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International Communist Current

Winter 2017

International Review

Presenting the *Review*

Spain, Catalonia
The workers have no country

**The United States at the heart of the
growing world disorder (part 1)**

Manifesto on the October 1917 revolution
**The world revolution is humanity's
only future**

22nd ICC Congress
**Resolution on the international
class struggle**

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Presenting the Review

This issue of the *International Review* brings together four documents that express our present concerns regarding the world situation and our role as revolutionaries within it.

First a new statement about Catalonia. We have already taken position on these events, as readers of our publications, above all the website will have noticed. In October 2017 we distributed the leaflet *“Confrontations in Catalonia: Democracy and the Nation are the reactionary past, the proletariat is the future”*,¹ translated into different languages. A number of other articles have appeared, in particular on our Spanish-language page, but these events will require a close following in the period ahead and the latest statement will certainly not be the last.

The independence movement in Catalonia is in direct contradiction with the “rational” management of the capitalist state and economy at the levels of Catalonia, Spain and the European Union. The only ones in the ranks of the bourgeoisie who could profit from a further deepening of this process would be the likes of Putin, the rivals of a strong EU in the global inter-imperialist competition. But the aspect that must concern us most of all is the impact of these events on the proletariat. The nationalist fever around Catalonia’s “independence” is a heavy blow against the working class not only in this area, but internationally, given the global importance of the class struggle in Spain.

We are seeing many of those who took part in the “Indignados” revolt in 2001, a movement which strove towards internationalism, towards proletarian principles, abandoning any idea of a fight against capitalism to join the demonstrations for or against independence. Proletarian families are torn apart between those who support Puigdemont or other fractions of the Catalan cause and the Españolistas who think that Spain should remain one country. And where are the internationalists? They are currently a beleaguered minority, but the need for them to speak out is greater than ever.

The second article “The United States at the heart of the growing world disorder”

1. See *World Revolution* n°378, “Confrontations in Catalonia, nationalism and democracy are the reactionary past, the proletariat is the future.”

is about the life of the bourgeoisie of the strongest economic and military power. It is part of an analysis of the ruling class in the main Western countries. The complete article has been published online. The article highlights the great difficulties of the ruling class in the US after almost one year of Trump as president. An important chapter is dedicated to the relationship between the two former bloc leaders and the role Russia plays today in America’s strategic options.

These assessments should be seen as a continuation of the orientation decided at the 21st international congress in 2015 to critically analyse the international situation, not excluding a self-critical reflection on possible mistakes we committed at this level in the past.²

The third text in the present review is our “Manifesto on the October revolution, Russia 1917”, one century after the first successful proletarian revolution. We published it online in October and organised a series of public meetings on the issue. First, we have to defend the internationalist character of the October revolution as part of a world class movement against capitalism. Without this reference point, together with a fearless examination of all the errors committed and the weaknesses encountered, a successful new attempt in the future will not be possible. The Russian revolution is part of our history, part of the proletarian story, despite its degeneration and the atrocities committed in its name afterwards. The Manifesto not only answers the present bourgeois campaigns but also draws the lessons and tries to give indications for the perspective of communism today. Although the revolution did not spread to the whole world and the process remained isolated and thus without a real perspective to overcome capitalism, “the October insurrection is to this day the highest point achieved by the proletarian class struggle – an expression of its ability to become organised on a mass scale, conscious of its goals, confident of taking the reins of social life. It was the anticipation of what Marx called ‘the end of prehistory’, of all conditions in which humanity is at the mercy of unconscious social forces; the anticipation of a future

2. See *International Review* n°156, “40 years after the foundation of the ICC.”

in which, for the first time, humanity will make its own history according to its own needs and purposes.”

The last text in this review is the “Resolution on the international class struggle”, a document of the last international congress of the ICC in spring 2017.

With this global analysis of the situation we start the reporting of the results of our congress which traditionally has the fundamental task of deciding the general orientations for our activities in the period ahead. The analysis of the world situation is a crucial element in this.

The resolution is focussed on the social situation, the balance of forces between the two main classes of present capitalist society – the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. Almost three decades after the collapse of the old bloc system and the onset of what we call the period of decomposition we are still trying to get a better understanding of the challenges facing revolutionaries today, to sharpen our concepts of the **historic course** and of **decomposition**: “The class movements that erupted in the advanced countries after 1968 marked the end of the counter-revolution, and the continuing resistance of the working class constituted an obstacle to the bourgeoisie’s ‘solution’ to the economic crisis: world war. It was possible to define this period as a ‘course towards massive class confrontations’, and to insist that a course towards war could not be opened up without a head-on defeat of an insurgent working class. In the new phase, the disintegration of both imperialist blocs took world war off the agenda independently of the level of class struggle. But this meant that the question of the historic course could no longer be posed in the same terms. The inability of capitalism to overcome its contradictions still means that it can only offer humanity a future of barbarism, whose contours can already be glimpsed in a hellish combination of local and regional wars, ecological devastation, pogromism and fratricidal social violence. But unlike world war, which requires a direct physical as well as ideological defeat of the working class, this ‘new’ descent into barbarism operates in a slower, more insidious manner which can gradually engulf the working class and render it incapable of reconstituting

itself as a class. The criterion for measuring the evolution of the balance of forces between the classes can no longer be that of the proletariat holding back world war, and has in general become more difficult to gauge." (Resolution point 11).

Which criteria do we need today for an appropriate assessment of the balance of class forces?

- The capacity of the working class to resist the austerity policy of the bourgeoisie and the degree of solidarity developed within its ranks are certainly relevant factors for such an assessment.
- However, there is also the question of the perspectives. If the proletariat is not able to perceive itself as a distinct class and develop a perspective going beyond the existing society which subjects us to the alienated logic of profit for the profit's sake, there is no future to strive for – and this state of mind affects the proletariat's capacity to resist. *"After 1989, with the collapse of the 'socialist' regimes, a qualitatively new factor emerged: the impression of the impossibility of a modern society not based on capitalist principles. Under these circumstances, it is more difficult for the proletariat to develop, not only its class consciousness and class identity, but even its defensive economic struggles, since the logic of the needs of the capitalist economy weigh much heavier if they appear to be without any alternative."* (Point 13).

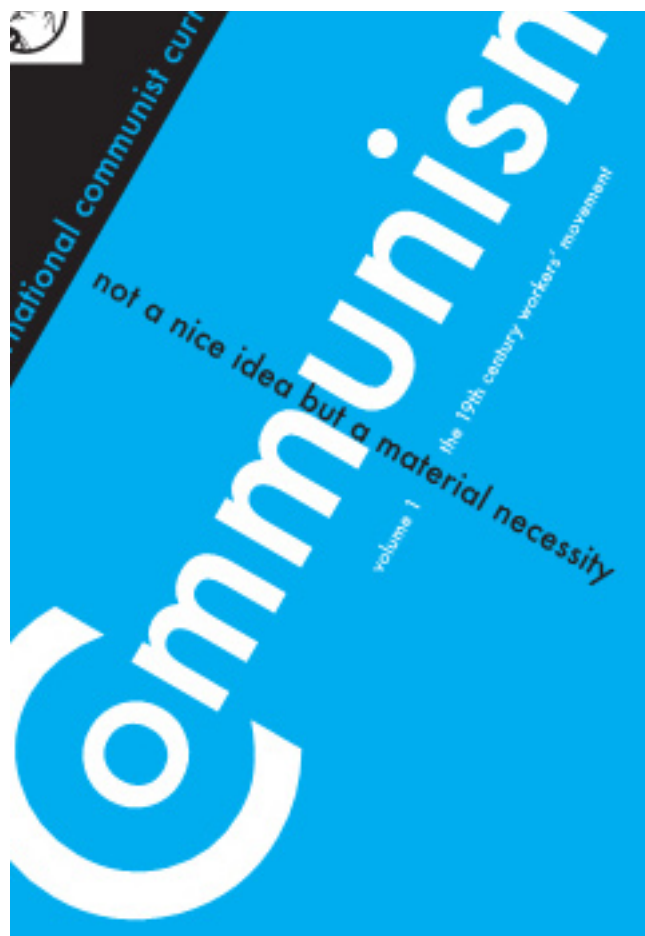
More specifically the resolution points to the pernicious effects of the loss of solidarity within the ranks of the proletariat: *"In particular, we are seeing the rise of the phenomenon of scapegoating, of ways of thinking which blame persons – onto whom all of the evil of the world is projected – for whatever goes wrong in society. Such ideas open the door to the pogrom. Today populism is the most striking, but far from being the only manifestation of this problem, which tends to permeate all social relations. At work and in the everyday life of the working class, it increasingly weakens cooperation, and favours atomisation and the development of mutual suspicion and of mobbing."* (Point 19).

We do not think that the point of no return has been crossed, that the class in the historically established centres of world capitals, along with the enormous proletariat of China, has been defeated. We still see a potential for the development of what we call the political-moral dimension of the proletarian struggle: the emerging of a deep seated rejection of the existing way of life on the part of wider sectors of the class (point 24).

This difficult situation also affects our tasks as a minority of the class. The revolutionary minorities are a product of the class and have a specific role – in the present period to be an organisational bridge from the past revolutionary struggles to those of the future, even if a huge distance has to be travelled.

November 2017

ICC Publications



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

£7.50, \$14.00, 10 Euros

www.internationalism.org

Spain, Catalonia

The workers have no country



Demonstration in Barcelona on 22 January 2011, against raising the retirement age

Catalonia, and Barcelona in particular, is one of those places inscribed in the memory of the Spanish and world proletariat. The struggles, the victories and defeats of the working class in this region have left their mark in the history of our class. Therefore, in the present situation, the ICC, through this article and others that have appeared in our territorial press, aims to alert our class to the danger of the proletariat being dragged into the unfolding nationalist squabble, which can only damage it.

From the hope generated by the Indignados movement in 2011...

In the same place, only a few years apart, two social scenarios that are not just different, but completely opposed to each other.

Barcelona, a few days after 15th May 2011: during the movement of the Indignados, Catalonia Square is a hub of meetings and assemblies. More than 40 different commissions are looking into questions from the environmental catastrophe to solidarity with the struggles in Greece against the cuts in social benefits. There are no flags, but there are improvised libraries

brought along by anonymous participants and available to all, with the aim of widening the vision of the movement, which is essentially an expression of indignation about the ravages of the capitalist crisis, of concern about the sombre future which the survival of this system implies for the whole of humanity. Places like this in Barcelona or elsewhere in Spain, in a movement initiated at the Puerta de Sol in Madrid, are seeing people of all ages, all languages, different conditions, coming together and debating with a sense of respect and a desire to listen. Day after day workers' demonstrations converge on the assemblies, demonstrations against the cuts in health benefits, delegations from neighbourhoods looking for solidarity in their fight against evictions and so on. The assemblies function as a collective brain which tries to link together the different expressions of the struggle into a common, unifying cause. "We are against the system because the system is inhuman"; this is what is proudly proclaimed. The movement is subjected to ruthless repression¹. This violent attack is denounced, but the

1. On 27th May 2011 the Catalan police carried out a brutal attack on the orders of the Catalan nationalist government, working closely with the Spanish interior minister, and aiming to "clear" Catalonia Square. More than 100 people were injured.

movement also raises the slogan "violence is also being paid 600 euros a month".

...to the backward step into nationalism in 2017

And today, in the same streets, hundreds of thousands are demonstrating "for the independence of Catalonia", but in this they can only be manipulated, can only operate as a mass to be manoeuvred, can only follow actions called by shadowy forces, actions which follow a script written by others. This is what happened to those who suffered the blows of police truncheons when they defended the ballot boxes during the October 1st referendum, those who saw how, in the days that followed the referendum, the organisations behind it relativised its significance and reduced it to a purely "symbolic" act. It's what happened to those who got caught up in the euphoria of "we are already a republic" after the pantomime of the proclamation of the Catalan republic on 27th October. As the independence leaders later insisted, this was a virtual, "symbolic" action. In complete contrast to the 15th May movement (15M) in 2011, when you join in with nationalist actions, the slightest critical spirit can only be an obstacle. All you need is to learn by heart the national "narrative". This is true of all nationalism, but in the case of Catalonia and other countries which don't have their own state, this narrative is a real mess where everything is mixed up and where no critical voices can be heard. So there are demands for a lost Arcadia, for a Catalan fatherland that never existed. In this process an enemy is needed and this can only be the central state with its "fascist" vestiges. And a scapegoat: the "Spanish" in general and everything which goes with them, presented as the cause of all the suffering of this society. And then you are ready to respond to the calls on social media and march, head down, eyes closed, alongside Catalan exploiters, corrupt Catalan politicians, the Catalan police, the Catalanist "ultras" dedicated to pointing the finger at and intimidating anyone who's not fervent enough in their anti-Spanish feelings. And it's the same ignoble schema we see again in the demonstrations which, a few days later, in the same streets, march "against the independence of Catalonia".

This time the lost paradise is the “peaceful co-existence of all Spaniards”. This time, the scapegoats, those to blame for poverty or uncertainty about the future are those who “defy the law” or “those who want to break up Spain”. And again, you march with a cohort of corrupt and repressive exploiters, and with another set of ultras who follow the same path of more or less open violence and intimidation.²

Two diametrically opposed options for the future of society

Between the Indignados movement in 2011 and the recent orgies of Catalan or Spanish patriotism, there is a class frontier, a gulf in perspectives. The first, despite the undeniable difficulties this movement had, was the expression of a class – the proletariat – which carries within itself the possibility of social transformation on a planetary scale, a class which needs to find a coherent explanation for all the problems facing the world, a class whose struggle creates the basis for a real unification of humanity, overcoming divisions of class, race, culture etc. A movement based on the quest for a revolutionary solution for humanity, for a future free from the chains of exploitation. These patriotic orgies, by contrast, are based on an atavistic yearning for a mythified past. Not only that: marching under nationalist flags justifies and deepens the separation between class brothers and sisters. Their perspective is not one of a revolutionary step forward, but of a reactionary step backwards to a past full of fear and distrust. It is fuelled not by a search for a new social organisation aimed at satisfying the needs of all, but by the decomposition of the old social order whose watchword is “every man for himself”.

How did it come to this?

Various circumstantial and local explanations are put forward. According to the Catalan nationalists, we are seeing the resurgence of the Francoist vestiges which remained in Spain after the transition to democracy. According to the Spanish nationalists, the movement for independence is a way of diverting attention from the corrupt practises which have characterised Catalan administrations for decades. The main refutation of these apologetics is the behaviour of the main actors in this process. For decades, the main party of the Generalitat (the autonomous Catalan

2. This climate of seeking the source of all society's ills in the other half of the population was also encouraged in the demonstrations against the terrorist attacks of 17th August. See *Acción Proletaria*: September 2017 “Atentados terroristas en Cataluña: la barbarie imperialista del capitalismo en descomposición”.



