



Belgique - België
PB
2600 Berchem 1-2
BC 9925

International Communist Current

2nd Quarter 2012

International Review

Massacres in Syria, Iran crisis...
**The threat of an imperialist cataclysm
in the Middle East**

Massive mobilisations in Spain, Mexico,
Italy, India....
**The union barrier against the
self-organisation and unification of the
struggles**

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of the workers' movement in Africa (v)**

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The decadence of capitalism (xiii)
Rejections and regression

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

149

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

International Review 149 2nd Quarter 2012

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

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Massacres in Syria, Iran crisis....

The threat of an imperialist cataclysm in the Middle East

In Syria, every day brings new massacres. The country has joined the other theatres of imperialist war in the Middle East. After Palestine, Iraq, Afghanistan and Libya, now it's Syria's turn. Unfortunately this situation immediately poses a very disquieting question. What's going to happen in the period ahead? The Middle East seems to be on the verge of a conflagration whose limits are difficult to foresee. Behind the war in Syria, it's Iran which is the focus of imperialist fears and appetites, but all the main imperialist brigands are ready to defend their interests in the region. This is a part of the world that is on a war footing – a war that could have irrational and destructive consequences for the whole capitalist system.

Mass destruction and chaos in Syria: who is responsible?

For the international workers' movement, for all the exploited of the earth, the answer to that question can only be: capital alone is responsible. This was already the case for the first and second world wars. But also with the incessant wars which, since 1945, have brought more deaths than the two world wars combined. It's just over 20 years ago that the first George Bush, president of the USA at the time, well before his son became president, triumphantly declared that the world was entering a New World Order. The Soviet bloc had literally crumbled, the USSR was no more, and along with this we were supposed to see the disappearance of wars and massacres. Thanks to victorious capitalism, and under the benevolent protection of the USA, peace would now reign throughout the world. All these lies would soon be exposed by reality. Was it not the same president who, not long after this cynical and hypocritical speech, unleashed the first Iraq war?

In 1982 the Syrian army bloodily crushed the rebellious population of Hama. The number of victims has never been reliably counted: estimates vary between 10,000 and 40,000.¹ At the time nobody talked about intervening to protect the population; nobody demanded the resignation of Hafez el-Assad, the father of today's Syrian president Bashar al-Assad. The contrast with the situation today is quite considerable! The reason is that in 1982, the world scene was still dominated by the rivalry between the two great imperialist blocs. Despite the overthrow of the Shah of Iran by the Ayatollahs at the beginning of

1979 and the Russian invasion of Afghanistan a year after, American domination over the region was not contested by the other great powers and it even guaranteed a certain stability.

Since then things have changed a lot: the collapse of the old bloc system and the weakening of US "leadership" have given free rein to the imperialist appetites of regional powers like Iran, Turkey, Egypt, Syria, Israel...the deepening of the crisis is more and more reducing the populations to poverty and is sharpening feelings of exasperation and revolt against the existing regimes.

Today no continent is escaping the rise in imperialist tensions, but all the dangers are most concentrated in the Middle East. And the centre of all this at the moment is Syria. It began with several months of demonstrations against unemployment and poverty, involving the exploited from all kinds of backgrounds: Druze, Sunni, Christian, Kurds, men, women and children all together in their protests for a better life. But the situation in this country has taken a sinister turn. Social protest has been recuperated and dragged onto a terrain which has nothing to do with its original motives. The working class in this country is very weak and, given the present state of workers' struggles throughout the world, this sad outcome was more or less inevitable.

The different factions of the Syrian bourgeoisie leapt onto the back of this rebellious, distressed population. For the government and the pro-Assad armed forces, the stakes are clear. It's a question of staying in power at any price. For the opposition, whose different sectors are quite

willing to fight among themselves and who are only kept together by the need to get rid of Assad, it's a question of taking power for themselves. During the recent meetings of these opposition forces in London and Paris, no minister or diplomat wanted to be very precise about their composition. Who does the Syrian National Council or the National Coordination Committee or the Free Syrian Army actually represent? What is the influence within them of the Kurds, the Muslim Brotherhood or the Salafist jihadis? This is just a mish-mash of bourgeois cliques, each one rivalling the other. One of the reasons that the Assad regime has not been overthrown is that it has been able to play on the internal rivalries within Syrian society. The Christians look askance at the Islamists and fear that they will suffer the same fate as the Copts in Egypt; some of the Kurds are trying to negotiate with the regime; and the latter holds onto the support of the Alawite religious minority, to which the presidential clique belongs.

In any case, the National Council would have no significant political or military existence if it were not supported by outside forces, each one trying to pull its chestnuts from the fire. These include the countries of the Arab League, with Saudi Arabia at the front, and Turkey, but also France, Britain, Israel and the USA.

All these imperialist sharks are using the pretext of the inhumanity of the Syrian regime to prepare for total war in this country. Via the Russian channel *The Voice of Russia*, relaying the Iranian public TV channel *Press TV*, information has come out that Turkey is planning, with US support, to attack Syria. The Turkish state is massing troops and materiel at its Syrian frontier. This information has been taken up by all the western media. And in Syria itself, ballistic missiles made in Russia are being readied in underground bunkers in the region of Kamechi and Deir ez-Zor, near the frontier with Iraq. Because the Assad regime is also supported by foreign powers, notably China, Russia and Iran.

This ferocious battle between the most powerful imperialist powers on the planet is

1. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hama_massacre

also being waged inside the den of thieves known as the UN, where Russia and China have twice vetoed draft resolutions on Syria. The most recent one proposed by the Arab League calls for nothing less than the ousting of Bashir al-Assad. After several days of sordid negotiations, the hypocrisy of all concerned was as clear as daylight. On March 21st the UN Security Council, with the accord of Russia and China, adopted a declaration that aimed to put a stop to the violence through the dispatch of a famous special envoy, Kofi Annan, leading a delegation which, it was clearly understood, had no power to constrain anyone. Which means that this was strictly for those who believed in it.

The question that we can pose here is very different. How is it that, for the moment, not one of the foreign imperialist powers involved in this conflict has yet intervened directly – obviously for its own national interests – as was the case for example in Libya a few months ago? Mainly because the factions of the Syrian bourgeoisie ranged against Assad officially oppose it. They don't want a massive foreign military intervention and they have let this be known. Each one of these factions has the legitimate fear that this would make it impossible to set itself up in a new regime. But this is no guarantee that the threat of all-out imperialist war, which is knocking at Syria's door, won't break out in the near future. In fact, the key to this situation is to be found elsewhere.

We need to ask why this country is attracting such interest from the imperialist powers. The answer to this question is to be found some kilometres from Syria. We have to turn our eyes to Syria's eastern frontier to discover what's essentially at stake in the whole drama around the conflict in Syria. Its name is Iran.

Iran at the heart of the world imperialist torment

On February 7th last year the *New York Times* declared: "*Syria is already the beginning of the war with Iran*". A war that has not been unleashed overtly but which lurks in the shadows behind the Syrian conflict.

The Assad regime is Tehran's main ally in the region and Syria is an essential strategic zone for Iran. The alliance with this country gives Tehran a direct opening to the strategic space of the Mediterranean and Israel, with military means directly on the borders of the Zionist state. But this potential, hidden war has its roots in the fact that the Middle East is once again a focus for all the imperialist tensions built into this rotting system.

This region of the world is a great crossroads between east and west. Europe and Asia meet in Istanbul. Russia and the northern countries look across the Mediterranean to the African continent and the major oceans. And above all, as the world economy is on the verge of toppling over, black gold has become a vital economic and military weapon. Everyone has an interest in controlling it. Without oil, no factory can run and no plane can take off. This is one of the key reasons why all the imperialisms are involved in this part of the world. However, none of these motives are the most direct and pernicious motives pushing this region towards war.

For several years, the USA, Britain, Israel and Saudi Arabia have been orchestrating an ideological campaign against Iran. This campaign has been accelerating violently of late. The recent report of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) let it be understood that there is a possible military dimension to Iran's nuclear ambitions. And an Iran possessing nuclear weapons is intolerable for a number of imperialist states. The rise to power of a nuclear Iran, imposing itself across the whole region, is quite unacceptable for these imperialist sharks, all the more because of the permanent instability created by the Israel-Palestine conflict. Iran is completely encircled militarily. The American army is installed on all its frontiers. As for the Persian Gulf, it's so stuffed full of war ships that you could cross it without getting your feet wet. The Israeli state doesn't cease proclaiming that it will never allow Iran to possess nuclear weapons and that it will have the capacity to build one within the next year. Israel's declaration to the world is terrifying because this is a very dangerous situation: Iran is not Iraq or Afghanistan. It's a country of over 70 million people with a "respectable" army.

Catastrophic consequences

Economic

But Iran's use of atomic weapons is not the only danger, nor the most pressing: Iran's political and religious leaders have asserted recently that they would respond with all means at their disposal if their country were attacked. Iran has a capacity to do harm which is difficult to measure. If it was led to block all navigation through the Straits of Hormuz by sinking its own ships, this would be a disaster for the global economy.

A major part of world oil production would not be able to reach its destination. The capitalist economy, already in an open crisis of senility, would automatically be hurled into a maximum force storm. The

damage to an already sick economy would be enormous.

Ecological

The ecological consequences could be irreversible. Attacking Iranian atomic sites, which are buried under thousands of tons of concrete and rock would require an air assault using tactical nuclear weapons. The military experts of all these imperialist powers have explained this. If this happened, what would become of the entire Middle East? What would be the repercussions for the populations and the ecosystem on a planetary scale? None of this is the product of the morbid imagination of a mad Doctor Strangelove, or the scenario of a new disaster movie. This plan is an integral part of the strategy studied and prepared by the Israeli state and, for the moment from a certain distance, by the US. The Israeli military HQ, in the course of its preparations, has studied the possibility, if a conventional air attack proved unsuccessful, of moving on to this level of destruction. It's capital in its decadence that is becoming mad.

Humanitarian

Since the outbreak of the wars in Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya, total chaos rules in these countries. War goes on and on. There are daily murderous bombings and shootings. The populations desperately try to survive from day to day. The bourgeois press says it openly: "*Afghanistan is suffering from a general lassitude. The fatigue of the Afghans is met with the fatigue of the westerners.*"² But while for the bourgeois press the world is simply tired of the war in Afghanistan, for the population itself it's more a matter of exasperation and despair. How can you survive in a situation of permanent war and decomposition? And if war against Iran took place, the human catastrophe would be even more widespread. The concentration of the population, the means of destruction that would be used, oblige us to envisage the worst. The worst would be Iran in flames and the Middle East in total chaos. None of the mass murderers who run the world's states are capable of saying where war in Iran would end. What would happen to the population of this whole region? The prospects are genuinely frightening.

Divided national bourgeoisies, imperialist alliances on the verge of a major crisis

Just considering some of the possible consequences of an attack on Iran scares those sectors of the bourgeoisie that are trying to maintain a minimum of lucidity.

2. *le Monde*, 21.3.12.

The Kuwaiti paper *Al-Jarida* has recently leaked some messages which the Israeli secret services want to be made public. Their previous director Meir Dagan has said that “*the perspective of an attack on Iran is the stupidest idea I have ever heard*”. This opinion also seems to be shared in another branch of the Israeli security services: Shin Bet.

It’s a well known fact that a whole section of the Israeli state does not want this war. But it’s also well-known that part of the Israeli political elite, organised around Netanyahu, does want to unleash it at a moment judged propitious for the Israeli state. In Israel, in the face of these questions of imperialist policy, a political crisis is brewing. In Iran, the religious leader Ali Khamenei is at loggerheads over this issue with the president Mohamed Ahmadinejad. But the most spectacular split is between the US and Israel. The US administration does not, at the present time, want open war with Iran. The Americans’ experience in Afghanistan and Iraq is hardly encouraging, and the Obama administration would prefer to rely on increasingly heavy sanctions. US pressure on Israel, aimed at making the latter adopt a more patient stance, is enormous. But the historic weakening of US leadership is also having its impact on its traditional ally in the Middle East. Israel is affirming loud and clear that there is no way it will allow Iran to get nuclear weapons, whatever the opinion of its closest allies. The grip of the American superpower continues to weaken and even Israel is now openly challenging its authority. For certain bourgeois commentators, we could see the first real breaks in the hitherto unquestioned US/Israel alliance.

The major player in the region on the immediate level is Turkey, which has the most significant armed forces in the Middle East (more than 600,000 in active service). Although in the past Turkey was a reliable ally of the US and one of the few local allies of Israel, with the rise of the Erdogan regime the most “Islamist” sector of the Turkish bourgeoisie is trying to play its own card of “democratic” and “moderate” Islamism. It is trying to profit as much as it can from the uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt. This also explains the turnaround in its relations with Syria. There was a time when Erdogan took his holidays with Assad, but once the Syrian leader refused to bow to the demands of Ankara and negotiate with the opposition, the alliance broke down. Turkey’s efforts to export its model of “moderate” Islam are also in direct opposition to the efforts of Saudi Arabia to increase its own influence in the region on the basis of ultra-conservative Wahabism.

The possibility of a war over Syria, and then in Iran, is serious enough to persuade the two biggest allies of these countries, China and Russia, to react with increasing strength. For China, Iran is of considerable importance because it supplies it with 11% of its energy needs.³ Since its industrial take-off, China has become a new major player in the region. Last December, it warned of the danger of a global conflict around Syria and Iran. It thus declared through the *Global Times*:⁴

“The West suffers from an economic recession, but its efforts to overthrow non-Western governments due to politics and military interests culminate. China, as well as its mammoth neighbour Russia, should keep on high alert and adopt countermeasures if necessary.”

“China should not shrink before a possible showdown with the West but seek a solution favouring itself. China will adopt concrete measures to show its determination to take its own path. Such a choice is important for China’s interests.”⁵

Even if a direct confrontation between the world’s big imperialist powers can’t be envisaged in the current global context, such declarations show how serious the situation is.

Capitalism is heading straight for the abyss

The Middle East is a powder keg and there are some who would be willing to put a match to it. Certain imperialist powers are coldly preparing to use types of nuclear weapons in a coming war with Iran.

The military and strategic means are already there. In dying capitalism the worst scenario is always the most probable and we cannot rule it out. In any case, the trajectory of this senile and obsolete system is increasingly irrational. Imperialist war amounts to a real self-destruction of capitalism. That capitalism, which has already been condemned by history, should disappear is not a problem for the proletariat and for humanity. Unfortunately this self-destruction of the system goes together with the threat of the total destruction of humanity. But recognising that capitalism is caught up in a process leading to the ruin of civilisation should not be a reason for despair or passivity. In the last issue of this *Review*, for the first part of this year, we wrote “*The economic crisis is not a never-ending story. It announces the end*”

3. <http://iranprimer.usip.org/resource/iran-and-china>

4. The international current affairs journal belonging to the official *People’s Daily* in China

5. <http://www.globaltimes.cn/NEWS/tabid/99/ID/686912/China-not-obliged-to-besiege-Iran.aspx>

of a system and the struggle for another world”. This assertion was based on the real evolution of the international class struggle. This world-wide struggle for another world is now beginning. Certainly with all kinds of difficulties, still very slowly, but it is now definitely present. And this new force in movement, illustrated most clearly by the struggle of the Indignados in Spain, enables us to see that there is a real possibility of ridding the planet from the barbarism of capital.

Tino 11 April 2012

Massive mobilisations in Spain, Mexico, Italy, India...

The union barrier against the self-organisation and extension of the struggle

While governments of every country are bent on imposing more and more violent austerity plans, the mobilisations of 2011 – the movement of the Indignant in Spain, Greece, etc., and the occupations in the United States and other countries – continued during the first quarter of 2012. However, the struggles came up against a powerful union mobilisation that managed to seriously hold back the process of self-organisation and unification, which began in 2011.

How do we get out from under the unions' thumb? How do we once again find and revive the tendencies that appeared in 2011? We are going to try to give some elements of a response to these questions.

Massive demonstrations

We will begin by briefly recalling the struggles (see our territorial press for a more detailed chronology).

In Spain, brutal social blows (in education, health and basic services) and the adoption of a "Labour Reform", which makes sacking easier and allows firms to immediately lower wages, have provoked big demonstrations, particularly in Valencia but also in Madrid, Barcelona and Bilbao.

In February, there was an attempt to create a climate of police terror in the street, by using the pupils of secondary education as punch-bags, and workers of all generations came onto the streets to struggle shoulder to shoulder with the schoolchildren. The wave of protests spread throughout the country, generating demonstrations in Madrid, Barcelona, Saragossa, Seville, which were often spontaneous or decided upon during the course of improvised assemblies.¹

In Greece, a new general strike in February led to massive demonstrations throughout the country. Participating in them were employees of the public and private sectors, young and old, as well as the unemployed. Even some cops joined in. Workers from the hospital at Kilki occupied their workplace, calling for solidarity and for the participation of the whole of the population, and launching an appeal for

international solidarity.²

In Mexico, the government concentrated most of its attacks against workers of the teaching sector, waiting to generalise them to other sectors, in the context of the general degradation of living conditions in a country where it was said they were "armour-plated against the crisis". Despite the extremely strong union grip, the teachers demonstrated in large numbers in the centre of Mexico.³

In Italy, in January several strikes broke out against the avalanche of job losses and the measures adopted by the new government: among rail workers, in firms like Jabil ex-Nokia, Esselunga di Pioltello in Milan; FIAT at Termini Imerese, Ceramica Ricchetti in Mordado/Bologna; the refineries at Tapani; among the precarious workers of the Gasliani de Genes hospital, etc; and, also among sectors close to the proletariat such as lorry drivers, taxi drivers, shepherds, fishermen, peasants... That said, these movements have been very dispersed. An attempt at co-ordination in the Milanese region failed, as it remained imprisoned within a trade unionist vision.⁴

In India, a country which, together with China is considered to be "the future of capitalism", a general strike convoked by the unions broke out on February 28.

More than a hundred unions representing 100 million workers throughout the country answered the summons (although far from all workers were called out by their union). This mobilisation was widely hailed as one of the most massive strikes in the world up to now. However, it was above all a day of demobilisation, a way of letting off steam in response to a growing wave of struggles since 2010, at the spearhead of which were the automobile workers (Honda, Maruti-Suzuki, Hyundai Motors). Thus, recently, in the car production factories, workers acted on their own initiative and didn't wait for union orders to mobilise, showing strong tendencies for solidarity and a will to extend to other factories. They also expressed tendencies to self-organisation and the setting up of general assemblies, as in the strikes at Maruti-Suzuki in Manesar, a new town whose development is linked to the industrial boom in the region around Delhi. During the course of this struggle, the workers occupied the factory against the advice of "their" union. Workers' anger rumbled on and that's why the unions were agreed on a common appeal for the strike... in order to put up a united face against the working class!⁵

2011 and 2012: one and the same struggle

Young people, the unemployed and precarious workers have been the motor force of the actions of the Indignants and Occupy in 2011, even if these mobilised workers of all ages. The struggle tended to organise itself around general assemblies, which went together with a critique of the unions. It didn't put forward any concrete demands, focussing instead on the expression of indignation and looking for explanations for the situation.

In 2012, the first struggles in response to the attacks of the state came in a differ-

1. See in Spanish: "Por un movimiento unitario contra recortes y reforma laboral" (<http://es.internationalism.org/node/3323>); "Ante la escalada represiva en Valencia" (<http://es.internationalism.org/node/3324>).

2. See <http://en.internationalism.org/icconline/201203/4701/workers-take-control-kilkis-hospital-greece>.

3. See in Spanish: "Nuestra intervención en las movilizaciones del magisterio en México" (<http://es.internationalism.org/ccionlinemarzo2012panfleto>).

