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International Communist Current

Autumn 2016

International Review

Introduction to the *Review*

Brexit, Trump

**Setbacks for the ruling class,
nothing good for the proletariat**

On the question of populism

Conference of the ICC sections in Germany
Switzerland and Sweden

Report on the situation in Germany

100 years since the Dublin Easter Rising

**The national question 100 years after
the Easter Rising**

IRA: Soldiers of imperialism (1978)

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Introduction to the *Review*

The summer of 2016 has been marked by signs of growing instability and unpredictability on a world scale, confirming that the capitalist class is finding it increasingly difficult to present itself as the guarantor of order and political control. The botched coup and subsequent wave of repression in Turkey, a strategically vital lynchpin of the global imperialist arena; the “blow back” of the chaos in the Middle East in the form of terrorist outrages in Germany and France; the intense political tremors provoked by the EU referendum result in the UK and the awful prospects taking shape with Trump’s presidential candidacy in the US: all these phenomena, so full of dangers for the ruling class, are no less threatening to the working class, and it is a major challenge to the revolutionary minorities within our class to develop a coherent analysis which cuts through the ideological fog obscuring these events.

It is not possible, in this *International Review*, to cover all these elements of the world situation. With regard to the coup in Turkey in particular, we want to take the time to discuss its implications and work on a clear analytical framework. For the moment we intend to focus on a series of questions which seem to us to be even more urgent to clarify: the implications of “Brexit” and the Trump candidacy; the national situation in Germany, in particular the problems created by the European refugee crisis; and the social phenomenon common to all these developments: the rise of populism.

We ourselves have been late to recognise the significance of the populist movements. Hence, the text on populism presented in

this issue is an individual contribution, written to stimulate reflection and discussion in the ICC (and hopefully beyond). It argues that populism is the product of an impasse which lies at the heart of society; even if the bourgeois state is giving rise to factions and parties which are attempting to ride this tiger, the result of the EU referendum in the UK and Trump’s ascendancy in the Republican Party demonstrate that this is no easy ride and can even deepen the political difficulties of the ruling class.

The purpose of the article on Brexit and the US presidential elections is to apply the ideas of the text on populism to a concrete situation. It is also intended to correct an idea present in previous articles published on our site, that the Brexit referendum result is somehow a “success” for bourgeois democracy, or that the rise of populism today “strengthens democracy”.

We also publish two historical articles on the national question, focusing on the case of Ireland. They are included not simply because we have reached the centenary of the 1916 Dublin rising, but because this event (and the subsequent history of the Irish Republican Army) was one of the first clear signs that the working class could no longer ally itself with nationalist movements or incorporate “national” demands in its programme; and because today, faced with a new surge of nationalism in the centres of the capitalist system, the necessity for revolutionaries to affirm that the working class has no country is more urgent than ever. As the Report on the German national situation puts it, overcoming the boundaries of the nation is the awesome challenge confronting the proletariat in the

face of globalised capitalism and the false alternatives of populism:

“Today, with contemporary globalisation, an objective historical tendency of decadent capitalism achieves its full development: each strike, each act of economic resistance by workers anywhere in the world, finds itself immediately confronted by the whole of world capital, ever ready to withdraw production and investment and produce somewhere else. For the moment, the international proletariat has been quite unable to find an adequate answer, or even to gain a glimpse of what such an answer might look like. We do not know if it will succeed in the end in doing so. But it seems clear that the development in this direction would take much longer than did the transition from trade unionism to mass strike. For one thing, the situation of the proletariat in the old, central countries of capitalism – those, like Germany, at the “top” of the economic hierarchy – would have to become much more dramatic than is today the case. For another, the step required by objective reality – conscious international class struggle, the “international mass strike” – is much more demanding than the one from trade union to mass strike in one country. For it obliges the working class to call into question not only corporatism and sectionalism, but the main, often centuries- or even millennia-old divisions of class society such as nationality, ethnic culture, race, religion, sex etc. This is a much more profound and more political step”.

ICC, August 2016

Brexit, Trump

Setbacks for the ruling class, nothing good for the proletariat

The referendum that went out of control

More than thirty years ago in the “Theses on Decomposition”,¹ we said that the bourgeoisie would find it more and more difficult to control the centrifugal tendencies of its own political apparatus. What this might mean concretely is demonstrated by the “Brexit” referendum in Britain, and Donald Trump’s candidature for the presidency in the United States. In both cases, unscrupulous political adventurers from the ruling class have exploited the populist revolt of those who have suffered most from the economic upheavals of the last thirty years, for their own self-aggrandisement.

The ICC has been late to recognise the rise of populism and to take account of its consequences. This is why we are publishing now a general text on populism, which is still under discussion in the organisation.² The article that follows aims to apply the main ideas put forward in the discussion text to the specific situations of Britain and the USA. In a rapidly evolving world situation, it has no pretension to being complete, but we hope that it will give food for thought and further discussion. The ruling class’ loss of control has never been more strikingly evident than in the spectacle of unprecedented shambolic disorder presented by the EU referendum in Britain and its aftermath. Never before has Britain’s capitalist class so far lost control of the democratic process, never before has it found its vital interests at the mercy of adventurers like Boris Johnson or Nigel Farage.

The failure on all sides to prepare for the consequences of Brexit shows the extent of the disarray within the British ruling class. Within hours of the results being announced, the main Leave campaigners were explaining to their supporters that the £350 million per week extra for the NHS¹ which they had promised a Brexit vote would bring – and a figure which had been plastered all over the sides of the Leave campaign buses – was in the nature of a “typing error”. Within days, Farage had resigned as UKIP² leader, dumping the whole Brexit mess in the laps of his fellow Leavers; Boris Johnson’s former director of communications Guto Harri declared that Johnson’s “*heart wasn’t in the Brexit campaign*”, and there is more than a strong suspicion that Johnson’s espousal of the Brexit cause was a purely opportunistic, self-serving manoeuvre designed to boost his leadership challenge to David Cameron; Michael Gove, who had been Johnson’s campaign manager all through the referendum and was supposed to run Johnson’s campaign for PM (and who had repeatedly

declared his own lack of interest in the job), stabbed Johnson in the back with only two hours to go before the candidature deadline, putting forward his own name for leader on the grounds that his longtime friend Johnson was not fitted to be PM; Andrea Leadsom entered the Tory leadership race as a firm Leave supporter – having declared only three years previously that leaving the EU would be a “disaster” for Britain. Lies, hypocrisy, double-dealing – none of this is new to ruling class politics of course. What is striking is the loss, within the world’s most experienced ruling class, of any sense of the state, of an overriding historic national interest which goes beyond personal ambition or the petty rivalries of cliques. To find a comparable episode in the life of the English ruling class, we would have to return to the Wars of the Roses (as dramatised in Shakespeare’s life of Henry VI), the last gasp of a decaying feudal order.

The unpreparedness of the financial and industrial bosses for a Leave victory is equally striking, especially given all the signs that the result was going to be “*the nearest run thing you ever saw in your life*” (if one may be permitted to quote the Duke of Wellington after the Battle of Waterloo).³

Sterling’s immediate collapse by 20%, then 30%, against the dollar is an indication that Brexit was not an expected result – it had not been factored in to Sterling’s value before the referendum. We were treated to the unedifying spectacle of banks and businesses rushing for the exit as they looked to move offices, or even incorporation, to Dublin or Paris. George Osborne’s snap decision to reduce corporation tax to 15% was clearly an emergency move to keep companies in Britain, the British economy being one of the world’s most dependent on FDI (Foreign Direct Investment).

The Empire strikes back

All this being said, Britain’s ruling class is not out for the count. Cameron’s immediate replacement as PM by Theresa May (not initially expected before September) – a solid and competent politician who had campaigned discreetly for Remain – and the demolition jobs done by the press and Tory MPs on her opponents Andrea Leadsom and Michael Gove, demonstrate a real capacity for rapid, coherent reaction on the part of the ruling class’ dominant state factions.

Fundamentally, this situation is determined by the evolution of world capitalism and the balance of class forces. It is the product of a more general dynamic towards the destabilisation of coherent bourgeois policies in the present stage of decadent capitalism. The driving forces behind the tendency towards populism are not the subject of this article: they are analysed in the discussion text “On the problem of populism” mentioned above. But these general international phenomena take concrete shape under the influence of specific national histories and characteristics. Hence the Tory party has always had its “Eurosceptic” wing which has never really accepted Britain’s membership of the EU and whose origins we can define

and – perhaps more to the point – that nobody really expected Leave to actually win the referendum. This was even true of the Leavers themselves. Apparently, Farage conceded victory to Remain at one in the morning the night of the referendum, only to discover to his shock the morning after that Remain had lost.

1. Published in 2001 in *International Review* n° 107 (http://en.internationalism.org/ir/107_decomposition).

2. See this issue of the *Review*.

1. National Health Service.

2. United Kingdom Independence Party: a populist party founded in 1991 which campaigns essentially for leaving the EU and against immigration. Paradoxically, it has 22 MEPs which makes it the largest single British party in the European Parliament.

3. It is true that the EU and the British Treasury made some effort to envisage contingency plans in the event of a victory for the Leave camp. Nonetheless, it seems clear that these preparations were inadequate

as follows:

- 1) Britain's – and before it England's – geographical position off the coast of Europe has meant that Britain has been able to remain detached from European rivalries in a way that continental states cannot; its relatively small size, and its non-existence as a land power, has meant that it could never hope to dominate Europe as France did until the 19th century or Germany since 1870, but could only defend its vital interests by playing the main powers against each other and avoiding commitment to any of them.
- 2) Britain's geographical position as an island, and its status as the world's first industrial nation, have determined its rise as a maritime world imperialism. Since at least the 17th century, the British ruling classes have had a world outlook, which again let them maintain a certain aloofness from solely European politics.

This situation changed radically after World War II, first because Britain's status as a dominant world power was no longer sustainable, second because modern military technology (airpower, long-range missiles, nuclear weapons) meant that isolation from European politics was no longer an option. One of the first to recognise this changed situation was Winston Churchill, who in 1946 called for the creation of a "United States of Europe", but his position was never wholly accepted within the Conservative Party. Opposition to membership of the EU⁴ grew as Germany increased in strength, especially after the collapse of the USSR and Germany's reunification in 1990 substantially increased the latter's weight in Europe. During the referendum campaign, Boris Johnson famously caused a scandal by saying that the EU was an instrument of German domination "à la Hitler", but he was hardly being original. The same sentiments, in much the same language, had already been expressed in 1990 by Nicholas Ridley, then a minister in Thatcher's government. It is a sign of the loss of authority and discipline within the post-war political apparatus that whereas Ridley was immediately forced to resign from government, the repercussions for Johnson have been membership of the new cabinet.

- 3) Britain's one-time status, and loss of status, as the world's greatest imperial power is a deeply-rooted psychological and cultural phenomenon within the British population (including the

working class). The national obsession with World War II – the last time Britain could appear to act as an independent world power – illustrates this perfectly. A part of the British bourgeoisie, and still more the petty bourgeoisie, has still not got the message that Britain is today merely a second or third rate power. Many of the Leave campaigners appeared to believe that if only Britain were free of the "shackles" of the EU, the world would rush to buy British goods and services – a fantasy for which the British economy is likely to pay a heavy price.

This sensation of resentment and anger at the outside world for a loss of imperial power is comparable to that felt by a part of the American population as a result of the United States' perceived loss of status (a constant theme of Trump's calls to "Make America great again") and inability to impose its own rule as it could during the Cold War.

The referendum as a concession to populism

The populist antics of Boris Johnson are more spectacular, and got more media hype, than David Cameron's old school upper-crust "responsible" persona. But in reality, Cameron is a better indication of how far the rot has gone in the ruling class. Johnson may have been the principal actor, but it was Cameron who set the stage by using the promise of a referendum for party political advantage to win the last general election. By its very nature, a referendum is more difficult to control than a parliamentary election and as such always represents a gamble.⁵ Like an addict in a casino, Cameron showed himself to be a repeat gambler, first with the referendum on Scottish independence which he won by the skin of his teeth, then with Brexit. His Conservative Party, which has always presented itself as the best defender of the economy, the Union,⁶ and national defence, has ended up putting all three at risk.

Given the difficulty of manipulating the results, plebiscites about important matters of national interest are for the most part an unwarranted risk for the ruling class. In the classical concept and ideology of parliamentary democracy, even in its decadent sham form, such decisions are supposed to be taken by "elected representatives" advised (and lobbied) by experts and interest groups – not by the population at large.

5. It is worth remembering that Thatcher remained in power for more than ten years despite never winning more than 40% of the popular vote in parliamentary elections.

6. That is to say the Union of the United Kingdom of England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland.

From the point of view of the bourgeoisie, it is a pure aberration to ask millions to decide on complex issues like the EU Constitutional Treaty of 2004, when the mass of voters were unwilling and even unable to read or understand the treaty text. No wonder the ruling class so often got the "wrong" result in the referenda held over this treaty (France, Netherlands, first time round in Ireland).⁷

There are those within the British bourgeoisie today who seem to hope that the May government will pull off the same trick as the French and Irish governments after their botched referenda over the Constitutional Treaty, and somehow just ignore or overturn the referendum. This seems to us unlikely, at least in the short term, not because the British bourgeoisie is more ardently democratic than its fellows but precisely because ignoring the "democratic" expression of the "popular will" merely gives credit to populist ideas and makes them more dangerous.

Theresa May's strategy so far has thus been to make the best of a bad job and to set out down the Brexit path with three of the best-known Leavers in ministerial posts, with responsibility for organising Britain's disentanglement from the EU. Even May's appointment of the clown Johnson as Foreign Minister – greeted abroad with a mixture of horror, hilarity, and disbelief – is certainly part of this broader strategy. By putting Johnson in the hot seat of the negotiations to leave the EU, May has made sure that the Leavers' main mouth will have to take much of the flak – and the discredit – for what will almost certainly be unfavourable terms, and is prevented from sniping from the sidelines.

The perception, especially by those who are voting for the populist movements in Europe or the USA, that the whole democratic process is a swindle because the elite simply ignores inconvenient results, is a real threat to the effectiveness of democracy itself as a system of class rule. In the populist conception of politics, "direct decision making by the people" is supposed to circumvent the corruption of elected representatives by the established political elites. This is why in Germany such referendums are excluded by the post-war constitution following the negative experience of the Weimar Republic and their use in Nazi Germany.⁸

4. Britain entered the European Economic Community (EEC) under a Conservative government in 1973. Its membership was confirmed by a referendum held by the Labour government in 1975.

7. Following these inconvenient results, the European governments dropped the Constitutional Treaty, but rescued its most essential elements by simply modifying the existing arrangements with the Lisbon Treaty of 2009.

8. One should make a distinction here with referenda in places like Switzerland and California, where they are part of the historically established political process.

The election that ran off the rails

If Brexit was a referendum that got out of control, Trump's selection as Republican candidate for the US presidency in 2016 is an election that ran off the rails. When Trump's candidacy was first declared it was barely taken seriously: the front runner was Jeb Bush, member of the Bush dynasty, preferred choice of the Republican grandees, and as such potentially a powerful fundraiser (always a crucial consideration in US elections). But against all expectations, Trump triumphed in the early primaries and went on to win state after state. Bush fizzled like a damp squib, other candidates were never much more than also-rans, and Republican Party bosses ended confronting the unpalatable prospect that the only candidate with any chance of defeating Trump was Ted Cruz, a man considered by his Senate colleagues as wholly untrustworthy, and only marginally less egotistical and self-serving than Trump himself.

The possibility that Trump might beat Clinton is in itself an indication of how insane the political situation has become. But already, Trump's candidacy has sent shock waves through the whole system of imperialist alliances. For 70 years, the USA has been the guarantor of the NATO alliance whose effectiveness depends on the inviolability of reciprocal defence: an attack on one is an attack on all. When a potential US President calls into question the NATO alliance, and US readiness to honour its treaty obligations, as Trump has done by declaring that a US response to a Russian attack on the Baltic states would depend on whether in his judgment they had "paid their way", it certainly sends shivers down the collective spines of the East European ruling classes that confront Putin's Mafia state directly, not to mention of those Asian countries (Japan, South Korea, Vietnam, Philippines) that are relying on America to protect them from the Chinese dragon. Almost equally alarming is the strong possibility that Trump simply does not know what is going on, as suggested by his recent statement that there are no Russian troops in the Ukraine (apparently unaware that Crimea is still considered part of the Ukraine by everybody except the Russians).

Not only that, Trump has gone on to welcome the Russian secret services hacking into the Democratic Party's IT systems and more or less invited Putin to do his worst. How much, if at all, this will damage Trump is hard to tell, but it is worth recalling that ever since 1945 the Republican Party has been vigorously, if not rabidly anti-Russian, in favour of

a powerful military establishment and a massive military presence world-wide no matter what the cost (it was Reagan's colossal military build-up that really sent the budget deficit through the roof).

This is not the first time the Republican Party has fielded a candidate regarded as dangerously extreme by its leadership. In 1964 it was Barry Goldwater who won the primaries, thanks to support from the religious right and the "conservative coalition" – the forerunners of today's Tea Party. His programme was at least coherent: drastic reduction of the Federal government especially social security, military strength and readiness to use nuclear weapons against the USSR. This was a classic far-right programme, but one that fitted not at all with the needs of US state capitalism and Goldwater went on to be heavily defeated in the election, partly as a result of the failure of the Republican hierarchy to back him.

Is Trump just a Goldwater 2.0? Not at all, and the differences are instructive. Goldwater's candidacy represented a seizure of the Republican Party by the "Tea Party" of the time, which was sidelined for years following Goldwater's crushing electoral defeat. It is no secret that the last couple of decades have seen a comeback for this tendency which has made a more or less successful takeover bid for the GOP.⁹ However, the Goldwater supporters were, in the truest sense, a "conservative coalition": they represented a real conservative tendency within an America undergoing profound social changes (feminism, the Civil Rights movement, the beginning of opposition to the Vietnam War, and the breakdown of traditional values). Although many of the Tea Party's "causes" may be the same as Goldwater's, the context is not: the social changes he opposed have taken place, such that the Tea Party is not so much a coalition of conservatives as an alliance of hysterical reaction.

This has created increasing difficulties for the big bourgeoisie, which cares little or nothing about these social and "cultural" issues and is basically interested in US military strength and the free trade from which it profits. It has become a truism that anyone running in a Republican primary must prove himself "irreproachable" on a whole series of issues: abortion (you must be "pro-life"), gun control (against it), fiscal conservatism and lower taxation, "Obamacare" (socialism, it should be abolished: indeed Ted Cruz based a part of his credentials on a publicity-seeking filibuster against Obamacare in the Senate), marriage (sacred), Democratic Party (if Satan had a

9. "Grand Old Party", a colloquial name for the Republican Party, dating back to the 19th century.

party this would be it). Now, in the space of a few short months, Trump has in effect eviscerated the Republican Party. Here we have a candidate who has shown himself "unreliable" on abortion, on gun control, on marriage (three times in his case), and who has in the past donated money to the Devil herself, Hillary Clinton. In addition, he proposes to raise the minimum wage, maintain Obamacare at least in part, return to an isolationist foreign policy, let the budget deficit go through the roof, and expel 11 million illegal immigrants whose cheap labour is vital to US business.

Like the Tories in Britain with Brexit, the Republican Party – and potentially the whole American ruling class – has found itself saddled with a programme which is completely irrational from the standpoint of its imperialist and economic class interests.

