



world revolution

IMPERIALIST

~~Humanitarian~~ war in Libya



“Expressing grave concern at the deteriorating situation, the escalation of violence, and the heavy civilian casualties...

Condemning the gross and systematic violation of human rights, including arbitrary detentions, enforced disappearances, torture and summary executions...

Considering that the widespread and systematic attacks currently taking place in the Libyan Arab

Jamahiriya against the civilian population may amount to crimes against humanity...

Expressing its determination to ensure the protection of civilians

Authorizes Member States that have notified the Secretary-General....to take all necessary measures.... to protect civilians and civilian populated areas under threat of attack”

From UN Resolution 1973,17 March 2011

Once again, the great leaders of this world are full of fine humanitarian phrases, ringing speeches about ‘democracy’ and the safety of populations, but their real aim is to justify their imperialist adventures.

Since 20 March an ‘international coalition’¹ has been carrying out a major military operation in Libya, poetically named ‘Operation Dawn Odyssey’ by the USA. Every day, dozens of war planes have been taking off from powerful French and US aircraft carriers, or from bases inside the UK, to launch a carpet of bombs at the all the areas containing the armed forces loyal to the Gaddafi regime². In plain words, this is war!

All these states are just defending their own interests

Obviously Gaddafi is a bloody dictator. After several weeks of retreat in the face of the rebellion, the self-proclaimed ‘Guide’ of Libya was able to reorganise his elite troops to make a counter-attack. Day after day, his forces were able to gain ground, crushing everything in his path, ‘rebels’ as well the population in general. And without doubt, he was preparing a bloodbath for the inhabitants of Benghazi when the Operation Dawn Odyssey was launched. The air strikes by the coalition took a heavy toll of Gaddafi’s forces and thus in effect prevented the massacre.

But who can believe for a moment that this use of force by the coalition really has the aim of ensuring the welfare of the Libyan population?

Where was this coalition when Gaddafi slaughtered over 1000 prisoners held at Abu Salim jail in Tripoli in 1996? The fact is that for 40 years this regime has been jailing people, terrorising them, making them disappear, executing them...with complete impunity.

Yesterday, where was the coalition when Ben Ali in Tunisia, Mubarak in Egypt or Bouteflika in

1. Britain, France, the USA in particular, but also Italy, Spain, Belgium, Denmark, Greece, Norway, Holland, the United Arab Emirates and Qatar.

2. If we are to believe the media, only Gaddafi’s henchmen are dying under these bombs. But let’s recall that at the time of the 1991 Gulf War, the same media were telling us that this was a ‘clean war’. In reality, in the name of protecting little Kuwait from the army of the butcher Saddam Hussein, the war claimed hundreds of thousands of victims.

Algeria were shooting at crowds during the uprisings of January and February?

And what is the coalition doing today when massacres are taking place in Yemen, Syria or Bahrain? Oh yes, it’s closing its eyes to Saudi Arabia’s intervention in Bahrain – to help the state repress the demonstrations there.

Sarkozy, Cameron, Obama and Co. can present themselves as saviours, as defenders of the widow and the orphan, but for them the suffering of the civilians of Benghazi is just an alibi to intervene and defend their sordid imperialist interests. All these gangsters have a reason for launching this imperialist crusade:

- This time, unlike in recent wars, the USA has not been at the forefront of the military operation. Why? Why is the American bourgeoisie playing a balancing act over Libya?

On the one hand it can’t allow itself to carry out a massive land intervention on Libyan soil. This would be seen by the whole Arab world as an act of aggression, a new invasion. The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have greatly increased aversion to ‘American imperialism, the traditional ally of Israel’. And the change of regime in Egypt, a long-term ally of Uncle Sam, has further weakened its position in the region.

But at the same time, they can’t stay outside the game because this would risk totally discrediting their status as a force fighting for democracy in

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A taxing budget for workers

A penny off petrol duty, paid for by a windfall tax on North Sea oil companies. A rise in the basic rate income tax allowance (i.e. a tax cut). A freeze in council tax. And a new tax on private jets. Has George Osborne suddenly taken the advice of the leftists and begun to change the balance of the tax burden?

The populist moves in the budget are no doubt an attempt to soften the pain of the previous emergency budget last year which unveiled a historic restructuring of the 'social state'. It goes without saying that even were we to take the measures at face value, they really go nowhere to ameliorating the most brutal assault on workers' living conditions since the Great Depression.

It's already clear that the cut in petrol duty has had little effect on actual prices, which were raised even before the measure was announced. And the increase in the tax allowance allowed the government to disguise another measure around taxation: the annual increase in personal allowances will now be calculated from the CPI as opposed to the RPI. In the long-term, the CPI generally runs at 1 percentage point below the RPI, meaning that tax allowances will rise much more slowly relative to the cost of living. Some analysts have suggested that the package of measures, supposedly designed to benefit low-paid workers, will ultimately hit them the hardest.

But does the 'tax the rich' mantra recited by the left actually offer a real alternative? Don't the bankers earn billions in bonuses? The left call upon the state to redistribute wealth through progressive taxation but this hides the real nature of the state, which is not a neutral organ but the 'executive committee' of the very ruling class the left call upon the state to tax. Armies of accountants

stand ready to find loopholes for capitalists in the rules they set themselves.

Nor does the 'tax the rich' slogan take into account the nature of capitalism. The central motor of capitalist society is the drive to growth (or accumulation). Recessions, crises, etc. are the breakdown of that accumulation process. Fundamentally, accumulation depends on the ability of capital to exploit labour to a sufficient degree to ensure this growth. The official explanation for the credit crunch (reckless lending by the banks) is thus only partially true. At root, it meant lending to capitalists who then failed to milk a suitable amount of profit from their workers. In essence, workers were paid too much relative to the exploitative needs of capital.

The only response to the crisis is to drastically reduce workers' real wages (both directly and the portion derived the social services provided by the state). And this is what we have seen through a combination of cuts in wages, social services and stealth cuts through inflation. Unfortunately for capital, these measures result in further shocks to demand because workers have to reduce their consumption, exacerbating the overproduction that is the classical expression of the capitalist crisis. The 'debate' about economic policy between right and left is how to reduce wages while stimulating demand.

The promises from the left are as empty as Osborne's populist gestures. Even were they actually carried out, they would only exacerbate the crisis. Rather than succumbing to utopian dreams of reforming a dying system, workers need to launch struggles in defence of their living conditions and work towards ending this social system once and for all. **Ishamael 1/4/11**

Pensions put out to pasture

Since the 1980s, the ruling class in Britain has been discussing how the various pensions schemes aimed at the working class have been too generous and unaffordable. Even at their peak, final salary schemes were generally only available to workers at the largest companies, leaving millions of workers dependent on the state pension or to be 'mis-sold' dodgy private pensions. In the years since, under governments of right and left, the state pension has been steadily eroded while 'final salary' schemes have been replaced with far less generous 'defined contribution' arrangements that reduced benefits to workers.

The efforts of the LibCon Coalition to tackle public sector pensions are thus in complete continuity with the previous Labour administration, which had presided over the more or less complete abolition of final salary pensions in the private sector. In the spirit of tying up loose ends, the Coalition are proposing to end National Insurance rebates that currently support final salary pensions schemes. This "*will almost certainly see the end of final salary pensions*" (*Financial Times* 24/3/11).

In this context, it must seem strange that the coalition is actually considering putting up the state pension, even if it is only to £155 per week. In practice, it means little more than abolishing the hated means-testing (which was so onerous many pensioners simply didn't bother) which largely pays for itself by cutting the state's administration costs. But what capitalism gives with one hand, it takes with the other. For those pushed over income tax allowance thresholds by the change, taxation will eat up the gains. Also to be taken into account is the acceleration of raising the pension age to 66. Previously planned for 2026 this is now

happening in 2020.

The ruling class have been trying to promote the idea of working longer as a positive for some time. For example, the ending of mandatory retirement ages has been presented as an attack on age 'discrimination'. Whatever the ruling class may plan for the future, the 'working pensioner' has already been a reality for some time. In 2006 more than half the jobs created were filled by people above the state pension age.

But while certain supermarket chains present us with the image of the plucky oldster happily continuing with his exploitation, the reality for many is that ill-health will eventually spoil this pretty picture. Another inconvenience is that while poverty may force pensioners to continue selling their labour, they face the same prospect as everyone else – the likelihood of unemployment – although the bourgeoisie will not count them as unemployed, of course.