Smothered by nationalism: An estimated one million march in Barcelona on the Catalan national day, 11 September 2017

administration), formerly known as CiU and now the PDECat,³ based its hegemony on a corrupt, client-centred regime. But this didn't stop successive Spanish governments of right and left from handing out succulent subsidies to this party from the coffers of the central state. And for their part, the Catalan nationalists have never had any qualms about working with the “residues of Francoism” in the Spanish state they talk about so much, making agreements with the Popular Party on the right⁴ and then with the Socialist Zapatero⁵ on the left (the tripartite governments of ERC and Iniciativa,⁶ who are now part of the supporters of the Mayor of Barcelona). When the PDECat came back to the Generalitat in 2010, Artur Mas – the successor anointed by Pujol himself⁷ – didn't hesitate to count on the PP to carry out a programme of implacable austerity against living standards which would later inspire Mariano Rajoy himself.

3. Convergence and Union (CiU) was a right-wing Catalan coalition which governed the region since the transition (1978) with a few intervals where the left ran the show. It had two components: one more nationalist and the other more autonomist, but both in favour of a pact with the central power and above all solidly united behind the cronyism which made the CiU one of the corrupt parties in Spain. The coalition disappeared and the more nationalist wing, who are now separatists, set up the European Democratic Party of Catalonia (PDECat), led by Puigdemont.

4. The PP is the party of Rajoy which governs Spain today. It's another champion in corruption.

5. Zapatero was the head of the Spanish socialist government between 2004 and 2011. After minimising the economic crisis of 2008, he brought in anti-working class measures which paved the way to their brutal acceleration by the Rajoy government.

6. The Catalan government of 2003–2010 formed by the “left”: SP, ERC (Republican Left of Catalonia) and a coalition, Iniciativa, made up of the CP plus the Greens.

7. Pujol was the leader of the party *Convergència Democràtica de Catalunya* (CDC) from 1974 to 2003, and President of Catalonia Generalitat from 1980 to 2003.

This is why we can say that the explanation for the separatist drive in Catalonia can't be found in the specific historical evolution of Catalonia or Spain but in world historic conditions, in the fact that world capitalism as a whole has entered into its final phase, its phase of social decomposition.

The historic causes

Marxism has never denied the existence of particular factors in the evolution of capitalism in each country. In particular, in the case of the different separatist movements in Spain, which function as a supplementary and reactionary barrier to the capacity of the proletariat to recognise itself as an indivisible class, it recognises the weight of the uneven development between those zones more open to commerce and industry, and others more caught up in isolation and unable to catch up with the rest.⁸ But marxism also explains how the evolution of these local conflicts and contradictions is conditioned by the course of capitalism on a world scale. This is especially obvious in the case of nationalism. While in the 18th and 19th centuries the formation of certain new nations could represent a decisive advance in the demolition of feudal structures and the development of the productive forces, once capitalism had reached the end of its ascendant phase at the beginning of the 20th century, “national liberation” became a clearly reactionary

8. This in turn was, as Marx pointed out, the result of the exceptional conditions behind the development of capitalism in Spain, which for centuries had a whole world in which to invest its capital without having any need to embark upon a generalised modification of its feudal structures and to industrialise the “mother country”. We have summarised this analysis of separatism in Spain in a recent online article “The Catalan quagmire shows the deepening decomposition of capitalism”.

myth used to dragoon the population, and the revolutionary class in particular, in and for imperialist war.⁹ This is why genuine revolutionaries have always denounced the anti-proletarian character of separatism in Spain, as a means to defend exploitation, as an enemy of the working class. The proletariat in Catalonia, one of the oldest in the world workers' movement, has been obliged on a number of occasions to recognise this.

The history of the proletariat in Catalonia and the grip of nationalism

It's not by chance that Barcelona was the theatre for the first general strike on Spanish territory, in 1855, or that this city was the seat of the Congress of the Workers of the Spanish Region, which in 1870 formed the basis of the First International in Spain.¹⁰ It was equally no coincidence that, faced with the most advanced expressions of the class struggle, such as the "La Canadiense" strike in Barcelona in 1919, the Catalan bourgeoisie, in 1920-22, made use of the bosses' "pistolero" gangs against strikes and the militants of anarcho-syndicalist organisations.¹¹ It's not by chance that Catalan nationalism (under the leadership of Francisco Cambó), along with the most backward sectors of the Spanish army, was the main promoter of the Primo de Rivera dictatorship of 1923-30. And it was again not by chance that it was the Catalan Generalitat (Companys supported by the Stalinists and with the complicity of the anarcho-syndicalist CNT itself) that became the bastion of the Republican state, diverting the workers – through both mystifications and force of arms – from their class terrain, from the fight against exploitation, towards the military fronts and the conflict between the fascist and democratic camps which prefigured the camp that lined up in the second world imperialist butchery. It was not fortuitous that it was the Catalan Generalitat which was charged with the criminal mission to put down in fire and blood the rising of the proletariat of Barcelona in May 1937,

the last attempt of the proletariat to fight on its own terrain against the exploiters of all camps and all fatherlands.¹²

Neither was it an accident that it was the workers of Catalonia, who had sometimes come from the most backward regions in the country, who in 1970 transformed their struggles (Bajo Llobregat in 1973, SEAT in 1975) into real beacons for the struggles of the whole working class in Spain. The working class in Catalonia, through its own development and its accumulated experience, is a central link in the chain of the associated production of social wealth, a process embodied in the international proletariat which comes up against the private, national appropriation of this wealth. In the region of Barcelona you will find workers from more than 60 nationalities, from trainee American engineers to immigrant workers from Sub-Saharan Africa. All of them are an integral and fundamental part of the same world working class, even if capitalist ideology, above all through its forces on the extreme left, constantly seeks to confer a "national" identity on the proletariat, which can only serve to undermine its class unity.¹³

What's at stake for the proletariat of Catalonia and for the proletariat of the world

Today, it's the whole potential accumulated over decades of workers' struggles which is threatened by the advance of capitalist social decomposition. This is not a social situation in which the workers are prepared to submit, like cannon fodder, to the quarrels between different factions of the exploiting class. That would mean the complete victory of the bourgeois solution to the historic crisis of capitalism. This is illustrated by the current situation in Catalonia, by the fact that the workers are not following with any great enthusiasm the calls for a general strike in favour of "independence". But neither does it mean that the workers are aware that they represent an alternative for the future of humanity, a future which can banish forever the war of each against all which decomposing capitalism carries in its entrails.

Particularly dangerous to the consciousness of the working class are the alternatives which claim that there is a "rational" solu-

tion to these tensions within the exploiting class, when capitalist decomposition is throwing up increasingly irrational "populist" answers, such as the call to leave the European Union (proposed for example by the CUP or parts of Podemos¹⁴), or the total acceptance of the Spanish state, as put forward by the "constitutionalist" parties. Nationalism can only end in violence. The illusion of a "revolution of smiles" peddled by Catalan separatism, or the dream of a "return to normal" by the supporters of Spanish unity, is a mystifying fiction. As we already stressed in our 1990 article, "The East: Nationalist barbarism"¹⁵, "*all expressions of nationalism, big or small, necessarily and fatally lead into the march of aggression, of war, of each against all, of exclusivism and discrimination*".

The alternative of the world proletariat is a completely different perspective for humanity. As we underline in this article on nationalist barbarism:

"The struggle of the proletariat contains the seed for overcoming national, ethnic, religious and linguistic divisions with which capitalism continuing the work of the oppressors of the previous modes of production has tortured humanity. In the common body of the united struggle for class interests these divisions will naturally and logically disappear. The common bases are the conditions of exploitation, which everywhere will tend to worsen with the world crisis, the common interest is the affirmation of their necessities as human beings against the inhuman necessities, each time more despotic, of the commodity and the national interest".¹⁶

What's at stake in the situation of the fraction of the world proletariat in Catalonia is the necessity for the revolutionary class to defend the interests of humanity as a whole, to advocate international class solidarity against the social disintegration which decadent capitalism is bringing about.

Faced with the search for a refuge in false local identities, with the notion of "every man for himself" to the detriment of everyone else, with growing social pessimism and national divisions, the proletariat must have confidence in its own forms of association. It must understand that the barbarism of the present world

9. See our pamphlet *Nation or Class*, and also our articles denouncing the reactionary character of the demand for "the right of peoples to self-determination" in *International Review* n°s 34, 37 and 42.

10. The name of the territory given to the Congress ("the Spanish region" and absolutely not "the Catalan nation") is an indication of the internationalist climate which reigned during these first steps of the workers' movement, which saw each region as one that would be inhabited by a liberated world humanity.

11. Which provokes all the more indignation when we see people claiming to be the heirs of the "Rosa de Foc" (the Fiery Rose, the name the anarchists gave to Barcelona in the 1920s and 30s, because it was the centre of so many social conflagrations) while bowing down to those who proclaim the fight against "the national oppression of Catalonia".

12. We encourage readers to refer to the texts of the Italian communist left on this question, republished in *International Review* n°s 4, 6 and 7.

13. The current campaign being led by the extreme left of capital, such as the CUP and Podemos, which tries to identify social interests with national interests is the heir – with an even more aberrant tone, if that is possible – of the campaign of the 70s and 80s led by the Stalinists, aimed at subordinating the class struggle to the demands of "democratic freedoms" or an "autonomous status" for Catalonia.

14. On Podemos, see our online article, "Podemos, new clothes at the service of the capitalist emperor", April 2016. This is a national Spanish party with regional "franchises". The one in Catalonia, along with its allies such as the mayor of Barcelona, isn't really sure which national garb to dance in. But it has been in favour of a referendum agreed to with the central power.

15. In *International Review* n° 62.

16. Ibid.

Continued on page 22

The United States at the heart of the growing world disorder (part 1)

Last year, the ruling “elites” of world capitalism were shocked by the outcome of the referendum in the United Kingdom about British membership of the European Union (“Brexit”), and by the result of the presidential elections in the United States (President Trump). In both cases, the results obtained did not correspond to the intentions or the interests of leading factions of the bourgeois class. We are therefore publishing a series of interconnected pieces which will aim at making an initial balance sheet of the political situation in the United States and Britain in the aftermath of these events. To widen the scope of our examination, we will also develop an analysis of the politics of the ruling class in the two main countries of continental Europe, France and Germany. In France, presidential and parliamentary elections took place in the early summer of this year. In Germany, the general elections to the Bundestag took place in September. The bourgeoisie of both countries is obliged to react to what has taken place in Britain and the USA – and they have reacted.

In this printed issue of the *International Review*, we are only publishing the chapter on the United States. The complete article can be found on our website.

In choosing to concentrate on these four countries, these pieces will not attempt an analysis of the political life of the bourgeoisie in two countries – Russia and China – which play a key role in the capitalist, imperialist power constellation today. A study of the situation there remains to be done. Having said this, we should point out that both Russia and China play an extremely prominent role in our analysis of the political situation of the four old central “western” capitalist countries to be examined in these pieces. We will also concentrate on the political life of the ruling class, without entering into that of the proletariat. Here again, it is clear that the present situation poses a series of questions and challenges to the working class which revolutionary organisations have to take up and help clarify, and which we will attempt to do in future articles. For the moment, we recommend readers to consult the resolution on the international class struggle from our last international congress, published in this issue of the *International Review*.

The historical background to these political developments is provided by a deeper process: the accelerating decomposition of the capitalist social order. We highly recommend that the reading of this and following articles be supplemented by a reading or re-reading of our “Theses on Decomposition”, available on our site. For us, the present situation is a strong confirmation of what we outlined in that text, written over a quarter of a century ago. In particular, the concrete examination of the present situation confirms that it is indeed the ruling class itself which is first and foremost affected by this decomposition of its system, and that (except in face of a proletarian menace) the bourgeoisie has increasing difficulties to maintain its political unity and coherence.

Trump and the sharpening global trade war

In reaction to the arrival of Donald Trump in the White House, the media in the rest

of the world, and the spokespersons of “liberalism” in America itself, painted a grim picture of a planet soon to be plunged by Trump into the throes of a protectionist catastrophe such as already

happened after 1929. The assumption was that protectionism is the programme of political “populism” in general, and of Donald Trump in particular. Already at that time, in our articles about populism and about the election of Trump, we argued that a particular economic programme (protectionist or otherwise) is not a major characteristic of right wing populism. On the contrary, what characterises this kind of populism, at the economic level, is the lack of any such coherent programme. Either these parties have little or nothing to say on economic questions, or – as in the case of Trump – they demand one thing one day and its opposite the next. Although Trump in power has already proven his penchant for “unilateralism” by threatening or beginning the withdrawal of the United States from two of the most important trade agreements: that of NAFTA (with North America) and TPP (with Asia without China). In the first case, this remains a threat and one that will be opposed by many important US companies. In the second, the actual agreement has never been signed so a formal withdrawal by the US is not necessary. At the same time Trump



Aleppo, Syria



An abandoned factory in America

has suspended the TTIP negotiations with the European Union – his intentions in so doing remain unclear. According to his own claims his goal is to impose a “better deal” for America. Throwing in the whole weight of the United States to pressurise the others, Trump is gambling with high stakes, as we predicted he would. The outcome remains unpredictable. What is clear however is that, at the level of economic policy, the ruling classes of the other countries have profited from the protectionist rhetoric of Trump in order to one-sidedly blame the USA for something which is first and foremost a product of global capitalism. What we have witnessed recently is nothing less than a qualitatively new stage in the economic life or death struggle between the leading capitalist powers – something which had already started before Trump became president. And at the same time as the other governments issue loud statements in “defence of free trade” against Trump, in reality they have all begun to adopt his rhetoric against dumping and for “free but also fair trade”. Once a slogan of NGO’s, “fair trade” is today the war cry of the bourgeois economic struggle. Protectionism is neither new nor the monopoly of the USA. It is part of capitalist competition, practised by all countries.

Formal market protectionism however is only one of the forms which this conflict takes. Another one is the weapon of sanctions. The economic sanctions against Moscow promoted above all by the United States are aimed against the European economy almost as much as against the Russian. In particular the recent American renewal and sharpening of these sanctions (imposed by a coalition of Democrats and Republicans, against the will of the president), openly put into question new oil and pipeline deals by western Europe with Russia, and have provoked a storm

of protest, above all in Germany. Already under Obama, the American bourgeoisie had also begun to legally prosecute German companies operating in the United States such as the Deutsche Bank and Volkswagen. It would not be an exaggeration to speak of an offensive American trade war against Germany, first and foremost against its car industry. We do not doubt for a moment that the likes of VW or Mercedes are guilty of all the dirty tricks they are being accused of (centred round the falsification of pollution controls). But this is not the main reason they are being prosecuted, and the proof is that other “culprits” are hardly being affected by the legal procedures.