The implications

The only thing that we can say for certain, is that Brexit and the Trump candidacy will usher in a period of increased instability at every level: economic, political, and imperialist. At the economic level, the European countries – which, we should not forget, represent a major part of the world economy and its biggest single market – are already in a fragile condition: they have weathered the financial crisis of 2007/8 and the threat of a Greek exit from the Euro zone but they have not overcome them. Britain remains one of the major European economies and the long process of unravelling its connections with the EU will be fraught with unpredictability, not least on the financial level: nobody knows, for example, what effect Brexit will have on the City of London, Europe's major centre for banking, insurance, and share trading. Politically, the success of Brexit can only encourage, and give greater credit to the populist parties on the European continent: next year sees a presidential election in France, where Marine Le Pen's populist, anti-Europe, Front National is now the biggest single political party in terms of votes. The governments of Europe's major powers are torn between the desire to make Britain's separation from Europe as smooth and painless as possible, and a real fear that any concessions to Britain (such as, for example, access to the single market together with restrictions on movement of people) will give ideas to others, notably to countries like Poland and Hungary. The attempt to stabilise Europe's south-eastern border by integrating the countries of ex-Yugoslavia will almost certainly come to a halt. The EU will find it more difficult to present a united response to Erdogan's democratic *coup d'Etat* in Turkey and his

use of Syrian refugees as pawns in a vile game of blackmail.

Although the EU itself has never been an imperialist alliance, most of its members are also members of NATO. Any weakening of European cohesion is therefore likely to have a knock-on effect on NATO's ability to counter Russian pressure on its Eastern flank, destabilising further the Ukraine and the Baltic states. It is no secret that Russia has for some time been financing the French Front National and is at least using if not financing the German Pegida movement. The only outright winner from the Brexit referendum is in fact Vladimir Putin.

As we said above, the Trump candidacy has already dealt a blow to US credibility. The idea of a President Trump with his finger on the nuclear button is, it must be said, a frightening prospect.¹⁰ But as we have said many times, one of the major elements of instability and war today is the United States' determination to maintain its dominant imperialist position against all comers and this situation will remain unchanged whoever becomes president.

Rage against the machine

Boris Johnson and Donald Trump have more in common than a big mouth. Both are political adventurers, devoid of any principle or any sense of overriding national interest. Both are ready to twist and turn, to adjust their message to what their audience wants to hear. Their posturing antics are blown up by the media till they seem larger than life, but in reality they are complete non-entities, nothing but mouthpieces through which the losers from globalisation howl their rage, their despair, and their hatred for the wealthy elites and the immigrants they hold responsible for their misery. Hence Trump gets away with the most outrageous and contradictory statements: his supporters simply do not care, he is saying what they want to hear.

This is not to say that Johnson and Trump are identical, but their differences are less to do with personal character than they are with the differences between the ruling classes to which they belong: the British bourgeoisie has been playing a major role on the world stage for centuries, while the American's brash, buccaneering, self-absorbed phase only really came to an end with Roosevelt's defeat of the isolationists to enter World War II. Important fractions of the American ruling class remain deeply ignorant of the outside world, one is almost

tempted to say that they are stuck in a state of retarded adolescence.

Electoral results will never be an expression of class consciousness; nonetheless they can tell us something about the condition of the working class. Whether it be in the Brexit referendum, in support for Trump in the USA, for Marine Le Pen's Front National in France, or for the German populists of Pegida and Alternative für Deutschland, all the voting figures suggest that where these parties and movements gain workers' support it is predominantly among those who have suffered most from the changes in the capitalist economy during the last forty years, and who have not unreasonably concluded, after years of defeat and endless attacks on their living conditions from governments of right and left, that the only way to frighten the ruling elite is by voting for demonstrably irresponsible parties whose policies are anathema to that same elite. The tragedy is that it is precisely these workers who were among the most massively involved in the struggles of the 1970s.

A common theme in both the Brexit and the Trump campaigns is the idea that "we" can "take back control". No matter that "we" have never had any real control over our lives: as one resident of Boston UK put it "we just want things back the way they were". Back to when there were jobs, and jobs with decent wages, when the social solidarity of working-class communities had not been broken down by unemployment and dereliction, when change seemed something positive and happened at a manageable speed.

It is undoubtedly true that the Brexit vote has created a new and ugly mood in Britain, one where the outright racists feel freer to crawl out from behind the woodwork. But many – probably the great majority – of those who voted Brexit or Trump to stop immigration are not racists as such, rather they are suffering from xenophobia: fear of the foreign, fear of the unknown. And this unknown is basically the capitalist economy itself, which is inherently mysterious and incomprehensible because it presents the real social relationships in the process of production as if they were natural forces, as elemental and uncontrollable as the weather, but whose effects on workers' livelihoods can be even more devastating. It is a terrible irony, in this age of scientific discovery, that people no longer believe that bad weather is caused by witches, but are quite prepared to believe that their economic woes are caused by their immigrant fellows in misfortune.

The danger confronting us

We began this article by referring to the "Theses on decomposition", written almost 30 years ago in 1990. We will conclude by citing them:

"We must be especially clear on the danger of decomposition for the proletariat's ability to raise itself to the level of its historic task (...) The different elements which constitute the strength of the working class directly confront the various facets of this ideological decomposition:

- *solidarity and collective action are faced with the atomisation of 'look out for number one';*
- *the need for organisation confronts social decomposition, the disintegration of the relationships which form the basis for all social life;*
- *the proletariat's confidence in the future and in its own strength is constantly sapped by the all-pervasive despair and nihilism within society;*
- *consciousness, lucidity, coherent and unified thought, the taste for theory, have a hard time making headway in the midst of the flight into illusions, drugs, sects, mysticism, the rejection or destruction of thought which are characteristic of our epoch".*

That danger confronts us starkly today.

The rise of populism is dangerous for the ruling class because it threatens its ability to control its own political apparatus and at the same time maintain the democratic mystification which is one of the pillars of its social domination. But it offers nothing to the proletariat. On the contrary, it is precisely the proletariat's own weakness, its inability to offer any alternative perspective for the chaos threatening capitalism, that has made the rise of populism possible. Only the proletariat can offer a way out of the dead-end that society finds itself in today, and it will never be able to do so if workers let themselves be taken in by the siren songs of populist demagogues promising an impossible return to a past which, in any case, never existed.

Jens, August, 2016

10. One of the reasons for Goldwater's defeat was his declared readiness to use tactical nuclear weapons. The Johnson campaign countered Goldwater's slogan "In your heart, you know he's right", with the slogan "In your guts, you know he's nuts".

Discussion text

On the question of populism

The article that follows is a document under discussion in the ICC, written in June of this year, a few weeks before the "Brexit" referendum in the UK. The article in this issue of the Review on "Brexit, Trump: Setbacks for the ruling class, nothing good for the proletariat" is an attempt to apply the ideas put forward in this article to the concrete situations posed by the referendum result in Britain and by the candidature of Trump in the US.

We are presently witnessing a wave of political populism in the old central countries of capitalism. In states where this phenomenon is more long established, such as France or Switzerland, the right wing populists have become the biggest single political party at the electoral level. More striking however is the encroachment of populism in countries which until now were known for the political stability and efficiency of the ruling class: the USA, Britain, Germany. In these countries, it is only very recently that populism has succeeded in having a direct and serious impact.

The contemporary upsurge of right wing populism

In the United States the political establishment initially strongly underestimated the presidential candidature of Donald Trump in the Republican Party. His bid was at first opposed more or less openly both by the established party hierarchy and by the religious right. They were all taken aback by the popular support he found both in the Bible belt and in the old urban industrial centres, in particular among parts of the "white" working class. The ensuing media campaigns designed to cut him down to size, led among others by the Wall Street Journal and the East Coast media and financial oligarchies, only increased his popularity. The partial ruining of important layers of the middle, but also of the working classes, many of whom lost their savings and even their homes through the financial and property crashes of 2007/08, has provoked outrage against the old political establishment which rapidly intervened to save the banking sector, while leaving to their fate those small savers who had been trying to become owners of their own home.

The promises of Trump to support small savers, to maintain health services, to tax stock exchange and financial big business, and to keep out immigrants feared as potential competitors by parts of the poor, have found an echo both among

Christian religious fundamentalists and more left, traditionally Democratic voters who, only a few years before, would not even have dreamt they could vote for such a politician.

Almost half a century of bourgeois political "reformism", during which candidates of the left, whether at the national or municipal/local level, whether in parties or trade unions, having been elected to allegedly defend workers' interests, consistently upheld those of capital instead, have prepared the ground for the proverbial "man on the street" in America to consider supporting a multi-millionaire like Trump, with the assumption that he at least cannot be "bought" by the ruling class.

In Britain the main expression of populism at the moment seems to be not a particular candidate or political party (although the UKIP¹ of Nigel Farage has become a major player on the political stage), but the popularity of the proposal to leave the European Union, and of deciding this by referendum. The fact that this option is opposed by most of the mainstream of the finance world (City of London) and of British industry has, here also, tended to increase the appeal of "Brexit" among parts of the population. Apart from representing particular interests of parts of the ruling class much more closely tied to the former colonies (the Commonwealth) than to continental Europe, one of the motors of this opposition current seems to be to take the wind out of the sails of new right wing populist movements. Perhaps the likes of Boris Johnson and other Tory "Brexit" advocates would, in the event of an eventual exit, be the ones who would then have to salvage whatever can be saved by trying to negotiate some kind of a close associated status to the European Union, presumably along the lines of that of Switzerland (which usually adopts EU regulations, without however having any say in formulating them).

But it is also possible that politicians of the Conservative Party have themselves

become infested by the populist mood, which, in Britain also, gained ground rapidly after the financial and housing crises which negatively affected significant parts of the population.

In Germany, where, after World War II, the bourgeoisie has always succeeded until now in preventing the establishment of parliamentary parties to the right of Christian Democracy, a new populist movement appeared on the scene, both on the streets (Pegida) and at the electoral level (Alternative für Deutschland) in response, not to the "financial" crisis of 2007/08 (which Germany weathered relatively unscathed) but to the ensuing "Euro-Crisis", understood by part of the population as a direct threat to the stability of the joint European currency, and thus to the savings of millions of people.

But no sooner was this crisis defused, at least for the moment, than there began a massive influx of refugees, provoked in particular by the Syrian civil and imperialist war and by the conflict with ISIS in the north of Iraq. This re-energised a populist movement which was beginning to falter. Although a sizeable majority of the population still support the "welcoming culture" of chancellor Merkel and of many leaders of the German economy, attacks against refugee shelters have multiplied in many parts of the country, while in parts of the former GDR² a veritable pogrom mood has developed.

The degree to which the rise of populism is linked to the discrediting of the party political establishment is illustrated by the recent presidential elections in Austria, the second round of which was fought between candidates of the Greens and the populist right, whereas the main parties, the Social Democrats and the Christian Democrats, who together have run the country since the end of World War II, both suffered an all time electoral debacle.

In the wake of the Austrian elections, political observers in Germany have concluded that a continuation of the present Christian and Social Democratic coalition in Berlin after the next general elections would be likely to further favour the rise of populism. In any case, whether through Grand Coalitions between left and right

1. United Kingdom Independence Party.

2. The German Democratic Republic, the old East German Stalinist regime.

parties (or “cohabitations” like in France), or through the alternation between left and right governments, after almost half a century of chronic economic crisis and around thirty years of capitalist decomposition, large parts of the population no longer believe there is a significant difference between the established left and right parties. On the contrary, these parties are seen as constituting a kind of cartel defending their own interests, and those of the very rich, at the expense of those of the population as a whole, and of those of the state. Because the working class, after 1968, failed to politicise its struggles and to take further significant steps towards developing its own revolutionary perspective, this disillusionment presently above all fans the flames of populism.

In the Western industrial countries, in particular after 9/11 in the USA, Islamism terrorism has become another factor accelerating populism. At present this poses a problem for the bourgeoisie in particular in France, which has once again become a focus of such attacks. The need to counter the continuing rise of the Front National was one of the motives for the anti-terrorist state of emergency and for the war language of François Hollande after the recent attacks, posing as the leader of an alleged international coalition against ISIS. The loss of confidence of the population in the determination and the capacity of the ruling class to protect its citizens at the security (not only the economic) level is one of the causes of the present populist wave.

The roots of contemporary right wing populism are thus diverse and vary from country to country. In the former Stalinist countries of Eastern Europe they seem to be linked to the backwardness and parochialism of political and economic life under the previous regimes, as well as to the traumatising brutality of their transition to a more effective, Western style capitalism after 1989.

In as important a country as Poland the populist right already runs the government, while in Hungary (a centre of the first wave of the proletarian world revolution in 1917-23), the regime of Victor Orban more or less openly promotes and protects pogromist attacks.

More generally, reactions against “globalisation” have been a leading factor of the rise of populism. In Western Europe, the mood “against Brussels” and the EU have long belonged to the staple diet of such movements. But today, such an atmosphere has also appeared in the United States, where Trump is not the only politician threatening to ditch the TTIP³ free

3. Trans-Atlantic Trade and Investment Partnership.

trade agreement being negotiated between Europe and North America.

This reaction against “globalisation” should not be confused with the kind of neo-Keynesian correction to the (real) excesses of neo-liberalism propounded by representatives of the left such as ATTAC. Whereas the latter put forward a responsible coherent alternative economic policy for the national capital, the populist critique represents more a kind of political and economic vandalism, such as already partly manifested itself as a moment of the rejection of the Maastricht Treaty in referendums in France, the Netherlands and Ireland.

The possibility of government participation by contemporary populism and the balance of forces between bourgeoisie and proletariat.

The populist parties are bourgeois fractions, part of the totalitarian state capitalist apparatus. What they propagate is bourgeois and petty bourgeois ideology and behaviour: nationalism, racism, xenophobia, authoritarianism, cultural conservatism. As such, they represent a strengthening of the domination of the ruling class and its state over society. They widen the scope of the party apparatus of democracy and add fire-power to its ideological bombardment. They revitalise the electoral mystification and the attractiveness of voting, both through the voters they mobilise themselves and through those who mobilise to vote against them. Although they are partly the product of the growing disillusionment with the traditional parties, they can also help to reinforce the image of the latter, who in contrast to the populists can present themselves as being more humanitarian and democratic. To the extent that their discourse resembles that of the fascists in the 1930s, their upsurge tends to give new life to anti-fascism. This is particularly the case in Germany, where the coming to power of the “fascist” party led to the greatest catastrophe in its national history, with the loss of almost half of its territory and its status as a major military power, the destruction of its cities, and the virtually irreparable damage to its international prestige through the perpetration of crimes which have gone down as the worst in the history of humanity.

Nevertheless, and as we have seen until now, above all in the old heartlands of capitalism, the leading fractions of the bourgeoisie have been doing their best to limit the rise of populism and, in particular, to prevent if possible its participation in government. After years of mostly

unsuccessful defensive struggles on their own class terrain, certain sectors of the working class today even seem to feel that you can pressurise and scare the ruling class more by voting for the populist right than by workers’ struggles. The basis for this impression is that the “establishment” really does react with alarm to the electoral success of the populists. Why this reticence of the bourgeoisie in face of “one of its own”?

Until now we have tended to assume that this is above all because of the historic course, (i.e. the still undefeated status of the present generation of the proletariat). Today it is necessary to re-examine this framework critically in the face of the development of social reality.

It is true that the establishment of populist governments in Poland and Hungary is relatively insignificant compared to what happens in the old Western capitalist heartlands. More significant however is that this development has not for the moment led to a major conflict between Poland and Hungary and NATO or the EU. On the contrary, Austria, under a social democratic chancellor, after initially imitating the “welcoming culture” of Angela Merkel in summer 2015, soon followed the example of Hungary in erecting fences on its borders. And the Hungarian Prime Minister has become a favourite discussion partner of the Bavarian CSU who are part of Merkel’s government. We can speak of a process of mutual adaptation between populist governments and major state institutions. Despite their anti-European demagoguery, there is no sign for the moment of these populist governments wanting to take Poland or Hungary out of the EU. On the contrary, what they now propagate is the spreading of populism within the European Union. What this means, in terms of concrete interests, is that “Brussels” should interfere less in national affairs, while continuing to transfer the same or even more subventions to Warsaw and Budapest. For its part, the EU is adapting itself to these populist governments, who sometimes are praised for their “constructive contributions” at complicated EU summits. And while insisting on the maintenance of a certain minimum of “democratic standards”, Brussels has refrained for the moment from imposing any of the threatened sanctions on these countries.

As for Western Europe, Austria, it should be recalled, was already a forerunner in once including the party of Jörg Haider as junior partner in a coalition government. Its aim in so doing – that of discrediting the populist party by making it assume responsibility for running the state – partly succeeded. Temporarily. Today however

the FPÖ,⁴ at the electoral level, is stronger than ever before, almost winning the recent presidential elections. Of course in Austria the president plays a mainly symbolic role. But this is not the case in France, the second economic power and the second concentration of the proletariat in continental Western Europe. The world bourgeoisie is looking anxiously towards the next presidential election in that country, where electorally the Front National is the leading party.

Many of the political experts of the bourgeoisie have already concluded from the apparent failure of the Republican Party in the USA to prevent the candidature of Trump, that sooner or later the participation of populists in western governments has become more or less inevitable, and that it would be better to start to prepare for such an eventuality. This debate is a first reaction to the recognition that the attempts, to date, to exclude or limit populism have not only reached their own limit but have even begun to have the opposite effect.

Democracy is the ideology best suited to developed capitalist societies and the single most important weapon against the class consciousness of the proletariat. But today the bourgeoisie is confronted with the paradox that, by continuing to keep at arms length parties which do not abide to its democratic rules of “political correctness”, it risks seriously damaging its own democratic image. How to justify the maintenance in opposition indefinitely of parties with a sizeable, eventually even with a majority share of votes, without discrediting oneself and getting caught up in inextricable argumentative contradictions? Moreover, democracy is not only an ideology but a highly efficient means of class rule – not least because it is able to recognise and adjust to new political impulses coming from society as a whole.

It is in this framework that the ruling class today poses the perspective of possible populist involvement in government in relation to the contemporary balance of class forces with the proletariat. Present trends indicate that the big bourgeoisie itself does not think that a still undefeated working class necessarily excludes such an option.

To begin with, such an eventuality would not mean the abolition of bourgeois parliamentary democracy, such as was the case in Italy, Germany or Spain in the 1920/30s after the defeat of the proletariat. Even in Eastern Europe today the existing right wing populist governments have not tried to outlaw the other parties or establish a system of concentration camps. Such measures would indeed not be accepted by the

4. Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs (Austrian Freedom Party).

present generation of workers, particularly in the western countries, and perhaps not even in Poland or Hungary.

In addition however, and on the other hand, the working class, although not definitively historically defeated, is presently weakened at the level of its class consciousness, its combativeness and its class identity. The underlying historical context here is above all the defeat of the first world revolutionary wave at the end of World War I and the depth and length of the counter-revolution which followed it.

In this context, the first cause of this weakening is the inability of the class, for the moment, to find an adequate answer, in its defensive struggles, to the present stage of state capitalist management, that of “globalisation”. In its defensive struggles, the workers rightly sense that they are immediately confronted with world capitalism as a whole. Because today not only trade and commerce but also, and for the first time, production is globalised, the bourgeoisie can rapidly reply to any local or national scale proletarian resistance by transferring production elsewhere. This apparently overwhelming instrument of the disciplining of labour can only effectively be counteracted by international class struggle, a level of combat which the class in the foreseeable future is still incapable of attaining.

