of the “liberation” of France.⁵

Thus the French fraction, and subsequently the GCF, were keenly interested in discussion with all the internationalist proletarian groups which had survived the war and which were undergoing a certain revival in its wake.⁶ Despite their characterisation of official Trotskyism as an appendage to Stalinism, they were open to the possibility that groups emerging from Trotskyism – provided they made a total break with its counter-revolutionary positions and practices – could evolve in a positive direction. This had evidently been the case with the RKD/CR tendency, and also with the Stinas group, the International Communist Union, in Greece, although we don’t know much about the existence of any contacts between Stinas and the Italian communist left during or after the war.⁷

5. This joint intervention with the RKD was falsely described as “collaborating with Trotskyism” by the Partito Comunista Internazionale, and served as a pretext for the expulsion of the GCF from the International Communist Left. But the RKD had clearly broken with Trotskyism on the key question of internationalism, opposition to the war, and denunciation of the USSR.

6. See for example our article on the internationalist conference in Holland in 1947 in *International Review* n° 132.

7. For Stinas, see our introduction to extracts from his memoirs in *International Review* n° 72 “Memoirs of a revolutionary (A. Stinas, Greece): Nationalism and antifascism.” See also “Greek Resistance in WW2: patriotism or internationalism” on our website. The memoirs of Stinas have been published in Greek and French *Agis Stinas, Mémoires: un révolutionnaire dans la Grèce du XXe siècle*, preface by Michel Pablo, translated by Olivier Houdart, La Brèche, Paris, 1990, pp369. A partial English translation can be found on libcom: “Revolutionary defeatists in Greece in World War II - Aghis Stinas”. Stinas was unwavering in his opposition to the imperialist war and to the patriotic Resistance. In his case, given the lack of real centralisation in the self-proclaimed Fourth International, he had assumed for some years

1. Marc’s wife and member of the GCF and later the ICC. See “Homage to our comrade Clara” in *World Revolution* n° 295, which also recounts this incident.

2. See *International Review* n° 128, 129, 130, 131, 134.

In France itself, the GCF entered into contact with the group around Grandizo Munis and, from 1949, with the *Socialisme ou Barbarie* group animated by Cornelius Castoriadis/Chaulieu (who had been a member of the Stinas group in Greece), Claude Lefort/Montal and others. In the case of the Munis group, then called Union Ouvrière Internationaliste, the GCF held a series of meetings with them on the present situation of capitalism. The seminal text “The evolution of capitalism and the new perspective” was based on the exposé given by Marc Chirik at one of these meetings. Similar initiatives were taken with the *Socialisme ou Barbarie* group.

In a subsequent article, we are going to examine the ideas of Munis and Castoriadis in more detail, not least because both of them devoted a great deal of energy to defining the meaning of proletarian revolution and of socialist society in a period of continuing reaction in which the hideous deformations of Stalinism, of “really existing socialism” in Russia and its bloc, were more or less dominant in the working class. This ideological domination was not at all challenged by official Trotskyism, whose “contribution” to understanding the transition from capitalism to socialism was limited to an apology for the Stalinist regimes, defined as deformed workers’

that this was the “normal” position of the Trotskyist party. It was only later that he discovered the full extent of official Trotskyism’s capitulation to anti-fascism....

states, and an advocacy of “nationalisation under workers’ control” (i.e. a form of state capitalism) in the countries outside the Russian bloc. It is thus of particular interest to study the work of elements who were breaking with Trotskyism not only because of its abandonment of internationalism, but also because its vision of social transformation remained firmly within the horizon of capitalism.