The bourgeoisie talk as though employment is more than an aspiration – as though people only have to decide to work and they are home and dry. 'Working until we drop' is going to be the least of our worries because the same economic crisis which has created the pension problem also creates mass unemployment. Furthermore, admirable as it is that some older people can show that they are still capable of looking out for themselves in the labour market, if the elderly continue to take up jobs at the same kind of rate as they did in 2006, that actually makes it even more difficult for the young to get jobs. For about a million young workers there is not much chance of getting into the labour market at all – much less of getting paid a rate that would allow them to contribute to a 'defined contribution' scheme or any other type of savings scheme. To 'work until they drop' would actually be a step up for those in the front line of crisis-ridden capitalism's brutal assault on the working class. **Hardin 1/4/11**

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Earthquakes, tsunamis and nuclear accidents in Japan: capitalism is a horror show

'significant seismic activity', according to the WNA, World Nuclear Association, a grouping of industrialists. Some of the 62 reactors under construction are also in areas of seismic risk, just like many of the 500 other projects especially in countries with emerging economies. Several nuclear power stations - including the four reactors at Fukushima damaged by the tsunami on March 11th - are on or near the 'Ring of Fire', a 40,000 km arc of tectonic faults around the Pacific.⁶ Thus, reliable information "suggests that radioactive elements are more and more around us. For example, while plutonium did not exist naturally before 1945, we are now finding it in the milk teeth of British children."⁷, and this despite the fact that Britain has ended its commercial nuclear programme.

Capitalism is pushing mankind towards more and more disasters

And Japan is not just suffering from the nuclear catastrophe but from another humanitarian disaster too. Thus, the world's third largest economic power has been plunged into crisis, unprecedented since the Second World War, in the space of a few hours. The same terrifying ingredients are present: massive destruction, tens of thousands dead and to top it off, radiation, like that from the atomic bombs on Nagasaki and Hiroshima.

Millions of people in north-eastern Japan are having to live without electricity, without drinking water, with diminishing supplies of food, supplies which may already be contaminated. 600,000 people have been uprooted by the tsunami that

has devastated entire towns close to the Pacific Ocean, and have been left destitute, out in the cold and the snow. Contrary to what the Japanese government says – it has continued to downplay the seriousness of the situation, and the numbers affected, providing small details of the increase in people dead, day after day - we can already, without hesitation, begin to count the deaths in the tens of thousands for the country as a whole. The sea is continually depositing dead bodies along the shores. This against a backdrop of massive destruction of homes, buildings, infrastructure, hospitals, schools, etc.

Villages, buildings, trains and even entire towns were swept away by the power of the tsunami that struck the north-eastern coast of Japan. For some towns, located in what are usually narrow valleys like at Minamisanriku, at least half the 17,000 people were swept away and perished. With the warning given by the government of only 30 minutes, the roads were quickly congested, putting the "laggards" at the mercy of the waves.

The population has been saluted by all the Western media for its "exemplary courage" and "discipline", and has been called on by the Japanese Prime Minister to "rebuild the country from scratch", i.e. in plain language, the working class of this country must now expect fresh hardship, increased exploitation and worsening poverty. Admittedly, all this fits in nicely with the propaganda about a servile population that exercises with the company boss in the mornings, who are silent and submissive, and who remain quite stoical and carry on as normal while the buildings are crashing down on top of them. For sure, the Japanese population is extraordinarily courageous, but the reality is completely at odds with the "stoicism" described in the papers. Apart from the hundreds of thousands who packed into gyms

and other communal areas, and whose anger rose to a fever pitch and rightly so, hundreds of thousands of others tried to flee, including a growing number of the around 38 million people in Tokyo and its suburbs. And those who remained, did not do it to brave the dangers but because they had no choice. With no money, where can you go? And who's going to take you in? In every sense, being an 'environmental refugee' isn't acceptable in the eyes of the bourgeoisie. About 50 million people are forced to migrate every year for reasons connected to the environment but they have no status under the UN Convention, even if they are victims of a disaster, be it "nuclear" or whatever. Clearly, the Japanese with no money who wants to try to escape the nuclear disaster, or simply to relocate elsewhere in the world, is going to be denied the 'right of asylum' all round the world.

This insane system of exploitation is moribund and shows itself to be more barbaric with every passing day. Although immense knowledge and enormous technological power has been acquired by mankind, the bourgeoisie is incapable of putting it to work for the good of humanity, to protect us all against natural disasters. Instead of this, capitalism is a destructive force, not just here and there, but all over the world. "*We have no other choice, faced with this capitalist hell: it's Socialism or Barbarism. We must fight it or die*"⁸. **Mulan 19/3/11**

8. The remarks made by someone in one of our forums in France during the discussion of this disaster: <http://fr.internationalism.org/forum/312/tibo/4593/seisme-au-japon>

Struggles of Uttar Pradesh road transport workers, defeated by unions

"...In Kanpur depots, workers assembled to oppose this sabotage by the unions. The meeting called for this discussed how to develop the struggle by taking it out of union control. It proposed to work for calling general assemblies of depots and others workers and instead of fighting separately, workers of UPSTRC should fight along with other workers of Kanpur. This was effort of a small minority and about 200 workers took part in these discussion. But this is an expression of a developing questioning..."

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France, Britain, Tunisia
The future lies in the
international development of
the class struggle

Capitalism has no way out of
its crisis

The economic crisis in Britain

The Hungarian revolution of
1919: the example of Russia
inspires the Hungarian work-
ers (part II)

The Manifesto of the Workers'
Group of the Russian
Communist Party (part III)

6. http://www.lemonde.fr/depeches/2011/03/15/ukushima-eclairer-le-risque-d-un-seisme-majeur-sous-un-nouvel-angle_3244_108_44577531.html
7. <http://blog.mondediplo.net/2011-03-12-Au-Japon-le-seisme-declenche-l-alerte-nucleaire>

The TUC's false alternative

Maybe half a million people were on the TUC's March for the Alternative on 26 March. From demo veterans to those on their first ever protest, all were shepherded from the Embankment to Hyde Park by a combination of police and union stewards.

In *The Socialist* (30/3/11) you could read that "All of those capitalist commentators that have written off the trade union movement today as a spent force were decisively answered by this demonstration. The power of the trade unions was undisputedly established." The ability of the unions to book special trains and charter coaches to get hundreds of thousands of people to walk a couple of miles across London is undeniable. Indeed, the numbers the unions were able to mobilise confirmed that they are still a significant social actor.

Robert Shrimley, a cynical columnist writing in the *Financial Times* (1/4/11), observed that "this kind of peaceful protest is pointless. The system has all the shock absorbers necessary to handle a law-abiding demonstration. The next

day ministers were already clear they would ignore the entire event". His analysis of the "political passivism" was that "Marching is as much about the marchers as it is about the cause. It's about their need to feel they are doing something; something responsible; something lawful – something futile that makes them all feel better". And if you add in the subsequent spectacle of a few small fires and graffiti in the West End, and the Fortnoms occupations, then you have a neat contrast between the spectacle of a lively minority and the spectacle of enormous numbers marching. And both functioned as outlets for anger at cuts past and future.

Although the TUC had only organised the passive parade to boost their credibility and give a focus for people's anxiety about their future, the marchers still had to turn up. Coaches and trains might have been free, but you still had to get up on a Saturday, for a stay of some hours in London, including waiting up to 2½ hours for the march to just get off, and listen to an excess of whistles and samba bands. As a protest it was impotent, but it did show how widespread is unease about jobs and declining living conditions.

Capitalism doesn't work

There were two stated aims to the TUC demonstration: "to give a national voice to all those affected by the cuts" and "to show that people reject the argument that there is no alternative."

The 'alternative' offered is one "in which rich individuals and big companies have to pay all their tax, that the banks pay a Robin Hood tax and ... in which we strain every sinew to create jobs and boost ... sustainable economic growth."

The idea that changes in the taxation system (plus the straining of every sinew) can create jobs and economic growth denies the reality and the depth of the capitalist crisis. There is no way of organising capitalism that will make its deepening crisis stabilise, let alone vanish, and there is no way that capitalism can be made to benefit the exploited rather than the exploiters.

Capitalism means the domination of the bourgeoisie, not only with the richest individuals and businesses having their interests protected, but as a society in which the accumulation of capital is the driving force for the ruling class. Capitalism means workers working for wages, as much as feudalism meant working for a feudal lord and slavery meant working for your owner. They are all forms of exploitation, not means for satisfying human needs (except those of the ruling class).

And, speaking of defenders of exploitation, it came as no surprise to hear Ed Miliband in Hyde Park saying that some cuts were actually needed and not to be opposed. After all, the last Labour government set in motion the cuts that the LibCon coalition is continuing with, and its thirteen years in power left the rich richer and the poor poorer.