4. See in Italian <http://it.internationalism.org/node/1147>.

5. See: <http://en.internationalism.org/worldrevolution/201204/4790/all-india-workers-strike-28-february-2012-general-strike-or-union-ritual>.

ent form: here the spearhead is made up of “established” workers of 40-50 years old from the public sector, strongly supported by the “users” (heads of families, parents of the sick, etc.), who were joined by the unemployed and youth. The struggles polarised around concrete demands and the tutelage of the trade unions is very much present.

It seems then as if it’s a matter of “different” if not “opposed” struggles as the various media try to make us think. The first are supposedly “radical”, “political”, animated by some “idealists having nothing to lose”; the second on the contrary, are made up of fathers of families impregnated with a union consciousness who don’t want to lose their “acquired privileges”.

Such a characterisation of these “two types of struggle”, which obscures the profoundly common social tendencies, has the political aim of dividing and opposing both reactions from the proletariat, which are products of the maturation of consciousness and express the beginnings of a response to the crisis, and which will have to unite in the perspective of massive struggles. It’s much more a question of two pieces of a puzzle that have to fit together.

This however will not be easy. A struggle where the workers play a more and more active and conscious part, in particular in the most advanced sectors of the proletariat, is a real necessity and its first condition is a clear assessment of all the weaknesses affecting the workers’ movement.

The mystifications

One of them is nationalism which has particularly affected Greece. Here, the anger provoked by the unbearable austerity has been channelled “against the German people”, whose so-called “wealth”⁶ is supposed to be at the origins of the misfortunes of the “Greek people”. This nationalism is used to propose “solutions” to the crisis based upon “getting back economic national sovereignty”, an autarkic vision shared by both the Stalinists and neo-fascists.⁷

The so-called rivalry between right and left is another of the mystifications with which the state tries to weaken the working class. We can particularly see it at work in

6. Deliberately forgetting the 7 million ‘mini-jobs’ (paid at 400 Euro a month) that the working class in Germany endures.

7. A minority of workers in Greece are aware of this danger, hence the appeal for international solidarity by the hospital workers of Kilkis and the students and teachers of the occupied law school in Athens

Italy and Spain. In Italy, the eviction of Berlusconi, a particularly repugnant individual, has allowed the left to create an artificial euphoria – “We are finally free!” – which has been a strong factor in the dispersion of the workers’ responses that we saw in the beginning of the austerity plans imposed by the “technocratic” government led by Monti.⁸ In Spain, the authoritarianism and the brutality of the repression which traditionally characterises the right has allowed the unions and the parties of the left to attribute the responsibility for the attacks to the “wickedness” and venality of the right and divert discontent towards the “defence of the social and democratic state”. In this sense we can see a convergence of mystifications, both from the traditional forces for corraling the working class, the unions and the parties of the left, and those more recently deployed by the bourgeoisie in order to face up to the movement of the Indignant, in particular DRY (“Democracia Real Ya!” – “Real Democracy Now!”). As we’ve said: “*the strategy of DRY, in the service of the democratic state of the bourgeoisie, consists in fact of putting forward a citizens’ movement of democratic reform to try to avoid the appearance of a social movement of struggle against the democratic state, against capitalism.*”⁹

The union barrier

In 2011, the bourgeoisie in Spain was surprised by the movement of the Indignant, which, paradoxically, managed to quite freely develop the classical methods of the workers’ struggle: massive assemblies, open demonstrations, wide-ranging debates.³ This is connected to the fact that it was mobilised not on the terrain of the firm but in the streets and that the young and precarious workers, who constituted its motor force, fundamentally distrusted all “recognised” institutions such as the unions.

Today, the implementation of austerity plans is on the agenda for all states, particularly in Europe, provoking strong discontent and a growing militancy. These states don’t want to be taken by surprise

8. Which didn’t even owe its birth to the election charade!

9. See: “Le mouvement citoyen ‘Democracia Real Ya!: une dictature sur les assemblées massives’”; http://fr.internationalism.org/icconline/2011/dossier_special_indignes/le_mouvement_citoyen%20democracia_real%20ya_une_dictature_sur_les_assemblees_massive.html.

3. The bourgeoisie didn’t really give the movement a free hand - it used new but ‘inexperienced’ forces like DRY against it.

and, to this end, they accompany the attacks with a political operation that obstructs the emergence of a united, self-organised and massive struggle of the workers that can take forward the tendencies which appeared in 2011.

The unions are the spearhead of this operation. Their role is to occupy the social ground by proposing demonstrations which create a labyrinth where the efforts, combativity and the growing indignation of the masses of workers cannot be expressed, or flounders on a field mined with divisions.

We clearly see this in one of the preferred tools of the unions: the general strike. In the hands of the unions, such endless mobilisations, which often bring together a good number of workers, cut the class off from any possibility of taking charge of a struggle and turning it into a massive riposte to the attacks of the bourgeoisie. No less than sixteen general strikes have been called in Greece in the last three years! There have already been three in Portugal; another is being prepared in Italy; a strike – limited to the education sector! – was announced in Britain; we’ve already talked about the strike in India at the end of February; and, in Spain, following the general strike of September 2010, another was announced for March 29th.

The multitude of general strikes convoked by the unions is of course an indication of the pressure exercised by the workers, of their discontent and combativity. But, for the most part, the official general strike is not a step forward. Rather it’s a way of letting off steam faced with social discontent.⁴

The Communist Manifesto argued that “*The real fruit of their battles lies, not in the immediate result, but in the ever-expanding union of the workers*”; the principal acquisition of a strike is found in the unity and consciousness, the capacity for initiative and organisation, the expressions of solidarity and the active links that are allowed to be established.

It is these acquisitions that the top-down general strikes and the union methods of struggle weaken and distort.

The union leaders announce the gen-

4. If we are to believe the “disquiet” and “anger” of the big business leaders and politicians, the general strike really does seem to worry them, as though it was the equivalent of some kind of revolution. But history has shown that all this is a comedy show, regardless of what this or that individual member of the ruling class might think

eral strike in a loud press and TV song and dance, launching great proclamations invoking “unity” but, at places of work, the “preparation” for the general strike in fact constitutes an immense manoeuvre of division, confrontation and atomisation.

Participation in the general strike is presented as the personal decision of each worker. In many firms, there are even management or administration staff who ask workers about their possible participation, with all that means in terms of blackmail and intimidation. This is what the “constitutional” right of the “citizen” to strike comes down to!

This manoeuvre faithfully reproduces the lying schema of the dominant ideology, according to which each individual is autonomous and independent, deciding “in all conscience” what to do. The strike is another of the thousand agonising dilemmas that life imposes on us in this society and to which we must respond alone in the greatest distress: must I accept this work? Must I profit from this occasion? Must I buy this object? Who should I vote for? Should I go on strike? From these dilemmas we come out with the feeling of being still more alienated: it is the world of competition, of the struggle of each against all, of everyone for themselves, that’s to say the quintessence of this society.

The days preceding the general strike see a proliferation of scenes of conflict and tensions between workers. Everyone confronts agonising questions: should I strike knowing we will get nothing? Am I letting down my comrades who are on strike? Can I afford the luxury of losing a day’s pay? Will I lose my job? The workers are caught between a rock and a hard place: on one side the unions, who try to make those that don’t take part feel guilty, on the other the bosses, who make all sorts of threats. It’s a real nightmare of confrontations, of divisions and tensions between workers, exacerbated by the question of whether to maintain a “minimum service”, which is a new source of conflicts.⁵

5. Let’s recall what we said in the article “Report on the class struggle” in *International Review* n° 117 (2004): “In 1921, during the March Action in Germany, the tragic scenes of the unemployed trying to prevent workers from entering the factories was an expression of desperation in the face of the retreat of the revolutionary wave. The recent calls of French leftists to block the public transport taking employees to work, or to prevent pupils from going to their exams [during the movement of spring 2003 in France]; the spectacle of west German unionists wanting to prevent east German steel workers – who no longer wanted a long strike for a 35 hour week – going back to work [at the end of the steel workers’

The capitalist world functions as an addition of millions of “free individual decisions”. In reality, none of these decisions are free but are subjected to a complex network of alienated relationships; from the infrastructure of the relations of production – the market and wage labour – up to the immense structure of juridical, military, ideological, religious, political and policing relations.

Marx said that “*the real intellectual richness of the individual depends entirely on the richness of real relationships*”¹³ these latter being the pillar of proletarian struggle and of the social force which alone will be able to destroy capitalism, whereas union summonses dissolve the social relations and enclose the proletarians in isolation, the corporatist prison, suppressing the conditions which would allow them to consciously decide: the collective body of the workers in struggle.

It’s the capacity of the workers to collectively discuss the pros and cons of an action that gives them their strength, because it is in this framework that they can examine the arguments, the initiatives, the clarifications, taking into account doubts, disagreements, feelings, the reservations of everyone, in a framework where they can take common decisions. It is this way of carrying out a struggle where the greatest number of workers can involve themselves with their responsibilities and convictions.

It is precisely all this which is thrown into the bin by the union call to “forget the talking shop” and “get rid of sentimentalism”, in the so-called “strength we get from blocking production or services where we work”. The working class draws its strength from the central place that it occupies in production, from the fact that it produces almost all the riches that the bourgeoisie appropriates. Thus, through the strike, the workers are potentially capable of stopping the whole of production and paralysing the economy. But in reality, the tactic of the “immediate blockade” is often used by the unions as a means to divert the workers away from their first priority, which is to develop the struggle through

strike in 2003], are dangerous attacks against the very idea of the working class and its solidarity. They are all the more dangerous because they feed on the impatience, immediatism and mindless activism which decomposition breeds. We are warned: if the coming struggles are a potential crucible of consciousness, the bourgeoisie is out to convert them into graveyards of proletarian reflection.” http://en.internationalism.org/ir/117_class_struggle.html

13. *The German Ideology*, “Feuerbach”.

taking charge of it and its extension.¹⁴ Moreover, in the period of the decadence of capitalism, and especially in periods of crisis such as we’re living through today, it’s the capitalist system itself, with its chaotic and contradictory functioning, which is responsible for the paralysis of production and its social services. Blockages in production – which can often last well over 24 hours! – are put to the profit of capitalism in order to eliminate stocks. Regarding services such as teaching, health or public transport, blockades can be used by the state in order to pit the “users”, most of them workers, against their comrades on strike!

The fight for a single and massive struggle

During the movements of 2011, the exploited masses were able to act on their own initiative and take up their most profound aspirations, expressing themselves according to the classical methods of the working class, inherited from the Russian revolutions of 1905 and 1917, May 68 etc. The present imposition of union tutelage makes this “free expression” more difficult, but the latter will continue to find a way. Against the union grip, workers’ initiatives are beginning to appear: in Spain for example we’ve seen several expressions of them. At the demonstration of March 29th in Barcelona, Castillon, Alicante, Valencia and Madrid, strikers carried their own banners, formed pickets to explain their mobilisation, claimed the right to speak at union meetings, held alternative assemblies... It is significant that these initiatives happened in the same way as those which developed around events in France in 2010 against the retirement reform.¹⁵

We are faced with the need to join a combat on booby-trapped ground in order to open up the way to authentic proletarian struggle. The rule of the unions seems insurmountable but conditions are ripening for the wearing out of their authority and thus for strengthening the autonomous capacities of the proletariat.

The crisis, which has already lasted five years and threatens to break out in new

14. Read our article “What can we learn from the blockade of the oil refineries in France?” <http://en.internationalism.org/wr/343/refineries>.

15. See *International Review* n° 144: “France, Britain, Tunisia: The future lies in the international development of the class struggle” (<http://en.internationalism.org/ir/144/editorial>). These struggles in 2010 politically and practically prepared the ground for the evolution of class consciousness in 2011

convulsions, little by little dispels illusions about “light at the end of the tunnel”, and reveals in its turn a profound preoccupation about the future. The growing bankruptcy of the social system becomes more and more evident, with everything that this implies about living conditions, human relations, thought, culture... Whereas during periods when the crisis wasn't so sharp, the workers seemed to be able to follow a road mapped out in advance, despite the often terrible sufferings that go along with exploitation, this road is progressively disappearing. And this dynamic is today worldwide.

The tendency, which was already expressed in 2011 with the movement of the Indignant in Spain and Occupy¹⁶ to take to the streets and squares in large numbers, is another powerful lever of the movement. In the present life of capitalism, the street is a place of alienation: traffic jams, solitary crowds buying, selling, managing, running businesses... When the masses take over the streets for “another use” – assemblies, massive discussions, demonstrations – they can become a space of freedom. This allows the workers to begin to glimpse the social force it is capable of becoming if it learns to act in a collective and autonomous fashion. It sows the first seeds of what could be the “direct government of the masses” through which it educates itself, frees itself from all the rags that this system sticks to its body, and finds the strength to destroy capitalism and construct another society.

Another force that pushes the movement towards the future is the convergence of generations of workers in the struggle. This phenomenon has been seen in miniature in struggles such as those against the CPE in France (2006)¹⁷ or in the revolts of youth in Greece (2008).¹⁸ The convergence all working class generations in common action is an indispensable condition for undertaking a really revolutionary struggle. At the time of the Russian revolution in 1917, proletarians of all ages kept close to each other, from children raised on the shoulders of their brothers or fathers, up to white-haired oldsters.

There is a whole range of factors that will help the working class to develop its powers, but this will not be immediate or easy. Hard battles, animated by the persevering intervention of revolutionary organisations, punctuated by often bitter defeats and moments of difficulty, confusion and temporary paralysis, will still be necessary in order to allow the full delivery of this power. The weapon of criticism, a firm criticism of errors and weaknesses, will be fundamental in order to go forward.

“On the other hand, proletarian revolutions, like those of the nineteenth century, criticise themselves constantly, interrupt themselves continually in their own course, come back to the apparently accomplished in order to begin afresh, deride with unmerciful thoroughness the inadequacies, weaknesses and paltriness of their first attempts, seem to throw down their adversary only in order that he may draw new strength from the earth and rise again, more gigantic, before them, recoil ever and anon from the indefinite prodigiousness of their own aims, until a situation has been created which makes all turning back impossible, and the conditions themselves cry out: Hic Rhodus, hic salta! Here is the rose, dance here!”¹⁹

C.Mir 27/3/12

16. For a balance sheet of these movements, see “2011: from indignation to hope” (<http://en.internationalism.org/icconline/201203/4766/statement-social-movements-2011>).

17. See *International Review* n° 125, “Theses on the Spring 2006 student movement in France” (http://en.internationalism.org/ir/125_france_students).

18. See *International Review* n°136 ‘The youth revolts in Greece confirm the development of the class struggle’ (<http://en.internationalism.org/ir/2009/136/intro>).

19. Marx, *The 18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*.

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

May 1968 in Senegal

This is the last part of our series of five articles on the class struggle in French West Africa, centred in particular on Senegal. The series covers the period from the end of the 18th century up to 1968 and began publication in *International Review* n°145.

May 1968 in Africa, an expression of the recovery of the international class struggle

A “May 68” actually took place in Africa, more precisely in Senegal, with characteristics very similar to those of the “French May” (student unrest forming a prelude to the emergence of the workers’ struggles) – which is not surprising given the historical ties between the working class of France and that of its former African colony.

If the global nature of “May 68” is generally acknowledged, its expression in certain corners of the world is nonetheless little known, or simply ignored: “*This is largely explained by the fact that these events occurred at the same time as others of a similar nature around the world. This has made it easier for analysts and propagandists who followed the events to blur the significance of the Senegalese May 68, by opting for a selective reading emphasising the university and high school student side in the crisis at the expense of its other dimensions.*”¹

In fact the “Senegalese May” was better known among students: students sent messages of protest from around the world to the government of Senghor which was suppressing their fellow African comrades. We should also note that the University of Dakar was the only university in the colonies of French West Africa (FWA) until after “independence”, which explains the presence within it of a significant number of foreign African students.

The organs of the bourgeois press had different interpretations of what caused the outbreak of the May movement in Dakar. For some, like *Afrique Nouvelle* (Catholic), it was the crisis in education that was the root cause of the movement. *Marches Tropicaux et Méditerranéens* (for the business community) considered it an extension of the movement in France.

1. Abdoulaye Bathily, *May 1968 in Dakar or the university revolt and democracy*, Edit. Chaka, Paris, 1992.

Jeune Afrique pointed out the connection between the student political unrest and the social unrest of wage earners.

There was another point of view that made a connection between this movement and the economic crisis: it came from Abdoulaye Bathily, one of the oldest participants in the famous revolt when he was then a student; later, in his role of researcher, he would make a general appraisal of the events of “May in Dakar.” We will quote him a lot in this article for his testimonies from inside the events.

The sequence of events

“*May 1968 has gone down in history characterised across the world by the massive social upheaval in which students and high school pupils were the spearhead. In Africa, Senegal was very clearly the theatre for the university and high school protests. Many contemporary observers concluded that the events in Dakar were nothing more than an extension to May 68 in France [...] Having participated directly, and at the highest level in the students’ struggle in Dakar, in May 68, this thesis has always appeared to me to be wrong. [...] The explosion of May 68 was undoubtedly fostered by a particularly tense social climate. It was the culmination of an unprecedented agitation by employees in the towns, the unsatisfactory national economic indicators from the continued French rule, and members of the bureaucracy disgruntled that the technical advisers were in control of the state. The agricultural crisis also contributed to the growing tension in the towns and in Dakar, notably from the influx from the rural areas [...]. The memorandum of the Union Nationale des Travailleurs de Senegal [UNTS] on May 8th calculated that purchasing power had declined by 92.4% since 1961.*”²

So, this was the context in which Dakar, between May 18th and June 12th, also experienced a “May 68” which almost

2. Bathily, *ibid.*

definitely undermined the pro-French regime of Senghor with wildcat general strikes by the students and then by the workers, before the government stepped in to end the movement, with the police and military imposing a brutal clampdown and with French imperialism providing critical support.

The “Senegalese May” had been preceded by several clashes with the Senghor government, especially between 1966 and 1968, when students organised demonstrations in support of “national liberation” struggles and against “neo-colonialism” and “imperialism”.

Similarly, there were “warning strikes” in high schools. Students at the high school in Rufisque (a suburb of Dakar) walked out of lectures on 26th March 1968 following disciplinary measures taken against a student. The movement lasted three weeks and the agitation and protests against the government spread to schools across the region.

The trigger for the movement

The movement of May 1968 was initially sparked off by the decision by the government of President Senghor to cut the number of monthly instalments of student grants from 12 to 10 per year, and by so doing to greatly reduce the spending on these, citing “the difficult economic situation facing the country”.

“*The news of the government decision spread like wildfire on the campus, causing widespread anxiety and provoking a general feeling of revolt. It was the only topic of conversation on the campus. Upon election, the new executive committee of the Democratic Union of Senegalese students [UDES] started to campaign over student grants, amongst students in the high schools and also with the trade unions.*”³

3. *Ibid.* It is worth recalling here what we already said in the first part of this article in *International Review* no.145: “...if we largely recognise the seriousness of the researchers who provide these reference sources, we do not necessarily share some of their interpretations of historic events. It’s the same for certain ideas, for example when they talk about ‘union consciousness’ instead of ‘class consciousness’ (of workers), or again ‘union movement’ (instead of workers’ movement). Otherwise, up to another order, we have confidence in their scientific rigour as long

Indeed, after this government announcement there were constant protests and the opposition to the government grew, especially on the eve of the elections that were denounced by the students, as the heading of one of their leaflets demonstrates: "From the economic and social situation in Senegal to the eve of the election farce on February 25th..." The agitation continued and on May 18th students decided to announce a "general strike" following the failure of negotiations with the government about their conditions, and there was a massive strike in all the faculties.