As a kind of preface to this study, we think it would be useful to republish the text “Welcome to *Socialisme ou Barbarie*” in *Internationalisme* n° 43, because it is a good example of the method employed by the GCF in its relationship with the refugees from the shipwreck of Trotskyism in the wake of World War Two

The title of the article immediately sets the tone: a fraternal welcome to a new group which the GCF recognises as clearly belonging to the revolutionary camp, despite the many differences in the method and outlook of the two groups. The new group was the result of a split by the Chaulieu/Montal tendency within the French Trotskyist Party, the Parti Communiste Internationaliste (in which Munis had also briefly sojourned). This led the GCF to qualify a previous statement it had made about this tendency:

“*The overall judgement we made of this tendency in recent issues of Internationalisme, however severe it might have been, was absolutely well-founded. We*

must however make a correction concerning its definitive character. The Chaulieu tendency was not liquidated, as we presented it, but found the strength, albeit after a very long delay, to break with the Trotskyist organisation and form itself into an autonomous group. Despite the heavy weight of this heritage on the group, this fact represents a new element that opens the possibility of its later evolution. The future alone will tell us to what extent it constitutes a gain in the formation of a new revolutionary movement. But right now we must say to them that they won’t be able to carry out this task unless they rid themselves completely and as quickly as possible of the scars they have inherited from Trotskyism and which can still be felt in the first issue of their review.”

And indeed, the “heavy weight of this heritage” was to prove an extremely difficult one to throw off. This burden can also be seen in the subsequent work of Munis, but it was to prove much more destructive in the case of *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, not least because, as the GCF article notes, the Chaulieu group immediately proclaimed that it had gone beyond all the existing revolutionary currents and would be able to provide definitive answers to the enormous problems confronting the working class. This arrogant assumption was to have very negative consequences for the future evolution of the group. We will seek to demonstrate this in a subsequent article.

Welcome to *Socialisme ou Barbarie* (Internationalisme 43, June/July 1949)

Internationalisme 43, June/July 1949

Welcome to *Socialisme ou Barbarie*

The first issue of a new revolutionary review called *Socialisme ou Barbarie* has just appeared in France.

In the sombre situation in which the workers’ movement in France and the rest of the world finds itself today, a situation marked by a course towards war, in which the rare revolutionary groups – expressions of the life and state of consciousness of the proletarian class – who still survive thanks to a determined desire to act and a constant ideological effort, are becoming a little weaker each day; in a situation where the revolutionary press is reduced to a few small duplicated bulletins, the appearance of a new printed review, an “*organ of criticism and revolutionary orientation*” is an important event which every militant can only welcome and encourage.

Whatever the breadth of our disagreements with the positions of *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, and whatever the future evolution of this review, on the basis of the fundamental positions and general orientation expressed in this first issue, we must consider this group as undeniably proletarian and revolutionary. That is to say, we welcome its existence, and will follow with sympathy and interest its future activity and efforts. Since revolutionary sympathy is above all based on paying attention to political positions, we intend to examine the ideas put forward by *Socialisme ou Barbarie* without prejudice and with the greatest of care, to analyse them as they evolve, criticising what seems erroneous in them and in such cases countering them with our own views. We see this not with the aim of carrying out a vain polemic based on denigration – something which has become only too

common among groups and which deeply repels us – but, however lively the discussion might be, as being exclusively geared towards the confrontation and clarification of positions.

Socialisme ou Barbarie is the organ of a tendency which has just broken with the Trotskyist party, the Chaulieu-Montal tendency. It is a political tendency known among the milieu of militants in France and we have spoken about it on several occasions, and again quite recently¹ not in exactly tender terms. This perhaps demands a supplementary explanation on our part.

Examining the Trotskyist movement in France and noting that it once again, for the umpteenth time, finds itself in a state of crisis, we posed the question whether this crisis had a positive significance from the

1. *Internationalisme* n° 41, January 1949, in the article “Where are we?”.