The second cause of this weakening is the inability of the class to continue to politicise its struggles after the initial impetus of 1968/69. What resulted is the absence of the development of any perspective for a better life or a better society: the present phase of decomposition. In particular, the collapse of the Stalinist regimes in eastern Europe appeared to confirm the impossibility of an alternative to capitalism.

During a brief period, maybe from 2003 to 2008, there were tender, relatively inconspicuous first signs of a beginning of the necessarily long and difficult process of proletarian recovery from these blows. In particular, the question of class solidarity, not least between the generations, began to be put forward. The anti-CPE⁵ movement of 2006 was the high point of this phase, because it succeeded in making the French bourgeoisie back down, and because the example of this movement and its success inspired sectors of youth in other European countries, including Germany and Britain.

However, these first fragile buds of a possible proletarian recovery were soon frozen to death by a third negative wave

5. Contrat Premier Emploi: see our “Theses on the spring 2006 students’ movement in France” [1] in *International Review* n°125.

of events of historic importance in the post 1968 phase, constituting a third major setback for the proletariat: the economic calamity of 2007/08, followed by the present wave of war refugees and other migrants – the biggest since the end of World War II.

The specificity of the 07/08 crisis was that it began as a financial crisis of enormous proportions. As a result, for millions of workers, one of its worst effects, in some cases even the main one, was not direct wage cuts, tax hikes or mass lay-offs imposed by employers or the state, but loss of homes, savings, insurance policies, and so on. These losses, at the financial level, appear as those of citizens of bourgeois society, not specific to the working class. Their causes remain unclear, favouring personalisation and conspiracy theories.

The specificity of the refugee crisis is that it takes place in the context of “Fortress Europe” (and Fortress North America). As opposed to the 1930s, since 1968 the world capitalist crisis has been accompanied by an international state capitalist management under the leadership of the bourgeoisie of the old capitalist countries. As a result, after almost half a century of chronic crisis, Western Europe and North America still appear as havens of peace, prosperity and stability, at least by comparison with the “world outside”. In such a context, it is not only the fear of the competition of the immigrants which alarms parts of the population, but also the fear that the chaos and lawlessness perceived as coming from the outside, will, along with refugees, gain access to the “civilised” world. At the present level of the extension of class consciousness it is too difficult for most workers to understand that both the chaotic barbarism on the capitalist periphery and its increasing encroachment on the central countries are the result of world capitalism and of the policies of the leading capitalist countries themselves.

This context of the finance, Euro and then the refugee crises have, for the moment, nipped in the bud the first embryonic strivings towards a renewal of class solidarity. This is perhaps at least partly why the Indignados struggle, although it lasted longer and in some ways appeared to develop more in depth than the anti-CPE, failed to stop the attacks in Spain, and could so easily be exploited by the bourgeoisie to create a new left political party: Podemos.

The main result, at the political level, of this new surge of decline in solidarity from 2008 to today has been the strengthening of populism. The latter is not only a symptom of the further weakening of proletarian class consciousness and combativeness,

but itself constitutes a further active factor in this. Not only because populism makes inroads into the ranks of the proletariat. In fact, the central sectors of the class still strongly resist this influence, as the German example illustrates. But also because the bourgeoisie profits from this heterogeneity of the class to further divide and confuse the proletariat. Today we seem to be approaching a situation which, at a first glance, has certain similarities with the 1930s. Of course, the proletariat has not been defeated politically and physically in a central country, as took place in Germany at the time. As a result, anti-populism cannot play exactly the same role as that of antifascism in the 1930s. It also seems to be a characteristic of the phase of decomposition that such false alternatives themselves appear less sharply contoured than before. Nevertheless, in a country like Germany, where eight years ago the first steps in politicisation of a small minority of searching youth were being made under the influence of the slogan “down with capitalism, the nation and the state”, today they are being made in the light of the defence of the refugees and the “welcoming culture” in confrontation with the neo-Nazis and the populist right.

In the whole post 1968 period, the weight of anti-fascism was at least attenuated by the fact that the concretisation of the fascist danger lay either in the past, or was represented by more or less marginalised right wing extremists. Today the rise of right wing populism as a potentially mass phenomenon gives the ideology of the defence of democracy a new, much more tangible and important target against which it can mobilise.

We will conclude this part by arguing that the present growth of populism and of its influence on bourgeois politics as a whole is also made possible by the present weakness of the proletariat.

The present debate within the bourgeoisie about the rise of populism

Although the bourgeois debate about how to deal with a resurgent populism is only beginning, we can already mention some of the parameters being put forward. If we look at the debate in Germany – the country where the bourgeoisie is perhaps the most aware and vigilant about such questions – we can identify three aspects being put forward.

Firstly that it is a mistake for the “democrats” to try and fight populism by adopting its language and proposals. According to this argument, it was this copying of the populists which partly explains the fi-

asco of the governing parties at the recent elections in Austria, and which helps to explain the failure of the traditional parties in France to stop the advance of the FN. The populist voters, they argue, prefer the original to any copy. Instead of making concessions, they argue, it is necessary to emphasise the antagonisms between “constitutional patriotism” and “chauvinist nationalism”, between cosmopolitan openness and xenophobia, between tolerance and authoritarianism, between modernity and conservatism, between humanism and barbarism. According to this line of argumentation, Western democracies today are “mature” enough to cope with modern populism while maintaining a majority for “democracy” if they put their positions forward in an “offensive” manner. This is the position for instance of the present German chancellor Angela Merkel.

Secondly, it is insisted, the electorate should be able to recognise again the difference between right and left, correcting the present impression of a cartel of the established parties. This idea, we suspect, was already the motivation for the preparation, over the past two years, by the CDU-SPD⁶ coalition, of a possible future Christian Democratic coalition with the Greens after the next general elections. The exit from atomic power after the Fukushima catastrophe announced not in Japan but in Germany, and the recent euphoric support of the Greens for a “welcoming culture” towards refugees associated not with the SPD but with Angela Merkel, were the main steps to date of this strategy. However, the unexpectedly rapid electoral rise of the AfD today threatens the realisation of such a strategy (the present attempt to bring the liberal FDP⁷ back into parliament might be in response to this, since this party could eventually join a “Black-Green” coalition). In opposition the SPD, the party which in Germany led the “neo-liberal revolution” with its Agenda 2010 under Schröder, could then adopt a more “left” stance. As opposed to the Anglo-Saxon countries, where the conservative right under Thatcher and Reagan imposed the necessary “neo-liberal” measures, in many European continental countries the left (as the more political, responsible and disciplined parties) had to participate or even lead their implementation.

Today however it has become clear that the necessary stage of neo-liberal globalisation was accompanied by excesses which sooner or later will have to be corrected.

6. Christlich Demokratische Union Deutschlands, currently the ruling party in Germany in a “grand coalition” with the “Socialist” Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands.

7. Freie Demokratische Partei, a “liberal-democratic” party which previously held the balance between SPD and CDU.

This was particularly the case after 1989, when the collapse of the Stalinist regimes appeared overwhelmingly to confirm all the ordo-liberal⁸ theses about the unsuitability of a state capitalist bureaucracy to run the economy. Such excesses are now increasingly being pointed to by thoughtful bourgeois commentators. For instance, it is not absolutely indispensable for the survival of capitalism that a tiny fraction of society owns almost all the wealth. This can be damaging, not only socially and politically but even economically, since the very rich, instead of spending the lion’s share of their wealth, are above all concerned about preserving its value, thus augmenting speculation and withholding solvent purchasing power. Equally, it is not absolutely necessary for capitalism that the competition between nation states takes, to the present extent, the form of cutting taxes and state budgets so that the state can no longer undertake necessary investments. In other words, the idea is that, through an eventual comeback of a kind of neo-Keynesian correction, the left, whether in its traditional form or through new parties like Syriza in Greece or Podemos in Spain, might regain a certain material basis for posing as an alternative to the ordo-liberal conservative right.

It is important however to note that today’s reflections within the ruling class about a possible future role of the left are not in the first instance inspired by fear (in the immediate) of the working class. On the contrary, many elements of the present situation in the main capitalist centres indicate that the first aspect determining the policy of the ruling class is presently the problem of populism.

The third aspect is that, like the British Tories around Boris Johnson, the CSU,⁹ the “sister” party of Merkel’s CDU, thinks that parts of the traditional party apparatus should themselves apply elements of populist policy. We should note that the CSU is no longer the expression of traditional Bavarian, petty bourgeois backwardness. On the contrary, alongside the adjacent southern province of Baden-Württemberg, Bavaria is today economically the most modern part of Germany, the backbone of its high-tech and export industries, the production base of companies such as Siemens, BMW or Audi.

This third option propagated in Munich of course collides with the first one mentioned above propounded by Angela Merkel, and the present head-on confrontations between the two parties are not just

8. The German equivalent of neo-liberalism, emphasizing the free market but also the role of the state in protecting the free market.

9. Christlich-soziale union.

electoral manoeuvres or (real) differences between particular economic interests, but also differences of approach. In view of the chancellor's present determination not to change her mind, certain representatives of the CSU have even begun to "think aloud" about putting up their own candidates in other parts of Germany in opposition to the CDU at the next general elections.

The idea of the CSU, like that of parts of the British Conservatives, is that if it has become inevitable, to a certain extent, that populist measures are taken, it is better if they are applied by an experienced and responsible party. In this manner, such often irresponsible measures could at least be limited on the one hand, and compensated for by auxiliary measures on the other hand.

Despite the real friction between Merkel and Seehofer, as between Cameron and Johnson, we should not overlook the element of division of labour between them (one part "offensively" defending democratic values, the other recognising the validity of the "democratic expression of enraged citizens").

At all events, what this discourse, taken as a whole, illustrates, is that the leading fractions of the bourgeoisie are beginning to reconcile themselves to the idea of populist governmental policies of some kind and to some degree, as is already partly being practised by the Brexit Tories or the CSU.

Populism and Decomposition

As we have seen, there has been, and there remains a massive reticence of the main fractions of the bourgeoisie in Western Europe and North America towards populism. What are its causes? After all, these movements in no way put capitalism in question. Nothing they propagate is foreign to the bourgeois world. Unlike Stalinism, populism does not even put in question the present forms of capitalist property. It is an "oppositional" movement of course. But so, in a certain sense, were Social Democracy and Stalinism, without this preventing them from being responsible members of governments of leading capitalist states.

To understand this reticence, it is necessary to recognise here the fundamental difference between present day populism and the left of capital. The left, even when they are not former organisations of the workers' movement (the Greens for instance), although they can be the best representatives of nationalism and the best mobilisers of the proletariat for war, base their attractiveness on the propagation of former or distorted ideals of the workers'

movement, or at least of the bourgeois revolution. In other words, as chauvinist and even anti-Semitic as they can be, they do not deny in principle the "brotherhood of humanity" and the possibility of improving the state of the world as a whole. In fact, even the most openly reactionary neo-liberal radicals claim to pursue this goal. This is necessarily the case. From the onset, the claim of the bourgeoisie to be the worthy representative of society as a whole was always based on this perspective.

None of this means that the left of capital, as part of the rotten society, does not also put forward racist, anti-Semitic poison of a similar kind to the right wing populists!

As opposed to this, populism embodies the renunciation of such an "ideal". What it propagates is the survival of some at the expense of others. All of its arrogance revolves around this "realism" it is so proud of. As such, it is the product of the bourgeois world and its world view – but above all of its decomposition.

Secondly, the left of capital proposes a more or less coherent and realistic economic, political and social programme for the national capital. As opposed to this, the problem with political populism is not that it makes no concrete proposals, but that it proposes one thing and its opposite, one policy today and another tomorrow. Instead of being a political alternative, it represents the decomposition of bourgeois politics.

This is why, at least in the sense the term is being used here, it makes little sense to speak of the existence of a left populism as a kind of pendant to that of the right.

Despite similarities and parallels, history never repeats itself. The populism of today is not the same thing as the fascism of the 1920s and 1930s. However, fascism then and populism now have, in some ways, similar causes. In particular, both are the expression of the decomposition of the bourgeois world. With the historic experience of fascism and above all of national socialism behind it, the bourgeoisie of the old central capitalist countries today is acutely aware both of these similarities, and of the potential danger they represent to the stability of capitalist order.

Parallels to the rise of National Socialism in Germany

Fascism in Italy and in Germany had in common the triumph of the counter-revolution and the insane fantasy of the dissolution of the classes into a mystical community after the prior defeat (mainly through the weapons of democracy and the left of capital) of the revolutionary wave. In common also is their open contestation of

the imperialist carve up and the irrationality of many of their war goals. But despite these similarities (on the basis of which *Bilan*¹⁰ was able to recognise the defeat of the revolutionary wave and the change in the historic course, opening the way for the bourgeoisie to mobilise the proletariat for world war), it is worthwhile – in order to better understand contemporary populism – to look more closely at some of the specificities of historic developments in Germany at the time, including where they differed from the much less irrational Italian fascism.

Firstly, the shaking of the established authority of the ruling classes, and the loss of confidence of the population in its traditional political, economic, military, ideological and moral leadership was much more profound than anywhere else (except Russia), since Germany was the main loser of the first world war, and emerged from it in a state of economic, financial and even physical exhaustion.

Secondly, in Germany much more than in Italy, a real revolutionary situation had arisen. The way the bourgeoisie was able to nip in the bud, at an early stage, this potential, should not lead us to underestimate the depth of this revolutionary process, and the intensity of the hopes and longings which it awakened and which accompanied it. It took almost six years, until 1923, for the German and the world bourgeoisie to liquidate all the traces of this effervescence. Today it is difficult for us to imagine the degree of disappointment caused by this defeat, and the bitterness it left in its wake. The loss of confidence of the population in its own ruling class was thus soon followed by the much more cruel disillusionment of the working class towards its own (former) organisations (social democracy and trade unions), and disappointment about the young KPD¹¹ and the Communist International.

Thirdly, economic calamities played a much more central role in the rise of National Socialism than was the case with fascism in Italy. The hyper-inflation of 1923 in Germany (and elsewhere in Central Europe) undermined the confidence in the currency as the universal equivalent. The great depression which began in 1929 thus took place only six years after the trauma of hyper-inflation. Not only did the great depression hit a working class in Germany whose class consciousness and militancy were already smashed; the way the masses, intellectually and emotion-

10. *Bilan* was the theoretical publication of Left Fraction of the Italian Communist Party, which the ICC sees as one of its predecessors. See our book *The Italian Communist Left 1926-45*.

11. Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands, the German section of the Third International.

ally, experienced this new episode of the economic crisis was to an important extent modified, pre-formatted so to speak, by the events of 1923.

The crises in particular of decadent capitalism affect every aspect of economic (and social) life. They are crises of (over) production – of capital, commodities, of labour power – and of appropriation and “distribution”, financial and monetary speculation and crashes included. But unlike expressions of the crisis that appear more at the point of production, such as redundancies and wage cuts, the negative effects on the population at the financial and monetary levels are much more abstract and obscure. Yet their effects can be equally devastating for parts of the population, just as their repercussions can be even more world-wide, and spread even faster than ones taking place closer to the point of production. In other words, whereas the latter expressions of the crisis tend to favour the development of class consciousness, those coming more from the financial and monetary spheres tend to do the opposite. Without the aid of marxism it is not easy to grasp the real links between for instance a financial crash in Manhattan and the resulting default of an insurance company or even a state on another continent. Such dramatic systems of interdependence blindly created between countries, populations, social classes, which function behind the backs of the protagonists, easily lead to personalisation and social paranoia. That the recent sharpening of the crisis of capitalism was also a financial and banking crisis, linked to speculative bubbles and their bursting, is not just bourgeois propaganda. That a speculative false manoeuvre in Tokyo or New York can trigger off the collapse of a bank in Iceland, or rock the property market in Ireland, is not fiction but reality. Only capitalism creates such life or death inter-dependence between people who are completely indifferent to each other, between protagonists who are not even aware of each others’ existence. It is extremely difficult for human beings to cope with such levels of abstraction, whether intellectually or emotionally. One way to cope is personalisation, ignoring the real mechanisms of capitalism: it is all the fault of evil forces who deliberately set out to harm us. It is all the more important to understand this distinction between these different kinds of attacks today when, no longer mainly the petty bourgeoisie and the so-called middle classes lost their savings, as in 1923, but millions of workers who own or try to own their own homes, have savings, insurance policies etc.

In 1932 the German bourgeoisie, which already planned to go to war mainly against Russia, found itself confronted by

a National Socialism which had become a real mass movement. To a certain extent the bourgeoisie was trapped, the prisoner of a situation it was largely responsible for having created. It could have opted for going to war under a Social-Democratic government, with the support of its trade unions, in a possible coalition with France and even Britain, initially even as a junior partner. But this would have entailed confronting or at least neutralising the Nazi movement, which had not only become too big to handle, but also mainly regrouped that part of the population which was longing for war. In this situation, the German bourgeoisie made the mistake of believing it could make use of the Nazi movement at will.

National Socialism was not simply a regime of mass terror exercised by a small minority against the rest of the population. It had a mass base of its own. It was not only an instrument of capital imposed on the population. It was also its opposite: a blind instrument of atomised, pulverised and paranoiac masses wanting to impose itself on capital.

National Socialism therefore was prepared, to an important extent, by the profound loss of confidence of large parts of the population in the authority of the ruling class and its capacity to run society effectively and afford a minimum of physical and economic security to its citizens. Bourgeois society was shaken to its foundations, first by World War I, then by economic catastrophe: the hyperinflation resulting from the World War (on the losers’ side) and the Great Depression of the 1930s. The epicentre of this crisis was the three empires – the German, Austro-Hungarian and Russian – all of which collapsed under the blows of defeat in war and the revolutionary wave.

Whereas the revolution initially succeeded in Russia, it failed in Germany and in the former Austro-Hungarian empire. In the absence of a proletarian alternative to the crisis of bourgeois society, a deep void opened up, centred around Germany and, let us say, continental Europe north of the Mediterranean basin, but with world-wide ramifications, engendering a paroxysm of violence and pogroms centred around the themes of anti-Semitism and anti-Bolshevism, culminating in the Holocaust and the mass liquidation of whole populations in particular on the territory of the USSR under German occupation.

The form taken by the counter-revolution in the Soviet Union played an important role in the development of this situation. Although there was no longer anything proletarian about Stalinist Russia, the violent expropriation of the peasantry (the

collectivisation of agriculture and the liquidation of the “Kulaks”) terrified not only small property owners and savers in the rest of the world, but also many big ones. This was particularly the case in continental Europe, where these property owners (which could include the modest owners of their own dwellings) unprotected (unlike their British and American counterparts) from “Bolshevism” by seas or oceans, had little confidence in the existing unstable European democratic or authoritarian regimes at the beginning of the 1930s to protect them against expropriation by crisis or by “Jewish Bolshevism”.

We can conclude from this historical experience that, if the proletariat is unable to put forward its own revolutionary alternative to capitalism, the loss of confidence in the capacity of the ruling class to “do its job” eventually leads to a revolt, a protest, an explosion of a very different kind, one which is not conscious but blind, directed not towards the future but the past, based not on confidence but fear, not on creativity but on destructiveness and hate.

A second crisis of confidence in the ruling class today

This process we have just described was already the decomposition of capitalism. And it is more than understandable that many marxists and other astute observers of society in the 1930s expected this tendency soon to engulf the whole world. But as it turned out, this was only the first phase of this decomposition, not yet its terminal phase.

Above all, three factors of world historic importance pushed back this tendency to decomposition:

- firstly the victory of the anti-Hitler coalition in World War II, which considerably raised the prestige of Western democracy, in particular of the American model, on the one hand, and “socialism in one country” and the Soviet model on the other;
- and secondly the post World War II “economic miracle” above all in the Western bloc.