Against Miliband's claims to speak for a "main-



Demonstrators ignoring TUC and Labour speeches

stream majority" there were union activists saying it was necessary to go from marches to "a plan of resistance including coordinated strike action", as Unite union leader Len McCluskey put it. Of course, any 'plan' and any 'coordination' would, in their vision, be in the hands of the unions. The experience of the working class is that such union actions undermine and ultimately sabotage the effectiveness of workers' struggles. Unions are still significant social actors, but they serve the interests of the bourgeoisie, not the working class. Car 2/4/11

New forums for proletarian discussion

In the wake of the militant student struggles in the autumn, and before and after the massive TUC demo of 26 March, there are growing signs of an effort by radical minorities to get together and discuss the lessons of the struggle and how to take it forward. Two recent examples: a discussion group in London which came together following the perceived failure of the 'Network X' initiative in Manchester, and a recent meeting on fighting the cuts organised by the Anarchist Federation in Whitechapel and attended by comrades from different political tendencies: both raise the possibility of more regular 'physical' forums for discussion in London. The article that follows is an account of a further expression of this phenomenon: the general discussion meetings that took place in a weekend of activities aimed at preparing for the TUC's 26 March demo and held at the University of London Union.

In the recent period ICC comrades have been to some of the many meetings relating to the demonstration against the cuts. No-one could go to them all. Some of course, focused on practical arrangements. Others have posed essential questions about the aims of the struggle against the cuts – basic points that underpin any discussion about what we should do. What does it mean to win? What is the nature of austerity? What was the role of organisations in the student protests and occupations? What do we know and what can we find out about other struggles going on in the world?

"From capitalist crisis to cuts...to revolution? ... could the fight against the cuts be the start of a new movement that goes beyond both the capitalist economy and the state?" The first presentation at this meeting at the 'Arts Against the Cuts March Weekend' from *Endnotes* certainly posed the essential questions. First of all the nature of the crisis, the role of bail outs and sovereign debt – which can only be paid back by the state squeezing us dry, whoever is in government, since the Labour Party also favours cuts. It is not easy to de-

feat the state, and the TUC slogan "Jobs, Growth, Justice" is posed entirely within the system. The revolutionary alternative is not easy, and the presentation went on to put the speaker's view that this requires going beyond 19th Century ideologies and in particular the notion of the working class as one pole of society leading a form of transition to communism, because that carries within itself the seeds of betrayal and counter-revolution. In his view what is needed is the immediate abolition of all capitalist categories¹. Posing the nature of the capitalist crisis we face today and the nature of revolution, the key questions at stake today, was certainly very ambitious for a 90 minute meeting.

Two more presentations followed. David Broder of *The Commune* did not want to start with the crisis but with the lack of working class reaction and the TUC inaction. He wanted to see the struggle against the cuts say what we want, such as how we want public services run. David Graeber introduced more points, such as the way our day to day interactions often follow principles of solidarity rather than capitalist exchange, that capitalism is not a creative force. Discussion from the floor raised many more points such as the contribution of anthropology and understanding of hunter-gatherer societies; the need for an international revolution; the importance of strikes going on in Egypt... the importance of struggles for jobs... And one speaker rejected the whole framework of trying to understand the crisis and revolution, which he characterised as being soft on the bourgeoisie, in favour of simply condemning the cuts proposed by the current government. Overall the lack of time and lack of focus provided by the different emphases in the three presentations inhibited the development of a real discussion.

Beginning to discuss the issues

Later on a second meeting, "Challenging the anti-cuts discourse" introduced by *Mute*, took up the key questions. A very brief presentation pointed out that the dominant perception on the left is the idea that there is no crisis, that it is simply a pretext for austerity. This misconception of the crisis and of what the struggle involves leads to

1. This second point, on which we have major disagreements with *Endnotes*, didn't get taken up in the meeting.

the idea that it is our job to propose an alternative for capitalism.

G, from the Hackney Alliance to Defend Public Services, disagreed with this. Capitalism is always in crisis, this is how it develops as shown by looking at any decade in the last 150 years. He disagreed with the notion of a terminal crisis of capitalism necessary for communism. Besides European companies hold lot of cash, and capitalism is growing in India and China – and could here if the working class could be forced to accept the same low level of wages.

Several contributions recognised the importance of the crisis: this is the biggest crisis since 1929, it is secular, not cyclical, and 2-3 years into the crisis we are still seeing fallout from it. Capitalism cannot find productive investment opportunities as greater productivity displaces labour. In the 19th Century crises came every 10 years or so, but since 1914 the problem has been on a different level. Keynesianism would make no sense without the Second World War.

What is the implication of this for struggling against the cuts? For G it is simply important to say 'no' to the cuts. David Graeber, who is also sceptical about the crisis which he described as artificial, thought we should use it to put forward radical positions.

But there is a crisis, which is causing the imposition of austerity all over the world. We can be honest about this and still demand no cuts. One contribution called the idea that cuts are unnecessary, as put forward by UKuncut, a social democratic analysis, and their idea of 'tax the bosses' a dead end, while the fight to keep services has the potential to go beyond that. For another, the TUC cannot admit the crisis because if there is no answer within capitalism they are redundant. Others pointed to the nationalism of the left with its British solutions for British problems, despite the international nature of the crisis, and to the importance of the international struggle of the working class.

This effort at discussing and understanding the situation faced by the working class today, one which we have seen from Exeter to Edinburgh, is an essential contribution to the development of the class consciousness we need. May 28.3.11

ICC online

Sentencing of Korean militants

What is happening in the Middle East?

March 26 Demonstration: Anarchists and communists debate the Black Bloc

"I think we were allowed to organise two futile forms of protest - one, a boring same-old march from A to B, and two, a little set-piece 'drama' of revolutionary 'violence' (of course, I don't really see it as violence) that will be used to scare people with 'thuggery'".

Book Review. *Egypt: The Moment of Change.*

A change of regime is not a revolution

10 shades of non-revolution

In the Ivory Coast, an imperialist battle between bloodthirsty gangs

Struggles of Uttar Pradesh road transport workers defeated by unions

Contribution from the ICC's Turkish section:

Understanding the period-Class analysis and events in the Arab world

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What can we learn from the blockade of the oil refineries in France?

We are publishing here an article written by our French section in *Revolution Internationale* 420 in response to the very widespread debate about the tactic of the oil refinery blockades during last autumn's struggles against pension 'reforms'. The blockades have certainly impressed some revolutionaries outside France. Brighton Solidarity Federation, for example, recently published a text 'The paradox of reformism: a call for economic blockades' which contains the following argument:

"It's all about the balance of class forces. It's primarily a power struggle, not a moral argument. We might have right on our side, but might will determine the outcome. For the fight against the cuts, there are several implications. Symbolic protest won't cut it. If actions like UK Uncut move from largely awareness-raising into the realms of economic blockades, then we'll be getting somewhere. And the state will react accordingly, we must be prepared for more police violence if we're serious about winning. No doubt such tactics will also be condemned by those notionally on 'our side' just like Aaron Porter condemned the Millbank Riot which kick-started this movement. The irony is without such a movement, they're powerless too. But given the TUC is in thrall to the Labour Party, and the lack of independent workers' organisation, sustained, co-ordinated strike action against austerity looks unlikely. On the other hand economic blockades have been used to great effect in France both as a standalone tactic and in support of strike action".

There's no doubt that the working class can't push back capital's attacks by complaining that they are unfair: it is indeed all about the balance of class forces. But the question is whether the tactic of the economic blockade really does create a balance of forces in favour of the working class. The Solfed article seems to offer a very misleading answer, since it seems to think that blockades could work as a 'standalone' tactic as well as part of a wider strike movement, and even seem to imply that it would be good to use such tactics in the UK because "sustained-coordinated action against austerity looks unlikely" here. In sum, blockades can work when more massive movements are not on the cards. This line of reasoning confirms the criticism made in the article that follows: that as an ideology, 'the blockade' obeys the same logic as trade unionism: a specialised minority acts on behalf of the working class; and furthermore, that the unions in France put so much emphasis on the blockade tactic precisely because they could use it to block the real extension of the class struggle.

1. <http://libcom.org/library/paradox-reformism-call-economic-blockades>

The blockade of petrol refineries and oil depots was a major element in the struggles against the retirement reform of 2010 in France. In the general assemblies and demonstrations it was a focus of many discussions and debates. For many, blocking the refineries appeared as a means of concretely bringing pressure to bear on the bourgeoisie by paralysing transport and the whole of the economy through this "strategic sector".

"Despite eight days of particularly well-followed action, it seemed that even with three-and-a-half million of people on the streets, the processions weren't enough to spread the struggle (...) Throughout France blockages of refineries, of refuse and waste treatment plants and in many other sites, were on the increase. Undoubtedly, the obstinacy of the state and the bosses in imposing their retirement reforms pushed the struggle to rediscover union practices which had disappeared a long time ago (...) How could it be seriously thought that strikes could boil down to processions in the street, hemmed in by the forces of order? History (...) often shows us that our rights, our social acquisitions have been drawn like teeth (and not through polite requests) coming out of very hard struggles and generally by using the only means available to workers: the strike and the blockade of production at the place of work"². These few lines from the CNT-Vignoles sum up what the "blockers" of autumn 2010 were effectively thinking. From February to November, demonstration followed demonstration, each time bringing together millions of people. Within the marches there was an immense anger faced with the degradation of living conditions. However, the French bourgeoisie did not cede ground and even stepped up its attacks on social security, access to health care and on the numbers of workers directly employed by the state. While the "processions in the street" seemed to everyone impotent and sterile, some minorities looked for more radical and effective methods of struggle. The blockade of the economy thus appeared as "obvious"³.