Galvanised by the clear success of the strike, and angered by the government's refusal to meet their demands, the students called an unlimited general strike and a boycott of exams from May 27th. Already, before this, meetings were taking place on campus and in high schools generally; in brief, this was a showdown with the government. For its part, the government seized control of all the official media and announced a series of repressive measures against the strikers, hoping to stir some opposition from the workers and peasants to the students, who it labelled "privileged". And the Senegalese Progressive Union (Senghor's party) tried to denounce the "anti-nationalist position" of the students' movement, but without any real echo; quite the contrary, the government campaigns only increased the anger of the students and gave rise to workers' solidarity and won sympathy from the public.

*"The meetings of the Student Union of Dakar (UED) were the focal point of the agitation on the campus. They attracted a considerable number of students, pupils, teachers, unemployed youths, political activists and, of course, many government spies. Over time, they were the barometer indicating the size of the political and social protest movement. Each meeting was a sort of gathering of the Senegalese opposition and of those on campus from other countries. The interventions were punctuated by pieces of revolutionary music from around the world."*⁴

Indeed, a real showdown was on the cards. In fact, at midnight on May 27th, students awoke to hear the sound of boots and to see the arrival en masse of police who cordoned off the campus. Then a crowd of students and pupils gathered and converged on the residential quarters to mount picket lines.

By encircling the university campus

as their theses don't come up against historical facts and don't prevent other interpretations." [NB. Part of this section was omitted from the version of the article published in the English language edition of *International Review* n° 145.]

4. Ibid.

with police, the government hoped to prevent any movement onto or out of the campus.

*"So, some of their colleagues were deprived of meals and others of their beds because as the UED repeatedly said, the social conditions were such that many of their colleagues (those without grants) ate in the town or slept there from the lack of housing on campus. Even medical students who treated patients in the hospital would be stuck in the town along with the other students in a medical emergency. It was a typical example of where academic freedoms were violated."*⁵

On May 28th, during an interview with the rector and the deans of the university, the UED demanded the lifting of the police cordon, while university authorities required students to make a declaration within 24 hours "to declare that the strike is not aimed at overthrowing the Senghor government". Student organisations responded that they were not allied with any specific regime and that within the time granted to them, they wouldn't be able to consult their members. After this, the President of the Government ordered the closure of all the academic institutions.

*"The anti-riot squad, reinforced by the police, went on the offensive and entered the living quarters one after the other. They had orders to remove the students by all means possible. So with truncheons, rifle butts, bayonets, tear gas grenades, sometimes crazed, smashing doors and windows, these henchmen entered the students' rooms looking for them. The riot squads and the police behaved just like looters. They stole what they could and smashed up things blocking their path, tore up clothes, books and notebooks. Pregnant women were abused and workers mistreated. Married women and children were beaten in their homes. There was one death and many wounded (around one hundred) according to official figures."*⁶

The explosion

The brutality of the government's reaction led to an outburst of solidarity and sympathy for the student movement. There was strong disapproval throughout the capital of the regime's brutal behaviour and against police cruelty and the confinement of large numbers of students. On the eve of May 29th all the ingredients were present for a social conflagration because things had reached fever pitch for the students and salaried workers.

The high school students were already

5. Ibid.

6. Ibid.

massively involved in the "warning strikes" of March 26th, and on May 18th were the first to start an indefinite strike. After this the university students and those in the high schools started to link up. And one after the other, all the institutions in secondary education declared a total and unlimited strike, formed struggle committees and called for demonstrations with the university students.

Alarmed by the increased numbers of young people joining the protests, on the same May 29th President Senghor made an announcement to the media of an indefinite closure of all learning establishments (high schools and colleges) in the vicinity of Dakar and St. Louis, and called on parents to keep their children at home. But with little success.

"The closure of the university and the high schools only increased social tension. University students who had escaped the police cordons, high school students and other young people began erecting barricades in neighbourhoods like Medina, Grand Dakar, Nimzat, Baay Gainde, Kip Koko, Usine Ben Talli, Usine Nyari Talli, etc.. On the 29th and 30th particularly, young demonstrators occupied the main streets of Dakar. Vehicles belonging to government officials and the leading personalities of the regime were tracked down. It was rumoured that many ministers were forced to abandon their official cars, famous cars like the Citroen DS 21. In people's eyes, and those of the university and high school students in particular, this type of official vehicle symbolised 'the lavish lifestyles of the comprador and political-bureaucratic bourgeoisie.'" ⁷

Faced with growing combativity and the escalation of the movement, the government reacted by tightening its repressive measures, extending them to the whole population. So, the government issued a decree that from May 30th all public buildings (cinemas, theatres, cabarets, restaurants, bars) would close day and night until further notice; and also, that meetings, demonstrations and gatherings of more than 5 persons would be prohibited.

A workers' general strike

Faced with these martial measures and with continued police brutality against young people in struggle, the whole country stirred and the revolt intensified, this time with more of the salaried working class becoming involved. It was at this point that the official union apparatus, notably the National Union of Workers of Senegal, the umbrella body for several unions, decided to make its play to avoid being bypassed

7. Ibid.

by the rank and file workers.

*“The rank and file unions pressed for action. On May 30th, at 18.00 hours, the regional union, UNTS de Cap-Vert (a region of Dakar), following a joint meeting with the National headquarters of UNTS, announced plans for an indefinite strike from midnight on May 30th.”*⁸

Given the difficult situation facing his regime, President Senghor decided to address himself to the nation and spoke threateningly to the workers urging them to disobey the call for a general strike, while accusing the students of being “under a foreign influence”. But despite the real threats of the government to requisition certain categories of workers, the strike was well supported in both the public and the private sectors.

General assemblies were planned in the labour union hall for 10am on May 31st, in which the invited strikers’ delegations would decide the next steps for the movement.

*“But the police had cordoned the area off. At 10 o’clock the order to attack the workers inside the hall was given. Doors and windows were smashed, cabinets pulled apart, records destroyed. Tear gas and truncheons overwhelmed the most foolhardy workers. In response to the police brutality, the workers in amongst the students and the lumpen proletariat, attacked vehicles and shops, some of which were torched. The next day Abdoulaye Diack, Secretary of State for Information, revealed to reporters that 900 people were arrested in the labour union hall and the surrounding area. Among these, there were 36 union leaders including 5 women. In fact, during the week of crisis, no less than 3,000 people were arrested. Some union leaders were deported [...]. These actions only heightened popular indignation and readied the workers for the fight.”*⁹

Indeed, directly after this press conference when the government’s spokesman gave statistics about the victims, the strikes, demonstrations and riots were intensifying and so the bourgeoisie decided to call a halt.

*“The unions, allied to the government and the employers, felt it was necessary to make concessions to the workers to avoid them adopting a hard line, since in the demonstrations they had been able to sense their power.”*¹⁰

Therefore, on June 12th, after a series of meetings between government and unions, President Senghor announced an 18 point

8. Ibid.

9. Ibid.

10. Ibid.

agreement to end the strike with a 15% increase in wages. Accordingly, the movement officially ended on that date, which did not prevent further discontent and the resurgence of other social movements, because the strikers were really suspicious regarding any promises from the Senghor government. And, in fact, just weeks after signing the agreement to end the strike, social movements were spreading more than ever, with some lively episodes, right up until the early 1970s.

Ultimately, it is worth noting the state of disarray in which the Senegalese government found itself at the height of its confrontation with the “May movement in Dakar”:

“From June 1st to 3rd, it seemed that there was a power vacuum. The isolation of the government was expressed in the inertia of the ruling party. Faced with the scale of the social explosion, the party machine of the UPS (Senghor’s party) did not react. The UPS Students’ Federation was happy to covertly distribute leaflets against the UDES in the early stages. This situation was all the more striking since the UPS had boasted three months earlier about having won a landslide victory in the parliamentary and presidential elections in Dakar on February 25th, 1968. But now it was unable to provide an acceptable response to what was happening.

*“Rumour had it that ministers were holed up in the administrative building, the seat of the government, and that senior party and state officials were hiding in their homes. This was very strange behaviour from party leaders who claimed to have a majority in the country. At one moment, the rumour ran that President Senghor had taken refuge in the French military base at Ouakam. These rumours were made even more believable following the news in Dakar that De Gaulle had “fled” to Germany on May 29th.”*¹¹

Indeed, the Senegalese government was truly reeling and in this context, it was quite symptomatic that de Gaulle and Senghor were seeking the protection and support of their respective armies at the same time.

Moreover, at the time, other more persistent “rumours” clearly indicated that the French army had forcibly intervened to prevent the protesters marching on the presidential palace, inflicting several deaths and injuries.

Let’s also recall that the Senegalese government did not only use its normal guard-dogs, namely the police, to bring an end to the movement but that it also had recourse to the more reactionary

11. Ibid.

forces like the religious leaders and peasants from the remote countryside. At the height of the movement, on May 30th and 31st, the leaders of the religious cliques were invited to use media day and night by Senghor to condemn the strike in the strongest terms and to urge the workers to go back to work.

As for the peasants, the government tried unsuccessfully to turn them against the strikers, by making them come to town to support pro-government demonstrations.

“The recruiters had led the peasants to believe that Senegal had been invaded from Dakar by a nation called ‘Tudian’ (student) and that they were being called on to defend the country. Groups of these peasants were actually located in the alleyways of Centennial (now Boulevard General de Gaulle) with their weapons (axes, machetes, spears, bows and arrows).

*“But they very quickly realised that they had been taken for a ride. [...] The young people dispersed them with stones and divided up their food amongst themselves. [...] Others were vilified on their way to Rufisque. In any event, the riot revealed the fragility of the political standing of the UPS and of the regime in the urban areas, particularly in Dakar.”*¹²

Undoubtedly, the government of Senghor would utilise every means available, including the most obscure, to bring the social uprising against its regime to an end. However, to permanently extinguish the fire, the most effective weapon for the government could only be that in the hands of Doudou Ngome. He played his part at the time as the leader of the main union, the UNTS. He would “negotiate” the terms for smothering the general strike. Moreover, as a thank you, President Senghor would make him a minister a few years later. It’s another illustration of the strike-breaking role of the unions who, in cahoots with the former colonial power, definitely saved Senghor’s neck.

The high-school students’ role in starting the movement

“The high schools in the Cap-Vert region, ‘aroused’ by the strike at Rufisque High School in April, were the first to spring into action. These students were especially quick to take to the streets as they saw themselves, like the university students, as victims of the education policy of the Government and were concerned in particular by the cut-backs in the grants. As future university students themselves, they were actively involved in the struggle of the UDES. The strike spread rapidly

12. Ibid.

from Dakar to other secondary schools around the country from May 27th [...] The leadership of the students' movement was very unstable, and from one meeting to the next, the delegates, and there were many, changed. [...] An important nucleus of very active strikers also drew the attention of the teacher training college for young girls at Thies. Some student leaders even moved to the old town and coordinated the strike from there. Subsequently, a national committee of the high schools and other secondary education colleges in Senegal was formed, becoming a sort of general staff of the student movement."¹³

Here the author is describing the active role of the high-school students in the mass movement of May 68 in Senegal, in particular the way the struggle was organised with general assemblies and 'co-ordinations'. Indeed, in every high school, there was a struggle committee and general assembly with an elected and revocable leadership.

The magnificent involvement of the high school students, both male and female, was highly significant as this was the first time in history that this part of the youth were mobilised in large numbers to protest against the new ruling bourgeoisie. If the starting point of the movement was a solidarity action with one of their comrades, victimised by the school authority, the high-school students, like the other students and workers, also saw the need to fight against the effects of the capitalist crisis that the Senghor government wanted to make them pay for.

Western imperialism comes to Senghor's aid

At the imperialist level, France was keeping close track of the crisis that the events of 1968 had given rise to, and for good reason; it had a lot invested in Senegal. Indeed, apart from its military bases (sea, air and land) located around Dakar, Paris had appointed a "technical advisor" to each ministry and to the president's office to steer the policies of the Senegalese government in a direction that would clearly serve its own interests.

In this respect, we can recall that before being one of the best "pupils" of the Western bloc, Senegal was for a long time the principal historic bastion of French colonialism in Africa (from 1659 to 1960) and for this reason Senegal participated with its foot soldiers in all the wars that France was involved in around the world, from the conquest of Madagascar in the 19th century, to both World Wars and the wars in Indochina and Algeria. It was therefore only natural for France to use its role as

"local gendarme" of the Western imperialist bloc in Africa to protect Senghor's regime using every means at its disposal:

"In the aftermath of the events of 68, France intervened with support from its EEC partners to rescue the Senegalese regime. The State was not able to meet its debts following negotiations that took place on June 12th. In a speech on June 13th, President Senghor said that the agreement with the unions would cost 2 thousand million francs (local currency). A week after these negotiations, the European Development Fund (EDF) agreed to the stabilisation fund for groundnut prices with an advance of 2 thousand and 150 million francs (local currency) 'intended to mitigate the effects of the fluctuations in world prices during the 1967/68 campaign'. [...] But even the U.S., which had been taken to task by the President Senghor during the events, participated with the other Western countries in restoring a peaceful social climate in Senegal. Indeed, the U.S. and Senegal signed an agreement for the construction of 800 housing units for middle income groups for a total of 5 million dollars."¹⁴

It is clear that in doing this the main issue for the Western bloc was avoiding the collapse of Senegal and its defection into the enemy camp (that of China and Eastern Bloc).

Thus, having regained control of the situation, President Senghor immediately set off to visit the "friendly countries", and Germany, amongst them, welcomed him to Frankfurt, just after the bloody suppression of the strikers in Senegal. This welcome in Frankfurt is also highly instructive because Senghor went there to get help and to be "decorated" by a country that was a leading member of NATO. On the other hand, this visit was an opportunity for the German students, for whom "Danny the Red" Cohn-Bendit was the mouthpiece, to show support in the streets for their Senegalese comrades, as the newspaper *Le Monde* reported, 25/09/1968:

"Daniel Cohn-Bendit was arrested on Sunday in Frankfurt during demonstrations against Mr Leopold Senghor, President of Senegal, and he was charged on Monday afternoon (along with 25 of his comrades) by a local German magistrate of inciting riot and illegal assembly..."

In their struggle, the Senegalese students would also receive support from their comrades overseas who often occupied the Senegalese embassies and consulates. News of the movement in Senegal reverberated throughout Africa:

"In Africa, there were further repercussions from the events in Dakar owing to the actions of the national unions (student unions). On returning to their home countries African students, expelled from the University of Dakar, continued campaigning. [...] The African governments of that time regarded the students from Dakar with suspicion. And in so far as most of them showed their irritation at the way their nationals were expelled, they also feared the contagion of their country with the 'subversion arriving from Dakar and Paris'."¹⁵

Actually, almost all African regimes feared "contagion" and "subversion" from May 68, starting with Senghor himself who had to resort to violent repressive measures against the educated youth. Hence, many of the strikers experienced prison or forced military service not dissimilar to deportation into military camps. And equally, large numbers of foreign African students were expelled en masse; some of whom were ill-treated on their return home.

Some lessons from the events of May 68 in Dakar

"May in Dakar" was unquestionably one of the links in the chain of a worldwide May 68. The significance of the involvement of the Western imperialist bloc in saving the Senegalese regime was an indication of the power of the movement of the workers and the university and high school students.

But over and above the radicalism of the student action, the movement of May 68 in Senegal, with its working class involvement, came about through a return to the spirit and the form of the proletarian struggle that the working class of the colony of French West Africa had achieved at the beginning of the 20th century, but which the African bourgeoisie in the government had succeeded in stifling, especially during the early years of "national independence".

May 68 was thus more than an opening to another world breaking with the counter-revolutionary period; it was a moment of awakening for many protagonists, especially the youth. Through their involvement in the fight against the forces of the national capital, they exposed a number of myths and illusions, including the "end of the class struggle" under the pretext there was no antagonism between the (African) working class and the (African) bourgeoisie.

It should also be noted the police repression and imprisonment of thousands of strikers proved insufficient for achieving victory over the social movement; it also

13. Ibid.

14. Ibid.

15. Ibid.

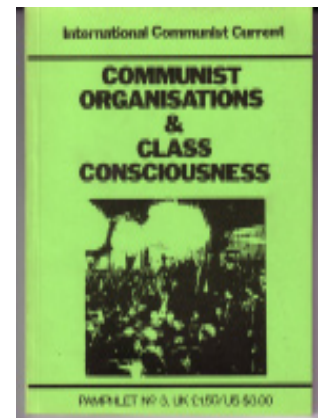
had to be lured into the union trap and the intervention of France and the Western bloc in support of their “favourite junior partner”. But it was also necessary to meet the demands of students and workers with a large increase in pay.

The basic thing is that the strikers did not “sleep” for long after the agreement that ended the strike because the following year, the working class took up the fight more than ever, participating fully in the wave of international struggles that May 68 set in train.

Finally, it is noteworthy that this movement used truly proletarian modes of organisation, proletarian strike committees and general assemblies, strongly demonstrating self-organisation; in short, a clear taking of the struggles into their own hands by the strikers. This is one specific aspect that characterises the struggle of a fraction of the world working class, fully involved in the battle to come for the communist revolution.

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How does class consciousness develop and what is the role of communist organisations in this process?

Why is the consciousness of the class that will make the communist revolution different from that of other revolutionary classes in history?

What are the implications for the revolutionary process?

Is capitalism a decadent mode of production and why? (ii)

Overproduction, a fundamental contradiction of capitalism, is linked to the existence of wage labour. This will be analysed in this second part of our article in order to reply to important questions on which we have serious disagreements with Marcel Roelandts'

book *Dynamics, contradictions and crises of capitalism*:¹ Why does increasing workers' wages not resolve the problem of overproduction? Where does the demand exterior to the workers come from and what are its role and limitations? Is there a solution

to the overproduction at the heart of capitalism? How to characterise those currents that propose wage increases as the solution to capitalism's crises? Is capitalism doomed to a catastrophic collapse?

Is there a solution to the crisis at the heart of capitalism?

The nature of overproduction

Overproduction is a characteristic of capitalist crises, unlike the crises of the modes of production that preceded it, which were characterised by scarcity.

This is a product, in the first place, of the way that this mode of production exploits the workforce, wage labour, which means that the workers must always produce more than would suffice for their own needs. It is this characteristic that is basically explained in the following passage by Marx:

*"The mere relationship of wage-labourer and capitalist implies [...] that the majority of the producers, the workers, ... must always be over-producers, produce over and above their needs, in order to be able to be consumers or buyers within the limits of their needs."*²

This then presupposes the existence of demand that is exterior to that of the workers as the latter by definition can never be enough to absorb all of capitalist production.

"It is forgotten that, as Malthus says, 'the very existence of a profit upon any commodity pre-supposes a demand exterior to that

*of the labourer who has produced it' and hence 'the demand of the labourer himself can never be an adequate demand'."*³

It is precisely when the demand external to that of the workers is insufficient that overproduction appears: *"If the demand exterior to the demand of the labourer himself disappears or shrinks up, then the collapse occurs."*⁴

The contradiction is all the more violent as, on the one hand, the workers' wage is reduced to the minimum socially necessary to reproduce the workforce and, on the other hand, the productive forces of capitalism tend to be developed to the maximum:

*"The ultimate reason for all real crises always remains the poverty and restricted consumption of the masses as opposed to the drive of capitalist production to develop the productive forces as though only the absolute consuming power of society constituted their limit."*⁵

Why do wage increases for the workers fail to resolve the problem of overproduction?