Although Trump, unlike his predecessor, has for the moment not taken such measures, he continues to massively threaten, not so much Europe, but above all China. From his point of view, he has good reason to do so. Already at the economic level, China is presently mounting two gigantic threats to the interests of the United States. The first of them is the so-called new Silk Road, a massive infrastructure programme aimed at linking southern Asia, the Middle East, Africa and Europe to China through a vast system of modern railways, highways, harbours and airports by land and by sea. Beijing has already pledged a thousand billion dollars to this, the most ambitious such infrastructure programme in history to date. The second threat is that China (but also Japan) has started to withdraw capital from the United States and the dollar zone, and to establish bilateral agreements with other governments (the so-called BRICS states, but also Japan or South Korea) to accept payment in each others’ currencies instead of paying with dollars. Although there are of course objective limits to how far China and Japan can go in this without harming themselves, these moves represent a serious threat to the United States: “Sooner

or later, the currency markets will mirror the relation of forces in international trade – meaning a multi-polar order with three centres of power. In the foreseeable future the Dollar will have to share its leading role with the Euro and the Chinese Yuan” (...) That will affect not only the economy and the social sector but also the military armament of the world power”.¹ This would indeed risk undermining, in the long term, the overwhelming military superiority of the United States, since it presently finances its gigantic military machine, and its state debt, to a considerable extent thanks to the role of the dollar as the currency of world trade.

Although both the United States and the European Union are threatening China with custom duties in response to what they call Chinese dumping, what they above all want to achieve is that Beijing is stripped of its status, in the international economic institutions, of a “developing country” (which gives China many legal possibilities to protect its own markets). The element in the economic programme of Trump, however, which has most impressed the ruling class, not only in the United States, is his planned “tax reform”. *The Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* in Germany declared that it would constitute – should it ever be realised – nothing less than a “tax revolution”.² Its main idea is not new in itself, but goes in the same direction as similar “reforms” in the “neo-liberal” era: that of taxing consumption rather than production as much as possible. Since everybody pays consumer tax, all such shifts constitute a kind of tax cut for the owners of the means of production. Convinced that the United States is the only major country where such a tax system could be imposed in a really radical manner, Trump hopes, by making production in the United States virtually tax free, to bring American companies, their headquarters now in places like Dublin or Amsterdam, but also some of their overseas production, “back home” – and to become more attractive for foreign investors and producers. This above all seems to be the counter-offensive which Donald Trump has in mind in the present stage of the economic war.

At the economic level, Trump is anything but the opponent of “neo-liberalism” which he sometimes claims to be. If anything, the goal of his government of billionaires is more like the “completion” of the “neo-liberal revolution”. Behind the rhetoric of his former adviser, Steve Bannon, about

1. Josef Braml: *Trump's Amerika*, page 211. Braml works for the German Society for Foreign Policy (DGAP)

2. *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* 02/04/17. The FAZ newspaper is one of the leading mouthpieces of the German bourgeoisie.

the “destruction of the state” there lurks the neo-liberal state, a particularly brutal and powerful form of state capitalism. But the problem of the Trump administration today is not only that its economic programme is self-contradictory. It is also that those elements of his programme which could be of most use to the American bourgeoisie are very unsure of ever being put into operation. The reason for this is the chaos in the political apparatus of the leading ruling class in the world-

The political crisis of the American bourgeoisie

Today, there is a president in the Oval Office who wants to run the country like a capitalist business, and who appears to have no understanding of things like the state and statesmanship, or diplomacy. This in itself is a clear sign of political crisis in a country like the US. Since 2010, the political life of the bourgeoisie in the United States has been characterised by a tendency for the main protagonists to reciprocally block each other. Radical Republicans held up the budgetary planning of the Obama Presidency, for instance, to such an extent that, at critical moments the state was on the brink of being unable to even pay the wages of its employees. The mutual obstruction between the president and the Congress, between the Republicans and the Democrats, and within each of the two parties (in particular within the former) has reached a scale where it has begun to seriously hamper the capacity of the USA to fulfil its role of maintaining a minimum of global capitalist order. An example of this is the reform of the structures of the International Monetary Fund (IMF), which became necessary in response to the growing weight in particular of the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa) in the world economy. President Obama recognised that, if US-inspired and led international economic institutions were to continue to perform their function of providing certain “rules of the game” of the world economy, there was no way of avoiding giving the “emerging countries” more rights and votes within them. But this restructuring was blocked by the US congress for no less than five years. As a result, China took the initiative in creating the so-called Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB). Worse still: Germany, Britain and France decided to participate in the AIIB (March 2015). A major step had been taken in the creation of an alternative, Chinese-led institutional architecture for the world economy. Nor did the opposition within America even succeed in preventing the “reform” of the IMF.

Donald Trump wanted to put an end to

this tendency towards a creeping paralysis in the American system of power by breaking the power of the “establishment”, of the established “elites”, in particular within the political parties themselves. Needless to say, this establishment has no intention of surrendering its power. The result of the Trump presidency, at least to date, has transformed this tendency towards blockage into a full scale crisis of the US political apparatus. A furious power struggle has opened up between the Trumpists and their opponents, between the president and the judiciary system, between the White House and the political parties, within the Republican Party itself – which Trump more or less kidnapped as part of his presidential bid – and even within the entourage of the president himself. A power struggle which is also being fought out in the media: CNN and the East Coast press versus Breitbart and Fox News. The courts and the municipalities are blocking Trumps immigration policy. His “health reform” to replace Obamacare lacks the support of his “own” Republican Party. The funds to build his wall against Mexico have not been granted. Even his foreign policy is openly contested, in particular his intention of making a “great deal” with Russia. The frustrated, hot-headed, twittering president has been firing one prominent member of his own team after the other. Meantime, step by step, the opposition against him is constructing a firewall around him, composed of media campaigns, investigations and the threat of prosecution and even impeachment. His capability to rule the country, and even his sanity, are being questioned in public. This development is not specific to the United States. The past two years, for instance, have witnessed a series of mass demonstrations against corruption, whether in Latin America (for example Brazil), Europe (Romania) or in Asia (South Korea). These are protests, not against the bourgeois state, but against the idea that the bourgeois state is doing its job properly (and of course they are protests against certain factions – often to the advantage of another faction). In reality, so-called corruption is but a symptom of deeper-lying problems. The permanent managing, not only of the economy, but of the whole of bourgeois society by the state, is a product of the decadence of capitalism, the global epoch inaugurated by World War I. The decline of the system necessitates a permanent control by the state with an increasingly totalitarian tendency: state capitalism. In its present form, the existing state capitalist apparatus, including the administration, the decision-making process and the political parties, are a product of the 1930s and/or of the post-World War II period. In other words, they have been in existence for decades. In the course of

time, their innate tendency towards inertia, inefficiency, self-interest and self-perpetuation become more and more marked. This also goes for the “political class”, with an increasing tendency for politicians and political parties and other institutions to pursue their own vested interests to the detriment of those of the national capital as a whole. “Neo-liberalism” developed partly in response to this problem. It tried to make bureaucracies more efficient by introducing elements of direct economic competition into their mode of functioning. But in many ways the “neo-lib” system has worsened the illness it wanted to cure. The “economisation” of the functioning of the state has given rise to a gigantic new apparatus of what is known as lobbyism. Out of this lobby system has developed in turn the sponsoring, by private individuals or groups, of what in the United States are called Political Action Committees (PAC): “think tanks”, political institutes and so-called grass root movements. In March 2010, the US Court of Appeals granted unlimited funding rights to such bodies. Since then, powerful private groups have increasingly been assuming a direct influence on national politics. One example is the “Grover Norquist Initiative” which succeeded in getting a large majority of Republicans in the House of Representatives to take a public oath never again to vote for tax increases. Another example is the Cato Institute and the Tea Party Movement sponsored by the Koch brothers (oil tycoons). Perhaps the most relevant example, in the present context, is Robert Mercer, apparently a brilliant mathematician, who used his mathematical skills to become one of the leading hedge fund billionaires (a kind of right wing equivalent of the “liberal” George Soros) and to create a powerful instrument for the investigation and manipulation of political opinions called Cambridge Analytica. The latter, along with his white supremacist news network Breitbart, were probably decisive in winning the presidency for Donald Trump, and have also been implicated in manipulating opinion for a pro-Brexit result in the UK referendum.³

The clearest indication that the mutual obstruction within the US ruling class has reached a new quality – that of a full scale political crisis – is the fact that, much more than in the recent past, the imperialist orientation, the military strategy of the super-power has itself become the principle bone of contention and object of obstruction.

3. For a more detailed analysis of the contradictions between the policies of Trump and the interests of the main fractions of the American bourgeoisie, see our article on the Trump election, which also develops on the context of the global decline of the United States and the still growing cancer of militarism.



The United States and the Russian question

One of the peculiarities of the 2016 US presidential elections was that (as in the proverbial “banana republics”) neither of the two candidates would accept their defeat. Trump already announced this before election day, but without saying what he would do in the case of his defeat. As for Hillary Clinton, instead of blaming someone else for her defeat (for instance herself),⁴ she decided to blame it on Vladimir Putin. In the meantime, a large part of the US political establishment has taken up this theme, so that “Russia-Gate” has become the principle instrument of opposition to the Trump administration within the American ruling class. As the world now knows, Trump’s connections with Russia go back all the way to the year 1987, when Moscow was still the capital of the USSR and the “Evil Empire” in the eyes of the USA. According to a recent documentary film shown on ZDF, the second state TV channel in Germany,⁵ it was Trump’s Russian connection, not least his business links to the Russian underworld, which (possibly several times) rescued Trump from going bankrupt. At all events, the main idea of the investigations against Trump about Russia is that someone has become president of the United States who is dependent on the Kremlin, and is perhaps even being blackmailed by it. What is certainly true is that the new president has business and other connections there. Not only Trump, but many from the inner circle of power he gathered round him when he entered the White House, including Rex Tillerson, Michael Flynn, Jared Kushner, Reince Priebus and Jeff Sessions. What is true above all is that the Trumpists wanted and still want to radically change the Russia policy of the United States, to make a “great deal” with Putin.

Here it is necessary to briefly recall the history of American-Russian relations since the collapse of the Soviet Union.

4. Her husband, ex-president Bill Clinton, was allegedly hopping mad about how incompetently her campaign had been managed.

5. ZDF Zom: *Gefährliche Verbindungen - Trump und seine Geschäftspartner* (Dangerous connections: Trump and his business partners) by Johannes Hano and Alexander Sarovic.

In the heady days of the US “victory” in the Cold War, there was a strong feeling in the American ruling class that its former superpower rival could become a kind of subordinate state and above all a source of abundant profits. The first Russian president Boris Yeltsin relied on American (“neo-lib”) advisers in the process of converting the existing Stalinist system into a “market economy”. What resulted was an economic disaster. As for the US “expert” advisers, their main concern was to get the fabulous raw material wealth of Russia under American control as much as possible. The Yeltsin presidency (1991-1999), a mafia type government, was more or less ready to sell out the resources of the country to the highest bidder. The administration which succeeded it, that of Vladimir Putin, although it has excellent connections to the Russian underworld, soon proved to be a regime of a very different kind, run by secret service officers determined to defend the independence of mother Russia, and to keep its wealth for themselves. It was Putin therefore who prevented the planned American takeover of the Russian economy. This serious loss corresponded to a more global decline in US authority, in which most of its former allies and even a number of secondary, dependent powers began to challenge the hegemony of the world’s only remaining superpower.

Ever since Putin’s ascendancy, the so-called Neo-Cons, the “conservative” and openly belligerent institutes and think-tanks in the United States, have been publicly advocating “regime change” in Moscow. Once again, Russia under Putin became a kind of “Evil Empire” for the war propaganda of US imperialism. Despite the abrupt change in Russian US policy under Putin, the American policy towards Russia remained basically the same until 2014. Its main axis was the military encirclement of the Russian Federation, first and foremost through the deployment of NATO ever closer to the heartlands of Russia. Through the integration of the former Baltic states of the USSR into NATO, the US military machine found itself surrounding the Russian enclave of Kaliningrad, almost within marching distance of the suburbs of St Petersburg, the second city of Russia. However, when Washington offered NATO membership to two other former components of the Soviet Union – the Ukraine and Georgia – this was prevented by other NATO “partners”, in particular Germany, who realised that this step was likely to provoke some kind of military reaction by Moscow.

Instead, the western “partners” agreed on a more subtle procedure: the European Union offered the Ukraine a “free trade” agreement. But since the Ukraine already

had a similar agreement with the Russian Federation, the consequence of the deal between Brussels and Kiev would be that European goods, via the Ukraine, could gain free access to Russia. Brussels however had deliberately excluded Moscow from its negotiations with Kiev. The reaction of Moscow to the deal between Brussels and Kiev therefore came promptly: the Ukraine would have to choose between a shared market with the EU, or one with Russia. A situation arose which led to an open confrontation between “pro-western” and “pro-Russian” forces in the Ukraine. In the wake of the massacre on the Maidan Square in Kiev (20.02.2014), president Viktor Janukovich was toppled and fled to Russia. At the time, the Grand Old Master of US diplomacy, Henry Kissinger, told CNN that regime change in Kiev was a kind of dress rehearsal for what would happen in Moscow.⁶ But then something happened which nobody in Washington seems to have been expecting: a Russian military counter-offensive. Its three main components were the Moscow-backed separatist movement in the eastern Ukraine, the annexation of the Crimean peninsula on the Ukrainian Black Sea coast, and the military intervention of Russia in Syria. A new situation had arisen, in which the coherence and unity of the US policy towards Russia began to crumble.

Agreement could still be reached in Washington about the economic strangulation of Russia, seen as an adequate response to the counter-offensive of Moscow. The three pillars of this policy – still in place – are economic sanctions; hurting the Russian energy sector by keeping the price of oil and gas on the world market as low as possible; and the stepping up of the arms race with a Russia economically unable to keep up. But from 2014 on there was growing dissent about how America should respond to Russia at the military level. A hard line faction emerged, which was to give its support to Hillary Clinton at the 2016 presidential election. One of its representatives was the commander of NATO forces in Europe, Philip Breedlove. In November 2014 and again in March 2015 Breedlove spread what turned out to be the fake news that the Russian army had invaded the east of the Ukraine. It looked like an attempt to create a pretext for a NATO intervention in the Ukraine. The German government was so alarmed that both Chancellor Merkel and foreign minister Steinmeier condemned in public what they called the “dangerous propaganda” of the NATO commander.⁷ Breedlove,

6. You Tube 17/08/15

7. *Der Spiegel*, 07/03/15 “Nato Oberbefehlshaber Breedlove irritiert die Alliierten” (“Nato Commander in Chief Breedlove irritates the Allies”).

evidently, was not breeding love, but war. According to the German review *Cicero* (04.03.16) Breedlove also proposed to the US Congress to attack Kaliningrad, the Russian Port on the Baltic Sea, as an adequate response to Russian aggression further south. He was not the only one in such a mood. Associated Press reported that the Pentagon was considering the use of atomic weapons against Russia. And at a conference of the US Army Association in October 2016, American generals argued that a war with Russia, and even China, was “almost unavoidable”.⁸ These pronouncements have been extreme, but they do show the ingrained strength of the “anti-Russian” position within US military circles.