The refinery blockade – a Pyrrhic victory

A few days of occupation of the refineries was sufficient to create a fuel and petrol shortage and problems in transport generally.

At the end of September, strikes broke out in

2. 'Generalise the practices of struggle, today and tomorrow' *Classe en lutte*, no.116, Nov. 2010 (CNT-Vignoles).

3. "France, autumn 2010: the blockade of the economy as an obvious fact", (Group Communiste internationaliste, published in English here: <http://libcom.org/news/france-autumn-2010-blockade-economy-obvious-fact-26112010>).

some refineries. The movement spread quite naturally and factories closed one after the other. In mid-October, 12 French refineries were all blocked. Faced with the provocations of the CRS police, some pickets composed of oil workers, workers of other sectors, unemployed, students, retired, etc., manned the gates day and night.

Rapidly petrol and diesel were drying up at the pumps and the shortage was the number one story in the media. The declarations of the political authorities affirmed that there was no problem of supply to the pumps came across as absurd. Finally, according to INSEE, petrol production was reduced by 56.5% during October.

Apparently the blockaders seemed to have succeeded in their aim. But clearly, in reality, they didn't. This so-called "victory" is nothing but an illusion created by the propaganda of the bourgeoisie. Letting us think that it is possible to block the production of one sector, whatever it is, is a big lie. And in the precise case of petrol, the bourgeoisie had the full capacity to face up to the blockades. France, as many other countries, in fact holds several million tonnes of petrol in reserve assuring itself of a number of months provisions (17 million tonnes of strategic stocks, or more than three months of normal consumption, reserve stocks of the petrol companies, reserves of oil managed by the army...). Further, with the internationalisation of pipeline networks and, quite simply, importing from abroad by road tankers, states do not solely rely on their own reserves in order to assure the distribution of fuel. As Peter Vener writes, "It is characteristic that even the most insurrectionist of the *tiqquniens*⁴ talk of blocking the 'economy of the country', from the simple generalisation of blockades made more or less sporadic or widespread, more or less spontaneous or controlled from above, etc., as if that made the least sense in this time of 'globalisation' and the organisation of modern capitalist 'network', particularly in the key sector of the production and distribution of fuel"⁵.

The risk of a shortage of fuel in October 2010, and the paralysis of the national economy was thus only a fairy tale to send the workers to sleep. The difficulties in filling up their tanks only affected some drivers, above all because of a panic. The petrol companies even profited from the occasion by putting up their prices. **The blockade of the**

4. The 'tiqquniens' are partisans of the magazine *Tiqqun*, published by the 'Parti de l'Imaginaire'. Their best-known member is Julien Coupat, who was investigated under the anti-terrorist laws and subjected to a major campaign in the media over his alleged involvement in the sabotage of high speed rail tracks in November 2008.

5. 'The ideology of the blockade', Peter Vener, November 2010.

refineries was only a gnat's bite on the back of an elephant. And capitalism has a thick skin!

In fact, behind this pretend victory of the blockade is hidden the contrary: a real defeat for the working class. The bourgeoisie used the refinery blockade to isolate the most combative workers and divide the proletariat.

* On the one hand, the unions, notably the CGT, resting on the absolute control that it exercised over operations, used it to isolate the refinery workers who were being threatened with restructuring and are thus particularly militant, from the rest of their class. Their justified anger was not the point of departure for an extension of the struggle: rather than organise flying pickets to enterprises of other sectors for them to join the movement, the CGT clearly locked the blockaders into their place of work. Everything revolved around the blockade of the refineries whatever the cost, creating the atmosphere of a besieged citadel where only the "fuel shortages" mattered.

* On the other hand, through an intense campaign on the risks of a fuel shortage, the government and its media readily created a climate of panic among the population. Squeezed between costly days of massively supported strikes and daily harassment from the bosses, many workers were afraid of not being able to get to work. This concern was expressed elsewhere in long queues at the petrol stations that journalists covered up to the point of nausea. If, in general, proletarians did not blame refinery workers and even expressed their solidarity, the hysterical propaganda from the media undeniably contributed to breaking the dynamic of extension in which the struggle was engaged.

Thus, it's not by chance if, after months of the movement growing in power, the decline started at the very moment when the blockade of the refineries was fully implemented.

But given a mass movement always starts off somewhere, couldn't the blockade of the refineries have been the point of departure of a much wider struggle? Why did the ICC, from the first blockades, warn of the risk of the confinement, isolation and division contained in this form of action?⁶.

The cult of a blockade against the mass nature of the struggle

From its first manifestations, the theory of the economic blockade was built on weak foundations. The pro-blockers very quickly became aware of the ineffectiveness of endless demonstrations organised by the unions. However, they concluded from this that a handful of determined individuals preventing the running of strategic targets such as refineries was the best basis on which to create the conditions for a widespread and authentic solidarity. A group in Lyon called "Premier Round" thus wrote: "The present movement goes from here: 'We must block the economy; how do we do it?' The answer is posed around the question of petrol. Even if no-one knows if it will work, if it is the best way to attack the problem, it's an attempt: organise a petrol shortage. And then see what happens. With the rolling strike voted on, it's sufficient that some strikers adopt the blockade as a means of action so that others come to join them from elsewhere. Where the strike and sabotage isn't enough, strikers should oppose transportation. In this way we'll see train drivers, students, postal workers, nurses, teachers, dockers, unemployed, together blocking the oil depots – without waiting for the endless appeals of an abstract 'convergence of struggles'. The same thing should happen at the railway stations, postal centres, transport depots, airports, and motorways: **wherever it's enough for a few dozen people to do the blocking** (...) the sinews of the struggle unfolding are the blockades of oil refineries and petrol depots, a relatively small number of nerve centres. To block the production and distribution of petrol is to finish with symbolic demands and to attack where it does the most damage"⁷. This single phrase alone reveals the false route: "wherever it's enough for a few

6. Cf. "Refinery blockades are a double-edged sword" *Revolution Internationale* – supplement to number 417, October 2010. <http://en.internationalism.org/icconline/2010/10/refinery-blockades>

7. "Block everything" *The blockade, an idea that works*, Tuesday October 26, 2010 (Premier Round).

dozen people to do the blocking".

It is moreover very significant that the targets aimed at were refineries, stations, airports, motorways or public transport. The transport sector is effectively a strategic sector for the working class, but for exactly the opposite reasons than those raised by *Premier Round*: the blockage of trains, metros or buses is often an obstacle to extending the struggle and can facilitate the games of the bourgeoisie. It's even one of their classic ploys: set workers against each other by unleashing campaigns around the theme of "taking passengers hostage". Above all the blockage of transport prevents the mobility of the workers who can no longer give their solidarity to the strikers by attending their assemblies or participating in their demonstrations. The movement of delegations of strikers towards other firms is equally made more difficult. In fact the total blockage almost always favours the struggle being locked up into corporatism and isolation. That's why the most advanced workers' struggles have never led to a blockade of transport.

When the working class appropriates the means of production

The theory of the blockade of the economy is based on a profoundly correct idea: the working class draws its force from the central place that it occupies in production. The proletariat produces almost all of the riches that the bourgeoisie, in its own parasitic role, takes for itself. Thus, through the strike, the workers are potentially capable of blocking all production and paralysing the economy.

At the time of events around May 68 in France and those of August 1980 in Poland, gigantic strikes paralysed the economy leading even... to fuel shortages. But the blockade wasn't in itself the objective of the workers, since the country was already paralysed. If these two struggles are historic and remain engraved in our memories, it is because the proletariat knew how to construct a rapport de force in its favour through self-organisation and the massive scale of its struggles. When the workers took over the struggle themselves, they spontaneously regrouped in general assemblies in order to debate and collectively decide which actions to undertake. They looked for the solidarity of their class brothers by going to meet them and draw them into the movement. To spread the struggle is a preoccupation and an instinctive practice of the exploited faced with capital.

At the times of these two great movements, the strikers looked to turn the economy around for themselves, in the service of the struggle and its needs. In 1968, for example, the railworkers ran their trains so that the population could travel to the demonstrations. In 1980, this grip on the means of production went much further still. The inter-enterprise strike committee (the MKS) had "all prerogatives to conduct the strike. It formed working commissions – maintenance, information, links with journalists, security – and decided if certain industries should continue working in order to assure the needs of the strikers. Thus refineries worked and produced, at a slower rate, the fuel necessary for transport, the buses and trains to run, the food industry went beyond the highest norms (previously fixed by the bureaucrats) in order to assure provisions for the population. The three towns (of the Baltic ports), Gdansk, Gdynia, Sopot, lived the rhythm of the strike, the rhythm that the strikers decided"⁸. In the strongest moments of this movement, the strike committee organised supplies to the strikers and the whole population by controlling electricity and food production.