There are various procedures that enable the bourgeoisie to mask overproduction:

1) By destroying excess production in order

2) By reducing the use of productive capacity or even destroying a part of it. An example of this way of drastically reducing production was the Davignon plan set in motion in 1977 by the European Commission to carry out the industrial reconstruction of the metal industry (with tens of thousands of redundancies) in the face of the overproduction of steel internationally. It led to the destruction of a large number of blast furnace plants in several European countries and the redundancy of tens of thousands of steel workers, which produced important struggles, in particular those in France in 1978 and 1979.

3) By increasing demand artificially, that is, generating demand that is not based on the need for investment to become more profitable but is motivated by the need to keep the productive apparatus working. This is typically the case with Keynesian measures, in which the state pays out and which therefore have repercussions on the competitive

to prevent its availability on the market from lowering the selling price. This is what happened in the 1970s and 1980s in particular with agricultural production in the countries of the European Economic Community. This procedure has the disadvantage for the bourgeoisie of revealing the contradictions of the system and of arousing indignation as the produce destroyed in this way is in desperately short supply for a large part of the population.

1. Éditions Contradictions, Brussels, 2010.

2. Marx, *Theories of Surplus Value*, Part Two, Chapter XVII, "Ricardo's theory of accumulation and a critique of it (The very nature of capital leads to crises)", Section 12 "Contradictions between production and consumption under conditions of capitalism, over production of the principal consumer goods becomes general overproduction."

3. Marx, *Grundrisse*, chapter on Capital notebook IV, p.420 (Penguin).

4. Ibid.

5. Marx, *Capital*. Volume III, Part V: "Division of Profit into Interest and Profit of Enterprise. Interest-Bearing Capital", Chapter 30: "Money-Capital and Real Capital".

edge of the national economy which uses such measures. This is why it can only be used if conditions allow it to compensate for the loss of competitiveness by means of a significant increase in productivity. This kind of measure may involve either wage increases or else public works programmes which yield no immediate profit.

These three procedures, although different in form, have the same significance for capitalist development and can basically be reduced to the first and most obvious example; the deliberate destruction of production. It may seem shocking, from a workers' point of view, to hear that wage increases that are not justified by the need to reproduce the workforce are a "waste". It is obviously a waste from the viewpoint of capitalist logic (which has nothing to do with the well-being of the worker), according to which paying the worker more in no way increases his productivity.

MR, who thinks that the mechanism at work during the post-war boom has been understood by very few marxists,⁶ has not himself understood, or does not want to understand, that according to Marx, "the aim of capital is not to minister to certain wants, but to produce profit"⁷ (quoted at the end of the article), whether the consumption is that of the working class or of the bourgeoisie.

We may call this wastage "regulation", as does MR, without acknowledging that we are talking about wastage; this perhaps allows him to make his thesis more accept-

6. "This analysis of the basis of Keynesian-Fordist regulation has rarely been understood in the marxist camp. As far as we know, it was only in 1959 that a coherent understanding of the post-war boom was developed for the first time." (p.74). MR then reproduces an extract of an article published in October 1959 in the internal bulletin of the group Socialisme ou Barbarie. In fact the group Socialisme ou Barbarie understood the post-war boom so well that the 1950s boom caused it to stumble and, in confusion, to cast doubt on the basis of marxist theory. On this point, see the article "The post-war boom did not reverse the decline of capitalism" in *International Review* n° 147, <http://en.internationalism.org/internationalreview/201111/4596/post-war-boom-did-not-reverse-decline-capitalism>. Paul Mattick is also cited by MR for developing an understanding of the phenomenon of the post-war boom. We really do not think that the author agrees with the following passage from Mattick: "Since the economists do not distinguish between economy in general and the capitalist economy, it is impossible for them to see that 'productive' and 'capitalistically productive' means two different things and that public, like private investments are capitalistically productive only if they create surplus value not because they supply material goods or amenities" (*Crisis and crisis theory*, chapter 4, "Splendour and miseries of the mixed economy", our emphasis). In other words, Keynesian measures do not produce surplus value and result in the sterilisation of capital.

7. *Capital*. Volume III, Part III, "The law of the tendency of the rate of profit to fall", Chapter 15, "Exposition of the internal contradictions of the law."

able. But this by no means changes the fact that, to a large extent, the prosperity of the post-war boom is the wastage of a part of the gains of productivity used to produce for production's sake.

Where does demand exterior to the workers come from?

For MR, and contrary to the position of Rosa Luxemburg whose theory of accumulation he criticises, the demand that does not come from the workers can quite well come from capitalism itself, and not necessarily from societies based on productive relations not yet capitalist and which have co-existed with capitalism for a long time.

According to Marx this demand does not come from the workers or from the capitalists themselves but from the markets that have not yet entered the capitalist mode of production.

In his book MR refers to Malthus' opinion on this point: "It should be noted that this 'demand exterior to that of the worker who has produced it' concerns, according to Malthus, demand that is entirely within capitalism because it concerns social strata whose purchasing power comes from surplus value and not from extra-capitalist demand according to the Luxemburgist theory of accumulation".⁸ Marx, who supports Malthus on this point, states categorically that this demand cannot come from the worker: "The demand created by the productive labourer himself can never be an adequate demand, because it does not go to the full extent of what he produces. If it did, there would be no profit, consequently no motive to employ him."⁹ He also states explicitly that for Malthus this demand comes from "social strata whose purchasing power comes from surplus value" but at the same time he rejects Malthus' motivation on the defence of the interests of the "Church and State hierarchy": "Malthus is interested not in concealing the contradictions of bourgeois production but on the contrary, in emphasising them, on the one hand, in order to prove that the poverty of the working classes is necessary (as it is, indeed, for this mode of production) and, on the other hand, to demonstrate to the capitalists the necessity for a well-fed Church and State hierarchy in order to create an adequate demand for the commodities they produce. [...] Thus he emphasises the possibility of general overproduction in opposition to the

8. Roelandts, Op. Cit., p.27.

9. Marx, *Theories of Surplus Value*, Part 3, Chapter 19, 12. "The Social Essence of Malthus's Polemic against Riccardo. Malthus's Distortion of Sismondi's Views on the Contradictions in Bourgeois Production".

view of the Ricardians."¹⁰ So just because Malthus thinks that adequate demand may come from "social strata whose purchasing power comes from surplus value" does not mean that Marx does so too. On the contrary, the latter is very explicit on the point that adequate demand cannot come either from the workers or the capitalists: "The demand of the workers does not suffice, since profit arises precisely from the fact that the demand of the workers is smaller than the value of their product, and that it [profit] is all the greater the smaller, relatively, is this demand. The demand of the capitalists among themselves is equally insufficient."¹¹

On this point, we should point out that MR's intentions are not entirely honourable when, in order to give his readers the means to broaden their reflection, he reports Marx's opinion on the need for demand other than that coming from the workers and capitalists. Otherwise how can we explain why he did not cite the following passage in which Marx explains explicitly the need for "orders from abroad", from "foreign markets" to sell the goods produced:

"How could there otherwise be a shortage of demand for the very commodities which the mass of people lack, and how would it be possible for this demand to be sought abroad, in foreign markets, to pay the labourers at home the average amount of necessities of life? This is possible only because in this specific capitalist interrelation the surplus-product assumes a form in which its owner cannot offer it for consumption, unless it first reconverts itself into capital for him. If it is finally said that the capitalists have only to exchange and consume their commodities among themselves, then the entire nature of the capitalist mode of production is lost sight of; and also forgotten is the fact that it is a matter of expanding the value of the capital, not consuming it."¹²

This quotation does not give us details enabling us to characterise these "foreign markets" or the "orders" from abroad but it states explicitly that the demand referred to cannot come from the capitalists themselves because the aim of production is the valorisation of capital, not consumption, and nothing prevents us from reflecting on this fact. Nor can the demand in question come from some other economic agent within capitalism which lives off the sur-

10. Marx, *ibid.*

11. Marx, *Theories of Surplus Value*, Part 2, Chapter XVI, "Ricardo's theory of profit", Section 3 "Law of the diminishing rate of profit"; (e) "Ricardo's Explanation for the Fall in the Rate of Profit and Its Connection with His Theory of Rent."

12. Marx, *Capital*, Volume III, Part III: "The Law of the Tendency of the Rate of Profit to Fall", Chapter XV "Exposition of the Internal Contradictions of the Law", III "Excess Capital and Excess Population".

plus value extracted and redistributed by the bourgeoisie. Who is left then within capitalist society? No-one, and this is why it is necessary to have recourse to “foreign markets”, that is, those not yet integrated into the relations of capitalist production.

This is exactly what the *Communist Manifesto* tells us when it describes the conquest of the planet by the bourgeoisie, impelled by the need to find ever larger outlets:

“The need of a constantly expanding market for its products chases the bourgeoisie over the whole surface of the globe. It must nestle everywhere, settle everywhere, establish connections everywhere. (...) The bourgeoisie, by the rapid improvement of all instruments of production, by the immensely facilitated means of communication, draws all, even the most barbarian, nations into civilisation. The cheap prices of its commodities are the heavy artillery with which it batters down all Chinese walls, with which it forces the barbarians’ intensely obstinate hatred of foreigners to capitulate. It compels all nations, on pain of extinction, to adopt the bourgeois mode of production; it compels them to introduce what it calls civilisation into their midst, i.e. to become bourgeois themselves. In one word, it creates a world after its own image.”¹³

Marx gives us a more detailed description of the way exchange takes place with non-capitalist mercantile societies of various kinds to make it possible for capital to benefit both from an outlet and also from a supply source that is necessary for its development: “Within its process of circulation, in which industrial capital functions either as money or as commodities, the circuit of industrial capital, whether as money-capital or as commodity-capital, crosses the commodity circulation of the most diverse modes of social production, so far as they produce commodities. No matter whether commodities are the output of production based on slavery, of peasants (Chinese, Indian ryots), of communes (Dutch East Indies), of state enterprise (such as existed in former epochs of Russian history on the basis of serfdom) or of half-savage hunting tribes, etc – as commodities and money they come face to face with the money and commodities in which the industrial capital presents itself and enter as much into its circuit as into that of the surplus-value borne in the commodity-capital, provided the surplus-value is spent as revenue; hence they enter in both branches of circulation of commodity-capital. The character of the process of production from which they originate is immaterial. They func-

tion as commodities in the market, and as commodities they enter into the circuit of industrial capital as well as into the circulation of the surplus-value incorporated in it. It is therefore the universal character of the origin of the commodities, the existence of the market as world-market, which distinguishes the process of circulation of industrial capital.”¹⁴

Did the primitive phase of accumulation modify capital’s relationship with its external sphere?

In addition, MR also reproduces the second part of the above quotation from the *Communist Manifesto*, taking care however to emphasize that “all the capacity and limitations of capitalism drawn out by Marx in *Capital* were arrived at by simply extracting its relationship with its external non-capitalist sphere. To be exact, Marx analyses the latter solely within the framework of primitive accumulation because he chooses to deal with the other aspects of ‘the extension of the external field of production’ separately in two volumes, one of which is specifically devoted to international trade and the other to the world market”.¹⁵

He goes on to affirm that, for him, “foreign markets” ceased to play an important role for the development of capitalism once the primitive phase of accumulation had been completed: “However once its basis had been cemented by three centuries of primitive accumulation, capitalism operated essentially on its own foundations. As for the importance and dynamism of capitalist production, its external environment became fairly marginal to its development.”¹⁶

Marx’s reasoning shows, as we have seen, the need for an external market. The description he gives of this external zone in the *Communist Manifesto* shows that it consists of commodity-producing societies that have not yet entered into capitalist relations of production. Marx obviously does not explain in detail why this sphere must be external to capitalist relations of production; however the necessity for it flows from the characteristics of capitalist production. If Marx or Engels had thought (as MR does) that there had been important changes since the first publication of the *Manifesto* regarding capital’s relationship to its external sphere and that the “foreign markets” had ceased to have the role that they had during primitive accumulation, we can suppose that they would have felt the need to mention it in the prefaces to

the subsequent editions of the *Manifesto*,¹⁷ as both of them witnessed, in different periods, the triumphal march of capitalism after the phase of primitive accumulation. Not only did they not do so but, what is more, book III was begun in 1864 and “finished” in 1875. One would think that at the time, Marx would have acquired sufficient hindsight on the question of the phase of primitive accumulation (from the end of the Middle Ages to the middle of the 19th century) and yet in this work he continues the idea contained in the *Communist Manifesto* by referring to “orders from abroad”, “foreign markets”.

MR persists in his thesis, claiming that it corresponds to Marx’s vision: “This is why we think, with Marx, that ‘the tendency to overproduction’ does not result from insufficient extra-capitalist markets, but rather from ‘the immediate relations of capital’ within pure capitalism: ‘It goes without saying that we do not intend to analyse in detail here the nature of overproduction; we will just remark the tendency towards overproduction which is present in the immediate relations of capital. So here we can leave aside all that regards other possessing or consuming classes, etc, who do not produce but rather live off their revenue, that is, those who engage in exchange with capital and as such constitute an exchange point for it. We will mention them only where they are really important, that is, at the origins of capital’ (Grundrisse, chapter on capital).”¹⁸

What the quotation from Marx says is that, in examining overproduction, we can leave aside the role played by the possessing classes in their exchange with capitalism because, from this point of view they have no more than a marginal role. The possessing classes referred to here are those that remained from the old feudal order. On the other hand, what the quotation does not say is exactly what MR wants to make it say; that the “foreign markets”, “orders” that arrive from “abroad” have no more than a marginal role in relation to overproduction. It is precisely this that is at the heart of the polemic.

The accumulation theory of Rosa Luxemburg put to the test

It was Rosa Luxemburg who demonstrated that capitalist enrichment as a whole depended on goods produced within it and exchanged with pre-capitalist economies, that is, those that practice commodity

13. Marx, *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, “Bourgeois and Proletarians”.

14. Marx, *Capital* Volume II, Part II, Book One: “The Process of Circulation of Capital”, Chapter 4: “The Three Formulas of the Circuit”.

15. Roelandts, Op. Cit., p.36 (our emphasis).

16. Ibid., p.38.

17. As they did in the preface to the 1872 edition when they pointed out the inadequacies laid bare by the experience of the Paris Commune and as Engels did in the 1890 edition where he shows the evolution made by the working class since the first edition of the *Manifesto*.

18. Roelandts, Op. Cit., p.38. Marx passage translated by us from the French

exchange but which have not yet adopted the capitalist mode of production. Rosa Luxemburg simply developed Marx's analysis and, when she felt it necessary, she also made a critique, in the *Accumulation of Capital*, regarding accumulation schemas, in which there were certain errors in her opinion because they do not include the intervention of extra-capitalist markets, although these are indispensable for the realisation of enlarged reproduction. She attributed this error to the fact that *Capital* is an unfinished work and Marx was saving the study of capital in relation to its environment for a future work.¹⁹

MR criticises the accumulation theory of Rosa Luxemburg. In his view Marx deliberately disregards the sphere of extra-capitalist relations when describing accumulation schemas and he also thinks that he was theoretically correct to do so: "*Understanding the place that Marx assigns to this sphere in the historic development of capitalism enables us to understand why he eliminates it from his analysis in Capital: not just as a methodological hypothesis as Luxemburg thinks, but because it represents an obstacle that capitalism had to get rid of. By ignoring this analysis, Luxemburg fails to understand the deeper reasons leading Marx to disregard this sphere in Capital.*"²⁰ On what basis does MR make such an affirmation? By using the argument which we have already rejected, that for him and for Marx, the "markets abroad" no longer played anything but a marginal role in capitalist development after its phase of primitive accumulation.

MR puts forward another three arguments which, according to him, support his critique of Rosa Luxemburg's accumulation theory.

1) "*For Rosa Luxemburg, the strength of capital depends on the importance of the pre-capitalist sphere and its exhaustion is its death knell. The view held by Marx is the opposite: 'As long as capital is weak, it still itself relies on the crutches of past modes of production, or of those which will pass with its rise. As soon as it feels strong, it throws away the crutches, and moves in accordance with its own laws.'* This sphere does not therefore constitute an area in which capitalism could nourish itself in order to expand, but a crutch that weakened it and which it had to get rid of in order to gain strength and develop according to its own laws."²¹ This con-

clusion is at the least hasty and forced.²² The *Manifesto* contains an idea very close to that contained in the above quotation from Marx taken from *Capital*, but it is expressed in a way that, contrary to what MR thinks, makes it possible to assert that the pre-capitalist milieu acted as a terrain that nourished capitalism:

"*Modern industry has established the world market, for which the discovery of America paved the way. This market has given an immense development to commerce, to navigation, to communication by land. This development has, in its turn, reacted on the extension of industry; and in proportion as industry, commerce, navigation, railways extended, in the same proportion the bourgeoisie developed, increased its capital, and pushed into the background every class handed down from the Middle Ages.*"²³

2) "*The best estimates of sales towards the third world show that capitalism's enlarged reproduction did not depend on extra-capitalist markets outside the developed countries: 'In spite of a wide-spread view to the contrary, there has never been, in the history of the developed western world, a period in which the outlets offered by the colonies, or even of the whole of the third world, played a big role in the development of its industries. The third world does not even represent a very important outlet..., the third world absorbs an estimated 1.3% to 1.7% of the total volume of production from the developed countries, of which only 0.6% to 0.9% from the colonies.'* (Paul Bairoch, *Mythes et paradoxes de l'histoire économique*, p 104-105). This percentage, which is already very small, is in fact an over-estimate as only a part of the sales to the third world are destined for the extra-capitalist sphere."²⁴

We will deal with this objection more generally by taking into consideration the following: "*It is those countries which have*

22. We reproduce in full the quotation from Marx in its context, which is to deal with the relationship between capitalism and free competition: "*The predominance of capital is the presupposition of free competition, just as the despotism of the Roman Caesars was the presupposition of the free Roman 'private law'. As long as capital is weak, it still itself relies on the crutches of past modes of production, or of those which will pass with its rise. As soon as it feels strong, it throws away the crutches, and moves in accordance with its own laws. As soon as it begins to sense itself and become conscious of itself as a barrier to development, it seeks refuge in forms which, by restricting free competition, seem to make the rule of capital more perfect, but are at the same time the heralds of its dissolution and of the dissolution of the mode of production resting on it.*" (*Grundrisse*, Chapter on Capital, Fixed and Circulating Capital, Competition. <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1857/grundrisse/ch12.htm>)

23. Marx. *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, "Bourgeois and proletarians", our emphasis.

24. Roelandts, Op. Cit., p 39.

a vast colonial empire which have the lowest growth rates, although those that sell on the capitalist market have much higher rates! This is true throughout the history of capitalism, and particularly when the colonies played, or should have played, their most important role! So in the 19th century, when the colonial markets intervened most, all the un-colonised capitalist countries experienced much more rapid growth than did the colonial powers (71% faster on average – an arithmetic mean of the growth rates not weighted according to the respective populations of the countries). It is enough to take the growth rates of the GDP per inhabitant during the 25 years of imperialism (1880-1913) that Rosa Luxemburg describes as the most prosperous and dynamic period of capitalism:

1) *Colonial powers: Great Britain (1.06%), France (1.52%), Holland (0.87%), Spain (0.68%), Portugal (0.84%);*

2) *Countries not or little colonised: USA (1.56%), Germany (1.85%), Sweden (1.58%), Switzerland (1.69%), Denmark (1.79%) (Annual average growth rate; source: <http://www.ggdc.net/maddison/>).*²⁵

We can answer this in a few words. It is wrong to identify extra-capitalist markets and colonies because the extra-capitalist markets also include the internal markets that the colonies have not yet subjected to the relations of capitalist production. During the period 1880-1913, all the countries referred to above benefited at least from access to their own internal extra-capitalist market and also to that of the other industrialised countries. Moreover, because of the international division of labour, commerce with the extra-capitalist sphere was also of benefit indirectly to countries who did not actually possess colonies.