Alarmed by this escalation, the last head of state of the USSR, Mikhail Gorbachev, wrote a contribution for *Time Magazine* (27.01.17) entitled “*It looks as if the world is preparing for war*”, where he warned of the danger of a nuclear catastrophe in Europe. Gorbachev was reacting not least to an idea increasingly put forward by conservative think-tanks in the United States: that the risks imposed by a nuclear conflict with Russia have become calculable and can be “minimised” – at least for the United States. According to this “school of thought” such a conflict would not be declared, but would develop out of the present “hybrid war” (Breedlove) with Russia, where the distinctions between armed clashes, conventional warfare and nuclear war become blurred. It was in response to such “thinking aloud” in Washington that the Kremlin “assured” the world that the Russian nuclear second strike capacity was such, that not only Berlin but also Washington would be “razed to the ground” if NATO attacked Russia.⁹

In the face of this growing consideration of the military option against Russia, opposition developed not only within NATO, but also within the US ruling class. The NATO summit of September 2014 in Wales rejected proposals to intervene militarily in the Ukraine, and abandoned, at least for the moment, the idea of Kiev becoming a NATO member. And from that moment on, Barack Obama, as long as he was in office, while contributing to the modernisation of the Ukrainian armed forces, always rejected a direct American military engagement there. But the politically most important reaction within the US bourgeoisie to the situation with Russia was that of Donald Trump.

To understand how, in this context, a new position on policy towards Russia

came to be formulated within the American bourgeoisie, it is important to keep in mind that Russia does not have the same significance for the United States as it had a quarter of a century ago, during the “honeymoon phase” between Bill Clinton and Boris Yeltsin. At that time, the main goal of America’s Russia policy was Russia itself, the control of its resources. Today American control of Russia would be more a means to a new end: the military encirclement of the new enemy No. 1, which is China. In this changed context, Donald Trump poses a very simple question to the rest of his class: If China is now our main enemy, why can’t we try to win over Moscow for an alliance against China? Russia is neither the natural friend of China, nor the natural enemy of the United States.

The question which is of more interest to the “mainstream” of the US bourgeoisie (in particular the supporters of Hillary Clinton) at the moment, however, is a different one: did the Kremlin influence the outcome of the last US presidential elections? The answer to this question is in fact not difficult. Not only did Putin influence the election; he even helped to create the group within the US bourgeoisie open to making deals with Moscow. The principal means he used to this end was the most legitimate one possible in bourgeois society: the proposal of business deals. For example, the deal offered to Exxon Oil and its president Rex Tillerson – now US secretary of state (foreign minister) – is said to have been worth 500 billion dollars. We can thus understand how, after all the bourgeois talk in recent decades about fossil energy sources belonging to the past, there is a government in Washington today with a strong over-representation of the oil and even the coal industry: they are the part of the US economy to which Russia can offer the most.

Although Trump has apparently succeeded in convincing Henry Kissinger of his proposal (Kissinger has become an adviser of Trump and an advocate of “detente” with Russia) he is very far from having convinced the majority of his top brass opponents. One of the reasons for this is that what Dwight Eisenhower, in his farewell speech as president of the United States (17.02.1961) called the “military-industrial complex” feels threatened in its existence by a possible deal with Russia. This is because Russia, for the moment, continues to be the main justification for the maintenance of such a gigantic apparatus. Unlike Russia, China, at least for the moment, although it is an atomic power, has no comparable array of intercontinental nuclear rockets directly targeting the major cities of the United States.

By way of a conclusion

The centre of the cyclone of decomposing capitalism is today the central country of the bourgeois system: the United States. The electoral triumph of a president who embodies the populist wave has already demonstrated how much this upsurge is antagonistic to the “rational” interests of the national capital and those factions of the bourgeoisie (security, military, diplomatic and political) who have the strongest sense of the “needs of state”. The tendency there at present is clearly one towards an intensification of tensions and even an authentic impasse within the ruling class. But precisely because the USA is so central to world capitalism, the pressure is daily increasing on the American bourgeoisie to try to resolve their present predicament. But how? Just at the moment it does not look as if the Trump Administration will be able to impose its politics – the resistance to this within the ruling class appears to be too strong. Another possibility is that the Trumpists give in and tacitly adopt the politics of their opponents (or at least show more readiness to compromise). Although there are signs in this direction, there are signals in the opposite direction too. The option most under discussion in public at present is that of the impeachment of the president. The drawback of this method of removing Trump from the Oval Office is that it threatens to become a protracted and complicated legal and political procedure. Other options, promising a more rapid resolution of the problem, are undoubtedly on the table too, even if they are not so freely discussed: one of them is to have the president declared insane. It is also possible that Trump (or someone else) will try to break out of the existing deadlock through military adventures abroad. One of the advantages of the “war against terrorism” led by George W. Bush was that it enabled his government, at least temporarily, to unite the ruling class behind him, and to impose large parts of their “neo-conservative” programme. Today, countries such as North Korea or Iran offer tempting targets for such operations, since they are closely linked not only to Russia but also to China. If there is one thing the US bourgeoisie still agrees on, it is that Beijing is its main challenger today.

Steinklopfer. First written 23.08.2017
but subsequently updated

8. Wolfgang Bittner: *Die Eroberung Europas durch die USA* (The conquest of Europe by the USA), page 151.

9. You Tube 05/02/15.

Manifesto on the October revolution, Russia 1917

The world revolution is humanity's only future



Congress of the Soviets, St Petersburg, 1917

In October 1917, after three years of unspeakable carnage on the battlefields, a beacon of hope in the fog of war: the Russian workers, having overthrown the Tsar in February, now deposed the bourgeois Provisional Government which had replaced him but which insisted on carrying on with the war “until victory”. The Soviets (workers’ soldiers’ and peasants’ councils), with the Bolshevik party at the fore, called for an immediate end to the war and appealed to the workers of the world to follow their revolutionary example. This was no idle dream because there were already rumblings of discontent in all the antagonistic countries – strikes in the war industries, mutinies and fraternisation at the front. And in November 1918, the outbreak of the German revolution obliged the ruling class to call a halt to the war for fear that any attempt to prolong it would only fan the flames of revolution. For a brief period, the spectre of “Bolshevism” – which at that moment symbolised working class solidarity across all frontiers, and the conquest of political power by the workers’ councils – haunted the globe. For the ruling class, it could only mean chaos, anarchy, the breakdown of civilisation itself. But for the workers and revolutionaries who supported it, the October insurrection contained the

promise of a new world. In 2017, the Russian revolution remains a pivotal event in world history, and its centenary brings back uncomfortable memories for the powers that rule the world. In Russia itself, the Putin regime is having a hard time getting the right note for its commemoration: after all, Stalin’s mighty USSR, whose empire Putin (trained by the KGB) dreams of restoring, also claimed to be the heir of the October revolution. But alongside (in fact, diametrically opposed to) this nationalist interpretation is the internationalist vision of Lenin and the Bolsheviks, the idea that the loyalty of the Russian working class should not be to Mother Russia but to the workers of the world. In the “democratic” countries of the West, there will also be a confusing mixture of analyses and explanations, but of one thing we can be sure: if they come from the political, media or academic mouthpieces of capitalism, they will all serve to distort the meaning of the Russian revolution.

What are the main lines of this ideological attack, this attempt either to bury or pervert the memory of the working class?

Is the class war over?

First line of attack: this is all ancient history, of little relevance to the modern world. We no longer live in the times portrayed in the jerky black and white films of the day, where cavalry charges were still a feature of warfare and where peasants still tilled the land with horse-drawn ploughs (if they were lucky enough to own a horse). Even the big factories like the Putilov works in Petrograd (today St Petersburg) where tens of thousands of workers were exploited to the hilt every day, have largely disappeared, from most western countries at least. Indeed, not only are there many less peasants, but is there really any such thing as the working class, and if there is, is this still an exploited class when you can claim welfare from a benevolent state and can afford to buy (even if on credit) all kinds of items which would have been far beyond the reach of the Russian workers in 1917? Are not super-modern companies like Uber closer to the mark when they categorise their workforce as self-employed individuals rather than as some kind of collective force capable of acting together in their own interests? Are we all, whatever job we do, not better defined as citizens of a broad democratic order?

And yet: we are told day after day that capitalism (mainly in its current “neo-liberal” form) dominates the planet, whether this is presented as a good thing or not. And it is indeed true that capitalism dominates the planet like never before – it is truly a world system, a global mode of production that rules every country in the world, including those like Cuba and China that still call themselves “socialist”. But the fact remains that where there is capital, there is a class which produces it, which labours, and which is exploited because capital is, by definition, based on the unpaid labour extracted from those who work for a wage – whether they work in factories, offices, schools, supermarkets, hospitals, transport, or at home. In short, as Marx put it, in a pamphlet precisely called *Wage Labour and Capital*: “capital presupposes wage labour, and wage labour presupposes capital”. Where there is capital, there is a working class.

Of course the shape of the world working class has changed a great deal since 1917. Entire industrial complexes have shifted to China, or Latin America, or other parts of what was once called the “Third World”. In large portions of the economy in the “industrialised countries” of western Europe, workers have stopped producing material goods on the factory floor and instead work at computer screens in the “knowledge economy” or the financial sector, often in

much smaller workplaces; and with the decimation of traditional industrial sectors like mining, steel and ship-building, the equivalent working class residential communities have also been broken up. All this has helped to undermine the ways in which the working class has identified itself as a class with a distinct existence and distinct interests in this society. This has weakened the historical memory of the working class. But it has not made the working class itself disappear.

It’s true that the objective existence of the working class does not automatically mean that, within a substantial part of this class, there is still a political project, an idea that the capitalist system needs to, and can be, overturned and replaced by a higher form of society. Indeed, in 2017, it is legitimate to ask: where are the equivalent today of the marxist organisations, like the Bolsheviks in Russia or the Spartacists in Germany, who were able to develop a presence among the industrial workers and have a big influence when they engaged in massive movements, in strikes or uprisings? In the past few decades, the period from the “collapse of communism” to the upsurge of populism, it often seems as though those who still talk about the proletarian revolution are at best viewed as irrelevant curiosities, rare animals on the verge of extinction, and that they are not only seen in this way by a hostile capitalist media. For the vast majority of the working class, 1917, the Russian revolution, the Communist International – all that has been forgotten, perhaps locked away in some deep unconscious recess, but no longer part of any living tradition. Today, we have reached such a low in the capacity of the workers’ movement to recall its own past that the parties of the populist right can even present themselves – and be represented by their liberal opponents – as parties of the working class, as the true heir of the struggle against the elites that run the world.

This process of forgetting is not accidental. Capitalism today, more than ever, depends on the cult of newness, on “constantly revolutionising” not only the means of production, but also the objects of consumption, so that what was once new, like the latest mobile phone, becomes old in the space of a couple of years and needs to be replaced. This denigration of what’s “out of date”, of genuine historical experience, is useful to the class of exploiters because it serves to produce a kind of amnesia among the exploited. The working class is faced with the danger of forgetting its own revolutionary traditions; and it unlearns the real lessons of history at its peril, because it will need to apply them in its future struggles. The bourgeoisie, as a

reactionary class, wants us either to forget the past or (as with the populists and the jihadists) offer us the mirage of a false, idealised past. The proletariat, by contrast, is a class with a future and for this very reason is capable of integrating into all the best of humanity’s past into the struggle for communism.

Capitalism has outlived itself



Aleppo 2016

The working class will need the lessons of its historic past because capital is a social system doomed by its own internal contradictions, and the contradictions which plunged the world into the horrors of World War One in 1914 are the same which threaten the world with an accelerating plunge into barbarism today. The contradiction between the need for a planet-wide planning of production and distribution and the division of the world into competing nation states lay behind the great imperialist wars and conflicts of the 20th century, and it still lies behind the chaotic military confrontations which are wrecking whole regions in the Middle East, Africa and beyond; and the same contradiction – which is just one expression of the clash between socialised production and its private appropriation – is inseparable both from the economic convulsions which have shaken world capitalism in 1929, 1973, and 2008, and the accelerating ecological destruction which is threatening the very basis of life on Earth.

In 1919, the revolutionaries who gathered together in Moscow to found the Third, Communist International proclaimed that the imperialist war of 1914-18 signalled the entry of world capitalism into its epoch of obsolescence and decline, an epoch in which mankind would be faced with the choice between socialism and barbarism. They predicted that if capitalism was not overthrown by the world proletarian revolution, there would be wars even more devastating than that of 1914-18, forms of capitalist rule more monstrous than any that had yet appeared. And with the defeat of the international revolutionary wave, with its consequence of the isolation and degeneration of the revolution in Russia, they were proved only too right:

the horrors of Nazism, Stalinism and the Second World War were indeed worse than anything which had preceded them.

It's true that capitalism has repeatedly surprised revolutionaries by its resilience, its capacity to invent new ways of surviving and even prospering. World War Two was followed by over two decades of economic boom in the central capitalist countries, even if it was also accompanied by the menace of nuclear annihilation at the hands of the two world-dominating imperialist blocs. And although this boom gave way to a renewed and prolonged economic crisis at the end of the 1960s, since the 1980s capitalism has been coming up with new formulae not only for staying alive but even for expanding into areas that had previously been "underdeveloped", such as India and China. But this very development, which has to a large extent been fuelled by huge injections of credit, has piled up enormous economic problems for the future (of which the financial crash of 2008 was already a warning). At the same time, the growth of the last few decades has extracted a terrible toll from the natural environment, and has in no sense diminished the danger of military conflicts. The threat of a world war between two gigantic blocs may have receded, but today even more countries are armed with nuclear weapons, and the proxy wars between the great powers, which were once more or less restricted to the less developed regions, are now impacting directly on the central countries themselves, through the multiplication of terrorist outrages in Europe and America, and the waves of refugees desperate to escape the nightmarish wars in the Middle East and Africa. The survival of capitalism is, more than ever, incompatible with the survival of humanity.