The blockade of the economy is a union manoeuvre

The pro-blockers close to the group *Premier Round* correctly and scathingly criticised the grip of the unions on the struggle. From this, they identified the blockade of the refineries as an action of radical struggle outflanking the iron grip of the unions: "New, informal solidarities are being put in place on the ground and outside of the control

8. 'The victory at the end of the great strike', *Impecor* no. 84, September 11 1980.

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Syrian bourgeoisie follows Gaddafi's example

"People were no longer prepared to beg for bread or tolerate being beaten in the streets by the police" - as an activist from Daraa in southwestern Syria near the border with Jordan explained to the *Financial Times* (1/4/11). These are the grievances that lie behind the revolts and protests across the Arab world this year, from Tunisia to Bahrain. In Syria there have been demands to know what became of the thousands who disappeared in the 1980s after the 1982 rebellion was drowned in the blood of tens of thousands, indignation at the arrest of schoolchildren for anti-government graffiti, and then at the murder of the mainly young men who protested against this.

The Syrian bourgeoisie have reacted just as murderously as Gaddafi - and Bahrain backed by Saudi Arabian troops - using teargas, live ammunition, baton charges, arrests and detention. In little over two weeks at least 60 people have been killed, including 55 in Daraa and another four after the demonstrations in Damascus. As Al Jazeera's senior analyst points out "*The complication of the situation in Libya, leading to internal violence and international intervention and great destruction, will clearly dissuade many Syrians and Arabs from attempting more of the same in Syria*". Despite this, unrest has now spread to the Kurdish northern cities. The sacking of the governor of Daraa, the sacking of the entire Syrian government, and Bashar al-Assad's announcement of a panel to look at replacing (or renaming) the emergency powers instituted in 1963 with anti-terror legislation were never going to satisfy the protesters.

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of the union leaderships. One feels that the latter have been overwhelmed by events and don't quite know what to do with all this 'support'. This solidarity has its own strength and can't really be controlled and isolated". But reality was exactly the opposite. It's sufficient moreover to carry on reading the article for this illusion to jump out of the page:

"Where do you go to support the strikers? Where to send the cash?"

* Grandpuits Refinery: donations in cash or cheques made payable to: CFDT-CGT at the following address: Intersyndicale CFDT-CGT, Raffinerie Total de Grandpuits, postal box 13, 77 720, MORMANT, or donate online through the internet site.

* Raffinerie Total de Flandres: address your donations to the strike fund managed by SUD-Chime: P.W. SUD-Chimie Raffinerie des Flandres 59140 DUNKERQUE. Cheques payable to: SUD-Chimie RF."

The actions of blockading are unfolding "outside of the control of the union leaderships" because they "can't really be controlled and isolated" so thinks *Premier Round*, which then informs us, without batting an eyelid, "Where to send donations" to support the strikers: to the CDFT, the CGT and the SUD! The truth is that the unions organised the paralysis of the fuel industry from top to bottom.

Again, Peter Vener provides a rare example of daring to look reality in the face: "*Some people joined up with the strike pickets around the refineries in general response to the appeal launched by the local inter-union committees, now often re-named inter-professional assemblies because they were looking to enlarge their base. Certainly, such people didn't have political designs but they simply had the impression of going beyond atomisation, separation and corporatism, in brief, participating in the 'convergence of struggles' and the 'blockade of the economy' (...)* The people who swelled the ranks of the pickets didn't ask themselves why the trade unionists of the energy and chemical industries, so usually corporatist and closed in on themselves, felt the need to appeal to forces not belonging to their sector, even strangers on whom they were still openly spitting the day before. Was it a question of new breaches through the walls of bastions so usually well protected and controlled by the trade unionists who, from their watchtowers, usually organise a cordon sanitaire around themselves? Do we see a real rupture by

Inevitably after half a century of the brutal dictatorship of the al-Assad dynasty there are huge illusions in the prospects democracy, illusions which have not helped the movements in either Egypt, where the military continue to rule having pushed Mubarak aside, or in Libya where different factions of the ruling class are sacrificing the population in a civil war.

Nor can the population rely on the democratic credentials of the 'international community' - currently embroiled in Libya as well as Afghanistan and Iraq. Not that this 'community' of thieves will fail to take any advantage they can out of the current unrest in Syria. Despite all the evidence of state repression over more than a decade, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton has spoken of a potentially reforming Syrian presidency and Obama's spokesman Jay Carney of "*an important opportunity to be responsive to the legitimate aspirations of the Syrian people*" (FT). Not because they are "*at best fooling themselves*" as Democrat Congressman Gary Ackerman said, but because the US administration sees opportunities as well as risks in the situation and particularly wants to drive a wedge between Syria and Iran. As ever, the 'humanitarian' statements of the bourgeoisie only serve its imperialist interests.

Faced with poverty, murderous repression and the manoeuvring of great powers, the protesters in Syria, as elsewhere, have shown great courage. The best way to show our solidarity is to develop our own struggles, for it is only the international struggle of the working class that can put an end to the system responsible for their misery. **Alex 2/4/11**

the workers of these sectors with their specific corporatism, based on the horrible neo-Stalinist tradition of 'produce French and buy French', etc? In reality, except perhaps for some amongst them, there's nothing of the sort here. Hence the acceptance of these forces coming from elsewhere, who, for the most part, have to play the role of additional troops to the union apparatus of the CGT and also the SUD (...) Today, via the re-centring of the main union organisation towards fashionable forms of intervention, such as the programmed blockage of the axes of communication, sometimes announced in advance to the police by the union leaders, we go from the 'strike by proxy' of the 1980s and 90s, to the 'blockade by proxy'. The 'blockaders' of the sites, have very often worked for the union head offices. Full stop."

Thus, at the refinery of Grandpuits in the Paris region, numerous workers, unemployed, students, retired, etc., came every day to give their support to the strikers. Some even sometimes joined in with the General Assembly. But these rare "open" GA's were just pathetic masquerades: speeches from the CFDT representative, then the CGT, then... vote. No discussion, no debate.

Why have these pro-blockaders, usually so critical of the union leaderships, put themselves forward as supporters of the actions typical of the strong-arm tactics of the CGT? For Peter Vener, "*one shouldn't confuse simple reactions of anger against union stewards with a profound criticism of trade unionism*". The experience of reality is moreover much more edifying. There is in fact a perfect concordance between the partisans of the economic blockade and those of the unions: a minority decides and acts instead of the majority of the exploited. The difference lies in what the blockers think acts in the interests of the struggle, whereas the union apparatus are fully conscious of their work of sabotage.

No immediate recipe, no minority activist practice, can be a substitute for the extension and massive struggle of the proletariat. Concretely, the blockade of the economy can't be a short-cut involving a victory falling from the sky by decree; it is the result of a process of generalisation of the self-organised struggle and solidarity of the workers. If it was obvious that the autumn demonstrations were ineffective, we must not deduce that it's useless for millions to be on the streets - the real question is this: who leads the movement - the workers or the unions?

"*The emancipation of the working class will be the work of the workers themselves*" ... of all the workers. **Pawel and V 21/2/11**

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IMPERIALIST war in Libya

the world. They obviously can't give a free hand to the Britain and France tandem

- Britain's participation has a dual objective. It is trying to polish up its tarnished image in the Arab world following its interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan. But it is also trying to get its own population used to the idea of foreign military intentions which are bound to get more and more frequent. 'Saving the Libyan people from Gaddafi' is a perfect opportunity for that³.

- The case of France is a bit different. This is the only big western country which still has a certain popularity in the Arab world, acquired under De Gaulle and amplified by its refusal to take part in the invasion of Iraq in 2003.

By intervening on behalf of the 'Libyan people', president Sarkozy knew very well that he would be welcomed with open arms by people there and that this would be seen in a good light by neighbouring countries, for whom Gaddafi is a bit too unpredictable and uncontrollable for their taste. And we have indeed heard the cry of 'Vive Sarkozy', 'Vive la France' in the streets of Benghazi. France has, for once, taken good advantage of the USA's difficulties⁴.

Sarkozy has thus made up some of the ground lost by his government's gaffes in Tunisia and Egypt (supporting the dictators that were eventually kicked out by the social revolts, allowing its ministers to stay too close to their regimes while the struggles were in full flow, even offering to send its police forces to help with the repression in Tunisia...).

We can't go into all the details about the particular interests of each state in the coalition now at work in Libya, but one thing is sure: there's nothing humanitarian or philanthropic about it! And the same goes for those who abstained from voting for the UN resolution or did so with great reluctance:

- China, Russia and Brazil are very hostile to this intervention, simply because they have nothing to gain from Gaddafi's departure;

- Italy actually has a lot to lose from it. The present regime has, up till now, assured it easy access to oil and a draconian control of its borders. The destabilisation of Libya could put all this into question;

- Angela Merkel's Germany is still a military dwarf. All its forces are tied up in Afghanistan. Participating in this operation would have made its weakness at this level even more obvious. As the Spanish paper *El Pais* put it on March 21, "*We are seeing a rerun of the constant balancing act between Germany's economic giantism, demonstrated during the euro crisis, and France's political strength, which is largely based on its military power*".