point of view of revolutionary formation. We replied with a categorical No, and for the following reason. Trotskyism, which was one of the proletarian reactions within the Communist International during the first years of its degeneration, never went beyond this position of being an opposition, despite its formal constitution into an organically separate party. By remaining attached to the Communist Parties – which it still sees as workers' parties – even after the triumph of Stalinism, Trotskyism itself functions as an appendage to Stalinism. It is linked ideologically to Stalinism and follows it around like a shadow. All the activity of Trotskyism over the last 15 years proves this. From 1932-33 where it supported the possibility of the victory of the proletarian revolution in Germany under Stalinist leadership, to its participation in the 1939-45 war, in the Resistance and the Liberation, via the Popular Front, anti-fascism and participation in the war in Spain, Trotskyism has merely walked in the footsteps of Stalinism. In the wake of the latter, Trotskyism has also contributed powerfully to introducing into the workers' movement habits and methods of organisation and forms of activity (bluff, intrigue, burrowing from within, insults and manoeuvres of all kinds) which are so many active factors in the corruption and destruction of any revolutionary activity. This doesn't mean that revolutionary workers who only have a little political education have not been drawn into its ranks. On the contrary, as an organisation, as a political milieu, Trotskyism, far from favouring the development of revolutionary thought and of the organisms (fractions and tendencies) which express it, is an organised milieu for undermining it. This is a general rule valid for any political organisation alien to the proletariat, and experience has demonstrated that it applies to Stalinism and Trotskyism. We have known Trotskyism over 15 years of perpetual crisis, through splits and unifications, followed by further splits and crises, but we don't know examples which have given rise to real, viable revolutionary tendencies. Trotskyism does not secrete within itself a revolutionary ferment. On the contrary, it annihilates it. The condition for the existence and development of a revolutionary ferment is to be outside the organisational and ideological framework of Trotskyism.

The constitution of the Chaulieu-Montal tendency within the Trotskyist organisation, and precisely after the latter had sunk itself up to its neck in the second imperialist war, the Resistance and national liberation, did not, with good reason, inspire much confidence towards it on our part. This tendency was formed on the basis of the theory of bureaucratic collectivism in the

USSR and consequently rejected any defence of the latter. But what value could this position of non-defence of the USSR have when your practice is to co-habit in an organisation whose activity clearly and concretely resides in the defence of Russian state capitalism and participation in imperialist war? Not only did the Chaulieu-Montal tendency find its cohabitation in the organisation possible, it participated actively, and at all levels, in the activism typical of Trotskyism, based on bluff and mystification, in all its electoral, trade union and other campaigns. Furthermore, we could hardly avoid being unfavourably impressed by the behaviour of this tendency, made up of manoeuvres, combinations, dubious compromises, aimed more at seizing control of the leadership of the party than at developing the consciousness of its militants. The prolonged hesitations of the members of the tendency to leave the organisation – at the last congress, in summer 1948, they were still accepting being elected to the central committee – denotes both their political incoherence, their illusion in the possibility of re-dressing the Trotskyist organisation, and finally their total incomprehension of the political and organisational conditions indispensable to the elaboration of revolutionary thought and orientation

The overall judgement we made of this tendency in recent issues of *Internationalisme*, however severe it might have been, was absolutely well-founded. We must however make a correction concerning its definitive character. The Chaulieu tendency was not liquidated, as we presented it, but found the strength, albeit after a very long delay, to break with the Trotskyist organisation and form itself into an autonomous group. Despite the heavy weight of this heritage on the group, this fact represents a new element that opens the possibility of its later evolution. The future alone will tell us to what extent it constitutes a gain in the formation of a new revolutionary movement. But right now we must say to them that they won't be able to carry out this task unless they rid themselves completely and as quickly as possible of the scars they have inherited from Trotskyism and which can still be felt in the first issue of their review.

It's not our intention here to make a deep and detailed analysis of the positions of the *Socialisme ou Barbarie* group. We will come back to this another time. Today we will limit ourselves to observing that, after reading their first issue, this is a group in evolution, and that its positions are anything but fixed. This should not be seen as a reproach, far from it. This group rather seems to be moving away from its fixed position about a third class, the bureauc-

racy, and from the idea of a dual historical antithesis to capitalism; either socialism or bureaucratic collectivism. This position, which was previously the only reason for its existence as a tendency, was a dead-end both at the level of theoretical research and of practical revolutionary activity. It's because it seems today to be abandoning, if only partially, this conception of a historical opposition between statism and capitalism, in favour of seeing statification as a tendency inherent in capitalism in the present period, that this group is managing to get a more correct appreciation of the present trade union movement and its necessary integration into the state apparatus.