In sum, revolution is even more necessary than it was in 1917; it is the last best hope of humanity in the face of a social system in full decomposition. And that can only mean a global revolution, a revolution which sweeps the capitalist system from the planet and replaces it with a world human community which makes the Earth a "common treasury" and frees production and distribution from the inhuman demands of the market and of profit. That was already the secret of the revolution in 1917, which was not merely "Russian" but was understood by its protagonists as only the first blow of the world revolution; and it was indeed an indispensable, active factor in the mass strikes and uprisings which spread across the world in a great wave between 1917 and 1923.



Does revolution make everything worse?

The problem remains: if a new society is necessary, is it really possible? And in fact, **a second line of attack** on the memory of October 1917 is that revolution can only make things worse.

The proof? That the Russian revolution ended up in the Stalinist Gulag: in mass terror, show trials, the falsification of history, the suppression of dissident opinion; that it created economies which could churn out vast military arsenals but were incapable of providing decent consumer goods; that it established a "dictatorship of the proletariat" which used tanks to crush proletarian revolts, as in East Germany in 1953, Hungary in 1956, or Poland in 1981.

And all this was not something which arrived out of the blue after the death of Lenin in 1924 and with Stalin's rise to power. Even in Lenin's day, workers' strikes and rebellions were met with armed force and the uncontrolled violence of the Cheka claimed many working class and peasant victims. Even in Lenin's day, the soviets had progressively ceased to wield any real control over the state, and the dictatorship of the proletariat had largely been replaced by a dictatorship of the Bolshevik party.

Those who are serious about the possibility of revolution have no interest in concealing the truth, or in minimising the immensity of the task facing a working class which has the audacity to confront and overturn the capitalist system. To make a revolution is to throw off the muck of ages – all the delusions and noxious habits inherited not only from capitalist society and its ideology but from thousands of years of class domination. It requires a vast physical, moral and intellectual effort aimed not only at dismantling the old regime, its state and its economy, but of creating new social relations based no longer on competition and exclusion but on solidarity and cooperation, and all this on the level of an entire planet. The very scale of the project, its seeming impossibility, has become a further factor in the current

difficulties of the working class. Far easier to retreat into passivity, or, for those who remain convinced that the present system is deeply flawed, to look for the "easier" alternatives offered by populist strongmen, by nihilistic terrorism posing as "jihad", or by the "left" parties who claim that the existing capitalist state can introduce a socialist society.

We do not hide from the reality of the Russian revolution, its terrible difficulties and its tragic errors. We will come back to some of these errors in due course. But before we come to the conclusions offered by conventional history – that Bolshevism was from the beginning no different from Stalinism, that any attempt to overthrow the existing state of affairs will inevitably end up in mass terror and repression, or that human nature is so constituted that present day capitalist society is the best we can hope for – let's remember that in 1917 the ruling class did not simply trust to the selfishness of human nature, did not wait around until it all went wrong so that they could sneer "I told you so". In 1917 and the years that followed, the ruling class of the whole world took the threat of revolution very seriously indeed, and did everything they could to suppress it. Faced with the outbreak of the German revolution in 1918, they hurried to bring the war to an end, in order to remove one of the main motive forces behind the mass strikes and mutinies; in addition, the Allies came to the aid of their former enemy – the German ruling class – in the latter's effort to put down the revolutionary workers, sailors and soldiers who had been tempted to follow the example of the October insurrection. Faced with soviet power in Russia, both sides in the imperialist war intervened with the aim of snuffing out the Bolshevik danger at source. Those defending soviet power in the civil war stirred up by the counter-revolutionary forces in Russia not only had to fight the home-grown "White" armies but expeditionary forces sent in by the British, the Americans, the Japanese, the Germans and others, who also sent arms and advisers to the White armies. The civil war, reinforced by an economic blockade imposed by the western allies after the soviet republic withdrew from the war, rapidly reduced the Russian economy – already exhausted by three years of war – to ruin, and resulted in dire shortages and outright famine. The conditions of civil war also weakened the strongholds of the industrial working class which had been the most active force behind the revolution, since many of its most dedicated militants volunteered to go to the military fronts and of them countless numbers lost their lives, while many other workers had little choice but to flee the starvation in the cities and

look for food and work in the countryside. Inside and outside Russia, a constant stream of propaganda was directed at the Bolsheviks, portraying them as murderers of children and ravishers of women, often employing anti-Semitic themes that implied that Bolshevism was a mere tool of a global Jewish conspiracy.

Indeed, for many of the politicians of the “democratic” powers – including Winston Churchill in Britain – the fascist regime in Italy (and later Germany) was seen as a necessary evil if it could be relied on to stem the Bolshevik tide. Similarly, when the USSR under Stalin sought to rejoin the “concert of nations”, a number of bourgeois politicians and states were able to see that Stalin was a “man you could do business with” and understood that his policy of “socialism in one country” meant that he was no longer interested – and was actually opposed to – the world revolution. This acceptance of the USSR into the imperialist concert was confirmed by its participation in the Second World War on the Allied side.

And this was the most telling demonstration that Stalinism was not the continuation of Bolshevism but its gravedigger. In 1914–18 Bolshevism stood for revolutionary opposition to imperialist war, for class struggle against all the belligerent states. In 1941 the Stalinist USSR – following a temporary pact with Nazi Germany – raised the flag of the “Great Patriotic War” and took part in the imperialist carve up of the globe at the end of it.

The great lie: “Stalinism equals communism”

Stalinism, then, was the product, not of the revolution, but of its isolation and defeat. By 1923, the international revolutionary conflagration sparked off by the October insurrection had died down, providing the ammunition needed by the bureaucratic layer that was gaining strength in the Bolshevik party to argue that the priority was no longer the world revolution, but the building of socialism in the USSR. But this meant abandoning the elementary marxist idea that socialism can only be built on a world scale, that isolated outposts of socialism are an impossibility. And so what was built by the ruthless Five Year Plans of the Stalinist bureaucracy was not socialism but a form of capitalism in which individual capitalists were replaced by a single state boss. This tendency towards state capitalism was by no means limited to the USSR: it was capitalism’s universal response to war and economic crisis, taking diverse forms: fascism in Italy and Germany, the New Deal in the USA, the

Keynesian welfare state after World War Two, military dictatorships in many of the weaker capitalist countries. What was particular about the USSR was that the drive towards state capitalism here reached its most concentrated, extreme form, a result of the virtual elimination (either by flight or expropriation) of private capitalists during the revolution; and that, since the counter-revolution had grown up from within the state that emerged out of the revolution, and had annexed a Bolshevik party which had become almost indistinguishable from the state, the Stalinist regime was for the rest of its days able to claim continuity with the October revolution which it had buried under piles of corpses.

This false identification gave a radical gloss to the Stalinist parties outside Russia, who could also cover their total commitment to capitalism and the national interest of their respective countries with references to Red October. But above all it provided the main factions of the ruling class in the west with a licence to publish the greatest lie in history: that the Stalinist regime was equal to “Communism”.

The immensity of this lie can be measured by comparing the Stalinist system to the understanding of what communism really means that has been defended within the workers’ movement since at least the days of Marx and Engels. For them, as for those that followed in their wake, communism means the overcoming of millennia of human alienation, of any social order in which humanity’s own creations have become hostile forces that dominate its life. At the political level, it means a society without a state, since the state is precisely the expression of the rule of one class over another, and thus of a political apparatus over which the vast majority have no control. And yet the Stalinist regime was the epitome of the total domination of the state over the individual, over society, and above all over the working class. At the economic level, communism means that humanity is no longer subject to inhuman economic laws, to the ruthless demands of profit and the market. And this means that in communism there is no place for money, the market, or wage labour. And yet the totalitarian power of the Stalinist state, the whole economic edifice dominated by production for war, was built on the surplus value extracted from the class of wage labourers. Capital is, in essence, a social relationship, not merely a form of legal ownership. For the wage labourer, it makes no difference whether his or her labour power is sold to a private entrepreneur or a state bureaucrat: the fundamentals of capitalist exploitation remain. And while communism means the end of the separation of humanity into different nations, the

abolition of borders, the Stalinist regimes were fanatical purveyors of nationalist ideology, entirely devoted to the defence of their national borders and the pursuit of their national and thus imperialist interests on the world arena.

But if the claim that Stalinism is communism was such a huge lie, why was it able to sustain itself for so long? First of all, it was in the interest of both sets of rulers, east and west, to keep it going. For all their crimes against humanity and the working class in particular, the Stalinist state bourgeoisie depended on proclaiming its “continuity” with the October revolution. The idea that these were “socialist” states in transition towards communism provided these regimes with their ideological justification. In this the Stalinists were cheered on from the “left” by the Trotskyists who continued to argue that these regimes, however degenerated or deformed, were indeed workers’ states that workers should defend. By the same token, for many workers in the west, for those who were not altogether convinced of the benefits of capitalism in its “democratic” form, the idea that there was somewhere on this planet an actual alternative to capitalism remained an important source of hope. The Stalinist regimes were indeed capitalist, but because they were such a distorted form of capitalism they could appear to many as representing a different kind of society altogether.

But for a much greater part of the population in the west – and indeed for the majority of the working class within the Stalinist regimes themselves – the idea that the USSR and its satellites were socialist or communist was the ultimate proof that the western variety of capitalism was the only possible system, a system to be defended or to strive for. In other words, the misery, austerity and repression that characterised the Stalinist regimes demonstrated the impossibility of replacing capitalism with a higher form of society. Capitalist competition, the desire to accumulate unlimited wealth, these were vindicated as being essential to human nature. This is why the ruling class in the west was so emphatic about describing its enemy in the east as socialist or communist, and when the eastern regimes collapsed at the end of the 80s, the lie that this was the final proof of the failure of marxism and communism was amplified across the world in deafening political campaigns whose echo has far from disappeared today. These campaigns have caused considerable confusion and disarray in the ranks of the working class, which was already, in the 1980s, finding it extremely difficult to develop a perspective, a historical project, which could have taken its immediate strug-



Red Guard Unit, Vulcan Factory

gles onto a higher and more unified level. The widely-held idea that there is nothing beyond this present society has dealt a very heavy blow to the capacity of the working class to politicise its struggles and confront the capitalist system as a whole.

In defence of October

A key component in the denigration of the Russian revolution is the idea that the October insurrection was no more than a coup d'état by a power hungry Bolshevik party, which quickly set about establishing a totalitarian state, the precursor of the Stalinist regime. Of course, in this version of history, great sympathy and understanding may be shown for the workers who, in February 1917, engaged in spontaneous mass strikes and formed the "democratic" soviets. This movement chased away the Tsarist autocracy and, in the view of eminent liberal historians like Orlando Figes, could have prepared the ground for the emergence of a genuinely democratic parliamentary state, which in turn might possibly have spared Russia from decades of suffering and terror. But those scheming Bolsheviks sabotaged these bright hopes with their dogma about the "dictatorship of the proletariat" and deceived the masses with their demagogic slogans.

But what really happened between February and October 1917? First of all, there was a profound political awakening of the working class and all the oppressed layers – a process captured very well by John Reed in his book *Ten Days that Shook the World*:

"All Russia was learning to read, and reading politics, economics, history - because the people wanted to know ... The

thirst for education, so long thwarted, burst with the Revolution into a frenzy of expression. From Smolny Institute alone, in the first six months, went out every day tons, carloads, trainloads of literature, saturating the land. Russia absorbed reading matter like hot sand drinks water ... Then the Talk, beside which Carlyle's 'flood of French speech' was a mere trickle. Lectures, debates, speeches - in theatres, circuses, school-houses, clubs, Soviet meeting-rooms, Union headquarters, barracks ... meetings in the trenches at the front, in village squares, factories ... What a marvellous sight to see Putilovsky (the Putilov Factory) pour out its forty thousand to listen to Social Democrats, Socialist Revolutionaries, Anarchists, anybody, whatever they had to say as long as they could talk! For months in Petrograd, and all over Russia, every street corner was a public tribune. In railway trains, street-cars, always the spurting of impromptu debates, everywhere ... At every meeting, attempts to limit the time of speakers were voted down, and every man free to express the thought that was in him."

This is what is meant by the politicisation of the class struggle. Workers, driven forward by dire economic necessity, are compelled to pose the question of how society as a whole is managed. And not through the fake democracy of the parliamentary system, which "empowers" workers every few years to hand over to experts and professional politicians to govern "on their behalf", but through the proletarian methods of association, debate and self-organisation – through a whole network of assemblies in the workplaces, in the neighbourhoods, in the regiments, in the villages, assemblies which could send mandated and revocable delegates to

more central councils, the soviets. In 1917, such a network sprang up all over Russia and within a year or less had inspired the formation of similar organs across the world. It was in these assemblies and councils that a deep process of maturation was taking place, of confrontation between those within them who remained attached to the parties and ideologies of the old system (including many who still called themselves socialists) and those who stood for taking the revolution to its logical conclusion: not handing over to a parliament dominated by bourgeois parties but resolving an inherently unstable situation of "dual power" through the assumption of political power by the soviets. The slogans of the Bolsheviks – above all the necessity to end the war, which was the cause of terrible hardship for the working class and the peasants – chimed with the growing consciousness of the majority that the bourgeois politicians and parties would not and could not break with the policy of "national defence"; and that, faced with the threat from below, these factions would prefer an open dictatorship of the bourgeoisie, even if this meant the suppression of the soviets. The complicity of the "democrats" with the attempted putsch by Kornilov in August 1917, and subsequent attempts by the Provisional Government to "restore order", convinced many that the only choice was between the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie and the dictatorship of the proletariat.

The October insurrection was, in truth, the high point of this whole process of politicisation. It corresponded to a growing influence of the Bolsheviks and other revolutionary groups within the soviets across Russia, a growing demand that the Provisional Government should be toppled and replaced by soviet power. But it also reflected a real development of self-organisation and centralisation. The fact that the insurrection was a planned, coordinated action which, in Petrograd in particular, passed off with a minimum of violence and was for the most part carried out by well-organised detachments of workers and sailors, the fact that it was under the overall command of an organ of the Petrograd Soviet – the Military Revolutionary Committee – and the fact that it rapidly made it possible for the all-Russian Congress of Soviets to declare itself the supreme power in the land, all this demonstrated that the insurrection was not a putsch and, on the contrary, that the Russian working class had learned the practical truth of Marx's saying that "insurrection is an art".