In sum, Libya, like the whole of the Middle East, is a huge chessboard on which the great powers are trying to advance their pawns.

Why are the great powers intervening now?

For weeks Gaddafi's troops were advancing on Benghazi, the rebels' fiefdom, slaughtering everything in their path. Why did the great powers, if they had so many interests in intervening in the region, wait so long to do so?

In the first days, the tide of revolt originating in Tunisia and Egypt also hit Libya. The same anger against oppression and poverty was welling up in all layers of society. At this point it was out of the question for the 'world's great democracies' to really support this social movement, despite their fine speeches condemning the repression. Their diplomacy hypocritically rejected the idea of interference and proclaimed the right of peoples to make their own history. Experience shows that it's the same with every social struggle: the bourgeoisie everywhere closes its eyes to the most horrible

3. We have to remember that in 2007, in Tripoli, former British PM Tony Blair threw his arms around Colonel Gaddafi, thanking him for signing a contract with BP. The current denunciations of the 'mad dictator' are pure cynicism and hypocrisy.

4. Let's not forget that France is also changing its tune here. It received Gaddafi with great ceremony in 2007. The images of Gaddafi's tent in the middle of Paris went round the world and made Sarkozy and his clique look a bit ridiculous. But now we have a new movie: NATO, the Return.

repression, when it's not directly lending a hand with it! But in Libya what seems to have begun as a real revolt by 'those at the bottom', by unarmed civilians who bravely attacked military barracks and torched the HQs of the so-called 'Peoples' Committees', quickly turned into a bloody 'civil war' between bourgeois factions. In other words, the movement escaped the control of the non-exploiting strata. The proof for this is that one of the leaders of the rebellion and the Transitional National Council is al Jeleil, Gaddafi's former minister of justice! This is a man whose hands are equally as bloodsoaked as those of his former Guide, now rival. Another indication: while the proletarians have no country, the provisional government has adopted the flag of the old Libyan monarchy. Finally, Sarkozy has recognised the TNC as the "legitimate representatives of the Libyan people".

The revolt in Libya thus took a diametrically opposed turn to what happened in Tunisia and Egypt. This was mainly due to the weakness of the working class in this country. The main industry, oil, almost exclusively employs workers from Europe, the rest of the Middle East, Asia and Africa. From the beginning these workers took no part in the movement of social protest. The result was that the local petty bourgeoisie stamped its mark on the revolt - hence the ubiquity of the national flag for example. Worse, the 'foreign' workers, who could not therefore identify with these struggles, fled the country. There were even persecutions of black workers by 'rebel' forces, following numerous rumours about the regime's use of mercenaries from black Africa to repress the demonstrations, casting suspicion on all black workers.

Workers' struggles vs imperialist wars

This turn-around in the situation in Libya has consequences which go well beyond its frontiers. First Gaddafi's repression, then the intervention of the coalition, is a blow against all the social movements in the region. This has permitted other dictatorial regimes to embark on a course of bloody repression: in Bahrain where the Saudi army has come to the assistance of the regime in dealing brutally with the demonstrations⁵; in Yemen where on 18 March government forces fired on the crowd, killing 51 people; and now in Syria where scores have also been gunned down.

Having said this, it is not at all certain that this will be a fatal blow. The Libyan situation is like a ball and chain on the world proletariat's feet, but there is so much anger against the development of poverty that it will not paralyse it completely. In Egypt and Tunisia, where the 'revolution' is supposed to have triumphed already, confrontations continue between demonstrators and the now 'democratic' state administered by more or less the same forces who ran it under the 'dictators'. Demonstrations have also continued in Morocco, despite King Mohammed VI declaring a constitutional monarchy.

Whatever happens, for all the populations facing the most terrible repression, or the bombs of this or that international coalition, the sky will not clear until the proletariat of the central countries, particularly western Europe, develops its own massive and determined struggles. Armed by its experience, especially with the traps of trade unionism and democracy, it would then be able to show its capacities for self-organisation and open up a genuinely revolutionary perspective, the only future for the whole of humanity.

To be in solidarity with all those today falling under bullets and bombs does not mean supporting Gaddafi, or the 'rebels', or the UN coalition. On the contrary: we have to denounce all of them as imperialist bloodhounds!

To be in solidarity is to choose the camp of proletarian internationalism, to struggle against 'our own' exploiters and killers, to participate in the development of workers' struggles and class consciousness all over the world! **Pawel, 25 March 2011**

5. Here again the weakness of the working class facilitates the repression. The movement in Bahrain has been dominated by the Shia majority, supported by Iran.

Revolutionaries and the mass strikes, 1910-1914: the strengths and limits of syndicalism

In WR 341 we described the wave of struggles popularly known as 'The Great Labour Unrest' that hit Britain and Ireland 100 years ago. We showed that these struggles – which at their high points reached near-insurrectionary levels – were in fact a spectacular expression of the mass strike analysed so clearly by Rosa Luxemburg, and formed an integral part of an international wave of class struggle that culminated in the 1917 Russian revolution.

In this article we look at the impact of the mass strikes on the British and Irish working class, and the attempts of militant workers and revolutionaries to draw the lessons of these historic struggles.

The mass strikes were a product of the growing class consciousness of the British and Irish workers, and gave an enormous stimulus to their understanding of capitalism and of the changing conditions for the class struggle on the eve of its decadent phase.

We can see the stimulus of the mass strikes in the broadening of class consciousness – the spreading of revolutionary ideas among the masses of workers thrown into struggle – and in its deepening; the growing understanding of the clearest minorities of militant workers and revolutionaries about the goals and methods of the proletariat's struggle against capitalism. We can also see the historical limitations of this understanding.

The growth of syndicalism

"Policy: 1 The old policy of identity of interest between employers and ourselves be abolished, and a policy of open hostility installed..." (The Miners' Next Step, 1912)

The most significant expression of the broadening of class consciousness in Britain and Ireland in the period from 1910 to 1914 was the growth of syndicalist ideas among the most militant workers.

We have written before about the rise of syndicalism (see WR 232). As a distinctive strand of ideas it emerged in the years after 1900. But it was in the mass strikes that syndicalism played a significant role in the workers' struggles. In fact we can say that syndicalism was the political expression of the most militant minority of the British and Irish working class in this period.

This doesn't mean that it was ever a coherent ideology or set of positions. As a movement syndicalism always contained different and conflicting strands such as De Leonist industrial unionism, anarcho-syndicalism and the 'amalgamation' movement in the trade unions, but some of the key ideas that directly influenced the mass strikes were:

- an emphasis on the economic power of the working class in the factories
- the central importance of class solidarity
- the need for direct action by the workers to defend their interests
- the goal of worker's control of industry and, ultimately, society.

Syndicalist ideas, popularised by Tom Mann, James Connolly, James Larkin and other well-known workers' leaders, found a ready echo among younger, militant workers, already suspicious of the trade union leaderships and their conciliatory policies and looking for new, more effective ways of organising against the attacks of capital.

With hindsight we can see that syndicalism was part of an attempt by the working class to respond to changes taking place in capitalism on the eve of its decadent phase, including larger units of production, de-skilling, 'scientific' management methods, etc., and in particular to the growth of state capitalism and the tendency for the trade unions to be integrated into the state.

So if the trade unions were not defending the working class, the burning question for militant workers was whether they should try to transform them from within, or build new, revolutionary industrial organisations to fight capital.

One wing of the syndicalist movement argued that the trade unions could still be radicalised

from the inside, and that the task was to propagandise within them for revolutionary policies. Tom Mann, for example, believed that *"The trade unions are truly representative of the men, and can be moulded by the men into exactly what the men desire."*¹

Probably the most important written statement of syndicalist ideas in Britain during the mass strikes was *The Miners' Next Step* produced by the Unofficial Reform Committee in the South Wales Miners' Federation. Faced with changes in production in the mining industry and the attacks of the employers, the younger militant workers of the URC analysed the failure of the union leadership's conciliatory policies to secure real improvements for the workers and proposed instead *"A united industrial organisation, which, recognising the war of interest between workers and employers, is constructed on fighting lines..."* This would be controlled by the rank and file and fight for real reforms in the mining industry like the minimum wage and the seven-hour day *"on the basis of complete independence of, and hostility to all capitalist parties."*

One of the strengths of the *Next Step* was its emphasis on involving all the workers in the practical organisation of the struggle. Political action was not rejected but defined as parliamentary action because relevant legislative measures would demand *"the presence in parliament of men who directly represent, and are amenable to, the wishes and instructions of the workmen"*. The URC's ultimate objective was *"...to amalgamate all workers into one national and international union, to work for the taking over of all industries, by the workmen themselves."*²

The central problem of this vision was that, in emphasising the economic power of the working class, it underestimated the political power of the capitalist class; there is no mention of the fact that the bourgeoisie might oppose this process of the gradual take-over of industry by the workers or of the consequent need for a confrontation with the capitalist state in order to achieve revolutionary change.