We want to draw attention to a very interesting study by A. Carrier on the cartel of autonomous unions, in which through his pen the group *Socialisme ou Barbarie* for the first time expresses "our position on the historically obsolete nature of trade unionism as a proletarian weapon against exploitation".

However, we are a bit surprised to learn, after such a clear declaration on the historically obsolete character of trade unionism, that this position does not lead *Socialisme ou Barbarie* to refuse to take part in any trade union life. The reason for this practical attitude, which is in contradiction with the whole analysis made of the trade union movement, is formulated thus: "we go where the workers are, not just because they are there, so to speak, physically, but because that's where they struggle, with more or less effectiveness, against all forms of exploitation". What's more, participation in the unions is justified by saying: "We are not uninterested in the question of demands. We are convinced that in all circumstances there are correct demand slogans which, without resolving the problem of exploitation, assure the defence of the elementary material interests of the class, a defence which has to be organised on a daily basis faced with the daily attacks of capitalism". And this after having, with the support of figures, demonstrated that "capitalism has reached the point where it can no longer give anything, where it can only take back what it has given. Not only is any reform impossible, but even the present level of poverty can't be maintained". From this point, the significance of the immediate programme has changed.

This whole study on "The cartel of united trade union action" is extremely interesting, but while it provides a valid analysis of trade unionism in the present period, it is also a very striking manifestation of the contradictory state of the *Socialisme ou Barbarie* group. The objective analysis of the evolution of modern capitalism towards statification, both of the economy and of

the economic organisations of the workers (an analysis which is that of the groups of the ultra-left, to which we belong) is in competition with the old traditional subjective attitude of participation and activity in the trade union organisation, an attitude inherited from Trotskyism from which they have not fully disengaged.

A good part of this number of *Socialisme ou Barbarie* is devoted to polemics with the Trotskyist Parti Communiste Internationaliste. This is very understandable. Leaving a political organisation, where you have a whole past of militancy and conviction, doesn't take place without a kind of emotional crisis, and often involves personal recriminations, which is quite natural. But here we are dealing with a polemic and a polemical tone which is well out of proportion.

We are thinking of the article by Chaulieu "Useless Mouths", which is aimed at clearing a member of the group, Lefort, of the accusations made against him by *La Vérité*. We can well understand the strong indignation that can be provoked by this kind of accusation, full of hypocritical insinuations and malicious allusions. But Chaulieu doesn't manage to keep things at a certain level, and in his reply he indulges in a regrettable grossness and vulgarity. Wordplay around the name of Pierre Frank is really worthy of a naughty schoolboy and doesn't really have a place in a revolutionary publication. Once again we are in the presence of the decomposition which has been infecting the workers' movement for years. The precondition for the reconstitution of a new revolutionary movement is to free itself of this venomous tradition imported by Stalinism, and maintained, among others, by Trotskyism. We can never insist too much on this "moral" aspect, which is one of the foundation stones of revolutionary work in the immediate and in the future. This is why we were so disagreeably impressed to find this malodorous polemic in the columns of the first issue of *Socialisme ou Barbarie*. We should also point out that, caught up in the fires of polemic, Chaulieu and his friends have forgotten to reply to one of the key questions which gave rise to this polemic, i.e. whether or not it's possible to carry out research into problems of the revolutionary movement through any publication that offers you its columns.