These two factors were the doing of the bourgeoisie. The third one was the doing of the working class: the end of the counter-revolution, the return of the class struggle to the centre stage of history, and with it the reappearance (however confused and ephemeral) of a revolutionary perspective. The bourgeoisie, for its part, responded to this changed situation not only with the ideology of reformism, but also with real material (of course temporary) concessions and improvements. All this enforced,

among the workers, the illusion that life could improve.

As we know, what led to the present phase of decomposition was essentially the stalemate between the two principal classes, the one unable to unleash generalised war, the other unable to move towards a revolutionary solution. With the failure of the 1968 generation to further politicise its struggles, the events of 1989 thus inaugurated, on a world scale, the present phase of decomposition. But it is very important to understand this phase not as something stagnant, but as a process. 1989 marked above all the failure of the first attempt of the proletariat to re-develop its own revolutionary alternative. After 20 years of chronic crisis, and of worsening of the conditions of the working class and the world population as a whole, the prestige and authority of the ruling class was also eroded, but not to the same extent. At the turn of the millennium there were still important counter-tendencies enhancing the reputation of the leading bourgeois elites. We will mention three here.

Firstly, the collapse of Eastern bloc Stalinism did not at all damage the image of the bourgeoisie of the former Western bloc. On the contrary, what it appeared to disprove was the possibility of an alternative to Western democratic capitalism. Of course, part of the 1989 euphoria was quickly dispelled by reality, such as the illusion of a more peaceful world. But it remained true that 1989 had at least lifted the Damocles sword of the permanent threat of mutual annihilation in a nuclear World War III. Also, after 1989, both World War II and the ensuing Cold War between East and West could credibly be made to appear, in retrospect, as having been the product of “ideology” and “totalitarianism” (thus the fault of fascism and “communism”). At the ideological level it is extremely fortunate for the Western bourgeoisie that the new more or less open imperialist challenger to the USA today is no longer Germany (nowadays itself “democratic”) but “totalitarian China”, and that much of the contemporary regional wars and terrorist attacks can be attributed to “religious fundamentalism”.

Secondly the present “globalisation” stage of state capitalism, already introduced beforehand, made possible, in the post 1989 context, a real development of the productive forces in what until then had been peripheral countries of capitalism. Of course the BRICS¹² states, for instance, constitute anything but a model of how workers in the old capitalist countries would want to live. But on the other hand they do create the impression of a dynamic

world capitalism. It is worth noting, in view of the importance of the question of immigration for populism today, that these countries are seen at this level as making a contribution to stabilising the situation, since they themselves absorb millions of migrants who might otherwise move towards Europe and North America.

Thirdly, the really breathtaking developments at the technological level, which have revolutionised communication, education, medicine, daily life as a whole, once again create the impression of a vibrant society (vindicating, by the way, our own understanding that the decadence of capitalism does not mean the halt of the productive forces or technological stagnation).

These factors (and there are probably others), although unable to prevent the present phase of decomposition (and with it already a first development of populism), were still able to attenuate some of its effects. As opposed to this, the contemporary bolstering of this same populism today indicates that we may be approaching certain limits of these mitigating effects, perhaps even opening up what we might call a second stage in the phase of decomposition. This second stage, we would argue, is characterised by a growing loss, among increasing parts of the population, of confidence in the willingness or capacity of the ruling class to protect it. A process of disillusionment which, at least for the moment, is not proletarian, but profoundly anti-proletarian. Behind the finance, the Euro and the refugee crises, which are more triggering factors than root causes, this new stage is of course the result of the accumulated effects, over decades, of deeper lying factors. First and foremost the absence of a proletarian revolutionary perspective on the one side. On the other side (that of capital), there is its chronic economic crisis, but also the effects of the ever more abstract character of the mode of functioning of bourgeois society. This process, inherent to capitalism, witnessed a dramatic acceleration in the past three decades with the sharp reduction, in the old capitalist countries, of industrial and manual labour, and of bodily activity in general through mechanisation and the new media such as personal computing and the Internet. Parallel to this, the medium of universal exchange has been largely transformed from metal and paper to electronic cash, which is part of a wider process involving a radical separation from the body and its sensual reality.

Populism and violence

At the basis of the capitalist mode of production is a very specific combination

of two factors: economic mechanisms or “laws” (the market) and violence. On the one hand: the precondition for equivalent exchange is the renunciation of violence: exchange instead of robbery. Moreover, wage labour is the first form of exploitation where the obligation to work, and the motivation in the labour process itself, is essentially an economic one rather than imposed by direct physical force. On the other hand, in capitalism the whole system of equivalent exchange is based on an original non-equivalent exchange – the violent separation of the producers from the means of production (“primitive accumulation”) which is the precondition for the wage system, and which is a permanent process in capitalism, since accumulation itself is a more or less violent process (see Luxemburg’s *Accumulation of Capital*). This permanent presence of both poles of this contradiction (violence and the renunciation of violence), and the ambivalence this creates, permeates the whole of life in bourgeois society. It accompanies every act of exchange, where the alternative option of robbery is ever present. Indeed, a society based at its roots on exchange, and therefore on the renunciation of violence, must enforce this renunciation with the threat of violence, and not only the threat – with the actual use of its laws, justice apparatus, police, prisons etc. This ambiguity is ever present particularly in the exchange between wage labour and capital, where economic coercion is supplemented by physical force. It is specifically present wherever the instrument of violence par excellence in bourgeois society is directly involved – the state. In its relation with its own citizens (coercion and extortion) and with other states (war), the instrument of the ruling class to suppress robbery and chaotic violence is itself, at the same time, the generalised, sanctified robber.

One of the focal points of this contradiction and ambiguity between violence and its renunciation in bourgeois society lies in each of its individual subjects. Living a normal, functional life in the present day world requires the renunciation of a plethora, of a whole world of bodily, emotional, intellectual, moral, artistic, creative needs. As soon as mature capitalism has passed from the stage of formal to that of real domination, this renunciation is no longer in the first instance enforced mainly through external violence. Indeed, each individual is more or less consciously confronted with the choice either of adapting to the abstract functioning of this society or of being a “loser”, possibly landing in the gutter. Discipline becomes self-discipline, but in such a way that each individual becomes the repressor of his own vital needs. Of course, this process of

¹² Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa.

self-disciplining also contains a potential for emancipation, for the individual and above all for the proletariat as a whole (as the self-disciplined class par excellence) to become master of its own destiny. But for the moment, in the “normal” functioning of bourgeois society, this self-discipline is essentially the internalisation of capitalist violence. Because this is the case, in addition to the proletarian option of the transformation of this self-discipline into a means of the realisation, the revitalisation of human needs and creativity, there also slumbers another option, that of the blind redirection of internalised violence towards the outside. Bourgeois society always needs and offers an “outsider” in order to maintain the (self) discipline of those who allegedly belong. This is why the blind re-externalisation of violence by the bourgeois subjects “spontaneously” directs itself (i.e. is predisposed or “formatted” to do so) against such outsiders (pogromisation).¹³

When the open crisis of capitalist society reaches a certain intensity, when the authority of the ruling class is damaged, when bourgeois subjects start to doubt the capacity and determination of the authorities to do their job, and in particular to protect them against a world of dangers, and when an alternative – which can only be that of the proletariat – is missing, parts of the population start to protest and even revolt against their ruling elite, not with the goal of challenging their rule, but in order to oblige them to protect their own “law-abiding” citizens against “outsiders”. These layers of society experience the crisis of capitalism as a conflict between its two underlying principles: between the market and violence. Populism is the option for violence to solve the problems the market cannot solve, and even to solve the problems of the market itself. For instance, if the world labour market threatens to flood the labour market of the old capitalist countries with a wave of have-nots, the solution is to put up fences and police at the frontier and shoot whoever tries to cross it without permission.

Behind populist politics today lurks the thirst for murder. The pogrom is the secret of its existence.

Steinklopper, 8th June 2016.

13. See the writings of the German researcher into anti-Semitism Detlev Claussen.

Conference of the ICC sections in Germany, Switzerland and Sweden

Report on the situation in Germany

The joint conference of the sections of the ICC in Germany and Switzerland, and the nucleus in Sweden, held in March 2016, adopted, among other documents, a report on the national situation in Germany, which we publish here. This report makes no claim to completeness. Instead it concentrates on points we think it are particularly important to reflect on and discuss now. Since these aspects in general have the dramatic events of the current situation as their point of departure, we add to the report the presentation made at the conference, which is partly devoted to bringing the report more up to date. Critical comments to the report and presentation made in the course of the ensuing debate are added as footnotes to the presentation. In view of the importance of the developments in what is the most central country of European capitalism today, we hope that these texts can be a positive contribution to the necessary reflection, from the point of view of the proletariat, about the present world situation.

Report

The competitiveness of German capital today

Since the German nation state was not constituted until 1870, and was late in joining the imperialist carve up of the world, it never established itself as a leading financial or colonial power. The main basis of its economic might was and remains its highly efficient industry and work force. Whereas East Germany (the old German Democratic Republic, GDR) fell behind economically through becoming part of the Eastern bloc, post-World War II West Germany was able to build on this foundation and even consolidate it. By 1989, the latter had become the world's leading export nation, with the lowest state deficit of all the leading powers. Despite comparatively high wage levels its economy was extremely competitive. It also benefited, economically, from the world wide trade possibilities opened up by membership of the Western bloc, and from having a restricted military budget as the main loser of two world wars.

At the political and territorial levels Germany then profited most from the collapse of the Eastern bloc in 1989, absorbing the former GDR. Economically however, the sudden absorbing of this zone, which had hopelessly fallen behind international standards, also represented a considerable burden, above all financially. A burden which threatened the competitiveness of the new, bigger Germany. During the 1990s it lost ground on the world markets, while the state budget deficit levels began to approach those of other leading powers.

Today, a quarter of a century later, Germany has more than regained the lost ground. As an exporter, it is second only to China. Last year, the state budget had a surplus of €26 billion. Its growth of 1.7% was moderate, but for a highly developed country still an achievement. Official unemployment has dropped to its lowest level since re-unification. To date, the policy of maintaining highly developed industrial production based in Germany itself has been a success.

Of course, as an old industrial country, the bedrock of this success is a high organic composition of capital, the product of at least two centuries of accumulation. But within this context, the high skills and qualifications of its population are decisive for its competitive edge. Before World War I, Germany had become the main centre of scientific development and its application in production. With the catastrophe of National Socialism and World War II it lost this advantage and has shown no signs since of recovering it. What remains however is its know-how in the production process itself. Since the demise of the Hansa,¹ Germany has never been a leading, long lasting, maritime power. Although long an essentially peasant economy, its soil, on average, is less fertile than that of France, for example. Its natural advantages lay in its geographic location at the heart of Europe, and in precious metals already mined during the Middle Ages. Out of this emerged a high aptitude for artisan and industrial

1. The Hanseatic League was a trading and industrial alliance in Northern Germany which dominated Baltic trade throughout the Middle Ages and early modern period.

labour and co-operation and a know-how developed and passed on from generation to generation. Although its industrial revolution benefited considerably from large coal resources, the demise of heavy industries from the 1970s on made clear that the heart of Germany's economic ascendancy lay not here, but in its efficiency in the production of the means of production, and more generally in the transformation of living into dead labour. Today Germany is worldwide the main producer of complex machines. More than the car industry, this sector is the backbone of its economy. Behind this strength, there is also the know-how of the bourgeoisie which, already during capitalist ascendancy, concentrated essentially on its economic and business activities, since it was more or less excluded from positions of political and military power by the Prussian landowner (Junker) caste. The passion for engineering which this bourgeoisie developed continues to find expression not only in the machine-tool industry, still often based on mid-sized, family run units, but in the particular capacity of the ruling class as a whole to run the entire German industry as if it were a single machine. The intricate and highly effective inter-connection of all the different units of production and distribution is one of the main advantages of the German national capital.

Confronted with the dead weight of the collapsing GDR economy, the turning point in the recovery of its competitive edge was reached in the first decade of the present century. Two factors were decisive. At the organisational level, all the main companies, including the mid-sized machine-tool manufacturers (*Maschinenbau*) began to produce and operate on a world scale, creating networks of production all centred around Germany itself. At the political level, under the leadership of the SPD (the Social Democrats), the attacks against wages and social benefits (the so-called "Agenda 2010") were so radical that the French government even accused Germany of wage dumping.

This turning point was favoured by three major developments in the global economic context that turned out to be particularly favourable to Germany.

Firstly the transition from the Keynesian

to the so-called Neo-Liberal model of state capitalism, favoured more export-oriented economies. While strongly participating in the post 1945 Keynesian economic order dominating the Western bloc, the West German “model” was from the onset influenced by “Ordo-Liberal”² ideas (Ludwig Erhard, Freiburger School), never developing the kind of “Statism” which continues to hamper the competitiveness of France today.

Second was the consolidation of European economic co-operation after the fall of the Berlin Wall (creation of the European Union, the Euro currency union). Although partly driven by political, essentially imperialist motives (its neighbours’ desire to keep “control” of Germany), at the economic level Germany, as the strongest competitor, has been the main beneficiary of the EU and of the currency union. The financial crisis and the Euro crisis after 2008, confirmed that the leading capitalist countries still have the capacity to deflect the worst effects of the crisis onto their weaker rivals. The different international and European salvage packages, such as those for Greece, essentially served the propping up of German (and French) banks at the expense of the “rescued” economies.

Thirdly, Germany’s geographical and historical proximity to Eastern Europe helped to make it the main beneficiary of the transformation there, conquering markets previously out of reach, including the extra-capitalist³ leftovers.

Relationship between German imperialism’s economic and military power

To illustrate the importance of the consequences of this competitive strength at other levels, we now want to examine the link to the imperialist dimension. After 1989, Germany could put forward its imperialist interests with greater determination and independence. Examples of this were its initiative, under Helmut Kohl, in encouraging the break-up of Yugoslavia (beginning with the diplomatic recognition of the state independence of Croatia and Slovenia), or the refusal, under Gerhard Schröder, to

support the second Iraq War. In the past 25 years there have certainly been advances at the imperialist level. Above all, both the “international community” and the population “at home” have become accustomed to German military interventions abroad. The transition from a conscript to a professional army has been made. The German armaments industry has increased its share of the world market. Nevertheless, at the imperialist level it has been unable to regain ground anything like to the same extent as economically. The problem of finding enough volunteers for the army remains unresolved. Above all, the goal of the technical modernisation of the armed forces and the significant increase of its mobility and firepower has not at all been achieved.

In fact, during this whole period after 1989, it was never the goal of the German bourgeoisie to try, either in the short or medium term, to “pose its candidature” as a potential bloc leader against the USA. At the military level, this would have been impossible, given the overwhelming military might of the United States, and Germany’s present status as “an economic giant but military dwarf”. Any attempt to do so would also have led to its main European rivals ganging up against it. At the economic level, supporting the weight of what would have had to be an enormous re-armament programme would have ruined the competitiveness of an economy already struggling with the financial burden of re-unification - as well as risking confrontations with the working class.

But none of this means that Berlin has renounced its ambitions to regain its status at least as the leading European military power. On the contrary, ever since the 1990s it has pursued a long-term strategy aimed at augmenting its economic power as a basis for a later military renaissance. Whereas the former USSR offered a reminder of how military power cannot be maintained in the long run without an equivalent economic basis, more recently China has revealed the other side of the same coin: how economic ascent can prepare a later military one.

One of the keys to such a long-term strategy is Russia, but also the Ukraine. At the military level, it is the USA, not Germany, which gained most from the eastward extension of the NATO (in fact Germany tried to prevent some of the steps of this roll back of Russia). Germany, by contrast, hopes to profit from this whole zone above all economically. Unlike China, Russia for historical reasons is unable to organise its own economic modernisation. Before the Ukraine conflict began, the Kremlin had already decided to attempt this modernisation in co-operation with

German industry. In fact, one of the main advantages of this conflict for the USA is that it blocks (via the embargo against Russia) this economic co-operation. Here also lies one of the main motivations for the German chancellor Merkel (and the French president Hollande as her junior partner in this affair) to mediate between Moscow and Kiev. Despite the present desolate state of the Russian economy, the German bourgeoisie is still convinced that Russia would be able to finance such a modernisation itself. The oil price will not remain forever as low as it is today, and Russia also has a host of precious metals to sell. In addition, Russian agriculture has still to be put on a modern capitalist basis (this is even more true for the Ukraine, which – despite the Chernobyl disaster – still has some of the most fertile soil on the planet). In the middle term perspective of food shortages and rising prices for agricultural products, such agricultural areas can gain a considerable economic and even strategic importance. The fear of the USA is thus not unfounded that Germany could profit from Eastern Europe to increase further its relative economic and political weight in the world, and somewhat reduce that of America in Europe.

An example of how Germany already successfully uses its economic strength to imperialist ends is that of the Syrian refugees. Even if it wanted to, it would be very difficult for Germany to participate directly in the present bombing of Syria, on account of its military weakness. But since, on account of its relatively low unemployment, it can absorb part of the Syrian population in the form of the present refugee influx, it gains an alternative means of influencing above all the post war situation there.

Against this background, it is not surprising that the USA, in particular, is presently trying to use juridical means to curb the economic power of its German competitor, for instance by bringing Volkswagen or the Deutsche Bank to court, threatening them with punitive fines of billions of dollars.

The difficulties of the working class

The year 2015 witnessed a series of strikes above all in transport (DB-German Railways, Lufthansa) and of kindergarten employees. There were also more local but significant movements such as that at the Charité hospital in Berlin, where there was a movement of solidarity between nurses and patients. All of these movements were very sectoral and isolated, sometimes partly focusing on the false alternative of big against small corporatist trade unions, blurring the necessity for autonomous self

2. “Ordoliberalism” is a German variant of political-economic liberalism which emphasises the need for the state to intervene in ensuring that the free market produces close to its economic potential.

3. According to Rosa Luxemburg, extra-capitalist zones centre around production not yet directly based on the exploitation of wage labour by capital, whether subsistence economy or production for the market by individual producers. The purchasing power of such producers helps enable capital accumulation to take place. Capitalism also mobilises and exploits labour power and “raw materials” (i.e. natural wealth) coming from these zones.

organisation by workers. Although all the unions organised strikes so as to cause a maximum of annoyance to the public, the attempt to erode solidarity, at least in the form of public sympathy with those on strike, only partly succeeded. The argument accompanying the demands in the kindergarten sector, for instance, that the regime of particularly low wages in traditionally female professions has to come to an end, while contributing to the isolation of this strike, was popular within the class as a whole, which seemed to recognise that this “discrimination” is above all a means of dividing the workers.

It is certainly an unusual phenomenon that, in contemporary Germany of all places, strikes played such a prominent role in the media in the course of 2015. These strikes, while giving proof of a still existing militancy and solidarity, are not however evidence of a continuing wave or phase of proletarian struggle. They should at least partly be understood as a manifestation of the particular economic situation of Germany as described above. In this context of relatively low unemployment and shortage of qualified labour, the bourgeoisie itself put forward the idea that, after years of sinking wages inaugurated under Schröder (they sank more radically than almost anywhere in Western Europe), the employees should at last be “rewarded” for their “sense of realism”. The new Grand Coalition government of Christian and Social Democrats itself set the trend by finally (as one of the last countries in Europe to do so) introducing a basic minimum wage law, and raising some social benefits. In the car industry, for instance, the big companies in 2015 paid bonuses (which they called “profit sharing”) of up to €9000 per worker. This was all the more possible because the modernisation of the production apparatus has been so successful that – at least for the moment – the German competitive edge depends much less on low wages than a decade before.