The militant workers behind *The Miners' Next Step* described in detail how their leaders became corrupted by the role they were forced to play, and sought to avoid this by making the existing unions act under the direct control of the workers. But another wing of the syndicalist movement – the dual or industrial unionists – believed that the existing trade unions could not be made to do this and that the task was to build new revolutionary unions.

Both strategies faced insurmountable obstacles: building mass organisations to replace the trade unions was never going to be realistic in Britain given the historical attachment of the working class to this institution (in fact the period of the mass strikes saw a huge rise in union membership), while the policy of 'boring from within' inevitably came up against the entrenched power of the union bureaucracy, which would never willingly give up its control.

The test for revolutionaries

The popularity of syndicalism and the spread of its ideas among militant workers were due at least in part to the weakness of the marxist movement and its lack of influence among militant workers. But the real problem was not so much its size as the strength of opportunism which dominated the whole workers' movement by this time. The hardened opportunist tendency which dominated the leadership of some socialist groups was firmly wedded to parliamentary and reformist tactics, and viewed spontaneous, violent mass action as a serious threat to its position rather than as any kind of opportunity for advancing the cause of the revolutionary proletariat.

If opportunism was the greater danger, sectarianism was undoubtedly the lesser: there were plenty of socialists in Britain who regarded strikes at best as a 'last resort' (like the Socialist Party of

1. *Industrial Syndicalist*, December 1910, quoted in James Hinton, *Labour and Socialism*, 1983, p.91.

2. <http://libcom.org/library/miners-next-step-swmf-1912>

Great Britain), or at worst as a criminal waste of energy and diversion from the 'real' struggle for socialism.

Those revolutionaries who managed to avoid both opportunism and sectarianism, and attempted to relate to the workers' struggles, still risked being swept away or falling prey to syndicalist illusions in the potential of the working class to destroy capitalism through use of its economic power alone. One negative effect of the mass strikes was to reinforce the identification of political action with parliamentarism and reformism, and to strengthen those tendencies in the revolutionary movement which rejected the need for political action at all.

Of the existing socialist groups, the reformist leadership of the Independent Labour Party was by this time far too closely linked to the Labour Party's fortunes in parliament to be able to relate to the workers' struggles outside it, and many left-wing dissidents in the party were attracted to syndicalism.

The right-wing leadership of the Social Democratic Federation opposed the mass strikes, complaining that: *"if the workers had used their political power as they ought to have used it, all these recent strikes would have been wholly unnecessary"*.³ Under the influence of the class struggle the SDF regrouped with elements of the ILP and others influenced by syndicalist ideas to form the British Socialist Party in 1911. The leadership was forced to allow a debate on the role of the political party and its relationship to the industrial struggle, and to reinsert support for immediate demands in the new party's constitution. During the railway and miners' strikes BSP militants distributed manifestos calling for simultaneous action by different sectors of workers. But before long the syndicalists and many other activists were forced out of the party and the right-wing reinforced its grip.

The Socialist Labour Party, though much smaller, and despite sectarian tendencies, was better able to play the role of a revolutionary organisation in the mass strikes: it supported the raising of immediate demands and through its advocacy of industrial unions it had a practical means of relating to the workers' struggles. The party formed a separate propaganda group, the Industrial Workers of Great Britain, which played an active role in the 1911 Singer's strike in Glasgow where at one point it recruited 4,000 of the 11,000 workforce and gained an important presence among Clydeside engineering workers. The SLP expelled a minority opposed to strikes and affirmed the role of the revolutionary party, successfully defending a marxist intervention in the class struggle.

The mass strikes also influenced the development of a wider and much more diverse milieu outside of the established marxist groups. There was a surge of new groupings coming more or less directly out of the struggles themselves. For example, the *Daily Herald* national daily paper, later to be known as the Labour Party's mouthpiece, originated as the news-sheet of striking London print workers in 1911. The Herald Leagues which grew up around the paper were critical of state capitalism, the Labour Party and existing socialist groups, not explicitly anti-parliamentary but sympathetic to syndicalism. Probably the most influential grouping was the Industrial Syndicalist Education League around Tom Mann and Guy Bowman, which published the *Industrial Syndicalist* from 1910 until its collapse in 1913.

Drawing the lessons of the mass strikes

The mass strikes certainly tested revolutionaries. There were real gains: growth (albeit temporary); the (partial) regroupment of revolutionaries and a small but significant presence within the struggles themselves.

With hindsight the biggest failure of revolutionary minorities was to draw the lessons from the appearance in the mass strikes of unofficial strike committees, mass meetings, discussion groups, etc. The syndicalist movement in particular re-

3. Harry Quelch at the first conference of the BSP in 1912, cited in Walter Kendall, *The Revolutionary Movement in Britain 1900-1921*, 1969, p.29.

mained wedded to the two false alternatives of transforming the existing trade unions or creating new unions. At this stage it was not clear to many workers that the tendency for the trade unions to be integrated into the capitalist state was already an irreversible process, but even the clearest revolutionaries were unable to take up the work of the German and Dutch lefts around Luxemburg and Pannekoek on the lessons of the 1905 mass strike in Russia, or to grasp the historic significance of the appearance of the soviets or workers' councils.

The biggest strength of revolutionary minorities in Britain was their recognition of the reactionary nature of state capitalism and its danger to the working class struggle. For example, the 1913 platform of the syndicalist Industrial Democracy League identified the trend towards the centralisation of capitalist state power and denounced the Liberal Party's social welfare legislation as *"the extension of the tentacles of the state into the vitals of organised labour"*.⁴

The clearest revolutionaries extended this analysis to the trade unions. In 1911 the Durham miners' leader George Harvey, a leading SLP member, warned that: *"the trade union movement is tending to create a sort of organ of oppression within the masters' organ of oppression - the state - and an army of despotic union chiefs who are interested in reconciling, as far as possible, the interests of masters and men"*.⁵ By 1917 this solid insight enabled the majority of the SLP to conclude that capitalism had definitely entered its epoch of decadence, and to support the formation of unofficial workshop committees as embryo soviets.

Conclusion

The sheer breadth and intensity of the pre-war mass strikes encouraged illusions in the ability of the working class to emancipate itself through the use of its economic power alone, and despite the depth of opportunism in the workers' movement the integration of the existing trade unions into the capitalist state was not yet proven by the tests of war and revolution. It was the outbreak of imperialist war in 1914 that sealed the trade unions' betrayal through their abandonment of internationalism and confirmed the necessity for a revolutionary assault on the power of the capitalist state.

The pre-war mass strikes in Britain and Ireland were inevitably overshadowed by the even greater revolutionary wave that ended the first world war which culminated in the seizure of political power by the working class in Russia. But today, when we are seeing the spectre of class struggle return to haunt the decrepit capitalist system, again led by younger generations of workers anxious to fight back against the attacks of capital, we can find in these struggles – in their immense militancy, their capacity to organise and extend the movement, and willingness to take on the capitalist class – a rich source of lessons and inspiration. One key lesson is the central importance of the revolutionary minorities of the working class in clarifying its historic tasks and the methods and tactics needed to achieve them. **MH 26/3/11**

4. Cited in Bob Holton, *British Syndicalism 1900-1914*, 1976, p.145.

5. *Industrial unionism and the mining industry*, 1911, quoted by Raymond Challinor, *The Origins of British Bolshevism*, 1977, p.73.

ICC online forum

"In my opinion Baboon was right to enthuse about the mass dissent in Libya - even if it only had a 'wildcat truth' for 72 hours. Equally Devrim was right that it would rapidly descend into the masses drawn into a bourgeois blood bath because it was never a 'proletarian' revolt in the first place."

From the 'Are muslims and non-proletarians excluded from the struggle against capitalism?' thread.

en.internationalism.org

Contact the ICC

Debate is vital to the revolutionary movement. One of the most important elements of our activity, defined in our Basic Positions, is the "Political and theoretical clarification of the goals and methods of the proletarian struggle, of its historic and its immediate conditions". This, we are convinced, is only possible through the confrontation and discussion of differing views and positions within the revolutionary camp.

For this reason, we urge our readers to write to us with their comments, opinions and disagreements on the positions and analyses that we defend in our written press, including our web site.

We will do our best to reply to all serious correspondence as quickly as possible, although given our limited resources we may not always be able to do so immediately. Should the subject matter be of general interest, then we may publish both correspondence and our reply in our press.