As for the United States, they are a typical example of the role played by extra-capitalist markets in economic and industrial development. Following the destruction of the slave economy of the southern states by the civil war (1861-1865), capitalism spread over the next 30 years towards the American west in a constant process that we can summarise thus: the massacre and ethnic cleansing of the indigenous population; the setting up of an extra-capitalist economy by means of the sale and concession of the new territory annexed by the government to the colonisers and small scale cattle ranchers; destruction of this extra-capitalist economy through debt, fraud and violence and the extension of the capitalist economy. In 1898, a document of the American State Department explained: "*It is more or less*

25. Ibid., pp.39-40.

19. On these questions we recommend the articles "Rosa Luxemburg and the Limits to Capitalist Expansion", and "The Comintern and the virus of 'Luxemburgism' in 1924" in *International Review* n°s 142 and 145.

20. Roelandts, Op Cit.p.36.

21. Ibid.

certain that each year we will be faced with an increasing overproduction of goods from our factories and workshops that will have to be placed on foreign markets if we want American workers to work all year around. Increasing foreign consumption of the foods produced in our factories and workshops has become a crucial question for the authorities of this country as it is for commerce in general.”²⁶ It then experienced a rapid imperialist expansion: Cuba (1898), Hawaii (also 1898), Philippines (1899), the zone around the Panama canal (1903). In 1900, Albert Beveridge (one of the main defenders of American imperialist policy) stated in the senate: “*The Philippines will always be ours.... And behind the Philippines there are the unlimited markets of China.... The Pacific is our ocean... Where will we find consumers for our surplus? Geography gives us the answer. China is our natural client.*” We do not need “*the best statistics*” to prove that the trump card that made it possible for the United States to become the main world power before the end of the 19th century was the fact that it had privileged access to huge extra-capitalist markets.

3) There is another argument in the book that needs a short comment: “*Reality therefore is in conformity with Marx’s vision and is the opposite of Rosa Luxemburg’s theory. This can be easily explained by various reasons that we cannot go into here. We will mention briefly that as a general rule, any sale of goods on an extra-capitalist market exits the circle of accumulation and so tends to act as a brake on the latter. The sale of goods outside capitalism may well allow individual capitalists to realise their goods but it brakes the global accumulation of capitalism because such sales represent a loss of the material means of the accumulation circle within pure capitalism.*”²⁷

Far from being a hindrance to accumulation, sales to extra-capitalist sectors actually benefit it. Not only do goods sold to the extra-capitalist sphere not hinder accumulation owing to the dynamism of this mode of production which, by its very nature, tends constantly to produce in excess, but in addition it makes it possible for the sphere of capitalist productive relations to receive payment (the product of the sale) which, in one way or another, increase the capital accumulated.

An examination of MR’s “arguments” for affirming that the existence of a substantial extra-capitalist sector did not constitute the condition for a significant development of capitalism, shows that they are not

consistent. But obviously we are willing to consider any critique of the method that we have used in our own critique.

The limits of the market exterior to capitalism

The abundance of extra-capitalist markets in the colonies made it possible, up until the first world war, to sell off the excess production of the main industrial countries. But within these countries in this period there were still extra-capitalist markets, more or less important (Great Britain was the first industrial power to exhaust them), that served as an outlet for capitalist production. During this phase in the life of capitalism the crises were less violent. “*However different they were in many ways, all of these crises had one thing in common: they represented a relatively brief interruption in the gigantic ascendant movement which on the whole can be considered as continuous.*”²⁸

But the extra-capitalist markets were not limitless, as Marx emphasised: “*the market is limited externally in the geographical sense, the internal market is limited as compared with a market that is both internal and external, the latter in turn is limited as compared with the world market, which however is, in turn, limited at each moment of time.*”²⁹ It was Germany that was the first to demonstrate this reality.

The phase of rapid industrial development experienced by this country took place in a period in which the division of the world’s riches was more or less completed and the possibility of new imperialist openings was increasingly rare. In fact, this nation state arrived on the world market at a time in which the territory formerly free of European domination had been almost completely divided up and reduced to the rank of colonies or semi-colonies of these older industrial states, which were its most formidable competitors. Overproduction and the need to export at all cost were the factors that oriented German foreign policy from the beginning of the 20th century (on this point see the developments in *Conflict of the Century*, pp.51, 53 and 151 in the French edition). The reduced access to extra-capitalist markets was a consequence of their transformation by the big colonial powers into protected hunting grounds. This was to such an extent that the dawn of the 20th century was marked

28. Fritz Sternberg, *The Conflict of the Century*. p.75. Éditions du Seuil (in French).

29. Marx, *Theories of Surplus Value, Part II*, Chapter XVII, “Ricardo’s theory of accumulation and a critique of it (The very nature of capital leads to crises)”, Section 13 “The expansion of the market does not keep in step with the expansion of production. The Ricardian conception that an unlimited expansion of consumption and production is impossible.”

by the increase in international tensions borne from imperialist expansion, which led to world war in 1914 when Germany initiated a war to re-divide the world and its markets.

MR mentions the great disparity of analysis within the revolutionary vanguard to explain the onset of decadence marked by the outbreak of the first world war: “*Although this historic sentence (capitalism’s entrance into a spiral of crises and wars) was generally shared within the communist movement, the factors put forward to explain it found much less agreement*”.³⁰ He omits, however, to mention the remarkable level of agreement between Rosa Luxemburg and Lenin on the analysis of a war to repartition the world. Lenin expresses it in this way: “*...the characteristic feature of this period is the final partition of the globe – not in the sense that a new partition is impossible – on the contrary, new partitions are possible and inevitable – but in the sense that the colonial policy of the capitalist countries has completed the seizure of the unoccupied territories on our planet. For the first time the world is completely divided up, so that in the future only re-division is possible; territories can only pass from one ‘owner’ to another, instead of passing as unowned territory to an ‘owner’.*”³¹

To talk of the need for countries endowed with fewer colonies to re-divide the world, is not the same as saying that there is a lack of extra-capitalist markets relative to the needs of production. An identification between the two has too often been made. In fact at the beginning of the 20th century there were still plenty of extra-capitalist markets (in the colonies and even within the industrialised countries), the exploitation of which was still able to produce leaps forward in capitalist development. This is the point that Rosa Luxemburg put forward in 1907 in her *Introduction to Political Economy*: “*With each step that it takes in its development, capitalist production inevitably nears the period in which it must develop more and more slowly and with increasing difficulty. The development of capitalism in itself has a long road ahead of it because capitalist production as such is no more than a tiny part of world production. Even in the oldest industrial countries in Europe there still exist, side by side with large-scale industrial businesses, lots of little, backward, artisan enterprises; the greater part of agricultural produce, peasant production, is not capitalist. Besides that, in Europe there are entire countries in which large-scale industry has hardly developed, where local production is of a*

30. Roelandts, Op. Cit., p.47.

31. *Imperialism, the highest stage of capitalism*, “The Division of the World among the Big Powers”.

26. Quoted by Howard Zinn, *A Popular History of the United States*, p. 344, Agone edition, 2002 (in French).

27. Roelandts, Op. Cit., p.40.

peasant or artisan character. On the other continents, with the exception of North America, capitalist enterprises form no more than small scattered islands in the midst of huge regions that have not yet gone over even to production with simple trading. [...] The capitalist mode of production has room for enormous expansion if it must drive out backward forms of production everywhere. Its evolution is moving in this direction.”³²

It was the 1929 crisis that gave warning of the lack of substantial extra-capitalist markets, not in absolute terms but relative to the need for capitalism to export goods in increasingly large quantities. These markets were by no means exhausted. The developments in industrialisation and the means of transport made in the capitalist metropolises made it possible to better exploit the existing markets, to the extent that they could still play a role in the 1950s as a factor in the prosperity of the post war boom.

However at this stage, according to Rosa Luxemburg, the question of the very impossibility of capitalism was raised: “Thus, this evolution traps capitalism in a fundamental contradiction: the more that capitalist production replaces more backward modes of production, the more narrow become the limits to the market created by the search for profit, in relation to the expansion of existing capitalist enterprises. This becomes quite clear if we try to imagine for a moment that the development of capitalism has advanced to such an extent that, over the whole face of the globe, everything is produced in a capitalist way, that is, exclusively by private capitalist entrepreneurs, in large factories, with modern wage workers. Now the impossibility of capitalism leaps to view.”³³ How was this impossibility overcome? We will come back to this later when examining the question of the catastrophic collapse of capitalism.

There is no solution to overproduction within capitalism

The fact that it is not possible under capitalism to resolve the crises of overproduction by increasing workers’ wages or by constantly increasing the solvent demand that does not come from the workers, means that overproduction cannot be overcome within capitalism. In fact this can only be done by abolishing wage labour and replacing capitalism by a society of freely

32. Rosa Luxemburg, *Introduction to Political Economy*, “The Tendencies in the World Economy” (http://www.marxists.org/francais/luxembur/intro_ecopo/intro_ecopo_6.htm) (in French).

33. Following on from the previous quotation taken from the *Introduction to Political Economy*.

associated producers.

MR cannot reconcile himself to this implacable and unavoidable logic for capitalism and its reformers. In fact he has amply quoted Marx in various ways around the theme “the worker cannot provide adequate demand” and has then rapidly forgotten it and contradicted the fundamental idea that “if the ‘demand exterior to the demand of the labourer himself’ disappears or shrinks up, then the collapse occurs.” So he makes it seem that the crisis of overproduction is a result of the diminution of the mass of wages, which is none other than a recycling of the Malthusian concepts that Marx fought against: “the mass of wages in the developed countries increases by an average of two thirds of the total revenue and has always been a large component of the final demand. Its diminution restricts the markets and results in a slump which is the basis of the crises of overproduction. This reduction in consumption directly affects wages but it also indirectly affects businesses because demand is restricted. In fact the corresponding increase in profits and the consumption of the capitalists only manages in a very partial way to compensate for the relative reduction in wage demand. It is even less the case as reinvestment of profits is limited by the general contraction of the markets.”³⁴

It is undeniable that the reduction in wages, as well as the development of unemployment, has a negative effect on the economic activity of businesses producing consumer goods, in the first place those producing the necessaries for the reproduction of the work force. But it is not the compression of wages that causes the crisis. The reverse is the case. It is because of the crisis that the state or the bosses are led to sack workers or reduce wages.

MR has turned reality on its head. His reasoning becomes “if the demand of the labourer himself shrinks up, then the collapse occurs.” He therefore thinks that the cause of the last stock exchange crash that took place immediately before the book was written (4th quarter 2010) lies in the compression of wage demand: “The best proof is the dynamic that led to the last stock exchange crash: as wage demand was drastically compressed, growth was obtained only by boosting consumption (graph 6.6) through an increase in debt (which began in 1982: graph 6.5), a reduction in the level of savings (which also began in 1982: graph 6.4) and an increase in patrimonial income.”³⁵ This more or less attributes the present level of debt to the compression in wage demand.

From that to the idea that the crisis is

34. Roelandts, Op. Cit., p.14.

35. Ibid., p.106.

the product of the rapacity of the capitalists is a small step.

As we will show, and as is quite clear to anyone who approaches this question seriously and honestly, MR defends an analysis of the basic causes of the economic crises of capitalism that is different from that defended by Marx and Engels in their time. This is well within his rights, and even his responsibility if he thinks it necessary. In fact, whatever the value and the depth of the considerable contribution that Marx brought to proletarian theory, he was not infallible and his writings should not be treated like holy texts. This would be a religious approach that is totally foreign to marxism and also to any scientific method. Marx’s writings should also be subjected to the critical marxist method. This is the approach adopted by Rosa Luxemburg in the *The Accumulation of Capital* (1913) when she brings out the contradictions contained in Book II of *Capital*. Having said this, when one questions a part of Marx’s writings, political and scientific honesty requires one to follow this trajectory explicitly and clearly. This is what Rosa Luxemburg did in her book and it produced a huge outcry from the “orthodox marxists” who were scandalised that she could openly criticise the writings of Marx. Unfortunately, this is not what MR does when he discards Marx’s analysis while pretending to remain faithful to it. For our part, we defend Marx’s analyses on this point because we think that they are correct and that they reflect the real life of capitalism.

In particular, we completely defend the revolutionary vision that they contain and we resolutely close the door against a reformist vision. Unfortunately this is not the case with MR, who declares his faithfulness to Marx’s texts and then does a bit of fast footwork to smuggle in a reformist vision “gently”. This, without doubt, is the most deplorable aspect of his book.

How can we characterise the currents who propose to resolve the capitalist crisis by means of wage increases?

Marx defended the need for the struggle for reforms but he energetically denounced the reformist tendencies that tried to imprison the working class and who “saw in the wage struggle only the wage struggle” and not a school for struggle in which the class forges the weapons of its definitive emancipation. In fact Marx criticised Proudhon for seeing “in misery only misery” and the trade-unions who “fail generally from limiting themselves to a guerilla war against the effects of the

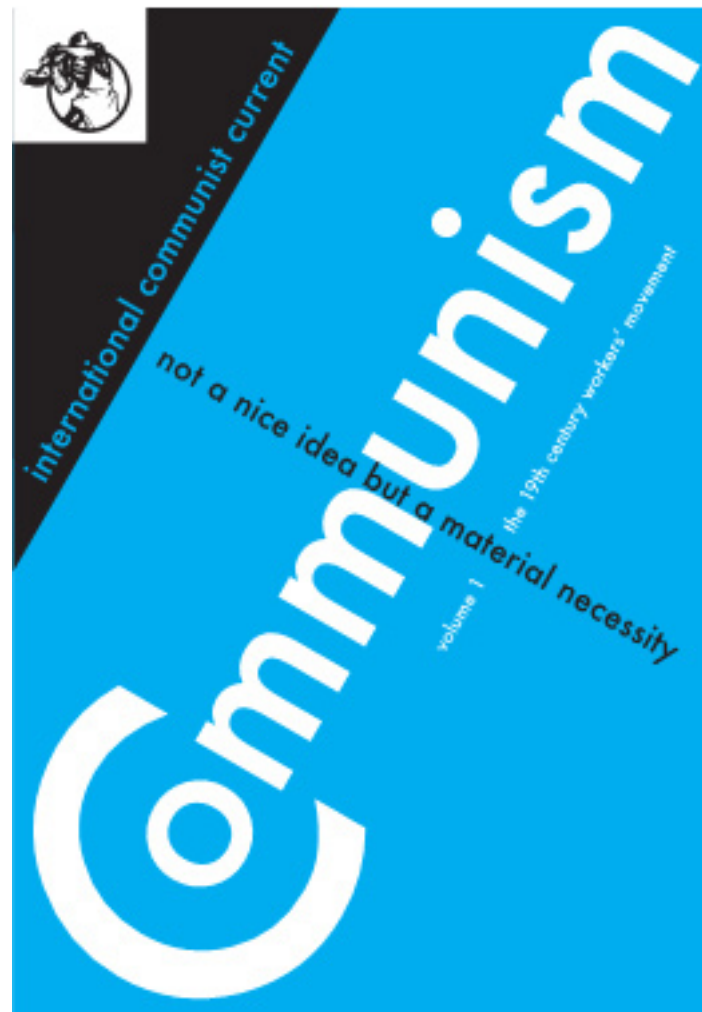
existing system, instead of simultaneously trying to change it, instead of using their organized forces as a lever for the final emancipation of the working class that is to say the ultimate abolition of the wages system".³⁶ When capitalism's entry into decadence put the proletarian revolution on the agenda and made any real reformist policy within the system impossible, there was a huge mystification trying to derail the proletariat from its historic goal by getting it to believe that it could still eke out a place for itself within the system, in particular by bringing to power good teams, good people, generally those belonging to the left or extreme left of the political apparatus of capital. For this reason, once the proletarian revolution is historically on the agenda, the defence of the struggle for reforms is no longer an opportunist side-track within the workers' movement, it is openly counter-revolutionary. This is why it is a responsibility of revolutionaries to combat any illusions spread about by the left of capital that try to make the reform of capitalism seem credible, while encouraging the resistance struggles of the working class against the degradation of its living conditions within capitalism. These struggles are indispensable in preventing it from being ground down by the constant encroachments of capitalism in crisis and are an indispensable preparation for the confrontation with the capitalist state.

In this respect it is worthwhile showing, as we have already done, how MR's theory offers gaping holes for reformism. His book mentions his political commitment. Permit us to doubt this somewhat given his dealings with representatives of "marxism", who are also politically committed but very clearly in the defence of reformist theses. This is why we think it necessary to underline the homage he pays to the contribution of "certain marxist economists": *"too little attention is given to the evolution of the rate of surplus value, the problems of re-distribution, the state of the class struggle and the development of the proportion of wages. It is only because of the work of certain marxist economists (Jacques Gouverneur, Michel Husson, Alain Bihr, etc) that these concerns are coming a little to the fore. We agree with them and hope that they will be followed by others"*.³⁷ The first of these, Jacques

36. Marx. *Value, Price and Profit*, "The Struggle between Capital and Labour and its Results".

37. Roelandts, Op. Cit., p.86. Michel Husson is, according to Wikipedia, an old militant of the Parti socialiste unifié (PSU, social-democratic), of the Ligue communiste révolutionnaire (LCR, Trotskyist), of which he is a member of the central committee. He is a member of the scientific council of Attac and supported the candidature of José Bové (alternative-worldist) to the French presidential election of 2007. Alain Bihr, also according to the same source, espouses libertarian communism and is known as a specialist

ICC publications



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

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Gouverneur, who “provided” MR with “numerous indications for deepening Capital”³⁸ is the author of a “working document”³⁹ with a revealing title, “Which economic policy against crisis and unemployment?”, in which he pleads against neo-liberal policies and for a return to an assortment of Keynesian policies that are “alternative policies” (“increase in public levies—essentially on profits—to finance socially useful production...”). As for Michel Husson, a member of the scientific council of Attac, who “has taught much” to MR “through the rigour and enormous richness of his analyses”⁴⁰ let’s hear his reflections on struggling against unemployment and precarious work: “So we must examine the left’s proposals on labour questions. On this point, the programme of the Socialist Party is very weak, even if it contains some interesting proposals (as do all programmes) [...] rather than increasing wealth, we should change its re-distribution. In other words, we cannot count on growth and especially not on changing its content, which is absolutely impossible with the present re-distribution of income. This means, in the first place, the need to deflate financial taxes and seriously review the fiscal laws on capital revenue.”⁴¹ And finally, Alain Bihl, who is less well-known than his reformist predecessors: although less right-wing than Husson, he is not backward in making his contribution to the campaign aiming to attribute the ravages of capitalism to liberalism: “The adoption of neo-liberal policies, their being carried out resolutely and followed methodically for more than thirty years has had the effect of creating the conditions for a crisis of overproduction by compressing wages too much: in brief, a crisis of overproduction because of under-consumption related to wages.” All of these people have taught MR, if he did not already know it, that the root of capitalist crises is to be found, not in its insurmountable contradictions, but in its neo-liberal policies, a bad division of wealth and consequently the state must be called upon to put into practice Keynesian policies, tax the revenues of capital, increase wages, in a word: try to regulate the economy.