"Demonstrations, street fights, barricades - everything comprised in the usual idea of insurrection - were almost entirely absent. The revolution had no

*need of solving a problem already solved. The seizure of the governmental machine could be carried through according to plan with the help of comparatively small armed detachments guided from a single centre... The tranquillity of the October streets, the absence of crowds and battles, gave the enemy a pretext to talk of the conspiracy of an insignificant minority, of the adventure of a handful of Bolsheviks... But in reality the Bolsheviks could reduce the struggle for power at the last moment to a 'conspiracy', not because they were a small minority, but for the opposite reason - because they had behind them in the workers' districts and the barracks an overwhelming majority, consolidated, organised, disciplined" (Trotsky, *The History of the Russian Revolution*).*

In overthrowing the government of the bourgeoisie in Russia, the working class was able to take advantage of a rather weak, divided, and inexperienced capitalist class. The German bourgeoisie was very quick to show that it was a much more formidable opponent; and it's certainly the case that in any future revolution, the working class will be faced with an even more sophisticated ruling class with a highly organised state and ideological apparatus at its disposal. Nevertheless, the October insurrection is to this day the highest point achieved by the proletarian class struggle – an expression of its ability to become organised on a mass scale, conscious of its goals, confident of taking the reins of social life. It was the anticipation of what Marx called “the end of prehistory”, of all conditions in which humanity is at the mercy of unconscious social forces; the anticipation of a future

in which, for the first time, humanity will make its own history according to its own needs and purposes.

The necessity for the class party

In the debates within the Bolshevik party in the period immediately prior to the insurrection, Lenin, growing impatient with the vacillations within the soviets (and even within the party itself), raised the possibility that the uprising could be carried out in the name of the Bolshevik party, which had by now won an effective majority within the principal soviets. But Trotsky disagreed, insisting that the insurrection should be clearly seen to be the work of an organ responsible to the soviets, that is to say, of the organisations of the working class as a whole. In this debate was the beginning of an understanding that the taking of political power is not the task of the party. We will come back to this. But what the stormy development of class consciousness between February and October certainly did prove was that a proletarian revolution cannot succeed without the determined intervention and political leadership provided by a communist party.

As an exploited class in bourgeois society, the consciousness of the class can never be homogenous. There will always be those who are more combative, more resistant to the penetration of the dominant ideology, more conscious of the historical struggle of the class and its lessons. It is the specific task of a communist organisation to regroup the most clear-sighted elements of the class around a solid programme,

to defend this programme whatever the immediate level of consciousness in the class as a whole. This does not mean that the communist organisation possesses an infallible truth: the communist programme is based on the theoretical elaboration of the real lessons of history, and is constantly enriched by new experiences and debates within the workers' movement. And there can be times – as during the Russian revolution itself, when Lenin himself noted that the advanced workers were already to the left of the party – when the party can lag behind new advances in the consciousness of the class. But this only means that the combat against the influence of ruling class ideology has to take place inside the communist organisation as it does within the class as a whole: indeed, it can be said that it is precisely at such moments that the communist organisation reveals its role as a vital laboratory for the elaboration of class consciousness.

Such a moment took place within the Bolshevik party in the aftermath of the February revolution. A majority of the “old Bolsheviks” within Russia, carried away by the democratic euphoria that followed the abdication of the Tsar, took up a frankly opportunist position of critical support for the provisional Government and of continued participation in the war, now dubbed as defensive and no longer imperialist on Russia's part. This position put into question three years of determined internationalist opposition against the war, which had put the Bolsheviks in the vanguard of the entire international socialist movement. But the proletarian life of the party, though menaced, was far from exhausted. On his return to Russia in April, Lenin – counting on the radicalisation of the most militant sectors of the class – shook the party to its foundations by unveiling the “April theses” which rejected any support for the bourgeois Provisional Government, any participation in the imperialist war, and called on the workers and poor peasants to prepare for the inevitable next step in the revolutionary process: the transfer of power to the soviets, which would be the signal for the world revolution against the global imperialist system. This position, Lenin understood, would have to be fought for within the party, and by the party within the soviets and the class as a whole, not through adventurist actions but through patient explanation, through a political battle for clarity.

“As long as we are in the minority we carry on the work of criticising and exposing errors and at the same time we preach the necessity of transferring the entire state power to the Soviets of Workers' Deputies, so that the people may overcome their mistakes by experience.” (Thesis 4)



Bolshevik Party Meeting

By carrying out this work of “patiently explaining”, as the crisis in Russia matured and the mass of workers and peasants became increasingly disillusioned with the false promises of the Provisional Government, the Bolshevik party (once it had itself come round to Lenin’s position) was able to decisively accelerate the development of class consciousness. The patience of the party proved particularly significant in the July days when a minority of workers and sailors in Petrograd were in danger of falling for bourgeois provocations and pushing for the seizure of power at a time when they would not have been followed by the majority of the class in Russia. This would have resulted in a totally demoralising massacre of the most advanced workers - a trap which, less than two years later, the Berlin workers and the Spartacists were not able to avoid. At this moment, the Bolsheviks did not hide in a corner but took part in the workers’ demonstrations, explaining why the time was not ripe for the seizure of power, a position which was not at all popular. In the immediate aftermath of these events, the party was subject to a sustained campaign of calumny, accused of being paid agents of German imperialism, and exposed to direct repression by the government. But the party not only survived this temporary set-back: it was able to regain its influence in the class through its leading role in the struggle against the attempted coup by general Kornilov in August, and build up its presence in the soviets across the country, thus preparing the ground for the moment when, far from holding the class back, it was necessary to come out in favour of determined action: the October insurrection.

This capacity to defend a coherent analysis and hold onto class principles even in times of adversity – just as they had done during the war, when many workers had succumbed to the fever of patriotism – gives the lie to the widespread slander that the Bolsheviks were nothing but a bunch of Machiavellian schemers whose only concern was winning power for themselves.

The degeneration of the revolution and the errors of the Bolshevik party

In the wake of the defeat of the revolution, some of the revolutionary political currents who had initially supported the Bolsheviks and the October revolution – parts of the German communist left, internationalist anarchists - who had seen early on the signs of the degeneration of the revolution, began to lend credence to this idea of October as a mere coup d’état by the power-hungry Bolsheviks. The idea arose in their ranks



Red Army troops attacking the Kronstadt rebels

that the Bolsheviks were at best “bourgeois revolutionaries” and were nothing to do with the proletarian movement. But in this way, they removed the real problem facing revolutionaries in coming to grips with what happened in Russia: the need to understand that proletarian organisations can degenerate and even betray under the enormous pressure of the existing social order and its ideology.

For our part, the best starting point for understanding the highs and the lows of the Russian revolution was provided by the Spartacist Rosa Luxemburg, who, in her pamphlet on the Russian revolution, written in 1918 when she was still in prison, expressed her total solidarity with the Bolsheviks against all the bloodthirsty propaganda of the ruling class. For her, by taking decisive action in favour of the proletarian revolution and against the imperialist war, the Bolsheviks had restored the honour of international socialism, deeply sullied by the treason of the opportunist wing of social democracy which had come out in favour of the war in 1914 and which now opposed revolution with all its might. The future, she wrote, belonged to Bolshevism because Bolshevism, as the ruling class readily understood, stood for the world revolution. This stance in no way prevented Luxemburg from criticising with great sharpness and insight the very serious errors she saw in the Bolshevik policies after the assumption of political power: the tendency to curtail and even suppress free debate and political organisation in the soviets and other bodies; the resort to “Red Terror” in the face of counter-revolutionary plots; the concessions to nationalism in the

policy of “national self-determination” for the subject peoples of the former Russian empire, and so on. But she never lost sight of the fact that these errors had to be examined in the context of the isolation of the Russian revolution, a context in which capitalist blockade and invasion had very rapidly reduced Soviet Russia to the condition of a besieged fortress. The overcoming of this situation lay exclusively in the hands of the international working class, above all the working class of western Europe, who alone could relieve the siege by fighting for the revolutionary overthrow of capitalism outside Russia. Later on, starting from Rosa Luxemburg’s approach of critical solidarity, other currents, above all the Italian Communist Left, were able to take Luxemburg’s most trenchant criticisms further while rejecting those which were themselves erroneous (such as her defence of the Constituent Assembly in Russia). In particular, the Italian Left insisted that it was the task of revolutionaries living in the wake of the defeat to develop an understanding of all the lessons that could only have been generated by real, living experience: the Bolsheviks themselves, like their contemporaries in the rest of the revolutionary movement, could not have had a prior understanding of questions which had not yet been tested in reality, such as the relationship between the party and the transitional state.

The experience of the failure of the Russian revolution belongs to the working class and it is up to our class and its political organisations to draw out its principal lessons, so that, in a future revolutionary movement, the same errors are not repeated.

We have written at great length about these lessons (see the reading list at the end) but we can highlight the most significant:

- 1) Not only is a socialist society in one country impossible, a lone proletarian political power cannot survive long in the face of a hostile capitalist world. When the proletariat takes power in one country, all its political and economic policies must be subordinated to the imperious need to spread the revolution across the globe. Confined to one country or region, the revolution will inevitably succumb either to outside attack or internal degeneration.
- 2) The role of the proletarian party is not to exercise power on behalf of the working class. This is the task of the workers' councils and other mass organisations. The council method of permanently elected and revocable delegation is not compatible with the method of bourgeois parliamentarism in which governmental power is held for several years by parties which have a majority of the national vote. Furthermore, by assuming political power a proletarian party immediately sacrifices its principal function, which is to be the most radical, critical voice within the mass organisations of the class. The Bolshevik's attempt to hold on to power at all costs after 1917 resulted not only in substituting itself for the soviets but to the decline and eventual destruction of the party itself, which was gradually transformed into a bureaucratic state machine.
- 3) The proletarian revolution necessarily uses violence against the former ruling class which will fight to the death to hold onto its privileges. But the class violence of the proletariat cannot use the same methods as the state terror of the ruling class. It is aimed above all at a social relation and not at persons; it abhors the spirit of revenge; it must at all times be subordinated to the overall control of the workers' councils; and it must be guided by the basic principle of proletarian morality – that the means you use must be compatible with the end, the creation of a society based on human solidarity, as opposed to the bourgeois notion that “the end justifies the means”. In this sense, Rosa Luxemburg was absolutely correct in rejecting the notion of Red Terror. Even though it was necessary to respond firmly to the counter-revolutionary schemes of the old ruling class and to create a special organisation aimed at their suppression, the Cheka, this organisation very quickly escaped the control of the soviets and tended to be infested with the moral and material corruption of the old social

order. Above all, its violence very soon came to be directed not merely against the ruling class but at dissident sections of the working class – workers on strike against real economic misery during the civil war, proletarian political organisations such as the anarchists who were critical of the Bolshevik policies. The culmination of this process was the crushing of the Kronstadt workers and sailors in 1921, who were denounced as counter-revolutionaries even though they raised the banner of world revolution and the regeneration of the soviets. This was a real expression of the “revolution devouring its own children”, a key moment in the internal destruction of soviet power. Its profoundly demoralising impact on the working class in Russia underlined emphatically that relations of violence within the working class must be rejected at all times.

- 4) The critique of the notion of the Red Terror is connected to the problem of the state in the period of transition. The Russian revolution gave rise not only to organs like the workers' councils but also to a whole network of soviets regrouping other classes and strata, as well as organisations like the Cheka and the Red Army formed to prosecute the civil war. This general state apparatus, in the terribly difficult conditions encountered by the revolution, tended to reinforce itself at the expense of the specifically proletarian organisations – councils, factory committees, workers' militias – as well as absorbing and nullifying the Bolshevik party itself. As Lenin observed bitterly in 1922, it was like a vehicle that had escaped the control of the driver. While a transitional state is an unavoidable necessity when classes still exist, the Russian revolution has taught us that state institutions have an inevitably conservative nature and must be constantly supervised and controlled by the direct organs of the revolutionary class. Through its workers' councils, the proletariat will exert its dictatorship over the transitional state.
- 5) If communism is a movement for the abolition of the state and the capitalist economy based on wage labour and commodity production, it is an error to see it being the product of a stage in which either the state, or a network of workers' councils, maintain and strengthen capitalist relations. In other words, neither state capitalism nor “workers' self-management” (which in Russia was advocated by the anarcho-syndicalists) are steps towards communism, but rather methods for the preservation of capital. This doesn't mean that authentic communism can be introduced

overnight, above all when the revolution has not yet conquered the globe; but it does mean that it is the product of a conscious and organised struggle against capitalist relations; that only a self-organised and political dominant proletariat can lead this struggle; and that as far as possible, the immediate economic measures taken by a proletarian power should not be incompatible with the goal of communism. But in Russia, the majority of the Bolshevik party was unable to break with the idea that state capitalism was a necessary stage on the road to socialism. And this, in practice, and even before the victory of Stalinism, meant that the increasing exploitation and impoverishment of the working class was justified in the name of “developing the productive forces” towards a future communist society. The idea that as long as the Bolshevik party clung to power, the dictatorship of the proletariat still existed, had the same tragic and disastrous consequence as the identification of state capitalism with socialism or as a step towards it: the real defeat of the revolution, the triumph of the capitalist counter-revolution in “Soviet Russia” took place from the inside, disguised as the continuation of October, and as we have seen this has created the most damaging confusions within the working class worldwide. It was the objective basis for the great lie that Stalinism equals communism

1968-2011: the spectre of revolution still haunts the capitalist system

It's one thing to draw the lessons from the defeat of the revolution. But can there be a new revolution in which they can be put into practice? Again, we can point to the irresolvable economic crisis, to the danger of war and self-destruction, to the devastation of the environment, to the rampant growth of criminality and the moral corrosion of social relations, and repeat confidently that communism is more than ever an objective necessity. Further: we can point to the increasingly global existence of the working class, to the growing interdependence of the world economy, and to decades of dizzying development in the means of communication, and insist on the objective possibilities for the unification of the world proletariat in defence of its common interests against capitalist exploitation. But the proletarian revolution is the first revolution in history which depends not only on the development of objective necessities and possibilities, but above all on the subjective capacity of an exploited class to understand the origins of its exploitation, and not only to defend



Workers and students demonstrate, Paris May 13th 1968

itself but to develop a project, a perspective, a programme for the abolition of all exploitation. And this subjective dimension, while much of it may develop unseen, underground, in small minorities, cannot be sustained, nourished and extended without the development of massive movements of the proletariat.

And such movements have indeed appeared on the world stage in the last 50 years. The enormous heights attained by the revolutionary wave of 1917-23 were followed by many decades of counter-revolution, which showed its most brutal face in those countries where the revolution had risen the highest: in Russia with the victory of Stalinism, in Italy and Germany with the advent of fascism and Nazism. And this deadly triangle was completed by the rise of the Popular Fronts and of democratic antifascism. The combination of these forces succeeded in smothering the last outbreaks of proletarian resistance (as in Spain 1936-7) and marching the proletariat into the maws of the second imperialist world war; and for the two decades that followed the war, class conflict was held in check by the economic boom and the safety net of the welfare state, as well as by the new false choice between western "democracy" and eastern "socialism".