In 2003 the ICC analysed the international class struggle, beginning with the protests against attacks against the pensions in France and Austria, as a turning point (unspectacular, almost imperceptible) for the better in class struggle, essentially because of the beginning of a recognition by the present working generation (for the first time since the last world war) that its children will have not better but worse conditions than themselves. This led to first significant expressions of solidarity between the generations in workers’ struggles. Because of the intimidation of strike movements by growing unemployment and precarious working conditions however this evolution expressed itself, at the “point of production” more at the

level of consciousness than of militancy – it became increasingly difficult and daunting to go on strike. In Germany itself the initial response of the unemployed to Agenda 2010 (the “Monday demonstrations”) also soon ran out of steam. But on the other hand, a new generation began to take to the streets, benefiting from not yet being under the direct yoke of wage labour to express not only their own anger and concern about the future, but also (more or less consciously) that of the class as a whole. In this, they were often joined by the precariously employed. These protests, extending to countries like Turkey, Israel and Brazil, but reaching their culmination in the anti-CPE and *Indignados* movements in France and Spain respectively, even found a small, weak but still significant echo in the movement of students and pupils in Germany. And they were accompanied, not yet by the crystallisation of a new generation of revolutionaries, but by its potential precursor.

In Germany this was expressed by a small but combative “Occupy” movement, more open than before to internationalist ideas. The slogan of the first Occupy demonstrations was “Down with capital, the state and the nation”. For the first time in decades in Germany, therefore, a politicisation was beginning which did not seem to be dominated by anti-fascist and national liberation ideology. This was taking place in response to finance crisis of 2008 followed by the Euro crisis. Some of these small minorities were beginning to think that capitalism was on the brink of collapse. The idea began to develop that if Marx was being proven right about the crisis of capitalism, he might also be right about the revolutionary nature of the proletariat. The expectation grew that the massive international attacks would soon be met with similarly massive international class struggle. “Athens today – Berlin tomorrow – international solidarity against capital” became the new slogan.

What followed was not an historic defeat, but the story of how the bourgeoisie smashed, for the moment, the political opening up begun in 2003, bringing this phase of the class struggle to a close. What began as the US sub-primes crisis posed a very real menace to the stability of the international finance architecture. The danger was acute. There was no time for long drawn out negotiations between governments about how to handle it. The bankruptcy of Lehmann Brothers had the advantage of obliging governments in all the industrial countries to take immediate and radical measures to salvage the situation (as the *Herald Tribune* later wrote: “*if it had not happened, the Lehman collapse would have had to be invented*”). But it also

had advantages at another level: against the working class. Perhaps for the first time, the world bourgeoisie responded to a major, acute crisis of its system, not by downplaying but by exaggerating its importance. The workers of the world were told that unless they immediately accepted the massive attacks, states and with them pension and insurance funds would go bankrupt, private savings melt away. This ideological terror offensive resembled the “shock and awe” military strategy employed by the US in the second Iraq war, aimed at paralysing, traumatising and disarming its adversary. And it worked. At the same time, the objective basis was there for not attacking all the central sectors of the world proletariat at the same time, since large sectors of the class in the US, Britain, Ireland and southern Europe suffered much more than in Germany, France and elsewhere in north-west Europe.

The second chapter of this offensive of terror and division was the Euro-crisis, where the European proletariat was successfully divided between north and south, between “lazy Greeks” and “arrogant Nazi Germans”. In this context, the bourgeoisie has another trump card up its sleeve: the economic success of Germany. Even the strikes of 2015, and more generally the recent increases in wages and social benefits there, were all used to hammer home the message, to the whole European proletariat, that making sacrifices in face of the crisis pays off in the end.

This message, that struggle does not pay, was further underscored by the fact that, in those countries where political and economic stability are particularly fragile, and the working class weaker, the protest movements of the young generation (“Arab spring”) only succeeded in triggering off internecine civil and imperialist wars and/or new waves of repression. All of this reinforced the feeling of powerlessness and lack of perspective in the class as a whole.

The non-collapse of capitalism and the failure of the European proletariat to oppose the massive attacks also took its toll on the precursors of a new generation of revolutionary minorities. The increase in public meetings and demonstrations which characterised this phase in Germany gave way to a real phase of demoralisation. Since then, other demonstrations have taken place – against “Pegida”, TTIP,⁴ gene technology or the surveillance of the Internet – but devoid of any more fundamental criticism of capitalism as such.

And now, since the summer of 2015,

4. The Trans-Atlantic Trade and Investment Partnership, the proposed free-trade agreement between Europe and the United States.

the blows of the finance and Euro crisis offensives were followed by another: the present refugee crisis. This also is being used to the maximum by the ruling class against any developing reflection within the proletariat. But more than the bourgeois propaganda, the refugee wave itself strikes a further blow against the first seeds of a recovery of class-consciousness from the blow of 1989 (“death of communism”). The fact that millions from the “periphery” of capitalism are risking their lives to gain access to Europe, North America and other “fortresses” can only, for the moment, enforce the impression that it is a privilege to live in the developed parts of the world, and that the working class at the centre of the system, in the absence of any alternative to capitalism, might have something to defend within capitalism after all. Moreover, the class as a whole, stripped for the moment of its own political, theoretical and cultural heritage, tends to see the causes of this desperate migration, not within capitalism, not linked to contradictions centred in the democratic countries, but in an absence or lack of capitalism and democracy in the conflict zones.

All of this has led to a renewed retreat of both militancy and consciousness within the class.

The problem of political populism

Although the phenomenon of right wing terror against foreigners and refugees is not new in Germany, particularly since re-unification and especially (although not only) in its new, Eastern provinces, until now the rise of a stable political populist movement in Germany has been successfully prevented by the ruling class itself. But in the context of the Euro-crisis, the acute phase of which lasted until the summer of 2015, and the “refugee crisis” which followed it, there has been a new upsurge of political populism. This has manifested itself mainly at three levels: The electoral rise of the “Alternative for Germany” (Alternative für Deutschland, AfD), which was originally constituted in opposition to the Greek salvage packages, and on the basis of a vague opposition to the joint European currency; a populist right wing protest movement centred on the “Monday demonstrations” in Dresden (“Pegida”); a new resurgence of right wing terrorism against refugees and foreigners, such as the “National Socialist Underground” (NSA).

Such phenomena are not new on the German political scene. But until now, the bourgeoisie has always succeeded in preventing them leading to any kind of stable and parliamentary presence. By the

summer of 2015, it seemed as if the ruling sectors would succeed in this once again. The AfD had been robbed of its theme (the “Greek” crisis) and of some of its financial resources, and had suffered its first split. But then this populism made a comeback – stronger than before – thanks to the new immigration wave. And since this immigration question risks playing a more or less dominant role in the foreseeable future, the chances have increased of the AfD establishing itself as a new, more lasting component of the party political apparatus.

The ruling class is able to use all of this to make its electoral game more interesting, to boost the ideologies of democracy and anti-fascism, and also to spread division and xenophobia. Nevertheless, this whole process neither corresponds directly to its class interest, nor is it able to control the process completely.

That there is a close connection between the sharpening of the global crisis of capitalism and the advance of populism is illustrated by the Euro crisis and its effects on the German political scene. The economic crisis not only augments insecurity and fear, intensifying the struggle for survival. It also fans the flames of irrationality. Germany economically would have the most to lose from any weakening of the cohesion of the EU and the Euro. Millions of jobs are directly or indirectly dependent on exports and the role the EU plays for Germany in this context. In such a country it is all the more irrational to put in question the EU, the Euro, the whole world market orientation. At this level, it is no coincidence that the recent appearance of such xenophobic movements was triggered off by worries about the stability of the new European currency.

Rationality is a vital moment of human reason, though not the only one. Rationality centres around the element of calculation in thinking. Since this includes the capacity to calculate one's own objective interests, it is an indispensable element, not only of bourgeois society, but also of the proletarian liberation struggle. Historically, it appeared and developed to a large extent under the impetus of equivalent exchange. Since, under capitalism, money fully develops its role as universal equivalent, the currency and the confidence it inspires plays a major role in “formatting” rationality in bourgeois society. Loss of confidence in the universal equivalent is therefore one of the main sources of irrationality in bourgeois society. This is why currency crises and periods of hyperinflation are particularly dangerous for the stability of this society. The inflation of 1923 in Germany was thus one of the most important factors prepar-

ing the triumph of National Socialism ten years later.

The present refugee and immigration wave, on the other hand, accentuates and illustrates another aspect of populism: the sharpening of competition between the victims of capitalism, and the tendency towards exclusion, xenophobia and scape-goating. The misery under capitalist rule gives rise to a triad of destruction: firstly the accumulation of aggression, hatred, maliciousness and a longing for destruction and self destruction; secondly the projection of these anti-social impulses onto others (moral hypocrisy); thirdly the directing of these impulses, not against the ruling class, which appears too powerful to challenge, but against apparently weaker classes and social strata. This three-pronged “complex” flourishes therefore above all in the absence of the collective struggle of the proletariat, when individual subjects feel powerless in the face of capital. The culmination of this triad at the root of populism is the pogrom. Although the populist aggression also expresses itself against the ruling class, what it demands, so vocally, from it is protection and favours. What it desires is that the bourgeoisie should either eliminate what it sees as its threatening rivals, or tolerate that it starts doing so itself. This “conformist revolt”, a permanent feature of capitalism, becomes acute in face of crisis, war, chaos, instability. In the 1930s the framework of its development was the world historic defeat of the proletariat. Today this framework is the absence of any perspective: the phase of decomposition.

As already developed in the ICC's *Theses on Decomposition*, one of the social and material bases of populism is the process of *déclassement*, the loss of any class identification. Despite German national capital's economic robustness and its shortages of qualified labour, there is an important part of the German population today which, although unemployed, is not really an active factor of the industrial reserve army (ready to take the jobs of others and therefore exercising a downward pressure on wages), but which belongs rather to what Marx called the Lazarus layer of the working class. Because of health problems, or being unable to bear the stress of modern capitalist labour and existence struggle, or the lack of appropriate qualifications, this sector is “unemployable” from the capitalist point of view. Instead of pressuring wage levels, these layers increase the total wage bill for the national capital through the benefits they live off. It is this sector also which most feels the refugees today as potential rivals.

Within this sector, there are two im-

portant groups of proletarian youth, parts of which can be prone to mobilisation as cannon fodder for bourgeois cliques, but also as active protagonists of pogroms. The first is comprised of the children of the first or second generations of *Gastarbeiter*. The original idea was that these “guest workers” would not stay when they were no longer needed, and above all that they would not bring their families with them or found families in Germany. The opposite took place, and the bourgeoisie made no particular effort to educate the children of such families. The result today is that, because unskilled jobs have to a large extent been “exported” to what used to be termed “third world countries”, part of this segment of proletarian youth is condemned to an existence on state benefits, never being integrated into associated labour. The other group is the children of the traumatic mass sackings in East Germany after re-unification. Part of this segment, Germans rather than immigrants, who were not brought up to match the highly competitive “Western” form of capitalism, and did not dare make the move to West Germany to find a job after 1989, as the more intrepid ones did, has joined this army of people living on benefits. These sectors in particular are vulnerable to lumpenisation, criminalisation and decadent, xenophobic forms of politicisation.

Although populism is the product of its system, the bourgeoisie can neither produce this phenomenon at will, nor make it disappear at will. But it can manipulate it to its own ends, and encourage or discourage its development to a greater or lesser degree. In general it does both. But this also is not easy to dominate. Even in the context of totalitarian state capitalism it is difficult for the ruling class to achieve and maintain a coherence in such a situation. Populism itself is deeply rooted in the contradictions of capitalism. The reception of refugees today, for instance, lies in the objective interest of important sectors of German capitalism. The economic advantages are even more apparent than the imperialist ones. This is why the leaders of industry and the business world are the most enthusiastic supporters of the “welcoming culture” at the moment. They reckon that Germany would need an influx of about one million each year in the coming period in view of the predicted shortage of qualified labour and above all the demographic crisis caused by the country’s persistently low birth rate. Moreover, refugees from wars and other catastrophes often prove to be particularly diligent and disciplined workers, ready not only to work for low wages, but also to take initiative and risks. Moreover, the integration of newcomers from “outside”, and the cultural openness this requires, is

itself a productive force (and a potential strength for the proletariat too, of course). An eventual success of Germany at this level could give it an additional advantage over its European competitors.

However, exclusion is, at the same time, the other side of the coin of Merkel’s inclusion policy. The immigration needed today is no longer the unqualified labour of the *Gastarbeiter* generations, now that the unskilled jobs have been concentrated in the periphery of capitalism. The new migrants should bring high qualifications with them, or at least the willingness to acquire them. The present situation requires a much more organised and ruthless selection than in the past. Because of these contradictory needs of inclusion and exclusion, the bourgeoisie encourages openness and xenophobia at the same time. It responds today to this need with a division of labour between left and right, including within Merkel’s Christian Democratic party and her coalition government with the SPD. But behind the present dissonance between the different political groupings about the refugee question there is not only division of labour, but also different concerns and interests. The bourgeoisie is not a homogeneous block. Whereas those parts of the ruling class and the state apparatus closer to the economy push for integration, the whole security apparatus is horrified by Merkel’s opening of the frontiers in summer 2015, and by the numbers coming ever since, because of the loss of control over who enters the state territory which this had temporarily led to. Moreover, within the repressive and legal apparatus there are inevitably those who sympathise with and protect the extreme right out of a shared obsession with law and order, nationalism etc.

As for the political caste itself, there are not only those who (depending on the mood in their constituency) flirt with populism out of opportunism. There are also many who share its mentality. To all of this we can add the contradictions of nationalism itself. Like all modern bourgeois states, Germany was founded on the basis of myths about shared history, culture and even blood. Against this background, even the most powerful bourgeoisie cannot invent and re-invent at will different definitions of the nation to suit its changing interests. Nor would it necessarily have an objective interest in doing so, since the old nationalist myths are still essential, and a powerful lever of “divide and rule” towards the inside, and in mobilising support for imperialist aggression towards the outside. Thus, it is still not self evident today that you can have something like a black or a Muslim “German”.

The German ruling class faced with the “refugee crisis”

In the context of decomposition and economic crisis the principal motor of populism in Europe in recent decades has been the problem of immigration. Today this problem has been sharpened by the biggest exodus since World War II. Why is this influx apparently much more of a political problem in Europe than in countries like Turkey, Jordan or even the Lebanon, which receive much bigger contingents? In the older capitalist countries, the pre-capitalist customs of hospitality, and the subsistence economic and social structures which go with them, have withered much more radically. There is also the fact that these migrants come from a different culture. This is of course not a problem in itself, on the contrary. But modern capitalism makes it a problem. In Western Europe in particular, the welfare state is the main organiser of social aid and cohesion. It is this state which is supposed to accommodate the refugees. This already places them in competition with the “indigenous” poor over jobs, housing and benefits.

Until now, because of its relative economic, political and social stability, immigration, and with it populism, has caused less problems in Germany than in much of Western Europe. But in the present situation, the German bourgeoisie is increasingly confronted by this problem, not only at home but also in the context of the European Union.

Within Germany itself, the rise of right wing populism disturbs its project of integrating part of the immigrants. This is a real problem since to date, all the attempts to raise the birth rate “at home” have failed. Right wing terror also damages its reputation abroad – a very sensitive point in view the crimes of the German bourgeoisie during the first half of the 20th century. The establishment of the AfD as a stable parliamentary force could complicate the formation of future governments. At the electoral level, it is at present a problem above all for the CDU/CSU, the leading governmental party, which, until now, under Merkel, has been able to attract both social democratic and conservative voters, thus cementing its leading position towards the SPD.

But it is above all at the level of Europe that populism today threatens German interests. The status of Germany as economically, and to a lesser degree politically a global player, depends to an important degree on the existence and coherence of the EU. The arrival in government of populist, more or less anti-European parties in

Eastern (already the case in Hungary and Poland) and above all in Western Europe would tend to hamper this cohesion. This in particular is why Merkel has declared the refugee question to be the issue which will “*decide the destiny of Germany*”. The strategy of the German bourgeoisie towards this question is to attempt to convert, at the European level, the more or less chaotic migration of the post-war *Gastarbeiter* and de-colonisation period into a meritocratic, highly selective immigration more on the Canadian or Australian model. The more effective sealing off of the external borders of the EU is one of the preconditions for the proposed conversion of illegal into legal immigration. It would also entail the establishment of yearly immigration quotas. Instead of paying horrific sums to get smuggled into the EU, migrants are to be encouraged to “invest” in improving their own qualifications in order to increase their chances of legal access. Instead of setting off towards Europe on their own initiative, those refugees accepted would be transported to accommodation and eventual jobs already designated for them. The other side of this coin is that the undesired immigrants would be stopped at the borders, or quickly and brutally expelled if they have already managed to gain access. This conversion of the EU borders into selection ramps (already an ongoing process) is presented as a humanitarian project aimed at reducing the numbers drowning in the Mediterranean, which, despite all media manipulation, has become a source of moral disgrace for the European bourgeoisie. Through its insistence on a European rather than a national solution, Germany is assuming its responsibilities towards capitalist Europe, at the same time underlining its claim to political leadership of the old continent. Its goal is nothing less than to defuse the time bomb of immigration, and with it of political populism, in the EU.

It was in this context that the Merkel government, in summer 2015, opened the German borders to refugees. At that moment, the Syrian refugees, who until then were ready to remain in eastern Turkey, began to lose hope in returning home, thus setting off, en masse, towards Europe. At the same time, the Turkish government decided, in order to blackmail the EU, which was blocking Ankara’s candidature for European entry, not to prevent their departure. In this situation, the closing of the German borders would have created a pile up of hundreds of thousands of refugees in the Balkans, a chaotic, almost uncontrollable situation. But by temporarily lifting the control of its borders, Berlin triggered off a new flood of migration of desperate people who suddenly (mis)understood that they were being invited to Germany. All

of this shows the reality of a moment of potential loss of control of the situation.

Because of the radical manner with which she has identified herself with “her” project, the chances of success for Merkel’s proposed “European solution” would considerably deteriorate were she to fail to be re-elected in 2017. One of the planks of Merkel’s re-election campaign seems to be an economic one. Given the present slowdown in Chinese and American growth, the export oriented German economy would normally be heading towards recession. An increase of state spending and building activity “for the refugees” could avoid such an eventuality in the run up to the elections.

Unlike the 1970s (when in many leading Western countries left capitalist parties came to government: “left in power”) or the 1980s (“left in opposition”) the present government strategy and electoral “game” in Germany is determined, to a much lesser degree by the more immediate threat of the class struggle, and much more than in the past by the problems of immigration and populism.

The refugees and the working class

The solidarity with the refugees expressed by an important part of the population in Germany, although exploited to the hilt by the state to promote the image of a humane, world-open German nationalism, was spontaneous and, at the beginning, “self-organised”. And still today, more than half a year after the beginning of the present crisis, the state management of the influx would collapse without the initiatives of the population. There is nothing proletarian about these activities in themselves. On the contrary, these people are partly doing the work which the state is unwilling or unable to do, often still without any payment. For the working class, the central problem is that this solidarity cannot take place presently on a class terrain. For the moment it takes on a very unpolitical character, unconnected to any explicit opposition to the imperialist war in Syria for instance. Like the NGOs and all the different “critical” organisations of an (in reality non-existent) civil society, these structures have more or less immediately been transformed into appendages of the totalitarian state.