MR also seems to sympathise with the idea, dear to Alan Bihl, that the proletariat is in crisis because of the capitalist crisis and that de-unionisation is a demonstra-

tion of this so-called crisis in the working class,⁴² when he writes: “the fear of losing one’s job destroys workers’ solidarity and the percentage unionised has diminished to begin a rapid decline from 1978-79. A significant aspect of this is the isolation of the long struggle of the British miners in 1984-85.”⁴³ This is no mean contribution to the bourgeoisie’s discourse, when we consider that the main factor in the isolation and defeat of the British miners was the union and the illusions that persisted in the working class regarding its radical version, “base unionism”.

Is capitalism condemned to a catastrophic collapse?

Now that it has reached a certain stage in its history, capitalism can only cast society into greater and greater convulsions, destroying the progress that it had previously ushered in. It is within this context that the class struggle of the proletariat unfolds with the perspective of overthrowing capitalism and bringing about a new society. If the proletariat does not manage to raise its struggle to the highest level of consciousness and organisation necessary, capitalism’s contradictions will make a new society impossible and will lead to “the common ruin of the contending classes”, as was the case with certain class societies in the past: “oppressor and oppressed, stood in constant opposition to one another, carried on an uninterrupted, now hidden, now open fight, a fight that each time ended, either in a revolutionary re-constitution of society at large, or in the common ruin of the contending classes.”⁴⁴

Within this context it is important to understand whether, over and above the increasing barbarism inherent to the decadence of capitalism, the economic characteristics of the crisis must of necessity make it impossible at a given moment for the system to go on functioning according to its own laws, so making accumulation impossible.⁴⁵ This is essentially the view of a number of marxists and we share it.⁴⁶ So,

42. An idea that we have already criticised in an article in our *International Review* n° 74, “The Proletariat is still the revolutionary class” (<http://en.internationalism.org/node/3416>).

43. Roelands, Op. Cit., p.84.

44. Marx: *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, “Bourgeois and Proletarians.

45. On this question see the article “For revolutionaries, the Great Depression confirms the obsolescence of capitalism”, *International Review* n°144 (<http://en.internationalism.org/ir/146/great-depression>).

46. MR puts forward the idea that the objective impossibility of capitalism inherent in Luxemburg’s vision is responsible for the immediatism evident in the 3rd Congress of the Communist International in which “the KAPD (an oppositional split from the German Communist Party) defended a theory of an offensive at all costs based on the Luxemburgist vision stating that the proletariat would be confronted with “the

for Rosa Luxemburg, “The impossibility of capitalism leaps to view” once “the development of capitalism has advanced to such an extent that, over the whole face of the globe, everything is produced in a capitalist way” (see the preceding quotations from the *Introduction to Political Economy*).⁴⁷ Even so, Rosa Luxemburg makes the following precision: “This is not to say that capitalist development must be actually driven to this extreme: the mere tendency towards imperialism of itself takes forms which make the final phase of capitalism a period of catastrophe.”⁴⁸

objective economic impossibility of capitalism” and confronted with “the inevitable economic collapse of capitalism...” (Rosa Luxemburg, *The Accumulation of Capital*). (Roelands Op. Cit., p.54). When Rosa Luxemburg defends the idea of the effective impossibility of capitalism, this perspective cannot be applied to the near future. But we find that the author, or those close to him, defend a fraudulent vision by attributing to Rosa Luxemburg such a perspective in the short term, given the inadequacy of the extra-capitalist markets relative to the needs of production. This will be explained in a subsequent note. For a clearer understanding of the causes of immediatism as manifested in the workers’ movement in relation to the perspective, we refer the reader to the article “The Decadence of Capitalism: the Age of Catastrophes”: *International Review* n° 143 (<http://en.internationalism.org/ir/143/decadence-08-age-of-catastrophes>).

47. “For a good explanation and critique of Rosa Luxemburg’s accumulation theory” (p.36); MR directs us to the following article: “Théorie des crises Marx – Luxemburg (I)” (<http://www.leftcommunism.org/spip.php?article110>). From the site recommended by him, we have read the article “L’accumulation du capital au XXe siècle – I” (<http://www.leftcommunism.org/spip.php?article223>) and we were surprised to learn that, according to Rosa Luxemburg in her work *The Accumulation of Capital* “capitalism reached ‘the ultimate phase of its historic career: imperialism’” because “the field for expansion offered to it was minimal compared to the high level attained by the development of capitalist productive forces...”. Unable to believe our eyes, we went back to the work referred to and found that the reality was quite different. What is minimal for Rosa Luxemburg (compared to the high level reached by the development of the productive forces of capitalism), is not, as the article says, the field for expansion offered to capitalism but the **last non-capitalist territories still free in the world**. The difference is important because at the time the colonies contained a significant proportion of extra-capitalist markets that were either virgin or not yet exhausted whereas such markets were much rarer outside of the colonies and the industrialised countries. Re-establishing what Rosa Luxemburg really said shows the fast footwork of MR’s friends. In this quotation we have emphasised what is stated in the incriminated article and we have highlighted an important idea that is disregarded by the author of the article: “Imperialism is the political expression of the accumulation of capital in its competitive struggle for what remains still open of the non-capitalist environment. Still the largest part of the world in terms of geography, this remaining field for the expansion of capital is yet insignificant as against the high level of development already attained by the productive forces of capital.” (*The Accumulation of Capital, III: “The historic conditions of accumulation”, 31: “Protective tariffs and accumulation”*) (<http://www.marxists.org/archive/luxemburg/1913/accumulation-capital/ch31.htm>).

48. *The Accumulation of Capital, III: “The historic conditions of accumulation”, 31: “Protective tariffs*

of the French extreme right (in particular the National Front) and of negationism.

38. Ibid., p.8.

39. http://www.capitalisme-et-crise.info/telechargements/pdf/FR_JG_Quelles_politiques_Zeonomiques_contre_la_crise_et_le_chomage_1.pdf

40. Roelands, Op. Cit., p.8.

41. *Chronique*, 6 May 2001 (<http://www.regards.fr/nos-regards/michel-husson/la-gauche-et-l-emploi>).

Likewise Paul Mattick,⁴⁹ who also thinks that the system's contradictions must lead to economic collapse, although he thinks that these contradictions are basically expressed in the form of a fall in the rate of profit and not in the saturation of the markets, recalls how this question has been approached historically: “*The discussion around Marx's theory of accumulation and crisis led to the development of two antithetical views, each giving rise to several variants. One insisted that the accumulation of capital has absolute limits and that an economic breakdown of the system is inevitable. The other held this to be absurd, maintaining that the system would not disappear from economic causes. It goes without saying that the reformists, if only to justify themselves, adopted the latter position. But even ultra-leftists – Anton Pannekoek, for example – saw the idea that the breakdown of capitalism would be a ‘purely economic’ process as a falsification of historical materialist theory. [...] He thought the shortcomings of the capitalist system as Marx described them and the concrete phenomenon of crisis, produced by the anarchy of the economy, were sufficient to provoke the development of revolutionary consciousness among the proletariat and thus to lead to proletarian revolution.*”⁵⁰

MR does not share this view of capitalism condemned by its fundamental contradictions (saturation of the markets, fall in the rate of profit) to a catastrophic crisis. On the contrary, he sees it like this: “*In fact, there is no material point alpha at which capitalism will collapse, whether this be percentage X of the rate of profit or a quantity Y of outlets or a number Z of extra-capitalist markets. As Lenin says in Imperialism the highest stage: ‘there is no situation from which capitalism cannot find a way out!’*”⁵¹

MR explains his vision thus: “*The limits to modes of production are above all social, a product of their internal contradictions and by the collision between relations that have become obsolete and the productive forces. This means that it is the proletariat and accumulation*”.

49. For more information on the political positions of Paul Mattick read the article “For revolutionaries, the Great Depression confirms the obsolescence of capitalism” in *International Review* n° 146, <http://en.internationalism.org/ir/146/great-depression>.

50. Paul Mattick. *Economic Crisis and Crisis Theory*, Chapter 3, “The Epigones”. <http://www.marxists.org/archive/mattick-paul/1974/crisis/index.htm>

51. Roelandts, Op. Cit., pp.117-118. This passage from Lenin is missing from the version on-line on marxists.org of *Imperialism the highest stage*. But there is one very like it in Lenin's *Report on the International Situation and the Fundamental Tasks of the CI*: “*There is no such thing as an absolutely hopeless situation*” (<http://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1920/jul/x03.htm#fw1>). However it is not referring to the economic crisis but to the revolutionary crisis.

which will abolish capitalism and that the latter will not die out of its own accord because of its ‘objective’ limits. This is the method put forward by Marx: ‘Capitalist production tends constantly to over-reach its inherent limits (editor's note: the periodic depreciation of constant capital accompanying crises in the production process); it manages to do so only by means that once more raise barriers before it but on a scale that is even more forbidding, and then again on an even greater scale, the same barriers rise up again before it.’ (Le Capital, 1032. La Pleiade Economie II [our translation from the French]). This is by no means a catastrophic vision, but rather sees the growing contradictions of capitalism raising the stakes to an ever higher level. However, it is clear that even if capitalism will not sink of its own accord, it will not however escape its destructive antagonisms.”⁵²

It is hard to see how the proletariat could overthrow capitalism if, as MR persists in trying to prove in his book, the whole history of this system since the second half of the 20th century has been exerting itself against the reality of impediments to the development of the productive forces.

Having said this, although it is right to say that only the proletariat can abolish capitalism, this in no way means that capitalism cannot collapse under the weight of its basic contradictions, which obviously is by no means the same as its revolutionary replacement by the proletariat. Nowhere in his text does MR formally demonstrate that this is impossible. Instead of this he tacks onto the crisis of the decadent period, the characteristics of the crises as they were manifested in the period of Marx. Moreover, in describing the latter he does not base his analysis on the quotations of Marx about the saturation of the markets, such as this one, for example: “*...in the cycle through which capital passes during its reproduction - a cycle in which it is not simply reproduced but reproduced on an extended scale, in which it describes not a circle but a spiral – there comes a moment at which the market manifests itself as too narrow for production. This occurs at the end of the cycle. But it merely means: the market is glutted. Over-production is manifest. If the expansion of the market had kept pace with the expansion of production there would be no glut of the market, no overproduction.*”⁵³ MR prefers those passages in which Marx deals only with the

52. Ibid., p.53.

53. *Theories of Surplus Value*, Part Two, Chapter xvii, “Ricardo's theory of accumulation and a critique of it (The very nature of capital leads to crises)”; “[13. The expansion of the market does not keep in step with the expansion of production. The Ricardian conception that an unlimited expansion of production and of the internal market is possible]”.

problem of the rate of profit. This allows him to claim that capitalism can always recover from its crises while covering himself with the authority of Marx. In fact, within this framework the devaluation of capital wrought by the crisis is often the condition for the recovery of a rate of profit that makes it possible for accumulation to take off again at a higher level. The only problem is that to attribute the present crisis first and foremost to the contradiction “*fall in the rate of profit*” is to side-step the reality that has produced the level of debt that we have today. There is another problem with this approach and one which confronts MR with the contradictions of his speculative constructions; that is, elsewhere he actually says: “*It is completely incongruous to affirm – as is too often done – that the perpetuation of the crisis since the 1980s is due to the tendency for the rate of profit to fall.*”⁵⁴

In fact even prior to the first world war the development of capitalism made it impossible to characterise the crises as a cyclical phenomenon. Engels referred to this development in a note within *Capital*, in which he says: “*The acute form of the periodic process with its former ten-year cycle, appears to have given way to a more chronic, long drawn out, alternation [...] Thus every factor, which works against a repetition of the old crises, carries within itself the germ of a far more powerful future crisis.*”⁵⁵ This description from Engels of the beginning of the open crisis shows us a precursor of the crisis of capitalist decadence, which is violent, generalised and deep and is by no means cyclical. It is rather prepared by a whole accumulation of contradictions, as witnessed by the occurrence of two world wars, the 1929 crisis and the 30s, and the present phase of the crisis that began at the end of the 1960s.

To say, as does MR, on the basis of quotations from Marx always dealing with the fall in the rate of profit and taken out of context: “*The very mechanism of capitalist production therefore removes the obstacles that it creates*”⁵⁶ can only

54. Roelandts, Op. Cit., p.82.

55. Engels note to *Capital*, Volume III, Section V “Division of profit into interest and profit of enterprise, interest-bearing capital”, chapter 30, “Money-capital and real capital I”.

56. The reference made by MR is the following, *Capital*, book I, 4th German edition, Editions Sociales 1983, p.694. It does not give enough detail about what section of the book is being referred to. There is no obvious equivalent to this sentence in French on marxists.org. However there is a passage of Marx that contains the same idea as that quoted, almost word for word, in Volume I of *Capital*. This is it, “*The mechanism of the process of capitalist production removes the very obstacles that it temporarily creates*” (Book I, Part VII “The Accumulation of Capital”, Chapter 25 “The General Law of Capitalist Accumulation”, Section 1 “The Increased Demand for Labour Power that Accompanies Accumulation, the

contribute to minimising the depth of the contradictions that undermine capitalism in its decadent phase. This can only lead to underestimating the seriousness of the present phase of the crisis, in particular, by relegating to second place the contradictions in question and talking twaddle about how capitalism can be regulated.

The objection could be made that Rosa Luxemburg's predictions have been shown to be inexact because the drying up of the last extra-capitalist markets in the 1950s did not lead to the "impossibility" of capitalism. In fact, it is clearly the case that capitalism did not collapse at that moment. However it could go on developing only by mortgaging its future through the injection of higher and higher doses of credit that can never be re-paid. The insoluble problem confronting the bourgeoisie now is that whatever austerity cures it inflicts on society, it is unable to reduce the level of debt. On the one hand, payment defaults and the bankruptcy of some of the economic players, including nation states, mean that this same situation infects their partners as well, thus aggravating conditions leading to the collapse of the house of cards. On the other hand, being unable to kick-start the economy adequately by means of new debts or printing money, capitalism cannot avoid a dive into recession. Contrary to the magic formulas spouted in this book, this dive is not preparing a future resurgence through the devaluation of capital that comes with it. However, it is preparing the ground for the revolution.

Silvio (December 2011)

Composition of Capital Remaining the Same"). It is at this precise point in *Capital* that MR has turned to feed his idea, where the omission of a "sometimes", both in the Éditions sociales and in the transcription of a passage from it by MR, is wonderfully convenient in serving the theme of his book, to present capitalism as always able to be born again out of its crises.

Rejections and regression

In the previous article in this series, we noted that among the new revolutionary groups which emerged out of the world-wide revival of class struggle in the late 60s, the “theory of decadence”, which had been defended by an intransigent minority despite the apparent triumph of capitalism evidenced by the post-war boom, gained a number of new adherents, providing a coherent historical framework for the revolutionary positions which this new generation had initially come to in a more or less intuitive manner: opposition to trade unions and reformism, rejection of national liberation struggles and of alliances with the bourgeoisie, recognition of the so-called “socialist” states as a form of state capitalism, and so on.

Given that, in the late 60s and early 70s, the open economic crisis of capitalism was only just beginning, and since, over the past four decades, the insoluble nature of this crisis has become increasingly evident, you might have expected that a majority of those attracted towards internationalism over those decades would have been rather easily convinced that capitalism was indeed an obsolete, decaying social system. In reality, not only has this not been the case, but – and this is particularly true with the new generations of revolutionaries which started to appear on the scene during the first decade of the 21st century – one could even speak of a persistent rejection of the theory of decadence, and at the same time a real tendency for many who had previously been convinced of the concept to put it into question and even to jettison it openly.

The attractions of anarchism

With regard to the rejection of the theory by the newer generations of revolutionaries, we are talking to a large extent about internationalist elements influenced by various forms of anarchism. Anarchism has enjoyed a major resurgence during the 2000s in particular and it is not difficult to see why it has such an attraction for young comrades who are eager to fight against capitalism but deeply critical of the “official” left, for a considerable part of which the collapse of “really existing socialism” in the eastern bloc has been such a debacle. Thus the new generation often turns to anarchism as a current which seems not to have betrayed the working class like the social democratic, Stalinist and Trotskyist traditions.

It would take an article in itself to analyse why, especially in the central capitalist countries, so many of the new generation

have been drawn towards different brands of anarchism rather than towards the communist left, which is certainly the most coherent of all the political currents which remained loyal to proletarian principles after the terrible defeats of the period from the 1920s to the end of the 1960s. A key element is certainly the problem of the organisation of revolutionaries – the “party question” – which has always been a bone of contention between marxists and the revolutionary strands of anarchism. But our main focus here is the specific question of capitalism’s decadence. Why do the majority of the anarchists, including those who genuinely oppose reformist practices and see the need for international revolution, reject this idea so vehemently?

It’s true that some of the best elements in the anarchist current have not always had this reaction. In a previous article in this series we saw how anarchist comrades like Maximoff, faced with the world-wide economic crisis and the push towards a second imperialist world war, had no difficulty in explaining these phenomena as expressions of a social relation which had become a fetter on human progress, of a mode of production in decline.

But these views were always in a minority within the anarchist movement. At a deeper level, while many anarchists are happy to acknowledge Marx’s unique contribution to our understanding of political economy, they have had a much harder idea with the historical methodology which underlay Marx’s critique of capital. Ever since Bakunin, there has been a strong tendency among anarchists to see “historical materialism” (or, as some prefer, the materialist approach to history) as a form of rigid determinism which underestimates and depreciates the subjective element of revolution. Bakunin in particular saw it as a

pretext for an essentially reformist practice on the part of the “Marx Party”, which argued at that time that since capitalism had not yet exhausted its historical usefulness for mankind, the communist revolution was not yet on the immediate agenda, and the working class had to focus on building up its resources and its self-confidence within the confines of bourgeois society: this was the basis for its advocacy of trade union work and the formation of workers’ parties which would, among other activities, contest bourgeois elections. For Bakunin, capitalism was always ripe for revolution. And by extension, if the marxists of the present historical epoch conclude that the old tactics are no longer valid, this is often derided by present-day anarchists as a retrospective justification for Marx’s errors, a way of avoiding the uncomfortable conclusion that the anarchists were right all along.

We are only touching the surface here. We will come back later to the more sophisticated version of this argument presented by the Aufheben group, whose series criticising the notion of decadence has been seen as definitive by so many in the libertarian communist milieu. But there are other elements to consider in the present generation’s rejection of what for us is the theoretical cornerstone of a revolutionary platform today, and they are less specific to the tradition of anarchism.

The paradox we face is the following: while for us capitalism seems to be becoming more and more rotten, to the point where we can speak of the terminal phase of its decline, for many others capitalism’s success in prolonging this process of decay offers evidence that the very concept of decline has been refuted. In other words: the more a long senile capitalism approaches its catastrophic end, the more some revolutionaries see capitalism as being capable of almost endless rejuvenation.

It is tempting to apply a little psychology here. We have already noted¹ that the prospect of its own demise is an element in the bourgeoisie’s rejection not only of marxism but even of its own efforts at a scientific understanding of the problem of value, once it became clear that such

1. <http://en.internationalism.org/ir/134/what-method-to-understand-decadence>

an understanding meant recognising that capitalism could only be a transient system, condemned to perish by its own inherent contradictions. It would be surprising if this ideology of denial did not affect even those who are attempting to break from the bourgeois world-view. Indeed, since the bourgeoisie's flight from reality grows increasingly desperate the closer it comes to its actual demise, we would expect to see this defence-mechanism permeating every layer of society, including the working class and its revolutionary minorities. After all, what could be more terrifying, more conducive to the reaction of running away or burying your head in the sand, than the real possibility of a dying capitalism crushing us all in the throes of its final agony?