But towards the end of the 1960s, as the post-war boom faded, as daily life under capitalism both in the west and the east revealed its real poverty and hypocrisy, as proxy wars between the two imperialist blocs continued to rage in Vietnam and Africa, a new generation of proletarians, which had not been through the defeats and traumas of its parents, began to question the normality of capitalist society. This questioning, which affected other layers of the population as well, would burst into the open with the huge general

strike in France in May-June 1968, a movement which marked the end of the period of counter-revolution and which was the signal for an international wave of workers' struggles on all continents. At its high point, the May 68 movement in France saw signs of the same intense political debates, on street corners, in schools, universities and workplaces, that John Reed had observed in Russia prior to October 1917. For the first time in decades, the idea of replacing capitalism with a new society was being discussed seriously among significant minorities of workers and students, and one of the most important fruits of this ferment was a new generation of revolutionary political organisations.

The movement in France could only pose the question of revolution at the theoretical level. Capitalism was just at the beginning of its open crisis and the ruling class still had many political tricks up its sleeve over the next few years, not least the use of its left parties and trade unions as a false "opposition" to the system. But the waves of struggles that began in 1968 continued over the next two decades. Their high point was probably the movement in Poland in 1980, a genuine mass strike which gave rise to forms of organisation – the inter-factory strike committees – which brought to mind the workers' councils of the revolutionary years. But despite this very advanced level of self-organisation, the Polish workers never raised the possibility of overthrowing the capitalist system. On the contrary, they were weighed down by the illusion that they were already living under a communist system and that their best hopes lay in the democratic forms of the capitalist west,

with its parliaments and "free trade unions". The workers in the west have a greater experience of the hollowness of these forms, but the fundamental problem they faced was not different from that of their class brothers and sisters in the eastern bloc: the difficulty of raising the struggle from the level of economic defence to that of a political offensive against capitalism.

The movements of the working class in the 70s and 80s did however have a very significant impact on the evolution of capitalist society. In the 1930s, when the outbreak of an open economic crisis encountered a working class in the throes of a profound historic defeat, there was no obstacle to capitalism's drive towards war. By contrast, in the 70s and 80s, even though the push towards world war was very strong, the refusal of the working class to sacrifice itself for the interests of the national economy also meant that it would be unwilling to march towards another war. We are told by the experts of the bourgeoisie that, if a third world war never took place, it is because capitalism has learned the lessons from previous wars and has established international organisms like the EU or the UN to keep national rivalries in check. Or that the very existence of atomic weapons was the surest "deterrent" to world war. The idea that the struggle of the working class might be the real deterrent was quite outside the box of bourgeois political thought.

But the barrier to war erected by the proletariat was rarely built in a conscious manner. The inability of the bourgeoisie to mobilise the class for war was one thing, but the working class was equally unable to develop its own political alternative: the world revolution. As a result, since the end of the 80s we have been living through a kind of stalemate in the evolution of society, which is unable to move towards either of these outcomes. Against the background of a long drawn out and unsolvable economic crisis, this situation is condemning capitalism to rot on its feet. With the collapse of the two imperialist blocs, the prospect of world war has now been pushed even further into the distance, but the capitalist war drive continues and accelerates in a more chaotic, but no less dangerous dynamic.

This latest phase in the long decline of the capitalist system, the phase of capitalism's decomposition, has created additional difficulties of the working class. The campaigns about the "death of communism" were one of the most evident expressions of the ability of the ruling class to turn the decomposition of its own system against the consciousness of the exploited class. Their central theme – the triumph of democracy

over totalitarianism – proved once again that the notion that we live under the reign of “democracy” is one of the most powerful mystifications secreted by capitalist society and strenuously maintained by the ruling class. The same theme is being given a fresh injection by the more recent campaigns around the battle between populism and anti-populism, in which both camps sell themselves as expressing the “true will of the people”.

Meanwhile, the very social processes at work in this phase of decomposition continue to operate in a more insidious manner: the tendency of capitalist society to fragment into cliques and gangs at every level, the rise of all kind of irrational fears and fanaticisms, the spreading search for scapegoats...

These tendencies are deeply inimical to the development of international working class solidarity and the kind of global, historical thinking needed to grasp the real processes of capitalist society. And yet: despite the overall reflux in the class struggle since the end of the 80s, we continue to see important upsurges of the proletariat, even if the participants in such movements often do not recognise themselves as proletarians. In 2006, the student movement in France escaped the control of the official unions and, because it threatened to spread to the employed sector, the bourgeoisie was obliged to withdraw the CPE, the law aimed at rapidly increasing the insecurity of employment. In 2011, in the wake of the revolts in North Africa, Israel and Greece, the “indignados” movement in Spain, like the French students in 2006, revived the memory of 68 by stimulating massive debates about the nature of capitalist society and its total lack of perspective. This was a movement that was very clear about its international nature and where the slogan of “world revolution” was becoming increasingly relevant amongst some small minorities. And, again as in the 2006 movement, the form of organisation adopted by the movement was the general assembly in the streets and the neighbourhoods, outside the official institutions of bourgeois society. In other words, a faint but definite echo of the soviet form of organisation. Of course these movements were short-lived and suffered from innumerable weaknesses and confusions, not least the ideology of democracy and citizenship which was ably exploited by leftist parties like Syriza and Podemos, with their refrain: “assemblies, yes, but let’s use them to regenerate our democratic life, increase participation in parliament and elections...” Sanders and Corbyn are selling the same fraud. But what’s essential about these movements is that they demonstrate that the proletariat is not dead, is still capable of raising its



Nothing to lose but our chains: Indignados movement, Spain 2011

head, and that when it does, it is irresistibly drawn to the revolutionary traditions of its own past.

The proletariat has not said its last word. The changes in the composition of the working class, despite their negative effects up until now, also hide elements which are much more favourable to the perspective of revolution. The young proletarian generations who live in a situation that combines insecure employment with chronic unemployment can in time recognise themselves as part of a class which, as the Communist Manifesto puts it, shares the misery of the slave without the security of the slave, which “has nothing to lose but its chains and a whole world to win”. The present and future situation of the world proletariat more and more reveals what Marx identified as the foundations of its revolutionary nature, its capacity to destroy capitalism and create communism:

- A class of bourgeois society which is alien to bourgeois society
- A class whose radical chains and universal suffering pushes it towards a radical and universal revolution
- A class which concentrates in itself all the sufferings of the other layers of society without benefiting from any of their advantages, and which can only emancipate itself by emancipating the whole of humanity
- An associated class which can organise society on the principle of association, which goes against the capitalist reign

of universal commodification

- A class which can free human morality from its capitalist prison by emancipating the human body from servitude to the commodity and wage labour.

Long live October!

The memory of the October revolution can never really be effaced, any more than you can have capitalism without class struggle. In 1917, humanity was confronted with the choice between socialism or barbarism: either world proletarian revolution, or the destruction of civilisation, perhaps the destruction of humanity itself. In 2017 we are confronted with the same dilemma. Capitalism cannot be reformed, turned green, or given a human face. Its overthrow is long overdue, and any future revolution will not be able to succeed without drawing all the lessons of the gigantic experience our class went through in Russia, as well as in Germany, Hungary, Italy, and the rest of the world a hundred or so years ago. It is the task and responsibility of the minority of revolutionaries, of proletarian political organisations, to study, elaborate, and disseminate these lessons as deeply and as widely as possible.

International Communist Current,
September 2017

Partial reading list of ICC articles on the Russian revolution and the international revolutionary wave.

All these texts, and many others, can be found on our website en.internationalism.org. Go to the headings "Theory and practice" or "ICC press: International Review".

- "October 1917, beginning of the proletarian revolution", parts one and two, *International Review* 12 and 13, first and second quarters, 1978
- The Russian Revolution (part 1): "The first massive and conscious revolution in history" *International Review* no.12 - 1st quarter 1978
- "The Russian Revolution (part 2): The Soviets take power", *International Review* no.72 - 1st quarter 1993
- "The Russian Revolution (part3): Isolation spells the death of the revolution", *International Review* no.75 - 4th quarter 1993
- "70 years ago, the Russian Revolution: The most important experience of the world proletariat", *International Review* no.51 - 4th quarter 1987
- "80 years since the Russian Revolution: The July Days and the vital role of the Party", *International Review* no.90 - 3rd quarter 1997
- "80 years since the Russian Revolution: October 1917 - a victory for the working masses", *International Review* no.91 - 4th quarter 1997
- "The degeneration of the Russian Revolution", *International Review* 3, 3rd quarter 1975
- "The lessons of Kronstadt", *International Review* no. 3, 3rd quarter 1975
- International revolutionary wave
- "Germany 1918-19 (i): Faced with the war, the revolutionary proletariat renews its internationalist principles", *International Review* no.133 - 2nd quarter 2008
- "Germany 1918-19 (ii): From war to revolution", *International Review* no.134 - 3rd quarter 2008
- "Germany 1918-19 (iii): Formation of the party, absence of the International", *International Review* no.135 - 4th quarter 2008
- "Germany 1918-19 (iv): Civil War", *International Review* no.136 - 1st quarter 2009
- "Germany 1918-19 (v): From Noske to Hitler", *International Review* no.137 - 2nd quarter 2009
- "The Hungarian Revolution of 1919 (i)", *International Review* no.139 - 4th quarter 2009
- "The Hungarian Revolution of 1919 (ii): The example of Russia 1917 inspires the workers in Hungary", *International Review* no.144 - 1st quarter 2011
- "The Russian revolution echoes in Brazil, 1918-21", *International Review* no. 151 - 1st quarter 2013

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is the result of submitting the planet to the capitalist laws of profit and competition. And above all, it is the duty of those groups who aim to stand in the forefront of the class struggle to denounce all the traps which divide our class and, above all, those elements who try to justify their support for one or another faction of the ruling class because they claim that they are "less repressive" or more favourable to the interests of the proletarian struggle. If the world-wide revolutionary alternative of the proletariat fails, the perspective can only be a war of each against all, in which it will be difficult to say which faction is the most cruel or the most inhuman in its attempt to ensure its survival at the expense of the rest of the human race.

When the police tried to tear down the camps of the 15M movement in Barcelona 2011, the cry went up: "we are all Barcelona". It was raised in all the squares and all the demonstrations, and nowhere more loudly than at the Puerta del Sol in Madrid. The upsurge of nationalism in Catalonia is a blow to the head not only to the proletariat of Barcelona, but to the proletariat in the whole of Spain, since throughout the country proletarians have been pulled into mobilisations for or against the unity of the Spanish state. This poison has also affected the many immigrants from Spain now working in other European countries, where there have been small but significant demonstrations around the same theme. And a blow against the proletariat of Spain, precisely because of the depth of its revolutionary traditions, is a blow against the entire world proletariat. As ever, solidarity with the workers of Spain can only lie in the development of the international class struggle.

Valerio, 5 December 2017

22nd ICC Congress

Resolution on the international class struggle

1. The election of Donald Trump as president of the USA, which closely followed the unexpected result of the EU referendum in the UK, has created a wave of unease, fear, but also questioning across the world. How could our rulers, those who are supposedly in charge of the present world order, allow such things to happen – turns of events that seem to go against the “rational” interests of the capitalist class? How did it come about that a chancer, a narcissist thug and hustler is now at the head of the world’s most powerful state? And more important: what does this tell us about where the entire world is headed?

I. A hundred years of class struggle

2. In our view, the real condition of human society can only be understood by looking at it from the point of view of the class struggle, of the exploited class of this society, the proletariat, which has no interest in hiding the truth and whose struggle obliges it to see through all the mystifications of capitalism in pursuit of the goal of overthrowing it. Equally, it is only possible to understand current, immediate or localised events by locating them in a world-historic framework. This is the essence of the marxist method. It is for this reason, and not simply because 2017 marks the centenary of the revolution in Russia, that we begin by going back a century or more to understand the historic epoch within which the most recent developments in the world situation are taking place: that of the decline or decadence of the capitalist mode of production.

The revolution in Russia was the response of the working class in Russia to the horrors of the first imperialist world war. As affirmed by the Communist International in 1919, this war marked the beginning of the new epoch, the end of the ascendant period of capitalism, of the first great burst of capitalist “globalisation” as it hit the barriers posed by the division of the world into rival national states: the epoch of “wars and revolutions”. The capacity of the working class to overthrow the bourgeois state in an entire country and to endow itself with a political party capable of guiding the class toward the dictatorship of the proletariat

was indicative that the promise of replacing capitalist barbarism was both an historic possibility and necessity.

Moreover the Bolshevik party which, in 1917, was in the vanguard of the revolutionary movement, recognised that the seizure of power by the workers’ soviets in Russia could only be sustained if it was the first blow of an incipient world revolution. Equally, the German revolutionary Rosa Luxemburg understood that if the world proletariat did not respond to the challenge posed by the October insurrection, and put an end to the capitalist system, mankind would be plunged into an epoch of growing barbarism, a spiral of wars and destruction that would endanger human civilisation.

With the world revolution in mind, and with the need to create an alternative pole of reference for the proletariat to now counter revolutionary Social Democracy, the Bolshevik Party took the lead in the creation of the Communist International whose first congress took place in Moscow in 1919. The new Communist Parties particularly those in Germany, Italy were to spearhead the extension of the proletarian revolution to western Europe.

3. The revolution in Russia indeed sparked off a world-wide series of mass strikes and uprisings which compelled the bourgeoisie to put an end to the imperialist slaughter, but the international working class was not able to take power in other countries, aside from some short-lived attempts in Hungary and in some German cities. Faced with the greatest threat yet from its potential grave-digger, the ruling class was able to overcome its most bitter rivalries to unite against the proletarian revolution: isolating the soviet power in Russia by blockade, invasion and support for the armed counter-revolution; making use of the social democratic workers’ parties and the unions, which had already shown their loyalty to capital by participating in the imperialist war effort, to infiltrate or neutralise the workers’ councils in Germany and divert them towards an accommodation with the new “democratic” bourgeois regime. But the defeat not only showed the continuing capacity of a now reactionary ruling class to rule; it also derived from the immaturity of the working class which was forced to make a sudden transition from the struggle

for reforms to the struggle for revolution, and still carried within itself many profound illusions in the possibility of improving the capitalist regime through the democratic vote, the nationalisation of key industries or the granting of social benefits to the poorest layers of society. In addition, the working class had been severely traumatised by the horrors of war, in which the fine flower of its youth had been decimated, emerging from it with deep divisions between workers of the “victorious” and “vanquished” nations.

In Russia, the Bolshevik party, faced with isolation, civil war and economic collapse, and more and more entangled with the apparatus of the Soviet State, made a series of disastrous errors which more and more brought it into violent conflict with the working class, notably the policy of the “Red Terror” which involved the suppression of workers’ protests and political organisations, culminating in the crushing of the revolt at Kronstadt in 1921 when the latter demanded the restoration of the genuine soviet power which had existed in 1917. On the international level, the Communist International, which was also increasingly tied to the needs of the Soviet State rather than the world revolution, began to resort to opportunist policies which undermined its original clarity, such as the United Front Tactic adopted in 1922.