But at the same time it would be a mistake to simply dismiss this solidarity as merely charity. All the more so since this solidarity is being expressed towards an influx of potential rivals on the labour and other markets. In the absence of pre-capitalist traditions of hospitality, in the old capitalist countries the associated labour and soli-

arity of the proletariat is the main social, material basis of any such, more generally felt solidarity. Its whole spirit has not been one of “helping the poor and weak”, but of co-operation and collective creativity. In the long term, if the class begins to recover its identity, consciousness and heritage, this present experience of solidarity can be integrated into the experience of the class and its search for a revolutionary perspective. Among the workers in Germany today, at least potentially, the impulses of solidarity express a certain kindling of a class memory and consciousness, recalling that in Europe also, the experience of war and massive population dislocation is a not so very far away, and that the failure of solidarity in the face of this experience during the period of counter-revolution (before, during and after World War II) should not be repeated today.

The opposite pole of populism in capitalism is not democracy and humanism but associated labour – the main counterweight to xenophobia and pogromism. The resistance to exclusion and scapegoating has always been a permanent and essential moment of the daily proletarian class struggle. There can today be the beginnings of a very unclear groping towards a recognition that the wars and other catastrophes which oblige people to flee, are part of the violent separations through which, in a permanent process, the proletariat is constituted. And that the refusal of those who have lost everything to obediently stay where the ruling class wants them to, their refusal to renounce the pursuit of a better life, are constituting moments of proletarian combativeness. The struggle for its mobility, against the regime of capitalist discipline, is one of the oldest moments in the life of “free” wage labour.

Globalisation and the need for an international struggle

In the part on the balance sheet of the class struggle, we argued that the 2015 strikes in Germany were more an expression of a temporary, favourable, national economic situation, rather than an indication of a more widespread European or international militancy. It remains therefore true that it has become increasingly difficult for the working class to defend its immediate interests through strike action and other means of struggle. This does not mean that economic struggles are no longer possible, or have lost their relevance (as the so-called Essen Tendency of the KAPD wrongly concluded in the 1920s). On the contrary, it means that the economic dimension of the class struggle contains a much more direct political dimension than in the past – a dimension which it is extremely difficult

to take responsibility for.

Recent ICC congress resolutions have rightly identified the intimidating weight of mass unemployment as one of the objective factors inhibiting the development of struggles in defence of immediate economic interests. But this is not the only, and not even the main economic cause of this inhibition. A more fundamental one lies in what is called globalisation – the present phase of totalitarian state capitalism – and the framework it gives for the world economy.

The globalisation of world capitalism is, in itself, not a new phenomenon. We already find it at the basis of the first highly mechanised sector of capitalist production: the textile industry in Britain was the centre of a triangle linked to the robbery of slaves in Africa and their labour in cotton plantations in the United States. In terms of world trade, the level of globalisation attained before World War I was not reached again until the end of the 20th century. Nevertheless, in the last three decades, this globalisation has acquired a new quality above all at two levels: in production and in finance. The pattern of the periphery of capitalism providing cheap labour, agricultural plantation products and raw materials for the industrial countries of the northern hemisphere has been, if not wholly replaced, certainly substantially modified by global production networks, still centred in more dominant countries, but where industrial and service activity is taking place all over the world. Inside this “Ordo-Liberal” corset, the tendency is for no national capital, no industry, no sector or business to be able to exempt itself anymore from direct international

competition. There is almost nothing being produced in any part of the world which could not be produced somewhere else. Each nation state, each region, each city, each neighbourhood, each sector of the economy is condemned to compete with all the others to attract global investment. The whole world is spellbound, as if condemned to waiting for the salvation through the coming of Capital in the form of investments. This phase of capitalism is by no means a spontaneous product, but a state order introduced and imposed above all by the leading, old bourgeois nation states. One of the goals of this economic policy is to imprison the working class of the whole world in a monster disciplinary system.

At this level, we can perhaps divide the history of the objective conditions of the class struggle, very schematically, into three phases. In capitalist ascendancy the workers were confronted first and foremost with individual capitalists, and could thus organise themselves more or less effectively in trade unions. With the concentration of capital in the hands of big enterprises and the state, these established means of struggle lost their effectiveness. Each strike was now directly confronted with the whole bourgeoisie, centralised in the state. It took time for the proletariat to find an effective answer to this new situation: the mass strike of the whole proletariat at the level of an entire country (Russia 1905), already containing within itself the potential for the seizure of power and spreading to other countries (the first revolutionary wave begun by Red October). Today, with contemporary globalisation, an objective historical tendency of decadent

capitalism achieves its full development: each strike, each act of economic resistance by workers anywhere in the world, finds itself immediately confronted by the whole of world capital, ever ready to withdraw production and investment and produce somewhere else. For the moment, the international proletariat has been quite unable to find an adequate answer, or even to gain a glimpse of what such an answer might look like. We do not know if it will succeed in the end in doing so. But it seems clear that the development in this direction would take much longer than did the transition from trade unionism to mass strike. For one thing, the situation of the proletariat in the old, central countries of capitalism – those, like Germany, at the “top” of the economic hierarchy – would have to become much more dramatic than is the case today. For another, the step required by objective reality – conscious international class struggle, the “international mass strike” – is much more demanding than the one from trade union to mass strike in one country. For it obliges the working class to call into question not only corporatism and sectionalism, but the main, often centuries- or even millennia-old divisions of class society such as nationality, ethnic culture, race, religion, sex etc. This is a much more profound and more political step.

In reflecting on this question, we should take into consideration that the factors preventing the development by the proletariat of its own revolutionary perspective lie not only in the past, but also in the present; that they have not only political causes but also economic (more correctly: economic-political) ones.

Presentation of the report (March 2016)

At the time of the 2008 financial crisis there was a tendency within the ICC towards a kind of economic “catastrophism”, one expression of which was the idea, put forward by some comrades, that the collapse of central capitalist countries such as Germany might now be on the agenda. One of the reasons for making the relative economic strength and competitiveness of Germany an axis of this report is in the hope of contributing to overcoming such weaknesses. But we also want to enforce the spirit of nuance against schematic thinking. Because capitalism itself has an abstract mode of functioning (based on equivalent exchange), there is an understandable but unhealthy tendency to see economic questions too abstractly, for

example judging the relative economic strength of national capitals only in very general terms (like the rate of organic composition of capital, labour intensive production, mechanisation, as mentioned in the report), forgetting that capitalism is a social relation between human beings, above all between social classes.

We should clarify one point: when the report says that the US bourgeoisie are using juridical means (fines against Volkswagen and others) to counter German competition, the intention was not to give the impression that the United States has no economic strengths of its own to throw into the scales. For example, the USA is presently ahead of Germany in the development of electric-powered and self

driving cars, and one of the hypotheses doing the rounds in the social media about the so-called Volkswagen scandal (that the information about the manipulation of emission measurements by that company may have been leaked to the American authorities from within the German bourgeoisie to oblige the German car industry to catch up at this level) are not wholly implausible.

On the way the refugee crisis is used for imperialist ends, it is necessary to bring the report up to date. At present, both Turkey and Russia are making massive use of the plight of refugees to blackmail German capital and weaken what remains of European cohesion. The way Ankara has been letting refugees move westwards is

already mentioned in the report. The price for Turkish co-operation on this question will not only be many billions of Euros. As for Russia, it has recently been accused by a series of NGOs and refugee aid organisations of deliberately bombing hospitals and residential districts in Syrian cities in order to trigger off new trails of refugees. More generally, Russian propaganda has been systematically using the refugee question to fan the flames of political populism in Europe.

As for Turkey, it is demanding not only money but also the acceleration of visa-free access of its citizens to Europe, and of negotiations towards membership in the EU. From Germany it is also demanding cessation of military aid to Kurdish unity in Iraq and Syria.

For Chancellor Merkel, the most prominent exponent of a closer collaboration with Ankara in the refugee question, and who is a more or less staunch Atlanticist (for her, proximity to the United States is the lesser evil compared to proximity towards Moscow), this is less of a problem than it is for other members of her own party. As the report already mentioned, Putin had planned the modernisation of the Russian economy in close collaboration with German industry, in particular its engineering sector which, since the Second World War, has been mainly located in the south of Germany (including Siemens, once based in Berlin and now in Munich, which seems to have been designated to play a central role in this “Russian operation”). It is in this context we can understand the link between the persistent critique of Merkel’s “European” (and “Turkish”) “solution” to the refugee crisis by the CDU’s companion party, the Bavarian CSU, and the spectacular semi-official visit by Bavarian party leaders to Moscow at the high point of this controversy.⁵ This fraction would prefer to collaborate with Moscow rather than with Ankara. Paradoxically, the strongest supports of the chancellor on this question today are not within in her own party, the CDU, but her coalition partner, the SPD, and the parliamentary opposition. We can explain this partly through a division of labour within the ruling Christian Democracy, the right wing of which is trying (for the moment not very successfully) to keep its conservative voters from defecting to the populists (AfD). But there are also regional tensions (since World War II, although the government was in Bonn and the financial capital in Frankfurt, the

cultural life of the German bourgeoisie was mainly concentrated in Munich. It is only recently that this, following the move of the government there, has started to regravitate towards Berlin).

In relation to the present waves of immigration, there is not only an antagonism within Europe, of course, but also collaboration and division of labour, for instance between the German and the Austrian bourgeoisie. By initiating the “closing of the Balkan route”, Austria made Berlin less one-sidedly dependent on Turkey in holding up refugees, thus partly bolstering Berlin’s negotiation position towards Ankara.⁶

While an important part of the business world supported Merkel’s “welcoming policy” towards refugees last summer, this was far from being the case among the security organs of the state, who were absolutely horrified by the more or less uncontrolled and unregistered influx into the country. They have still not forgiven her for this. The French and other European governments were no less sceptical. They are all convinced that imperialist opponents from the Islamic world are using the refugee crisis to smuggle Jihadists into Germany, from where they can move on to France, Belgium etc. In fact, the criminal assaults of New Year’s Eve in Cologne already confirmed that even criminal gangs have been exploiting asylum procedures to position their members in the big European cities. You do not have to be a prophet to foresee that yet another expansion of the scale and importance of the police and secret services in Europe will be one of the principal results of the present developments.⁷

The report makes a connection between economic crisis, immigration and political populism. If we add the growing role of anti-Semitism, the parallels with the 1930s become particularly striking. But it is interesting, in this connection, to examine how the situation in Germany today also illustrates the historical differences. The fact that there is no conclusive evidence, for the moment, that the central sections of the proletariat are defeated, disoriented and demoralised as they were 80 years ago, is the most important, but not the only difference. The economic policy favoured by the big bourgeoisie today is globalisation, not autarky, nor the protectionism advocated by “moderate” populists. This touches on

an aspect of contemporary populism still underdeveloped in the report: opposition to the European Union. The latter is, at the economic level, one of the instruments of present day globalisation. In Europe, it has even become its main symbol. Part of the background of the formation of populist governments in central-eastern Europe recently is, for example, the negotiation of the TTIP trade agreement between North America and Europe, through which big industry and agri-business stand to benefit at the expense of small farmers and producers in places like the so-called Visegrad-states (Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic and Slovakia).

As far as the situation of the proletariat is concerned, the concern expressed at the end of the report is that we should not only look at causes essentially lying in the past (such as the counter-revolution which followed the defeat of the Russian and World Revolution at the end of World War I) to explain the difficulties of the working class to politically develop its struggle in a revolutionary direction after 1968. All these factors from the past, and which are all profoundly true explanations, nonetheless prevented neither May ‘68 in France nor the 1969 Hot Autumn in Italy. Nor should we assume that the revolutionary potential expressed at that time, in an embryonic manner, was condemned to failure from the onset. Explanations based one-sidedly on the past lead to a kind of determinist fatalism. At the economic level, so-called globalisation was an economic and political, state capitalist instrument which the bourgeoisie found to stabilise its system and to counter the proletarian threat, an instrument which the proletariat, in turn, will have to find an answer to. This is why the difficulties of the working class in the past 30 years to develop a revolutionary alternative are intimately linked to the politico-economic strategy of the bourgeoisie, including its capacity to postpone an economic *Kladderadatsch* (catastrophe) for the working class – and thus the threat of class war – in the old centres of world capitalism.

5. The discussion at the conference also rightly pointed out that the formulation of the report, according to which the business world in Germany supports, as if as a single block, the refugee policy of Merkel, is very schematic and as such incorrect. Even the need for fresh labour resources by employers is very varied from one sector to another.

6. Although this convergence of interests between Vienna and Berlin, as was pointed out in the discussion, is temporary and fragile.

7. This Jihadist infiltration and the mounting likelihood of terrorist attacks is a reality. But so is the use of this and other means by the ruling class to create an atmosphere of permanent fear, panic and suspicion, antidotes to critical reflection and solidarity within the working population.

100 years since the Dublin Easter Rising

The national question 100 years after the Easter Rising

One hundred years ago, during the Easter of 1916, a handful of Irish nationalists seized strategic positions in the centre of Dublin and declared Ireland's independence from the British empire, and the creation of an Irish Republic. They managed to hold out for a few days before being crushed by the British armed forces, which did not hesitate to shell the city using naval cannon. Among those summarily executed after the Easter Rising's defeat was the great revolutionary James Connolly, one of the best known leaders of the working class in Ireland who brought his workers' militia into the revolt alongside the nationalist Irish Volunteers.

Throughout the second half of the 19th century, support for the cause of Irish and Polish national independence had been a given of the European workers' movement. Ireland's tragedy and Marx's belief in the necessity of Irish independence has been used over and over again to justify support for any number of "national liberation" movements against imperialist powers both old and new. But the outbreak of world war in 1914 set the seal on changed conditions which invalidated the old positions. As our predecessors of the French Communist Left put it: "*Only an activity based on the most recent developments, on foundations that are constantly being enriched, is really revolutionary. In contrast, activity based on yesterday's truths that have already lost their currency is sterile, harmful and reactionary*".¹

Sean O'Casey reportedly said that when James Connolly was executed, the labour movement lost a leader and Irish nationalism gained a martyr.

How could this happen? How could a convinced and constant internationalist like Connolly throw in his lot with patriotism? We do not propose here to go over the evolution in his attitude in 1914: this is dealt with in an article first published in *World Revolution* in 1976, and which remains valid to this day.¹ Nor do we need to demonstrate his fundamental hostility to inter-classist nationalism: Connolly's own words, in an article published on this site, are clear enough.² Our purpose rather is to set Connolly's thinking within the wider framework of the international socialism of his day, and to examine how the attitude of the workers' movement to the "national question" evolved between the wave of popular uprisings against aristocratic and autocratic governments that swept Europe in 1848, and the outbreak of imperialist world war in 1914.

The events of 1848 were – as Marx was to show later – of a dual nature. On the one hand they were national democratic movements aimed at unifying a "nation" divided up among a multitude of petty semi-feudal fiefdoms: this was true above all in Germany and Italy. On the other, especially in Paris, they saw the nascent industrial proletariat appear for the first time³ on the historical stage as an independent political force. Not surprisingly, 1848 therefore also posed the question of the attitude that the working class should adopt to the national question.

The same year saw the publication of the *Communist Manifesto*, which laid out, clearly and unequivocally, the internationalist principle as the bedrock of the workers' movement: "*The working men have no country. We cannot take from them what they have not got (...) The proletarians have nothing to lose but their chains. They have a world to win. Working Men of All Countries, Unite!*"⁴

This then is the general principle:

1. "Against the concept of the brilliant leader", in *International Review* n°33.

2. This article has been republished in *WR* n° 373 and on our website: <http://en.internationalism.org/icconline/201603/13876/james-connolly-and-irish-nationalism>.

2. <http://en.internationalism.org/icconline/2010/7/connolly>.

3. At least in continental Europe. Arguably, the proletariat had already made its appearance in Britain first with the Luddite, then the Chartist movements.

4. In the original German the last words: "*Proletarier aller Länder, vereinigt euch!*". Thus, a more correct translation would be "*Proletarians [men and women] of all countries, Unite!*"

the workers are not divided by national interests, they must unite across national boundaries: "*United action, of the leading civilised countries at least, is one of the first conditions for the emancipation of the proletariat*" (*Manifesto*). But how is the principle to be worked out in practice? In mid-19th century Europe, it was clear to Marx and Engels that for the proletariat to seize power it had first to become a major social and political force, and that this in turn was dependent on the development of capitalist social relations. Such a development meant the overthrow of the feudal aristocracy, the demolition of feudal particularism, and the unification of the "great, historic nations" (the expression is Engels') to create the large internal market that capitalism needed to develop and in doing so, develop the numbers, strength, and organisation of the working class.

For Marx and Engels, and for the workers' movement in general at the time, national unity, the suppression of feudal privilege, and the development of industry, can only be accomplished by a democratic movement: a free press, access to education, the right of association – these are all democratic demands, within the framework of the nation state, and whose existence is impossible without the nation state. How far these were necessary conditions is debatable. After all, 19th century industrial development was not limited to democracies like Britain or the United States. Autocratic regimes like Tsarist Russia or Japan under the Meiji Restoration also witnessed startling industrial progress during the same epoch. That said, the development of Russia and Japan remained essentially dependent on that of the more advanced democratic countries, and it is significant that the reactionary autocratic Prussian Junker regime that dominated Germany was forced to respect a certain number of democratic freedoms.

These democratic demands were also in the interests of, and important to, the working class. As Engels put it, they give the workers' movement "room to breathe" and to develop. Freedom of association made it easier to organise against capitalist exploitation. Freedom of the press made it easier for workers to educate themselves, to

prepare themselves politically and culturally for the seizure of power. Because it was not yet ready to make its own revolution, the workers' movement at this point shared its immediate goals with other classes, and there was a strong tendency to identify the causes of the proletariat, of progress and of national unity with the fight for democracy. Here, for example, is Marx speaking in 1848 at a meeting in Brussels to celebrate the second anniversary of the rising in Krakow, Poland: "*The Krakow revolution has set all of Europe a glorious example, because it identified the question of nationalism with democracy and with the liberation of the oppressed class (...) It finds its principles confirmed in Ireland, where O'Connell's party with its narrowly restricted nationalistic aims has sunk into the grave, and the new national party is pledged above all to reform and democracy*".⁵

The struggle for national unity and independence was by no means a universal principle however. Hence Engels, writing in *The Commonwealth* in 1860: "*This right of the great national subdivisions of Europe to political independence, acknowledged as it was by the European democracy, could not but find the same acknowledgement with the working classes especially. It was, in fact, nothing more than to recognise in other large national bodies of undoubted vitality the same right of individual national existence which the working men of each separate country claimed for themselves. But this recognition, and the sympathy with these national aspirations, were restricted to the large and well defined historical nations of Europe; there was Italy, Poland, Germany, Hungary*".⁶ Engels goes on to say: "*There is no country in Europe where there are not different nationalities under the same government. The Highland Gaels and the Welsh are undoubtedly of different nationalities to what the English are, although nobody will give to these remnants of peoples long gone by the title of nations, any more than to the Celtic inhabitants of Brittany in France*". Engels clearly distinguishes between the "right of national existence for the historic peoples of Europe" and that of "those numerous small relics of peoples which, after having figured for a longer or shorter period on the stage of history, were finally absorbed as integral portions into one or the other of those more powerful nations whose greater vitality enabled them to overcome greater obstacles".

Was Ireland a "special case"?

This rejection of an all-embracing national principle naturally raises the question: what makes Ireland different? Why did Marx and Engels not advocate that Ireland should simply be absorbed into Britain, as a condition of its industrial development?