But the problem is more complex than this. For one thing, it is connected to the manner in which the crisis has evolved in the past 40 years, which has made it much harder to diagnose the real severity of capitalism's fatal disease.

As we noted, the first decades after 1914 offered strong evidence that the system was in decline. It was not until the post-war boom had really got underway, in the 50s and 60s, that a number of elements in the proletarian political movement began to voice profound doubts about the notion that capitalism had reached its epoch of decadence. The return of the crisis – and of the class struggle – at the end of the 1960s made it possible to see the transient nature of the boom and rediscover the foundations of Marx's critique of political economy. But while in essence this approach has been vindicated by the "permanent" nature of the crisis since the end of the 60s and, above all, by the more recent explosion of all the contradictions that have been building up over this period (the "debt crisis"), the length of the crisis is also testament to capitalism's extraordinary capacity to adapt and survive, even if it has meant flouting its own laws and piling up even more devastating problems for itself in the long term. The ICC has certainly, on occasions, underestimated this capacity: some of our articles on the crisis in the 80s – a decade where brutal mass unemployment had once again become part of daily life – did not really foresee the "boom" (or rather booms, since there were numerous recessions as well) in the 90s and 2000s, and we certainly did not foresee the possibility of a country like China industrialising itself at the frantic pace we have seen during the 2000s. For a generation reared in these conditions, where rampant and unabashed consumerism in the advanced countries made the consumer society of the 50s and 60s seem quaint by comparison, it is understandable that talk of capitalism's decline should be seen as somewhat old

hat. The official ideology of the 90s and well into the 2000s was that capitalism had triumphed all along the way and that neo-liberalism and globalisation were opening the door to a new and indeed unprecedented era of prosperity. In Britain, for example, the economic mouthpiece of the Blair government, Gordon Brown, claimed in his 2005 budget speech that the UK was experiencing its most sustained period of economic growth since records began in 1701. Little wonder that "radical" versions of these ideas should be taken up even among those arguing for revolution. After all, the ruling class itself continues to dispute about whether it had finally done away with the cycle of "boom and bust". This problematic has been echoed by many "pro-revolutionaries", who can cite Marx on the periodic crises of the 19th century and explain that while there may still be periodic crises, each one would serve to clear out the economy's dead wood and bring about a new spurt of growth.

Regressions from the coherence of the Italian left

This was all very understandable, but it was perhaps less forgivable in the ranks of the communist left, who had already acquired some education about the diseased basis of capitalist growth in the epoch of its decline. And yet ever since the 70s, we have seen a series of defections from the theory of decadence in the ranks of the communist left, and the ICC in particular, often accompanying quite severe organisational crises.

This is not the place to analyse the origins of these crises. We can say that crises in political organisations of the proletariat are an inevitable part of their lives, as a glance at the history of the Bolshevik party or the Italian and German left will quickly confirm. Revolutionary organisations are part of the working class, and this is a class that is constantly subjected to the immense pressure of the dominant ideology. The "vanguard" cannot escape this pressure and is obliged to engage in a permanent combat against it. Organisational crises generally occur at the point where a part or whole of the organisation is confronted with – or succumbing to – a particularly acute dose of the dominant ideology. Very often these convulsions are initiated or exacerbated by the necessity to confront new situations or by wider crises in society.

The crises in the ICC have nearly always been centred around questions of organisation and political behaviour. But it is also noticeable that virtually all of the most important splits in our ranks have called into question our view of the

historic epoch as well.

The GCI: is progress a bourgeois myth?

In 1987, in *International Review* n° 48, we began the publication of a new series entitled "Understanding the decadence of capitalism". This was in response to a growing body of evidence that elements in or around the revolutionary movement were having second thoughts about the concept of decadence. The first three articles in the series² were a response to the positions of the Groupe Communiste Internationaliste, which had originated as the result of a split with the ICC at the end of the 70s. At least some of the elements who initially formed the GCI had seen themselves as continuators of the work of the Italian Fraction of the Communist Left, opposing what they saw as the councilist deviations of the ICC. But following further splits within the GCI itself the group evolved towards what the *IR* articles described as "anarcho-punk Bordigism": a strange combination of concepts drawn from Bordigism, such as the "invariance" of marxism, and a regression towards the voluntarist outlook of a Bakunin. Both these elements led the GCI to vehemently oppose the idea that capitalism had been through an ascendant and a decadent phase, principally in the article "Theories of decadence or decadence of theory?" *Le Communiste* n° 23, 1985.

The *IR* articles refuted a number of the charges levelled by the GCI. It attacked the GCI's gross sectarianism which threw proletarian groups who argue that capitalism is decadent into the same sack as Jehovah's Witnesses, Moonies and ne nazis; they exposed their ignorant claim that the concept of decadence arose **after** the defeat of the 1917-23 revolutionary wave when "*certain products of the victory of the counter-revolution began to theorise a 'long period' of stagnation and 'decline'*"; above all they show that what underlies the GCI's "anti-decadentism" is an abandonment of the materialist analysis of history in favour of anarchist idealism.

What the GCI really rejects in the concept of decadence is the notion that capitalism was once an ascendant system, was still capable of playing a progressive role for humanity: in fact, the GCI, rejects the very notion of historical progress. For them, this is mere ideology, justifying capitalism's "civilising" mission: "*The bourgeoisie presents all the modes of production which preceded it as 'barbarous' and 'savage' and, as historical evolution moves on, they*

2. http://en.internationalism.org/ir/048_decadence_part01.html; http://en.internationalism.org/ir/049_decadence_part02.html; http://en.internationalism.org/ri/050_decadence_part03.htm

become progressively 'civilised'. The capitalist mode of production, of course, is the final and highest incarnation of Civilisation and Progress. The evolutionist vision thus corresponds to the 'capitalist social being', and it's not for nothing that this vision has been applied to all the sciences (ie all the partial interpretations of reality from the bourgeois point of view): the science of nature (Darwin), demography (Malthus), Logical history, philosophy (Hegel)...³

But because the bourgeoisie has a certain vision of progress, where everything culminates in the rule of capital, it does not follow that all concepts of progress are false: this is precisely why Marx did not reject the discoveries of Darwin but saw them – correctly interpreted, using a dialectical rather than a linear vision – as an additional argument in favour of his view of history.

Neither does the marxist view of historical progress mean that its adherents line themselves up with the ruling class, as the GCI claims: “The decadentists are thus pro-slavery up till a certain date, pro-feudal up till another ...pro-capitalist until 1914! Thus, because of their cult of progress, they are at every step opposed to the class war waged by the exploited, opposed to the communist movements which had the misfortune of breaking out in the 'wrong' period...”⁴ The 19th century marxist movement, while generally recognising that capitalism had not yet created the conditions of the communist revolution, still saw its role as intransigently defending the class interests of the proletariat within bourgeois society, and “retrospectively” it saw the absolutely vital importance of the revolts of the exploited in previous class societies, even while recognising that these revolts could not have resulted in a communist society.

This superficial radicalism of the GCI is frequently found among those who openly espouse anarchism, and indeed has sometimes provided them with a more “sophisticated” and semi-marxist justification for holding on to their old prejudices. While the latter might acknowledge certain of Marx's theoretical contributions (critique of political economy, concept of alienation etc), they simply can't abide his actual political practice, which meant building workers' parties that participated in parliament, developing the trade unions and even in some cases supporting bourgeois national movements. All these practices (with the possible exception of developing the trade unions) were bourgeois (or authoritarian) then and they are bourgeois (or authoritarian) now.

In fact, however, this blanket rejection of a whole section of the past workers' movement is no guarantee for a genuinely radical position today. As the second article in the series concludes: “for marxists the forms of the proletarian struggle depend on the objective conditions in which it is taking place and not on the abstract principles of eternal revolt. Only by basing yourself on an objective analysis of the balance of class forces, seen within its historical dynamic, can you judge the validity of a strategy or form of struggle. Without this materialist basis, any position you take up on the means of the proletarian struggle is built on sand; it opens the door to disorientation as soon as the superficial forms of eternal revolt – violence, anti-legalism – appear on the scene”. As proof it cites the GCI's flirtation with the Shining Path in Peru – an ideological stance it has repeated in its more recent pronouncements on the jihadi violence in Iraq.⁵

IP: the charge of “productivism”

The series we published in the 80s also contained a response to another group that had emerged from a split in the ICC in 1985: the External Fraction of the ICC, which published the review *Internationalist Perspective*. The EFICC, falsely claiming that it had been expelled from the ICC and devoting a large part of its early polemics to proving the ICC's degeneration and even its Stalinism, had begun life with the declared intention of defending the ICC's platform from the ICC itself – hence the name of the group. However, before long, it began to question more and more of the ICC's basic political framework, and central to this was our approach to the problem of decadence. The name “EFICC” was eventually dropped and the group adopted the title of its publication. Unlike the GCI, however, IP has never declared that it rejects the very notions of the ascendancy and decadence of capitalism: its stated aim was to deepen and clarify these concepts. This is certainly a laudable project in itself. The problem for us is that its theoretical innovations add little that is genuinely deep and serve mainly to dilute the basic analysis.

On the one hand, IP began more and more to develop a “parallel” periodisation of capitalism, based on what it defined as the transition from the formal domination to the real domination of capital, which in IP's version more or less corresponds to the same historical time frame as the “traditional” shift into the period of decline in the first part of the 20th century. In IP's view, the increasing global penetration of the law of value into all areas of social and

economic life constitutes the real domination of capital, and it is this which provides us with a key to understanding the class lines which the ICC previously based on the notion of decadence: the bankruptcy of trade union work, of parliamentarism and support for national liberation, and so on.

It is certainly true that the actual emergence of capitalism as a world economy, its effective “domination” of the globe, corresponds to the opening of the period of decadence; and that, as IP also point out, this period has indeed seen the increasing penetration of the law of value into virtually every corner of human activity. But as we argued in our article in *IR* 60,⁶ IP's definition of the transition from formal to real domination takes a concept elaborated by Marx and stretches it beyond the specific meaning he gave to it. For Marx the transition in question was rooted in the change from the period of manufacturing – where artisan labour was grouped together by individual capitalists, without really altering the old methods of production – to the factory system proper, based on the collective labourer. In essence this change had already taken place in Marx's day, even when capitalism only “dominated” a small part of the planet: its future expansion was to be based directly on the “real domination” of the process of production. Our article thus found more consistency in the Bordigists of Communisme ou Civilisation who argued that communism had been possible since 1848 because for them this marked the actual transition to real domination.

But there was another prong to IP's questioning of the concept of decadence it had inherited from the ICC: the charge of “productivism”. In one of the earliest salvos, Macintosh claimed that all the groups of the communist left from *Bilan* to existing groups like the ICC and IBRP suffered from this malady: they were “hopelessly, and inextricably entangled with the productivism that is capital's Trojan horse within the camp of Marxism. This productivism makes the development of technology and the productive forces the very standard of historical and social progress; within its theoretical purview, as long as a mode of production assures technological development it must be judged to be historically progressive”.⁷ The ICC's pamphlet *The Decadence of Capitalism*⁸ came in for particular criticism. Rejecting Trotsky's idea, expressed in the 1938 programmatic document *The Death Agony of Capitalism and the Tasks of the Fourth International*,

3. Ibid.

4. Ibid.

5. <http://en.internationalism.org/icconline/2006/groupe-communiste-internationaliste>

6. http://en.internationalism.org/ir/060_decadence_part08.html

7. *Internationalist Perspective* n° 28, autumn 1995

8. <http://en.internationalism.org/pamphlets/decadence>

that mankind's productive forces had actually ceased to grow, our pamphlet defined decadence as a period in which the relations of production act as a *fetter* on the development of the productive forces but not an absolute barrier, and conducted a thought experiment to show how much capitalism might have developed had it not been held back by its in-built limitations.

Macintosh honed in on this passage and countered it with various figures which for him indicated such fearsome rates of growth in the epoch of decadence that any notion of decadence as a slackening of the development of the productive forces would have to be replaced by a notion which saw that it was precisely the **growth** of the system which was so profoundly anti-human – as witness, for example, the deepening ecological crisis.

Articles written by other members of IP continued in the same vein, for example, "For a non-productivist understanding of decadence" by E.R. in *IP* 44.⁹ However, there had already been a rather penetrating reply to Macintosh's text by MLazare in *IP* 29.¹⁰ Leaving aside its occasional caricature of the ICC's alleged caricatures, this article shows quite well how Macintosh's critique of productivism was still somewhat caught in a productivist logic.¹¹ First, it challenged Macintosh's use of figures, which purport to show us that capitalism had grown by a factor of 30 in the 80 years since 1900. ML pointed out that this figure looks much less impressive when it is broken down to an annual rate, giving us average growth of 4.36% per year. But, more importantly, he argues that if we are talking quantitatively, then despite the impressive growth rates that capital in decline has been capable of displaying, when we look at the gigantic waste of productive forces entailed by bureaucracy, arms, war, advertising, finance, a host of useless "services" and recurring or quasi-permanent economic crisis, the "actual" expansion of real productive activ-

9. http://internationalist-perspective.org/IP/ip-archive/ip_44_decadence-2.html

10. http://internationalist-perspective.org/IP/ip-archive/ip_29_decadence.html

11. Macintosh was not the first or last of our former members to be so dazzled by capitalism's growth rates that they began questioning or abandoning the concept of capitalist decadence. Towards the end of the 90s, in the wake of a serious crisis centred once again on the question of organisation, a number of former members of the ICC constituted the Paris Discussion Circle, among them RV, who wrote the *Decadence of Capitalism* and the articles responding to the GCI's critique of "decadentism". Although the question of decadence had never been a focus of the debates around the internal crisis, the Circle very quickly published a major text rejecting the concept of decadence altogether – its essential argument focusing on the considerable development of the productive forces since 1914 and above all since 1945 (<http://cercledeparis.free.fr/indexORIGINAL.html>).

ity would have been far, far greater. In this sense the notion of capital as a fetter which holds back but does not totally block the development of the forces of production, even in capitalist terms, remains essentially valid. As Marx put it, capital is the living contradiction, and "*the real barrier of capitalist production is capital itself.*"¹²

However, and again quite rightly, ML does not leave the argument there. The question of the "quality" of the development of the productive forces in decadence is posed immediately you bring factors like waste and war into the equation. Contrary to certain of ML's insinuations, the ICC view of decadence has never been purely quantitative, but has always focused on the social and human "cost" of the prolonged survival of the system. Above all, there is nothing in our view of decadence which excludes the idea, also brought in by ML, that we need to have a much deeper concept of what the development of productive forces actually means. Productive forces are not inherently capital, a delusion fostered both by the primitivists who see technological development itself as the source of all our woes, and the Stalinists who measured the progress towards communism in tons of cement and steel. At root, mankind's "productive forces" are his powers of creation, and the movement towards communism can only be measured by the degree to which humanity's creative capacities have been liberated. The accumulation of capital – "production for production's sake" – was once a step towards this, but once it has laid down the prerequisites of a world communist society, it ceases to play any further progressive role. In this sense, far from being ruled by a productivist vision, the Italian communist left were among the first to criticise it openly, since they rejected Trotsky's hymns to the miracles of socialist production in Stalin's USSR, and insisted that the interests of the working class (even in a "proletarian state") were necessarily antagonistic to the demands of accumulation (ML also notes this, contrary to Macintosh's accusations against the left communist tradition)

For Marx, and for us, capital's "progressive mission" can be gauged by the degree to which it contributes towards freeing man's creative powers in a society where the measure of wealth is no longer labour time but free time. Capitalism constituted an unavoidable step towards this horizon, but its decadence is signalled precisely by the fact that this potential can now only be realised by abolishing the laws of capital.

It is crucial to envisage this problem in its full historical dimension, one that

embraces the future as well as the past. Capital's attempts to maintain accumulation in the straitjacket imposed by its global limitations creates a situation where not only is humanity's potential being held back – its very survival is under threat as contradictions in the capitalist social relation express themselves more and more violently, pushing society towards ruin. This is surely what Marx hints at in the *Grundrisse* when he talks about development as decay.¹³

A current illustration: China, whose dizzying rates of growth have so besotted many of the former stalwarts of decadence theory. Has Chinese capital developed the productive forces? In its own terms, yes, but what is the global and historic context in which this is taking place? It's certainly true that the expansion of Chinese capital has increased the size of the global industrial proletariat, but this has come about through a vast process of de-industrialisation in west, which has meant the loss of many key sectors of the working class in the original countries of capital, along with a great deal of their traditions of struggle. At the same time, the ecological costs of the Chinese "miracle" are gigantic. The raw materials needed for Chinese industrial growth result in the accelerated pillaging of the world's resources and the resulting production brings with it a grave increase in global pollution. At the economic level, China is entirely dependent on the consumer markets of the west. Both with regard to the internal market, and to exports, the longer-term prospects of the Chinese economy are not at all positive, just like those of Europe and the US. The only difference is that China is beginning from a higher point of departure.¹⁴ But its advantages, or at least some of them, could be lost if it in turn falls victim to a series of bankruptcies.¹⁵ Sooner or later China can only become part of the recessionary dynamic of the world economy.

13. On this last point, see our article "The study of Capital and the Grundrisse of communism" from the series *Communism is not just a nice idea but a material necessity* http://en.internationalism.org/ir/075_commy_07.html

14. The IMF estimates that "the Chinese economy could see its growth cut in half if the crisis of the eurozone gets worse" (*Les Echos*. <http://www.lesechos.fr/entreprises-secteurs/finance-marches/actu/0201894521951-les-banques-chinoises-invitees-a-reechelonner-les-prets-aux-provinces-288265.php>).

15. To maintain growth rates in spite of the world economy slowing down, China has been betting on its internal market, through local administrations running up mounting debts. But here again there is no miracle in sight. You can't get into endless debt without creating the risk of bankruptcy, and this certainly applies to the Chinese commercial banks: "to avoid a cascade of defaults on payment (the latter) have put off into the future a large part of the debts of local bodies, or are in the process of doing so" (*Les Echos*)

Marx, in the late 19th century, saw reasons to hope that capitalist development would not be necessary in Russia because he could see that on a world scale the conditions for communism were already coming together. How much truer is this today?

Hesitations in the IBRP?

In 2003-4 we began a new series on decadence – in response to a number of new assaults on the concept, but in particular to alarming signs that the International Bureau for the Revolutionary Party (now the Internationalist Communist Tendency), which had in general based its political positions on a notion of decadence, was also being influenced by the prevailing “anti-decadentist” pressures.

In a statement “Comments on the latest crisis in the ICC” dated February 2002 and published in *Internationalist Communist Review* n°21, the concept of decadence is criticised as being “as universal as it is confusing [...] alien to the critique of political economy [...] foreign to the method and the arsenal of the critique of political economy”. We are also asked “What role then does the concept of decadence play in terms of the militant critique of political economy, i.e. for a deeper analysis of the characteristics and dynamic of capitalism in the period in which we live? None. To the extent that the word itself never appears in the three volumes constituting *Capital*.”¹⁶

A contribution published in Italian in *Prometeo* n°8, Series VI (December 2003), and in English in *Revolutionary Perspectives* n°32, third series, summer 2004,¹⁷ “For a definition of the concept of decadence”, contained a whole series of worrying assertions.

The theory of decadence is apparently seen as leading to a fatalist notion of the trajectory of capitalism and the role of revolutionaries: “*The ambiguity lies in the fact that decadence, or the progressive decline of the capitalist mode of production, proceeds from a kind of ineluctable process of self-destruction whose causes are traceable to the essential aspect of its own being [...] the disappearance and destruction of the capitalist economic form is an historically given event, economically ineluctable and socially predetermined. This, as well as being an infantile and idealistic approach, ends up by having negative repercussions politically, creating the hypothesis that, to see the death of capitalism, it is sufficient to sit on the banks*

of the river, or, at most, in crisis situations (and only then), it is enough to create the subjective instruments of the class struggle as the last impulse to a process which is otherwise irreversible.”