While debate amongst revolutionaries is vital, it is equally necessary not to fall into the trap of thinking that our activity is something anodyne and acceptable to the bourgeois dictatorship disguised under the trappings of the democratic state. We will not under any circumstances publish our correspondents' real names, nor their home or e-mail addresses.

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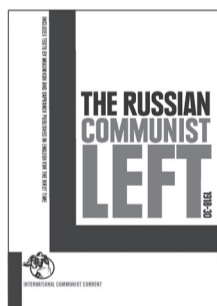
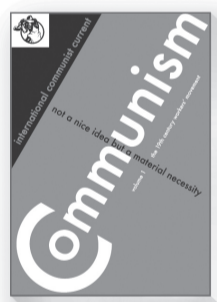
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Earthquakes, tsunamis and nuclear accidents in Japan: capitalism is a horror show

“Fear the worst!” That’s the message now splashed across newspaper front pages, in all the media, and on the lips of the world’s leaders too. But it can’t get any worse! Because from the earthquake, to the tsunami and then the nuclear accidents, and it’s not finished there, it means the current predicament of the Japanese population is horrific. And because now there are millions of people on the planet living under the Sword of Damocles of the nuclear cloud released by the reactors at Fukushima. This time round, it is not a poor country like Haiti and Indonesia that is being hit hard but the heart of one of the most industrialised countries of the world, one that specialises in cutting-edge technologies. It’s a country that has first-hand experience of the devastating effects of nuclear energy, having suffered the atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945.

Capitalism makes humanity more vulnerable to natural disasters

Once again, the madness of capitalism and irresponsibility of the bourgeoisie has become front page news. Only now is the world finding out that millions of people have been crammed into wooden houses, along coastal shores, permanently threatened by the risk of earthquakes and giant waves that can consume all before them. And this in a country that’s the world’s third largest economic power! As if this were not enough, they have also built nuclear power stations, which are all real time bombs, at the mercy of the earthquakes and the tsunamis. Most of Japan’s nuclear power plants were built 40 years ago, not only in densely populated areas but also near the coast. They are therefore particularly vulnerable to flooding. Thus, of the 55 Japanese reactors spread over 17 sites, 11 have been affected by the disaster. As a direct consequence, the population is already exposed to radiation levels that have officially¹ risen to more than 40 times the norm as far away as in Tokyo, 250 km from Fukushima, a radiation level which the Japanese government nonetheless declared to be of “no risk”! And it’s not only nuclear power stations that have been hit but also petrochemical plants built by the coast, and some of these have set on fire, which will only make the disaster worse

1. And experience shows that we can’t give much credit to the official figures in general and to those concerned with nuclear especially: lies, manipulation, under-estimation of the dangers are here the golden rule for every country.

Political positions of the ICC

World Revolution is the section in Britain of the **International Communist Current** which 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 stratified 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

and add to the existing ecological catastrophe. The bourgeoisie is still trying to make us believe that it is all the fault of nature, that we cannot predict the power of earthquakes and the magnitude of tsunamis. This is true. But what is most striking is how capitalism, after two hundred years in which it has produced phenomenal scientific knowledge and technical know-how that could be used to prevent this kind of disaster constantly increases the monstrous danger to humanity. The capitalist world of today has enormous technological machinery but is not able to use it to benefit humanity, as it is only concerned with the profits of capital... to the detriment of our livelihoods. Since the Kobe earthquake disaster in 1995, the Japanese government has, for example, developed a policy of constructing earthquake resistant buildings that have withstood the quake, but which are intended to house the very rich or to serve as city office blocks.

The bourgeoisie tells big lies

Today, comparisons abound with previous major nuclear accidents, especially with the meltdown of the reactor at Three Mile Island in the United States in 1979. Officially no-one died in that one. In comparison, all the political leaders are saying that the current disaster is not “for now” as serious an incident as the explosion of the Chernobyl power plant in 1986. Should we be reassured by these outrageously optimistic remarks? How do we assess the real danger to the populations of Japan, Asia, Russia, the Americas... and the world? The answer leaves us in no doubt: the consequences will be dramatic in every sense. There is already major nuclear pollution in Japan and the TEPCO officials who operate the Japanese nuclear plants can only deal with the risk of an explosion by fiddling with the problem day by day and shamelessly exposing hundreds of employees and fire-fighters to fatal levels of radiation. Here we see the fundamental difference between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. On the one hand there is a ruling class that has no hesitation in sending ‘its’ people to their deaths and, more generally still, endangering the lives of tens of millions of people in the name of its sacrosanct profits. On the other hand, there are workers ready to sacrifice their lives and to suffer the slow and unbearable agony of exposure to radiation on humanity’s behalf. Today, the impotence of the bourgeoisie is such that after a week of desperate attempts to cool the damaged reactor, its special-

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

ists are forced to play the sorcerer’s apprentice, trying to reconnect the different systems for cooling the reactor’s core onto the electricity network. Nobody knows if this will work: either the pumps work properly and succeed in cooling the reactor, or the cables and equipment are damaged which could create short-circuits, fires and... explosions! The only solution then will be to cover the core of the reactor with sand and concrete, like... Chernobyl.² Faced with such atrocities now and in the future, our exploiters will always respond in the same way: with lies!

In 1979, Washington lied about the radioactive effects of the meltdown of the core of the reactor, while still evacuating 140,000 people; if no actual deaths were reported, the cancers still multiplied one hundredfold in the population, something which the U.S. government never wanted to acknowledge.

With regard to Chernobyl, when the problems mounted with the plant and its maintenance, the Russian government hid the urgency of the situation for weeks. Only after the reactor exploded and an immense nuclear cloud was dispersed miles up in the air and thousands of miles around did the world come to see the magnitude of the disaster. But this kind of behaviour is not just peculiar to Stalinism. The western officials behaved exactly the same. At the time, the French government excelled itself with a whopping great lie about this cloud coming to a full stop right at the western border of France! Another interesting fact, even today, is that the WHO (World Health Organisation), no doubt colluding with the IAEA (International Atomic Energy Agency), produced a derisory and even laughable review of the Chernobyl explosion: 50 people dead, 9 children deaths from cancer, and a possible 4,000 more cancer fatalities! In fact, according to a study by the New York Science Academy, 985,000 people perished due to this nuclear accident.³ And today these very same agencies are responsible for producing a run-down on the situation at Fukushima and in-

2. As *Le Canard Enchaîné* reported on March 16th 2011, the current disaster was even predicted: “the eight German engineers from Areva who worked on site at the Fukushima nuclear power station 1, weren’t mad (...) surprised by the earthquake ‘when the number 4 reactor block was fully operational’ on Friday evening (March 11th), they were sent away to safety 40 miles from the nuclear power station” and then “taken to Frankfurt on Sunday March 13th”.

3. Source: ‘Troublante discrétion de l’Organisation mondiale de la santé’, *Le Monde*, 19 March.

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

forming us of the risks! How, after that, are they at all believable? For example, what is going to become of those they call “the liquidators” (those who are now dealing with the emergency) at Fukushima when we know that at Chernobyl “*of the 830,000 liquidators brought onto the site after the event, between 112,000 and 125,000 are dead.*”⁴ Even today, the bourgeoisie tries to hide the fact that this reactor is still highly dangerous as there is still an urgent necessity to continue enclosing the reactor core under more and more new layers of concrete, just as it hides the fact that there have been no less than 200 incidents at the Fukushima power stations during the past ten years!

All countries lie about the dangers from nuclear power! The French State expresses unerring confidence that the 58 nuclear reactors of L’Hexagone, the company in charge, are perfectly safe, when most of these power stations are either in seismic zones, or in coastal areas, or on rivers vulnerable to flooding. During the stormy weather of 1999, when gales inflicted serious damage across France and left 88 dead in Europe, the power station at Blaye, near Bordeaux, was flooded and this nearly caused the melt-down of a reactor. Few people knew about it. And then there’s the power station at Fessenheim that was so obsolescent that it had to close-down for a few years. But by using replacement parts (many of which aren’t the approved standard), it is somehow still in operation, and no doubt the maintenance staff will suffer the consequences of exposure to the radiation. That’s what they mean by “being in control” and “transparency”! From the beginning of the earthquake in Japan, on Friday, 11 March, the media advisedly reassured us that the Japanese nuclear power stations were among the “safest” in the world. Two days later it contradicted itself and recalled that the company, TEPCO, which manages the power stations in Japan, had already hidden incidents of nuclear radiation leaks. How can it be that the power stations in France, where “*in the space of ten years, the number of minor incidents and faults at nuclear sites has doubled*”⁵, like they have elsewhere in the world, “*are any “safer”?*” In no way at all. “*Around 20% of the 440 commercial reactors in operation worldwide are located in areas of*

4. <http://www.monde-diplomatique.fr/2010/12/KATZ/19944>
5 <http://www.europe1.fr/France/En-France-les-incidentes-nucleaires-en-hausse-455587>

Continued on page 2

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*, 1884-1914, 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*.