For there is no doubt that in their eyes, Ireland was a "special case" of particular significance. Marx at one point even went so far as to say that Ireland was the key to revolution in England, just as England was the key to revolution in Europe.

There were two reasons for this. Firstly, Marx was convinced that the brutal spoliation of the Irish peasantry by absentee English landlords was one of the main factors underpinning the reactionary aristocratic class that barred the way to democratic and economic progress.

Second, and perhaps more important, was the moral factor. England's domination of an unwilling Ireland, and the treatment of the Irish, especially the Irish workers, as an enslaved underclass, was not only unjust and offensive, it was morally corrupting for the English workers. How, Marx reasoned, could the English working class rouse itself to the revolutionary overthrow of the existing order if it remained complicit with its own ruling class in the national oppression of the Irish? Moreover, as long as the Irish were deprived of their own national self-respect, there would never be a shortage of Irish proletarians ready to enlist in the service of the English army and help put down revolts by English workers – as Connolly was later to point out.

This insistence on Irish independence extended to the organisation of the First International, as Engels argued in 1872: "*If members of a conquering nation called upon the nation they had conquered and continued to hold down to forget their specific nationality and position, to 'sink national differences' and so forth, that was not Internationalism, it was nothing else but preaching to them submission to the yoke, and attempting to justify and to perpetuate the dominion of the conqueror under the cloak of Internationalism. It was sanctioning the belief, only too common among the English working men, that they were superior beings compared to the Irish, and as much an aristocracy as the mean whites of the Slave States considered themselves to be with regard to the Negroes.*

"*In a case like that of the Irish, true Internationalism must necessarily be based upon a distinctly national organisation; the Irish, as well as other oppressed nationalities, could enter the Association only as equals with the members of the conquer-*

ing nation, and under protest against the conquest. The Irish sections, therefore, not only were justified, but even under the necessity to state in the preamble to their rules that their first and most pressing duty, as Irishmen, was to establish their own national independence."⁷

It was essentially the same logic that led Lenin to insist that the Bolshevik Party programme should include the right to national self-determination: this was the only way, in his view, to render explicit and unequivocal the Party's rejection of "Great Russian chauvinism" – the equivalent among Russian workers, of the English workers' feelings of superiority to the Irish.

National unity within defined national borders, democracy, progress, and the interests of the working class: all these, then, could be seen as moving in the same direction. Even Marx – who was hardly given to sentimental flights of fancy – could, in what was perhaps a moment of unguarded optimism, envisage the possibility of the workers taking power through the ballot-box in countries like Britain, Holland, or the United States. But at no point was national unity, or indeed democracy, the ultimate goal; they were merely contingent principles on the road to that goal: "*The workers have no country. Workers of all countries, unite!*"

The problem with such contingent principles is that they can become frozen into abstract, fixed principles so that they no longer express the dynamic vanguard of real historical development, but on the contrary become a drag, or even worse an active obstacle. This, as we shall see, was what happened to the socialist movement's perspective on the national question towards the end of the 19th century. But first, let us pause for a moment for a brief overview of how Connolly's own thought gives concrete form to the dominant ideas of the Second International.

Although he spent some years in the United States, where he joined the IWW,⁸ Connolly remained very much the Irish socialist. He espoused the methods of industrial unionism, in opposition to narrow craft unionism, joining with Jim Larkin to build up the Irish Transport & General Workers' Union and playing a key role in the great Dublin strike and lockout of 1913. But even during his time in the USA Connolly was a member successively of Daniel De Leon's Socialist Labor Party, and of the Socialist Party of America, and it would be fair to say that his life was dedicated to

5. <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1848/02/22a.htm>

6. <https://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspaper/nl/vol10/no07/engels.htm>

7. <https://www.marxists.org/history/international/iwma/documents/1872/irish-section.htm>

8. The revolutionary syndicalist Industrial Workers of the World.

building an Irish political socialist organisation. He would probably have thought of such an organisation as marxist, insofar as pinning theoretical labels on an organisation had any interest for him. Certainly, his Irish Socialist Republican Party⁹ was recognised as an Irish delegation in its own right at the 1900 Congress of the Second International. But there is little or no indication in Connolly's writing that he knew of, or took part in, the debates within the International, on the national question in particular: this is all the more surprising in that he had taught himself to read German with some fluency.

Connolly believed that socialism could only grow in national soil. Indeed, his important study of "Labour in Irish history" is partly devoted to showing that socialism emerges naturally from Irish conditions; he highlights in particular the writings of William Thompson in the 1820s, who he considers not unjustly as one of Marx's forerunners in identifying labour as the source of capital and profit.¹⁰

It is not surprising therefore, to see Connolly argue, in a 1909 article in *The Irish Nation*¹¹ titled "Sinn Fein, socialism, and the nation" for a rapprochement between "Sinn Feiners who sympathise with Socialism" and "Socialists who realise that

a Socialist movement must rest upon and draw its inspiration from the historical and actual conditions of the country in which it functions and not merely lose themselves in an abstract 'internationalism' (which has no relation to the real internationalism of the Socialist movement)". In this same article, Connolly opposes those socialists who "observing that those who talk loudest about 'Ireland a Nation' are often the most merciless grinders of the faces of the poor, fly off to the extreme limit of hostility to Nationalism and, whilst opposed to oppression at all times, are also opposed to national revolt for national independence" and those "principally recruited amongst the workers in the towns of North-East Ulster [who] have been weaned by Socialist ideas and industrial disputes from the leadership of Tory and Orange landlords and capitalists, but as they are offered practical measures of relief from capitalist oppression by the English Independent Labour Party, and offered nothing but a green flag by Irish Nationalism... naturally go where they imagine relief will come from".

This identification of the working class with the nation could plausibly claim to derive from Marx and Engels. After all, we can read in the *Manifesto* that "Since the proletariat must first of all acquire political supremacy, must rise to be the leading class of the nation, must constitute itself the nation, it is so far, itself national, though not in the bourgeois sense of the word". And the same idea is found in Kautsky, writing in 1887:¹² "Just as for bourgeois freedoms, the proletarians must come to the defence of their nation's unity and independence, both against reactionary, particular interests, and against possible outside attack (...) In the decadent Roman Empire, social antagonisms had reached such a pitch, and the process of decomposition of the Roman nation – if we can call it such – had become so intolerable that for many, the national enemy, the German barbarian, appeared as a saviour. We have not yet reached this point, at least not in the national states. Nor do we think that the proletariat will ever reach it. Certainly, the antagonism between bourgeoisie and proletariat is constantly increasing, but at the same time the proletariat is more and more the core of the nation in numbers and intelligence, and the interests of the proletariat and the nation are growing ever closer. A policy hostile to the nation would be pure suicide for the proletariat".

With hindsight, it is easy to see the betrayal of 1914 – the defence of German "Kultur" against Tsarist barbarism – be-

hind this identification of the nation and the proletariat. But hindsight is not much help in the present, and the fact is that the marxist movement at the end of the 19th century had largely failed to re-evaluate its view on the national question in the face of a changing reality.

For forty years, the socialist movement had not really challenged the *Manifesto's* optimistic assumption that "National differences and antagonism between peoples are daily more and more vanishing, owing to the development of the bourgeoisie, to freedom of commerce, to the world market, to uniformity in the mode of production and in the conditions of life corresponding thereto." On one level this was true – we will return to this aspect shortly – yet by the 1890s the "national question" was coming to the forefront of the political scene as never before, precisely as a result of the phenomenal expansion of capitalist social relations and industrial production. With the development of modern conditions of production, new national bourgeoisies with modern national aspirations were appearing in Eastern and Central Europe. The resulting debate over the national question took on a new importance, above all for the Social Democracy of Russia with regard to Poland, and of the Austro-Hungarian Empire with regard to the national aspirations of the Czechs and a multitude of smaller Slav peoples.

Luxemburg's critique of the nation state

The last thirty years of the 19th century thus transformed the way in which the national question was posed.

Firstly, as Luxemburg demonstrated in *The national question and autonomy*,¹³ once the bourgeois class has conquered its internal market, it must inevitably become a conquering imperialist state. More, in capitalism's imperialist phase, all states are constrained to seek by imperialist means to make a place for themselves on the world market. Answering Kautsky's postulate of capitalism's evolution towards a single "super-state"¹⁴ Luxemburg writes: "The 'best' national state is only an abstraction which can be easily described and defined theoretically, but which doesn't correspond to reality (...) The development of world powers, a characteristic feature of our times growing in importance along with the progress of capitalism, from the very outset condemns all small nations to political impotence..."¹⁵ "The argument

9. Connolly was one of the founders of the ISRP in 1896. Although it probably never exceeded 80 members, it was influential in later Irish socialist politics, espousing the principle of a republic in Ireland before Sinn Fein. The party survived until 1904, and published the *Workers' Republic*.

10. "If we were to attempt to estimate the relative achievements of Thompson and Marx we should not hope to do justice to either by putting them in contrast, or by eulogising Thompson in order to belittle Marx, as some Continental critics of the latter seek to do. Rather we should say that the relative position of this Irish genius and of Marx are best comparable to the historical relations of the pre-Darwinian evolutionists to Darwin; as Darwin systematised all the theories of his predecessors and gave a lifetime to the accumulation of the facts required to establish his and their position, so Marx found the true line of economic thought already indicated, and brought his genius and encyclopaedic knowledge and research to place it upon an unshakeable foundation. Thompson brushed aside the economic fiction maintained by the orthodox economists and accepted by the Utopian, that profit was made in exchange, and declared that it was due to the subjection of labour and the resultant appropriation, by the capitalists and landlords, of the fruits of the labour of others (...) All the theory of the class war is but a deduction from this principle. But, although Thompson recognised this class war as a fact, he did not recognise it as a factor, as the factor in the evolution of society towards freedom. This was reserved for Marx, and in our opinion, is his chief and crowning glory" (from "Labour in Irish history", <https://www.marxists.org/archive/connolly/1910/lih/chap10.htm>).

Marx was always scrupulous in citing his sources and giving credit to thinkers who had preceded him, and he does indeed cite Thompson's work in *Capital* (in the chapter on "Division of labour and manufacture" in Volume 1).

11. <https://www.marxists.org/archive/connolly/1909/01/sfsocslm.htm>.

12. "Die Moderne Nationalität", in *Neue Zeit*, V, 1887, translated in *Les marxistes et la question nationale 1848-1914* (Haupt, Löwy, Weill), Editions L'Harmattan, 1997, p125.

13. <https://www.marxists.org/archive/luxemburg/1909/national-question/index.htm>.

14. In *Nationalität und Internationalität*, 1908.

15. Part 1, "The right of nations to self-determination".

that an independent nation-state is, after all 'the best' guarantee of national existence and development involves operating with a conception of a nation-state as a completely abstract thing. The nation-state as seen only from a national point of view, only as a pledge and embodiment of freedom and independence, is simply a remnant of the decaying ideology of the petty bourgeoisie of Germany, Italy, Hungary – all of Central Europe in the first half of the nineteenth century. It is a phrase from the treasury of disintegrated bourgeois liberalism (...) 'Nation-states', even in the form of republics, are not products or expressions of the 'will of the people', as the liberal phraseology goes and the anarchist repeats. 'Nation-states' are today the very same tools and forms of class rule of the bourgeoisie as the earlier, non-national states, and like them they are bent on conquest. The nation-states have the same tendencies toward conquest, war, and oppression – in other words, the tendencies to become 'non-national'. Therefore, among the 'national' states there develop constant scuffles and conflicts of interests, and even if today, by some miracle, all states should be transformed to 'national', then the next day they would already present the same common picture of war, conquest, and oppression."¹⁶

For the smaller nationalities, this inevitably meant that their only possible "independence" meant detaching themselves from the orbit of one great imperialist state, to attach themselves to another. Nowhere was this more clearly illustrated than in the negotiations entered into by the Irish Volunteers (forerunners of the IRA) with German imperialism via the intermediary of the American Clan na Gael organisation, and Roger Casement who acted as an ambassador to Germany itself.¹⁷ Casement supposedly believed that 50,000 German troops would be necessary for a successful rising, but this was obviously out of the question without a decisive German victory at sea. The attempt to land a shipload of rifles from Germany in time for the 1916 rising ended in fiasco, but it remains a damning indictment of Irish nationalism's readiness to participate in imperialist war.

By abandoning a marxist class analysis of imperialist war as the result of capitalism irrespective of nations, Connolly also abandoned the independence of the working class against the capitalists. How far he did so can be seen in the culpable naivety of his idyllic depiction of "peaceful Germany", combined with a semi-racist onslaught

on the "half-educated" English workers:¹⁸ "Basing its industrial effort upon an educated working class, [the German nation] accomplished in the workshop results that this half-educated working-class of England could only wonder at. That English working class trained to a slavish subservience to rule-of-thumb methods, and under managers wedded to traditional processes saw themselves gradually outclassed by a new rival in whose service were enrolled the most learned scientists co-operating with the most educated workers (...) It was determined that since Germany could not be beaten in fair competition industrially, it must be beaten unfairly by organising a military and naval conspiracy against her (...) The conception meant calling up the forces of barbaric powers to crush and hinder the development of the peaceful powers of industry". One wonders what the tens of thousands of Africans massacred during the Herero rising of 1904,¹⁹ or the inhabitants of Tsingtao annexed at gunpoint by Germany in 1898, might have thought of the "peaceful powers" of German industry.

Not only did "national states" tend inevitably to become conquering, imperialist states as Luxemburg demonstrated, they were also becoming less "national" as a result of industrial development and migration of the workforce from the countryside into the new industrial towns. In the case of Poland, by 1900 not only was the "Kingdom of Poland" (i.e. that part of Poland which had been incorporated into the Russian Empire in the 18th century) industrialising rapidly, the same was true of the ethnic-Polish areas under German²⁰ (Upper Silesia) and Austro-Hungarian (Cieszyn Silesia) rule. Moreover, the industrial areas were less ethnic-Polish: workers in the great textile city of Lodz were Polish, German, and Jewish in origin, with a sprinkling of other nationalities including English and French. In Upper Silesia, workers were German, Polish,

18. In an article titled "The war upon the German nation" in *Irish Worker*, 29th August 1914 (<https://www.marxists.org/archive/connolly/1914/08/waronman.htm>).

19. In what was then known as Damaraland, in modern Namibia. An eyewitness account described one Herero defeat: "I was present when the Herero were defeated in a battle in the vicinity of Waterberg. After the battle all men, women, and children who fell into German hands, wounded or otherwise, were mercilessly put to death. Then the Germans set off in pursuit of the rest, and all those found by the wayside and in the sandveld were shot down and bayoneted to death. The mass of the Herero men were unarmed and thus unable to offer resistance. They were just trying to get away with their cattle". The German High Command were fully aware of the atrocities and indeed approved them. See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Herero_and_Namaqua_Genocide.

20. Luxemburg herself was much in demand by the German SPD as one of their rare, and certainly their best, Polish-language orators and agitators.

Danish, Ruthenian, etc. When Marx had called for Polish national independence as a bulwark against Tsarist absolutism a Polish working class barely existed: now, the question of Polish socialists' attitude to Polish nationhood became acute, and led to a split between the Polish Socialist Party (Polska Partia Socjalistyczna, or PPS) on the right and the Social-Democracy of the Kingdom of Poland and Lithuania (Socjaldemokracja Królestwa Polskiego i Litwy, or SDKPiL) on the left.²¹

For the PPS Polish independence meant Poland's separation from Russia, but also the unification of those parts of historical Poland then under German or Austrian rule, where Polish proletarians worked side by side with Germans (and other nationalities). In effect, the PPS made proletarian revolution **dependent** on the "solution" of the "national question" – which could only, as Luxemburg said, lead to division within the ranks of the organised working class in Germany and Austria-Hungary. At best, this would be a distraction, at worst, destructive of workers' unity.

For Luxemburg and the SDKPiL, on the contrary, any resolution of the national question was dependent on the seizure of power by the international working class.²² The only way for workers to oppose national oppression was to join the ranks of international social-democracy: by ending all oppression, the Social-Democracy would also end national oppression: "Not only did [the 1896 London Congress] set the Polish situation squarely on a level with the situation of all other oppressed peoples; it at the same time called for the workers of all such nations to enter the ranks of international socialism as the only remedy for national oppression, rather than dabbling off and on with the restoration of independent capitalist states in their several countries; only in this way could they hasten the introduction of a socialist system that, by abolishing class oppression, would do away with all forms of oppression, including national, once and for all".

When Luxemburg undertook to oppose the PPS' Polish nationalism within the Second International, she was well aware that she was attacking a sacred cow of the socialist and democratic movement:

21. A number of outstanding figures of the revolutionary period came from the SDKPiL, among them Rosa Luxemburg herself, Karl Radek, Leo Jogisches, and Julian Marchlewski.

22. It should perhaps be pointed out – though it is outside the scope of this short study – that there was a good deal of disagreement and uncertainty about what exactly identified a "nation". Was it language (as Kautsky argued), or was it a more vaguely defined "cultural identity" as Otto Bauer thought? The question remains a valid – and open – one to this day.

16. Part 2, "The nation-state and the proletariat".

17. See FSL Lyons, *Ireland since the Famine*, Fontana Press, 1971, pp340, 350.

“Polish Socialism occupies – or at any rate once occupied – a unique position in its relation to international socialism, a position which can be traced directly to the Polish national question”.²³ But, as she said and demonstrated very clearly, to defend in the 1890s the **letter** of Marx’s 1848 support for Polish independence was not only to refuse to recognise that social reality had changed, but to transform marxism itself from a living **method** for investigating reality, into a dried-up quasi-religious dogma.

Luxemburg went further than this. In effect, she considered that Marx and Engels had treated the Polish question as essentially a matter of “foreign policy” for the revolutionary democracy and the workers’ movement: *“Even at first glance this standpoint [i.e. Marx’s position on Poland] reveals its glaring lack of inner relation to the social theory of Marxism. By failing to analyse Poland and Russia as class societies bearing economic and political contradictions in their bosoms, by viewing them not from the point of view of historical development but as if they were in a fixed, absolute condition as homogeneous, undifferentiated units, this view ran counter to the very essence of Marxism”*. It is as if Poland – and indeed Russia as well – could be treated as somehow “outside” capitalism.

The development of capitalist social relations had essentially the same effect in Ireland as in Poland. Despite Ireland’s being above all a country of emigration, the Irish working class was by no means homogeneous: on the contrary, the most heavily industrialised area was Belfast (textile industry and the Harland & Wolff shipyards), whose workers were drawn from the Catholic, sometimes Gaelic-speaking Celtic population, and from the descendants of the Protestant, Scottish and English who had been “settled” in Ireland (thanks to the violent displacement of the original inhabitants) by Oliver Cromwell and his successors. And this very working class had already begun to show the road to the only possible solution of the “national question” in Ireland: by joining ranks in the massive Belfast strikes of 1907.²⁴ Irish workers were present in all the major industrial areas of Britain, especially around Liverpool and Glasgow.

The moral question that Marx had posed

23. This and following quotations are taken from Luxemburg’s Foreword to the anthology *The Polish Question and the Socialist Movement*, which was a collection of documents from the London Congress of 1896 where Luxemburg successfully opposed the PPS’ attempt to make Polish independence and unification a concrete and immediate demand of the International.