Decadence no longer seems to result in the alternative between socialism and barbarism, since capitalism is endlessly capable of renewing itself: “*The contradictory aspect of capitalist production, the crises which are derived from this, the repetition of the process of accumulation which is momentarily interrupted but which receives new blood through the destruction of excess capital and means of production, do not automatically lead to its destruction. Either the subjective factor intervenes, which has in the class struggle its material fulcrum and in the crises its economically determinant premise, or the economic system reproduces itself, posing, once more and at a higher level, all of its contradictions, without creating in this way the conditions for its own self-destruction*”

As in the 2002 statement, the new article argued that the concept of decadence has little to do with a serious critique of political economy: it could only be considered useful if we can “prove” it economically, by examining the tendencies in the rate of profit: “*Nor is the evolutionary theory valid, according to which capitalism is historically characterised by a progressive phase and a decadent one, if no coherent economic explanation is given (...) The investigation of decadence either individuates these mechanisms which regulate the deceleration of the valorisation process of capital, with all the consequences which that brings with it, or it remains within a false perspective, which prophesises in vain (...) But the listing of these economic and social phenomena, once they have been identified and described, cannot, by itself, be considered as a demonstration of the decadent phase of capitalism. These are only the symptoms, and the primary cause which brings them into existence is to be identified in the law of the profit crisis.*”

The two *International Review* articles written in reply¹⁸ showed that while the Internationalist Communist Party - Battaglia Comunista, the ICT’s section in Italy, from whom this contribution originated – had always been somewhat inconsistent in its adherence to the notion of decadence, this marked a real regression to the “Bordigist” view which had been one of the elements leading to the 1952 split in the Internationalist Communist Party. Bordiga – whose position was strongly opposed by Damen,

as we saw in a previous article in this series¹⁹ – had claimed that the “theory of the descending curve” was fatalist, while also denying any objective limits to the growth of capital. As for the idea of economically “proving” decadence, the recognition that 1914 opened up a qualitative new phase in the life of capital had been affirmed by marxists like Lenin, Luxemburg and the communist left above all on the basis of social, political and military factors – like any good physician, they had diagnosed the disease from its most evident symptoms, above all world war and world revolution.²⁰

We are unclear about how this discussion has been pursued within the ICT following the publication of this article by Battaglia²¹. The fact remains however that both the articles we have mentioned here are a reflection of a more general flight away from the coherence of the Italian left, an expression of this trend within one of the most solid groups of this tradition.

The regression from decadence theory from elements in the communist left may be seen by some as a liberation from a rigid dogmatism and an opening towards theoretical enrichment. But while we are the last to deny the need to elucidate and deepen the whole question of capitalism’s ascent and decline,²² it seems to us that what we are facing in the main here is a retreat from the clarity of the marxist tradition and a concession to the enormous weight of bourgeois ideology, which is necessarily predicated on faith in the eternal, self-rejuvenating nature of this social order.

Aufheben: It is capital that is “objectivist”, not marxism

As we said at the beginning of this article, this problem – the incapacity to grasp

19. <http://en.internationalism.org/internationalreview/201111/4596/post-war-boom-did-not-reverse-decline-capitalism>

20. The article in *International Review* n° 120 also exposes the hypocritical claims of a group of elements who really had been excluded from the ICC for their unacceptable behaviour: the “Internal Fraction of the ICC”, who published a fawning article about Battaglia’s contribution. Having attacked the ICC for abandoning the concept of decadence via the theory of decomposition (which has no meaning outside of a concept of decadence) the political project of this “Fraction” – to attack the ICC while flattering the IBRP – was revealed very clearly in this article.

21. It seems that the article from *Prometeo* 8 was a discussion document and not a statement of position by the IBRP or one of its affiliated groups, which made the title of our response (“Battaglia Comunista abandons the marxist concept of decadence”) somewhat inappropriate

22. For example: the debate on the economic basis of the post-war boom (see http://en.internationalism.org/ir/133/economic_debate_decadence, and articles in subsequent issues) and the recognition that decadence has a history, leading to the concept of decomposition as the final stage of capitalist decline.

16. <http://www.leftcom.org/en/articles/2002-08-01/comments-on-the-latest-crisis-of-the-icc>

17. <http://www.leftcom.org/en/articles/2003-12-01/for-a-definition-of-the-concept-of-decadence>

18. http://en.internationalism.org/ir/119_decadence_ii.html and http://en.internationalism.org/ir/120_decadence_iii.html

capitalism as a transient form of social organisation which has already proved its obsolescence – is particularly prevalent in the new generation of politicised minorities, who are strongly influenced by anarchism. But anarchism as such has little to offer at the theoretical level, above all when it comes to the critique of political economy, and is usually obliged to borrow from marxism if wants to give the appearance of real depth. To some extent, this has been the role of the *Aufheben* group in the libertarian communist milieu in Britain and internationally, much of which has eagerly awaited the yearly production of the *Aufheben* magazine to provide it with weighty analyses of the questions of the hour written from the standpoint of “autonomist marxism”. In particular, the series on decadence²³ has been seen by many as the definitive refutation of this concept of capitalist decline, seen as a heritage of the mechanical marxism of the Second International, an “objectivist” view of the dynamic of capitalism which totally underestimates the subjective dimension of the class struggle.

“For the left Social-democrats it is seen as essential to insist capitalism is in decay - is approaching its collapse. The meaning of ‘marxism’ is being inscribed as accepting that capitalism is bankrupt and thus that revolutionary action is necessary. Thus they do engage in revolutionary action, but as we have seen, because the focus is on the objective contradictions of the system with revolutionary subjective action a reaction to it, they do not relate to the true necessary prerequisite of the end of capitalism – the concrete development of the revolutionary subject. It seemed to the more revolutionary members of the movement such as Lenin and Luxemburg that a revolutionary position was a position of belief in breakdown while the theory of breakdown had in fact worked to allow a reformist position at the start of the Second International. The point was that the theory of capitalist decline as a theory of capitalism’s collapse from its own objective contradictions involves an essentially contemplative stance before the objectivity of capitalism, while the real requirement for revolution is the breaking of that contemplative attitude.”²⁴

Aufheben considers that both the Trotskyists and left communists of today are the heirs of this (left) social democratic tradition: “Our criticism is that their theory contemplates the development of capitalism, the practical consequences of which being the fact that the trots move after anything that moves in order to recruit

for the final showdown while the left communists stand aloof waiting for the pure example of revolutionary action by the workers. Behind this apparent opposition in ways of relating to struggle, they share a conception of capitalism’s collapse, which means that they do not learn from the real movement. Although there is a tendency to slip into pronouncements that socialism is inevitable, in general for the decadence theorists it is that socialism will not come inevitably - we should not all go off to the pub - but capitalism will breakdown. This theory can then accompany the Leninist building of an organisation in the present or else, as with Mattick, it may await that moment of collapse when it becomes possible to create a proper revolutionary organisation. The theory of decay and the Crisis is upheld and understood by the party, the proletariat must put itself behind its banner. That is to say ‘we understand History, follow our banner’. The theory of decline fits comfortably with the Leninist theory of consciousness, which of course took much from Kautsky who ended his commentary on the Erfurt Program with the prediction that the middle classes would stream ‘into the Socialist Party and hand in hand with the irresistibly advancing proletariat, follow its banner to victory and triumph’.”

As can be seen from this claim that the theory of decadence leads logically to a “Leninist” theory of class consciousness, *Aufheben*’s general outlook has been influenced by *Socialisme ou Barbarie* (whose abandonment of the marxist theory of crisis in the 1960s was examined in a previous article in this series²⁵) and in particular by Italian autonomism.²⁶ Both these currents shared a criticism of an “objectivist” reading of Marx, where a focus on the remorseless working out of the economic laws of capital minimises the impact of the class struggle on the organisation of capitalist society and fails to grasp the importance of the subjective experience of the working class in the face of its exploitation. At the same time *Aufheben* were aware that Marx’s theory of alienation is founded precisely on the subjectivity of the proletariat and criticised Cardan (S ou B’s main theoretician) for erecting a criticism of Marx which failed to take into account this key element of his thought: “S or B’s ‘fundamental contradiction’ does not grasp the full radicality of Marx’s critique of alienation. In other words they presented as an innovation what was actually an

impoverishment of Marx’s critique.”²⁷

The autonomists also went beyond Cardan’s superficial idea that Marx had written “a monumental work (*Capital*) from which the class struggle is virtually absent.”²⁸ Harry Cleaver’s book *Reading Capital Politically*, published in 1979, which explicitly identifies itself with the tradition of “autonomist marxism”, demonstrates very well that in Marx’s approach, capital is defined as a *social relation* and as such necessarily includes the proletariat’s resistance to exploitation, which in turn modifies capital’s way of organising itself. This was evident, for example, in the struggle for the reduction of the working day and the switch to the extraction of relative surplus value rather than absolute surplus value (during the 19th century), and the system’s growing need for state planning to deal with the proletarian danger (in the 20th century).

This is a valid corrective to a mechanistic “Kautskyite” view which did indeed develop during the period of the Second International, according to which the inexorable laws of capitalist economy will more or less guarantee that power will fall “like a ripe fruit” into the hands of a well-organised social democratic party. Furthermore, as Cleaver also points out, this approach, which really does underestimate the subjective development of class consciousness, is not avoided by a kind of ultra-Leninism which interposes the party as the only true element of subjectivity, as in Trotsky’s famous dictum that “the crisis of humanity is reduced to the crisis of revolutionary leadership.”²⁹ The party is indeed a subjective factor, but its capacity to grow and influence the class movement depends on a much wider development of proletarian combat and consciousness.

It’s also true that the bourgeoisie is obliged to reckon with the struggle of the working class in its attempts to manage society - not only at the economic level but also at the political and military level. And the ICC’s analyses of the world situation have certainly taken this into account. Several examples can be given: when we interpret the choice of political teams to run the “democratic” state, we always define the class struggle as a central element. This is why during the 1980s we talked about the bourgeoisie’s preference for keeping left parties in opposition to better

27. <http://libcom.org/library/decadence-aufheben-3>

28. Cardan, *Modern capitalism and revolution*. From the chapter “Political implications of the “classical” theory”.

29. *The Death Agony of Capitalism*. See the article in this series in *IR* 146: “Decadence of Capitalism: For revolutionaries, the Great Depression confirms the obsolescence of capitalism” <http://en.internationalism.org/ir/146/great-depression>

23. “Decadence: The Theory of Decline or the Decline of Theory?”, which began with issue n° 2, summer 1993.

24. <http://libcom.org/library/decadence-aufheben-2>

25. <http://en.internationalism.org/internationalreview/201111/4596/post-war-boom-did-not-reverse-decline-capitalism>

26. “The rise and fall of Autonomia Operaia”, *IR* 16: http://en.internationalism.org/specialtexts/IR016_auto_operaia.htm

deal with proletarian reactions to austerity measures. By the same token, the strategy of privatisation not only has an economic function dictated by the abstract laws of the economy (generalising the sanction of the market to every stage of the labour process), but also a social function aimed at fragmenting the proletariat's response to attacks on its living standards, which are no longer seen as emanating directly from a single boss, the capitalist state. On the more historical plane, we have always maintained that the weight of the class struggle, whether overt or potential, plays a crucial role in determining the "historic course" towards war or revolution. We cite these examples to show that there is no logical link between holding a theory of capitalist decline and denying the factor of class subjectivity in determining the general dynamic of capitalist society.

But the autonomists lost the plot altogether when they concluded that the economic crisis which broke to the surface at the end of the 1960s was itself a product of the class struggle. Even if workers' struggles can at certain moments deepen the bourgeoisie's economic difficulties and block its "solutions", we also know only too well that the economic crisis can reach catastrophic proportions in phases when the class struggle is in profound retreat. The Depression of the 1930s provides us with the clearest evidence of this. The view that workers' struggles provoked the economic crisis had a certain plausibility in the 70s when both phenomena appeared at the same time, but Aufheben themselves are able to see its limitations in the section in the series on decadence which deals with the autonomists: "*The class struggle theory of crisis lost its way somewhat in the '80s, for while in the seventies the breaking of capital's objective laws was plain, with capital's partial success the emergent subject was knocked back. It appears that during the '80s we have seen the objective laws of capital given free reign to run amok through our lives. A theory which connected the manifestations of crisis to the concrete behaviours of the class found little offensive struggle to connect to and yet crisis remained. The theory had become less appropriate to the conditions.*"³⁰

So what is left of the equation between decadence theory and "objectivism"? Earlier on we mentioned that Aufheben correctly criticised Cardan for ignoring the real implications of Marx's theory of alienation. Unfortunately, they commit the same error when they amalgamate the theory of capitalist decline with the "objectivist" vision of capital as nothing more than a machine regulated by its clock-work, inhuman laws. But for marxism,

capital is not something hovering above humanity like God; or rather, like God, it is engendered by human activity. But this is an alienated activity, which means that it takes on a life independent of its creators – in the end, both of the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, since both are driven by the abstract laws of the market towards an abyss of economic and social disaster. This objectivism of capital is precisely what the proletarian revolution aims to abolish, not by humanising these laws but replacing them with the conscious subordination of production to human need.

In *World Revolution* n°168 (October 93)³¹ we published an initial response to Aufheben's articles on decadence. The central argument in the article is that, in attacking the theory of decadence, Aufheben are rejecting Marx's entire approach to history. In particular, by raising the charge of "objectivism", they ignore the critical breakthrough made by marxism in rejecting both vulgar materialist and idealist methodologies, and thus in overcoming the dichotomy between the objective and the subjective, between freedom and necessity.³²

Interestingly, not only did Aufheben's original articles on decadence recognise the inadequacy of the autonomists' explanation of the crisis: in a highly critical introduction to the series that accompanies the online version of the series on libcom.org,³³ they admit that they had failed to grasp precisely this relationship between the objective and the subjective factors in a number of marxist thinkers (including Rosa Luxemburg, who certainly defended the notion of capitalist decline) and accepted that our criticisms of them on this key point had been quite valid. Indeed, they realised after the publication of the third article that the whole series had gone off the rails and for this reason had been abandoned. This self-critique is not particularly well known, while the original series continues to be referenced as a final smack down for decadence theory.

31. http://en.internationalism.org/wr/168_polemics_with_aufheben

32. See also the article in this series in *International Review* n° 141 "The theory of capitalist decline and the struggle against revisionism", which contains a criticism of Aufheben's notion that decadence theory begins in the Second International. <http://en.internationalism.org/ir/141/capitalist-decline-revisionism>

33. <http://libcom.org/aufheben/decadence>. In this introduction, Aufheben make it clear that at the beginning of the group, the ICC's writings had been an important reference point. However, they argue that our dogmatic and sectarian approach to them (for example at a meeting in London about the future of the European Union) convinced them that it was not possible to discuss with us. It is true that the ICC had a sectarian approach to Aufheben to some extent, and this was also reflected in our 1993 article, for example at the end when we say to the group that it would be better if it was to disappear.

Such self-examination can only be welcome, but we are not convinced that its results have been especially positive. The most obvious indication being that, precisely at a time where the economic impasse facing this system seems more and more obvious, the most recent editions of *Aufheben* show that the group has been engaging in a mountain of labour to produce a very disappointing molehill: for them, the "debt crisis" which broke out in 2007 is not in the least an expression of an underlying problem in the accumulation process but arises essentially from the errors of the financial sector. What's more it could quite easily lead to a new and extended "upswing" like the one that supposedly preceded it in the 90s and 2000s.³⁴ We have not got the space to go further into this article here, but this is beginning to look like anti-decadentism reaching the final phase of its decline.

34. The concluding paragraphs of the article, published in 2011, read: "*there seems little to suggest we have entered a long downswing, or that capitalism is now mired in stagnation other than the financial crisis itself. Indeed the rapid recovery in profits, and the confidence of much of the bourgeoisie in the long-term prospects of renewed capital accumulation, would seem to suggest otherwise. But if global capitalism is still in the middle of a long upswing, with historically high rates of profits, how are we to explain the unforeseen financial crisis of 2007-08?*"

"*As we have long argued, against the 'stagnationist' orthodoxy, 'upswing' theory has been correct in grasping that the restructuring of the global accumulation of capital that has occurred in the past decade, particularly the integration into the world economy of China and Asia, has led to the restoration of profit rates and, as a consequence, a sustained economic upswing. But as we now recognise, the problem is that the upswing theory has failed to adequately grasp the importance of the emergence of global banking and finance, and the role this has played in bringing about this restructuring.*"

"*Thus, in order to overcome the limitations of both the 'stagnationist' and 'upswinger' theories of the crisis it was necessary to examine the relation between the emergence and development of global banking and finance and the global restructuring of real capital accumulation that has occurred over the past thirty years. On the basis of this examination we have been able to conclude that the financial crisis of 2007-8 was caused neither by an accident due to misguided policy, nor a crisis in the financial system that simply reflected an underlying crisis of stagnation of the real accumulation of capital. But instead, the underlying cause of the financial crisis was an oversupply of loanable money-capital within the global banking and financial system that has arisen since the late 1990s. This in turn has been the result of developments in the real accumulation of capital - such as the rise of China, the take off of the 'new economy' and the continued liquidation of the 'old economy' - that have been central to sustaining the long upturn.*"

"*Hence, we might tentatively conclude that the nature and significance of the financial crisis is not that of a decisive turning point leading to an economic downturn or the end of neoliberalism as many have supposed, but more of a point of inflection pointing to a new phase in the long upturn. The significance of this new phase and the implications it has for the future development of global capitalism and the struggle against it is a question that we have no space to take up here.*" *Aufheben* no. 19 <http://libcom.org/library/return-crisis-part-2>

A very provisional conclusion

We will end this particular polemic here, but the debate about this whole issue will certainly continue. It has been made increasingly urgent by the fact that for more and more people, above all in the younger generation, are becoming aware that capitalism really does have no future, that the crisis is indeed terminal. This is more and more the question to be debated in the class battles and social revolts that the crisis is provoking all over the globe. It is more than ever vital to provide a clear theoretical framework for understanding the historic nature of the impasse facing the capitalist system, of insisting that this is a mode of production that is out of control and is heading towards self-destruction, and thus of pointing out the impossibility of all reformist solutions aimed at making capital more human or democratic. In short, of demonstrating that the alternative of socialism or barbarism, proclaimed loudly and clearly by revolutionaries in 1914, is more relevant today than ever. Such a call is anything but a plea for passive acceptance of the way society is going. On the contrary it is a demand for the proletariat to act, to become increasingly conscious and to open up the road to a communist future which is possible, necessary, but anything but guaranteed.

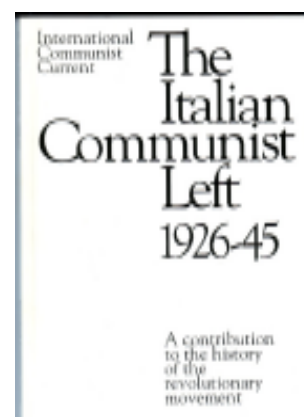
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This history of the Italian Left is not neutral, looking down on the social battlefield. In today's world of decomposing capitalism, the alternative posed more than sixty years ago by the Communist Left is more valid than ever: "communist revolution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

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

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

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

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BASIC POSITIONS OF THE ICC

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

proletariat.

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

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

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

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

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

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

OUR ACTIVITY

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

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

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

OUR ORIGINS

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

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