In *Internationalisme* we have already looked at this question, and the conclusion we arrived at is in the negative. Today there is an anguishing problem of a lack of means of expression for revolutionary thought. Every thinking revolutionary militant has had this feeling of being stifled and feels the need to break out of the silence which

has been imposed on them. But beyond the subjective aspect of the problem there is a political problem linked to the present situation. We can't find relief by depositing our thoughts anywhere: we have to make our thought an effective weapon of the proletarian class struggle. Have Lefort, Chaulieu and their friends asked themselves what is the result of collaborating with a literary and philosophical review like Sartre's *Les Temps Modernes*?

This kind of collaboration will not only produce little more than "revolutionary" verbiage, but it will also give credibility among militants to a review, an ideological current towards which the greatest political and ideological reserve is necessary. In this way, instead of clarifying things by distinguishing between different currents, you only end up increasing confusion. It shows a real lack of understanding of the conditions for revolutionary research to turn Sartre and his review - for whom the political application of his philosophy means support for the RDR² - into a place, a milieu, for discussion about the role played by Trotsky and Trotskyism in the degeneration of the Communist International. Revolutionary theoretical research can never be the topic of conversation in a salon, or provide a theory for left-leaning literary types. However pitiful the means of expression available to the revolutionary proletariat, it's only in this framework that you can work towards the elaboration of the theory of the class. Working on, improving, developing these means of expression is the only way for militants to make their thought and action effective. Trying to use means of expression that don't belong to the organisms of the class always denotes an intellectualist and petty bourgeois tendency. The fact that this problem is completely neglected in the polemic written by *Socialisme ou Barbarie* proves that it has not even grasped, let alone solved, the problem. We think that this too is very significant.

Before engaging in a critical examination of the positions defended by the *Socialisme ou Barbarie* group, we think that it's necessary to pause a moment at another point, which is also highly characteristic: the manner in which this group presents itself. It would be wrong to consider that this is something without any importance. The idea one has of oneself, and the appreciation one has of other groups, is intimately linked to the general conceptions one professes. It is often this aspect which is most revealing about the nature of a group. In every

2. ICC note: Rassemblement Démocratique Révolutionnaire: a short-lived party formed by Sartre in 1947 along with various left social democrats and Trotskyists.

case it is an indispensable element which makes it immediately possible to grasp the underlying conceptions of a group.

Here are two extracts from the leading article of the first issue of the review, an article which is in some ways the credo or political platform of the group.

Talking about the present-day workers' movement, and having noted the complete alienation of the masses in anti-working class ideologies, the review writes:

"The only ones that seem to be keeping afloat in this universal deluge are weak organisations like the '4th International', the anarchist federations, and a few so-called 'ultra-left' groups (Bordigists, Spartacists, council communists). Organisations which are weak, not because of their meagre numbers - which in itself means nothing, and is not a criterion - but above all because of their lack of ideological and political content. Linked much more to the past than to the anticipation of the future, these organisations already find themselves absolutely incapable of understanding the social development of the 20th century, and even less of orienting themselves positively in response to it."

And, having enumerated the weaknesses of Trotskyism and anarchism, the article continues a few lines later:

"Finally, the 'ultra-left' grouplets either passionately cultivate their sectarian deformations, like the Bordigists, sometimes going so far as to making the proletariat responsible for their own incapacity, or, like the council communists, content themselves with drawing up, on the basis of past experience, recipes for the 'socialist' kitchens of the future.... Despite their delirious pretensions, both the '4th International' and the anarchists and the ultra-lefts are in truth nothing but historical memories, tiny scabs on the wounds of the class, doomed to disappear with the rise of the new skin being prepared in the underlying tissues" (p 9).

So much for the other existing tendencies and groups. It thus becomes understandable that, after such a severe judgement, a condemnation without appeal of the others, you present yourself in these terms:

"By presenting ourselves today, through the means of this review, to the vanguard of manual and intellectual workers, we are the only ones responding in a systematic way to the fundamental problems of the contemporary revolutionary movement; we think that we are the only ones taking up and continuing the marxist analysis of the mod-

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Sinking into the economic crisis

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against the October revolution**

Belated response to a revolutionary anarchist
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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*.

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