24. See <http://en.internationalism.org/icconline/2007/sept/belfast-1907>.

– the problem of English workers’ sensation of superiority to the Irish – was no longer limited to Ireland and the Irish: capital’s constant need to absorb more labour power led to mass migrations from agricultural economies to newly industrialising areas, while the expansion of European colonisation brought European workers into contact with Asians, Africans, Indians... all over the planet. Nowhere was immigration more important than in the capitalist powerhouse of the United States, which witnessed not only a huge influx of workers from all over Europe, but a massive importation of cheap labour from Japan and China and of course the migration of black workers from the cotton fields of the backward South into the new industrial centres of the North: the legacy of slavery and racial prejudice remains a “gaping wound” (to use Luxemburg’s expression) in America to this day. Inevitably, these waves of migration brought with them prejudice, misunderstanding, rejection... all the moral degradation that Marx and Engels had noted in the English working class was reproduced over and over again. The more migration mixed populations of different origins, the more absurd the idea of “national independence” as a solution to prejudice inevitably became. All the more so in that underlying all these prejudices was one, universal and far more ancient than any national prejudice, driven right through the heart of the working class: the unthinking assumption of male superiority to women. Marx and Engels had identified a real problem, a crucial one even. Unsolved, it would mortally weaken the struggle of a class whose only weapon is its organisation and its class solidarity. But it could, and can, only be solved through the experience of working and living together, through the mutual solidarity imposed by the demands of the class struggle.

What caused James Connolly to end his life in such flagrant contradiction with the internationalism he had espoused during it? Apart from the weaknesses inherent in his view of the national question, which he shared with the majority of the Second International, it is also possible – though this is pure speculation on our part – that his confidence in the working class had been shattered by two major defeats: the defeat of the Dublin strike of 1913, which was in large part due to the abject failure of the British trade unions to give the ITGWU adequate and above all active support; and the disintegration of the International itself when confronted with the test of World War I. If such were the case, we can only say that Connolly drew the wrong conclusions. The failure of the Dublin strike as a result of the Irish workers’ isolation demonstrated, not that Irish workers should

seek salvation in the Irish nation, but on the contrary that the limits of little Ireland could no longer contain the battle between capital and labour which was now being fought out on a far broader stage; and the Russian Revolution, only one year after the suppression of the Easter Rising was to show that workers’ revolution, not national insurrection, was the only hope of putting an end to imperialist war and the misery of capitalist domination.

Jens, April 2016

100 years since the Dublin Easter Rising

IRA: Soldiers of imperialism (1978)

The article that we are republishing here first appeared in *World Revolution* n° 21 in 1978. In the first paragraph it establishes the framework in which “national liberation” struggles should be seen. “*The ‘small nations’ like Ireland, which wanted to grab something for themselves, would have to try and exploit for their own interests the conflict between the big imperialist powers.*” This reality was identified by revolutionaries at the time of the 1916 Easter Rising. Trotsky (*Nashe Slovo* 4 July 1916) pointed out the military importance of Ireland in relation to British imperialism: “*an ‘independent’ Ireland could exist only as an outpost of an imperialist state hostile to Britain.*” This lack of “independence” is acknowledged in the Proclamation read out at the beginning of the Easter Rising when it declared that the Irish nationalists were “*supported by her exiled children in America and by gallant allies in Europe.*” This is a reference to funds received from supporters in the US and arms supplies from Germany. The “national” struggle needed imperialist backers. For more on the background to the 1916 events see “The national question 100 years after the Easter Rising” in this issue.

The 1978 article traces the development of the national situation and specifically the role of the IRA up to the early 1970s. If, after the passage of nearly 40 years, we can see that some of the formulations have not stood the test of time, the overall framework is still valid. And these formulations still pose important questions. For example, the text talks about “*the downfall of Unionism.*” While it is true that the Unionist-dominated Parliament of Northern Ireland was abolished in the early 1970s, the pro-British Unionists have continued as a force to this day. But the dominance of their position has changed, especially after the Good Friday Agreement of 1998. The text says that “*the IRA will not disappear.*” On the face of it, with the IRA’s declaration of an

end to its armed campaign in 2005 and its statement that it would only pursue its goals by political means, this appears to be contradicted by events. However, the IRA’s political wing, Sinn Féin, is now a leading part in Northern Ireland’s Executive, sharing power with Unionists as a fundamental pillar of the capitalist state’s political apparatus. That the article also mistakenly identifies Stalinist republicanism as a force for the future only demonstrates that the outcome of conflicts within the bourgeoisie can not be calculated in every detail. We can also add that the “armed wing” of Republicanism has not disappeared, even if it has taken the form of dissident breakaways from the IRA.

One other problematic aspect of the analysis (that is not limited to Ireland) can be seen in the idea that the difficulties of the Irish economy are due to “*the fact that the world market is already divided among the great capitalist powers, and above all because the capitalist system itself prevents a global development of the productive forces.*” The division of the world market between different national capitals is not fixed. Over the past 20 years, for example, we have seen a decline in the relative position of the Japanese economy and advances for Chinese capitalism. This is not to say that the decade of growth of the Celtic Tiger could have been sustained, but that, in the competition between capitals, the possibility of individual advances and retreats is not excluded. In addition there is in the quoted passage the implicit idea that there are no possibilities left for the expansion for capitalism. This is something that has marked other texts during the history of the ICC.

Above all, however, the article strikes exactly the right note when it finishes with the assertion that only the class war can confront the attacks of capitalism and its mobilisations for imperialist war.

The Dublin Easter Rising of 1916, typically petty bourgeois in its hopelessness – its heroism a product of pure desperation – opened a new period of social and political crisis in Ireland. Through the ruthlessness with which the British bourgeoisie crushed the Easter Rising, through the relatively disinterested and even hostile attitude of the Irish workers (their ears still ringing with the defeat of their strike wave in 1913) towards the goals of the ruling classes in Ireland, history had shown the Irish bourgeoisie that the era of the possibility of the bourgeois revolution in Ireland was at an end. The reality of the Great War was the violent re-division of the globe among the powerful but crisis-ridden imperialist powers. The “small nations” like Ireland, which wanted to grab something for themselves, would have to try and exploit for their own interests the conflict between the big imperialist powers. Thus, after 1916,

Sinn Féin’s¹ policy revolved around the fight to gain admission to the post-war peace conference of the big powers, in the hope of gaining American backing for Irish independence against Britain. Similarly, the so-called Irish “Labour Movement” sent delegates to the wretched conference of Social Democratic reconciliation in Berne,² in order to win the support of Europe’s most eloquent butchers for the Irish cause.

1. Sinn Féin (Ourselves Alone): Irish Republican political party. Founded in 1902 by Arthur Griffith, it came under the leadership of de Valera in 1917. After the “War of Independence” in 1919–21, a split occurred in 1922, Griffith and Michael Collins accepting the Partition and the establishment of the Irish Free State; de Valera in opposition to them formed another party, Fianna Fail.

2. Berne Conference of 1920 grouped all the “Socialist” Parties, like the Independent Labour Party in Britain that had split with the IInd International when it capitulated to the war effort, but which refused to join the Communist International. The Communist International denounced this move as an attempt to resurrect the IInd International in spirit if not in name.

Had Britain lost the war it might have been a different story. As it was, the Irish Nationalists were unable to persuade anyone. Their most radical factions had either stayed out of the war, or had attempted to enlist the support of German imperialism. Now they found themselves empty-handed.

Developments in the world during and immediately after the war had shaken the economy in Ireland. The massive concentration and centralisation of capital under the direction of the state in wartime Britain and Europe, and the grave economic crisis which followed the war and the dismantling of the war economy, threatened to ruin and eliminate the small manufacturing bourgeoisie in the South of Ireland. It was the desperate struggle for survival of such worn-out strata, faced as they were with the convulsions of a world capitalism itself in its death throes, which gave birth to that

remarkable imperialist abortion - the Irish Free State. In this atmosphere, the bourgeoisie in the South was able to mobilise the urban and rural petty bourgeoisie for a guerrilla war against the British forces. This became known as the War of Independence (1919–1921).

During this period, the Nationalists fashioned the nucleus of a separate state. It was modelled on the most modern lines: equipped with a parliament, a police force, courts, prisons, and – of course – an army. The Irish Republican Army was based on the Volunteer Brigades of 1916, but was well-disciplined and firmly wedded to the framework of the new state, itself a bulwark of capitalist order. The IRA entered the world with the blood of the proletariat dripping from its hands. In the South and the South-West, it didn't hesitate to move against striking workers (see "James Connolly and Irish Nationalism", *World Revolution* n° 17³). In the cities, its brutal terrorisation of the civilian population during the "War of Independence" matched that dished out by the British Black and Tans.

Partition

Tottering on the brink of defeat, the Nationalists were forced to sign a treaty with Britain in 1921. This granted Ireland nominal independence. However, the country was to be partitioned: the industrial counties of the North-East received their own regional parliament and retained special connections with Britain.

The acceptance of the Treaty threatened to provoke an army coup. This didn't happen but it did lead to a split in the government and in the army in the South, with the Republican extremists wanting to hold out for a better deal from Britain.⁴ And although attempts were made to reunite the IRA in order to launch an attack against Northern Ireland, in the face of the obvious impossibility of such a campaign, the Free State slid into a bourgeois faction fight still more savage than the War of Independence. This conflict ended with the victory of the pro-Treaty (British-backed) forces in the South.

These events show us not only the absolutely anti-proletarian character of "Irish Independence and Unity" in the present epoch, but its objective impossibility as well. Before 1916, the Ulster Unionists

and the Southern Irish Nationalists were engaged in rival arms build-ups and the constitution of paramilitary armies. In the North, Craig – the Unionist leader – had generously sent the Ulster workers to the imperialist slaughter in order to show his love of King and Country. But the Unionists were prepared, even if it came to a show of arms, to resist any attempt by London to subordinate their interests in any way to the control of the Southern Irish bourgeoisie. Ulster's industry lived from, and produced for, the British and world market. It had no interest in supporting the stagnant Irish agricultural economy, or in becoming the victim of Southern protectionist policies.

The economic development of Ireland

In Ireland, only Ulster participated in the British industrial revolution. Politically and economically in control of the whole island, only the British bourgeoisie would have been capable of industrialising the South of Ireland. But within the United Kingdom, Ireland assumed the role of cheap supplier of agricultural products and labour power. If the Irish Republic finds itself in exactly the same situation today, then this is the result – not of "700 years of betrayals" – but of the fact that the world market is already divided among the great capitalist powers, and above all because the capitalist system itself prevents a global development of the productive forces. This, then, is no mere Irish question: we find ourselves in a beggar's world of hunger and misery, careering towards nuclear self-destruction if the resolution of the present crisis of capitalism is left up to the bourgeoisie.

The hostility of the North and South

The desperate hostility of the North and South in Ireland reflected the antagonistic imperialist aims of the Ulster and Southern bourgeoisies. In the face of a contracting world market, these aims could not be reconciled. But their conflict had a "positive" aspect for capitalism in Ireland. The lords of the Belfast sweatshops, and the Republican Army of Dublin's men of property, ensured that the workers got caught in the crossfire between them. In the industrial centres of the North, the Protestant and Catholic ghettos were made to compete against each other for whatever miserable jobs, wages and housing were going. Mobilised or intimidated behind the Orange and the Green, the class solidarity of the workers was answered with the tyranny of pogroms. In Belfast, the proletarian strike wave of 1919 was soon followed by bloody orgies, sparked off by the IRA's killing of

Protestant workers, and taken up by Carson's Ulster Volunteers. Over sixty died in this wave of barbarism. In the 1930s, the Republican and Unionist gangs would react with the same suspicion and hostility to the united struggle of the unemployed workers in Belfast.

Southern Ireland under de Valera

Through the Civil War, the pro-Treaty wing of the IRA established itself as the official army of the state in the South. Soon afterwards, de Valera and his supporters moved away from the extreme IRA and founded a political party, Fianna Fail, to represent the radical Republicans in parliament. In the face of the world economic collapse of 1929, de Valera came to power in the 1932 elections armed with a makeshift protectionist and state capitalist programme. His election victory owed much to the support given him by the IRA. However, although the Republicans took radical measures to shore up the national capital in Southern Ireland, they were unable to stimulate industrial growth. Their "Economic War" with Britain led only to chaos in the vital, export-oriented agricultural sector. But despite the fiasco this policy represented, we can see how the Republicans established themselves during this period as the natural rulers of Irish capitalism. In the 1930s, de Valera was able to employ the full force of the state – plus the IRA – in beating down the essentially pro-British Fascists of O'Duffy's Blueshirts. This was the time when the rebel IRA men flocked into the ranks of the official security forces of the state and the secret police to fight the fascist menace. And when the Blueshirts led farmers in withholding annuity payments to the government in an attempt to make de Valera call off the "Economic War" with Britain, it was the Republican gunmen who confiscated these farmers' cattle and auctioned them off.

The "Economic War" was a desperate response to the folding of the world market following the Great Crash. It neither did, nor could have posed, any threat to Britain's control economically over Ireland. And this is true despite the nostalgia of the Irish leftists today for this period. Between 1926 and 1938, the economic rate of growth in Southern Ireland was about 1% per annum. In the war years it would be nil. Out of necessity, the policy had to be abandoned before the outbreak of World War II. Indeed, London was quite prepared to make concessions in the immediate pre-war period. Chamberlain, when requested, evacuated the naval bases in Ireland. Later, Churchill would offer unification of Ireland to the Southern bourgeoisie in return for more open support from the "neutral" Republic

3. Reprinted in *World Revolution* n° 373 and here: <http://en.internationalism.org/icconline/201603/13876/james-connolly-and-irish-nationalism>

4. In order to get this better deal, de Valera acting for the extremists had even suggested that Britain should declare a "Monroe Doctrine" regarding Ireland, i.e. that Britain should guarantee that the people of Ireland alone had the right to decide their own destiny.

during the war. The idea of placing Ulster's war industries within the cocoon of Irish neutrality seemed tempting to the Southern bourgeoisie. But as ever, the intransigence of the Ulster Unionists – who were profiting from the British war economy – barred the way to this solution.

The legacy of 1916

“Hatred of Britain” may have been the force animating the “men of ‘16”. But for the IRA, and for de Valera's Republicanism, this legacy was used more as propaganda for their regime and as a recruiting weapon to win them support. Their aim, after all, was never to smash British imperialism, which (quite apart from being impossible in this epoch) would have amounted to slaying the hen which lays the golden eggs as far as they were concerned. The real world historical goal of the bourgeois forces behind the so-called Irish Revolution was either to cajole or force the British government into giving the Ulster Unionist bosses the kick in the teeth they had coming. And Britain was the only one around strong enough to do this.⁵ The Republicans reckoned that if they could bring together the industrial North with the agricultural South, they'd have tractors to plough their fields. They could then hope to feather their own nests while “invading” the British market. The plan was to reconcile Southern Irish and British imperialist interests at Ulster's expense. This grand expansionist strategy of the Republicans was referred to as “the unification of Ireland”.

The outbreak of World War II seemed to change this situation. It presented to the Republicans the possibility of really toppling the Unionists themselves, and chasing the Brits out of Ireland by hanging on to the coat-tails of German imperialism. The 1939 bombing campaign in England (which involved the murder of British workers) was followed by hair-brained schemes of action worked out between the IRA anti-fascists and the Nazi government in Germany.⁶ However, the German bourgeoisie never seriously contemplated an Irish campaign, so the IRA succeeded only in bringing new waves of Fianna Fail repression upon itself. In moving against an unwanted political friend, the democratic Dublin government never hesitated to use concentration camps

5. There were basically two political tendencies involved here, represented by Fianna Fail hoping to manoeuvre, and the IRA hoping to force, the British bourgeoisie into handing over Ulster.

6. At one stage – in 1942 – the IRA demanded “*That as a prelude to any co-operation between Oglaihnóh-Eireann and the German Government, the German Government explicitly declare its intention of recognising the Provisional Government of the Irish Republic (i.e. the IRA) as the Government of Ireland in all post-war negotiations affecting Ireland*”.

and open murder in its clampdowns against the IRA during the 1930s and 1940s. Just as today, the democratic government in Ireland organises systematic terror in defence of bourgeois “freedoms and civil liberties” even while it breaks into floods of tears for the victims of the smaller-scale terror campaigns of the IRA.

The pulverisation of the IRA

By the 1960s, the IRA was militarily pulverised in the North and in the South. It had lost all its support among the “Catholic” workers, who had been an important source of its cannon-fodder before. It then settled down to the formulation of a radical state capitalist programme to win back support and, as a result, began to lean towards the Russian imperialist bloc. The stunted Southern Irish economy, so as to benefit from the post-war boom, had had to lift its protectionist barriers. But with the close of the period of reconstruction after 1965, the Irish Republic found itself increasingly dependent on its more powerful neighbours. If its economy was to avoid collapse in the face of the world economic crisis, the Southern economy had to become more closely integrated into the Western bloc as a whole. Shortly thereafter, Ireland entered the EEC.

The IRA, would-be saviours of the nation, responded to the crisis – and to the alarming combativity of the working class in the South – by turning to Stalinism. But this smooth leftward swing was rudely interrupted by the events in Northern Ireland after 1969. The Ulster industrial caste, losers in the economic fight for survival, had become a real obstacle to Britain's political and economic management of the crisis. The bourgeoisie was aware it had to shift the Unionist rubbish heap. But when they tried to touch it, they found it crawling with angry rats. At this stage, with the Unionists resisting all reforms, the Dublin government intervened, first through its support for the civil rights movement in the North, and secondly by offering to support the Northern IRA in a new campaign. But this support was conditionally given. The Northern IRA had to agree to split from the Southern Irish IRA leadership.

These measures soon led to a split in the IRA. The Provisionals, straight-nationalist murder gangs, were based in the Ulster ghettos and the “non-sectarian” Stalinists of the Southern Command comprised the Officials. As a result of its clever manoeuvre, the Dublin government hoped to achieve two things:

1) preparations of the military shove needed to topple the Unionists, the main barrier to “Irish Unification”;

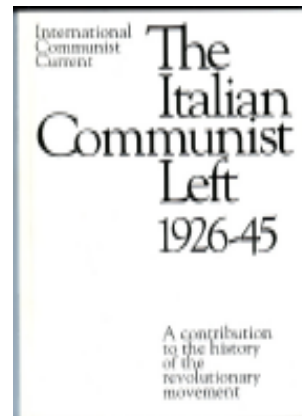
2) the weakening of its Stalinist opponents in the IRA in the South.

Without going into the course of recent events in Ulster it is clear that the anti-proletarian part played by the IRA in this bloody holocaust marks a continuation of its bourgeois traditions. It has played its part, to be sure, in the downfall of Unionism. At the same time it has itself received a severe beating. Despite the IRA's continuing wild bombings and shootings, tomorrow and the future will see the British and the Irish security forces--the masters of the streets and the concentration camps, the armed anti-terrorists--as the main forces attempting to butcher the revolutionary movement of the proletariat on these islands. But however battered it may be, the IRA will not disappear. It remains the living symbol of a frustrated Irish imperialism. And particularly in its Stalinist form, it will have an important role to play in the coming fight against the workers.

Divided and demoralised by over fifty years of counter-revolution, the Ulster proletariat found itself driven into the ghettos in 1969, looking for security where none was to be found. Now it must emerge to meet the relentless attacks of capitalism as the economic crisis deepens. And gigantic as this task will be, there is no other way out. As militants of the working class, we denounce the cynical lies of the Irish and British bourgeoisie about reconciliation and a democratic “settlement”. And we call on the proletariat--North and South--to take up the class war.

Krespel

History of the working class



The Dutch and German Communist Left

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

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

The Italian Communist Left

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

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

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

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

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BASIC POSITIONS OF THE ICC

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

* All factions of the bourgeoisie are equally

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

goals of the proletariat's combat.

OUR ACTIVITY

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

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

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

OUR ORIGINS

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

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