This degeneration gave rise to an important left opposition notably in the German and Italian Parties. And it was from the latter that the Italian fraction was able, in the late twenties and thirties, to uncover the lessons of the eventual defeat of the revolution.

4. The defeat of the world revolutionary wave thus verified the warnings of the revolutionaries in 1917-18 about the consequences of such a failure: a new descent into barbarism. The dictatorship of the proletariat in Russia not only degenerated but also turned into a capitalist dictatorship against the proletariat, a process that was confirmed (though not begun) by the victory of the Stalinist apparatus with its doctrine of “socialism in one country”. The “peace” installed to end the threat of revolution soon gave way to new imperialist conflicts which were accelerated and intensified by the outbreak of the world

crisis of overproduction in 1929, a further sign that the expansion of capital was coming up against its own inbuilt limits. The working class in the heartlands of the system, especially the US and Germany, was fully exposed to the blows of the economic depression, but having tried and failed to make the revolution a decade earlier, it was fundamentally a defeated class, despite some real expressions of class resistance, such as in the USA and Spain. It was thus unable to stand in the way of another march towards world war.

5. The pitchfork of the counter-revolution had three main prongs: Stalinism, fascism, democracy, each one of which has left deep scars in the psyche of the working class.

The counter-revolution plumbed the lowest depths in the countries where the revolutionary flame had risen the highest: Russia and Germany. But everywhere, faced with the necessity to exorcise the proletarian spectre, to cope with the greatest economic crisis in its history, and to prepare for war, capitalism assumed an increasingly totalitarian form, penetrating every pore of social and economic life. The Stalinist regime set the tone: a complete war economy, the crushing of all dissent, monstrous rates of exploitation, a vast concentration camp. But the worst legacy of Stalinism – in life as well as in death decades later – was that it masqueraded as the true heir of the October revolution. The centralisation of capital in the hands of the state was sold to the world as socialism, imperialist expansion as proletarian internationalism. Although, in the years when the October revolution was still a living memory, many workers continued to believe in this myth of the Socialist Fatherland, many more have been turned away from all thought of revolution by successive revelations of the true nature of the Stalinist regime. The damage Stalinism has done to the perspective of communism, to the hope that working class revolution can inaugurate a higher form of social organisation, is incalculable, not least because Stalinism did not descend on the proletariat from the clouds, but was made possible by the international defeat of the class movement and above all the degeneration of its political party. After the traumatic defection of the social democratic parties in 1914, for the second time in the space of less than two decades the organisations that the working class had laboured mightily to create and defend had betrayed it and become its worst enemy. Could there be a greater blow to the proletariat's self-confidence, its conviction in the possibility of leading humanity onto a higher level of social life?

Fascism, initially a movement of outcasts from the ruling and middle classes,

and even renegades from the workers' movement, could be taken up by the most powerful factions of German and Italian capital because it coincided with their needs: to complete the crushing of the proletariat and the mobilisation for war. It specialised in the use of modern techniques to unleash the dark forces of irrationality that lie under the surface of bourgeois society. Nazism in particular, the product of a much more devastating defeat of the working class in Germany, attained new depths of irrationality, statifying and industrialising the mediaeval pogrom, and leading demoralised masses in a mad march towards self-destruction. The working class, on the whole, did not succumb to any positive belief in fascism – on the contrary it was much more vulnerable to the lure of *anti-fascism*, which was the principal rallying cry for the coming war. But the unprecedented horror of the Nazi death camps was no less a blow against confidence in mankind's future – and thus the perspective of communism – than the Stalinist Gulag.

Democracy, the dominant form of bourgeois rule in the advanced industrial countries, presented itself as the opponent of these totalitarian formations – which did not prevent it from supporting fascism when it was finishing off the revolutionary workers' movement, or allying with the Stalinist regime in the war against Hitler Germany. But democracy has proved itself to be a far more intelligent and durable form of capitalist totalitarianism than either fascism, which collapsed in the rubble of war, or Stalinism, which (with the notable exception of China and the anomalous regime in North Korea) was to fall under the weight of the economic crisis and its inability to compete on the capitalist world market, whose laws it had tried to circumvent by state decree.

The managers of democratic capitalism have also been obliged by the crisis of the system to use the state and the power of credit to bend the forces of the market, but they were not compelled to adopt the extreme form of top-down centralisation imposed by a situation of material and strategic weakness on the eastern bloc regimes. Democracy has outlived its rivals and has now become the only game in town in the old capitalist heartlands of the West. To this day, it is irreligious to call into the question the necessity to have supported democracy against fascism in World War Two; and those who argue that behind the façade of democracy stands the dictatorship of the ruling class are dismissed as conspiracy theorists. Already during the 1920s and 30s, the development of the mass media in the democracies provided a model for the dissemination of official propaganda

that was the envy of a Goebbels, while the penetration of commodity relations into the spheres of leisure and family life, as pioneered by American capitalism, provided a more subtle channel for the totalitarian domination of capital than the mere reliance on informers and naked terror.

6. Contrary to the hopes of the much-reduced revolutionary minority which held onto internationalist positions during the 30s and 40s, the end of the war did not bring about a new revolutionary upsurge. On the contrary it was the bourgeoisie, with Churchill in the vanguard, which learned the lessons of 1917 and nipped any possibility of proletarian revolt in the bud, through the carpet bombing of German cities and through the policy of "letting the Italians stew in their own juice" in the wake of the massive strikes in the north of Italy in 1943. The end of the war thus deepened the defeat of the working class. And again, contrary to the expectations of many revolutionaries, the war was not followed by a further economic depression and a new drive towards world war, even if the imperialist antagonisms between the victorious blocs remained as a constant threat hanging over humanity's head. Instead the post-war period witnessed a phase of real expansion of capitalist relations under American leadership, even if one part of the world market (the Russian bloc and China) attempted to shut itself off from the penetration of western capital. The continuation of austerity and repression in the eastern bloc did provoke important workers' revolts (East Germany 1953, Poland and Hungary 1956), but in the West, following some post-war expressions of discontent like the strikes in France in 1947, there was a gradual attenuation of the class struggle, to the point where sociologists could begin theorising about the "embourgeoisement" of the working class as a result of the spread of consumerism and the development of the welfare state. And indeed both these aspects of capitalism after 1945 remain as important added weights on the possibility of the working class reconstituting itself as a revolutionary force. Consumerism atomises the working class and peddles the illusion that everyone can attain the paradise of individual ownership. Welfarism – which was often introduced by left parties and presented as a conquest of the working class – is an even more significant instrument of capitalist control. It undermines the self-confidence of the working class and makes it reliant on the benevolence of the state; and later on, in a phase of mass migration, its organisation by the nation state would mean that the issue of access to health, housing and other benefits became a potent factor in the scapegoating of im-

migrants and divisions within the working class. Meanwhile, along with the apparent disappearance of the class struggle in the 1950s and 60s, the revolutionary political movement was reduced to the most isolated state in its history.

7. Some of those revolutionaries who did maintain an activity during this dark period began to argue that capitalism had, thanks to bureaucratic state management, learned to control the economic contradictions analysed by Marx. But others, more prescient, like the *Internacionalismo* group in Venezuela, recognised that the old problems – the limits of the market, the tendency for the rate of profit to fall – could not be conjured away, and that the financial difficulties experienced in the late 60s heralded a new phase of open economic crisis. They also hailed the capacity of a new generation of proletarians to respond to the crisis through the reassertion of the class struggle – a prediction amply confirmed by the formidable movement in France in May 1968 and the subsequent international wave of struggles, which demonstrated that decades of counter-revolution had come to an end, and that the proletarian struggle was the key obstacle in preventing the new crisis initiating a course towards world war.

8. The proletarian upsurge of the late sixties and early 70s had been preceded by a growing political agitation among wide layers of the population in the advanced capitalist countries, and particularly among the young. In the US, protests against the Vietnam war and racial segregation; movements among German students who manifested an interest in a more theoretical approach to the analysis of contemporary capitalism; in France, the agitation of students against the war in Vietnam and the repressive regime in the universities; in Italy, the “operaist” or autonomist tendency which reaffirmed the inevitability of the class struggle when those wise sociologists were proclaiming its obsolescence. Everywhere, a growing dissatisfaction with the dehumanised life advertised as the luscious fruit of post-war economic prosperity. A small minority, propelled by the upsurge of militant struggles in France and other industrial countries, could participate in the foundation of a conscious, internationalist political vanguard, not least because part of this minority had begun to rediscover the contribution of the communist left.

9. As we are only too aware, the rendezvous between this minority and the wider class movement only took place episodically during the movements of the late sixties and early 70s. This was partly the result of the fact that the politicised minority was heavily dominated by a discontented

petty bourgeoisie: the student movement, in particular, lacked the strong proletarian core brought into being by changes in the organisation of capitalism over the next few decades. And despite powerful class movements across the world, despite serious confrontations between the workers and the forces of containment in their midst – unions and left parties – the majority of class struggles remained defensive, and only rarely posed directly political questions. Furthermore the working class faced important divisions within its ranks as a world-wide class: the “iron curtain” between East and West, and the division between the so-called “privileged” workers of the centres of capital and the impoverished masses in the former colonial areas. Meanwhile the maturation of a political vanguard was held back by a vision of immediate revolution and by activist practices, typical of petty bourgeois impatience, which failed to grasp the long-term character of revolutionary work and the gigantic scale of the theoretical tasks facing the politicised minority. The predominance of activism made large parts of the minority vulnerable to recuperation by leftism or, when the struggles died down, to demoralisation. Meanwhile, those who rejected leftism were often hampered by councilist notions which rejected the whole problem of organisational construction. However, a small minority was able to overcome these obstacles and to take up the tradition of the communist left, initiating a dynamic towards growth and regroupment which continued throughout the 1970s, but this too came to an end at the beginning of the 1980s, symbolised by the breakdown of the International Conferences. The failure of the struggles of this period to reach a more advanced political level, to nourish the seeds that, in the streets and meetings of 1968, had posed the problem the replacement of capitalism East and West with a new society, was to have very significant consequences in the following decade.

Nevertheless, this huge outburst of proletarian energy did not simply run out of steam, but required a concerted effort by the ruling class to divert, derail and repress it. Fundamentally, this took place at the political level, making maximum use of the forces of the capitalist left and the unions, which still had a considerable influence within the working class. Whether through the promise of electing governments of the left, or through the later strategy of the “left in opposition” coupled with the development of radical trade unionism, throughout the two decades that followed 1968 the instrumentalisation of organs which the workers still to some extent saw as their own was indispensable to the containment of the struggles of the class.

At the same time, the bourgeoisie took all the advantage it could of the structural changes imposed on it by the world crisis: on the one hand, the introduction of technological changes which replaced both skilled and unskilled labour in industries like the docks, automobile and print; on the other hand, the movement towards the “globalisation” of the production process, which decimated whole industrial networks in the old centres of capital and shifted production to the peripheries where labour power was incomparably cheaper and profits far greater. These alterations in the composition of the working class in the heartlands, often affecting sectors which had been at the centre of the struggles in the 70s and early 80s, became additional factors in the atomisation of the class and the undermining of its class identity.

10. Despite certain pauses, the dynamic of struggle unleashed in 1968 continued through the 70s. The high point in the maturation of the proletariat’s capacity for self-organisation and extension was attained in the Polish mass strike in 1980. However, this zenith also marked the beginning of a decline. Although the strikes in Poland revealed the classic interplay between economic and political demands, at no point did the workers in Poland pose the problem of a new society. In this aspect, the strikes were “below” the level of the movement in 68 where self-organisation was somewhat embryonic, but which provided a context for a much more radical debate about the need for social revolution. The movement in Poland, with a few very limited exceptions, looked to the “Free West” as the alternative society they wanted, to ideals of democratic government, “independent trade unions” and all the rest. In the West itself, there were some expressions of solidarity with the strikes in Poland, and from 1983, in the face of a rapidly deepening economic crisis, we saw a wave of struggles which were increasingly simultaneous and global in their scope; in a number of cases they showed a growing conflict between the workers and the trade unions. But the juxtaposition of struggles across the world did not automatically mean that there was an awareness of the need for the conscious internationalisation of the struggle; neither did clashing with the unions, which are of course part of the state, entail a politicisation of the movement in the sense of a realisation that the state must be overthrown, or of a growing capacity to put forward a perspective for humanity. Even more than in the 70s, the struggles of the 80s in the advanced countries remained on the terrain of sectional demands and in this sense also remained vulnerable to sabotage by radicalised forms of trade unionism. The aggravation of imperialist tensions between

the two blocs in this period certainly gave rise to a growing preoccupation with the threat of war, but this was largely diverted towards pacifist movements which effectively prevented the development of a conscious connection between economic resistance and the war danger. As for the small groups of revolutionaries who maintained organised activity during this period, though they were able to intervene more directly in certain initiatives by the workers, on a deeper level they were coming up against the prevailing suspicion of 'politics' within the working class as a whole – and this growing gulf between the class and its political minority was itself a further factor in the inability of the class to develop its own perspective.

II. The impact of decomposition

11. The struggle in Poland, and its defeat, would provide a summation of the global balance between the classes. The strikes made it clear that the workers of eastern Europe would not be prepared to fight a war on behalf of their Russian overlords, and yet they were not able to offer a revolutionary alternative to the deepening crisis of the system. Indeed, the physical crushing of the Polish workers had extremely negative political consequences for the working class in that entire region, who were absent as a class in the political upheavals that initiated the demise of the Stalinist regimes, and who were subsequently vulnerable to a sinister wave of nationalist propaganda which is today embodied in the authoritarian regimes reigning in Russia, Hungary and Poland. The Stalinist ruling class, unable to deal with the crisis and the class struggle without ruthless repression, showed that it lacked the political flexibility to adapt to changing historical circumstances. Thus in 1980-81 the scene was already set for the collapse of the eastern bloc as a whole, heralding a new phase in the historic decline of capitalism. But this new phase, which we define as that of the *decomposition* of capitalism, has its origins in a much wider stalemate between the classes. The class movements that erupted in the advanced countries after 1968 marked the end of the counter-revolution, and the continuing resistance of the working class constituted an obstacle to the bourgeoisie's "solution" to the economic crisis: world war. It was possible to define this period as a "course towards massive class confrontations", and to insist that a course towards war could not be opened up without a head-on defeat of an insurgent working class. In the new phase, the disintegration of both imperialist blocs took world war off the agenda independently of the level of class struggle. But this meant that the question

of the historic course could no longer be posed in the same terms. The inability of capitalism to overcome its contradictions still means that it can only offer humanity a future of barbarism, whose contours can already be glimpsed in a hellish combination of local and regional wars, ecological devastation, pogromism and fratricidal social violence. But unlike world war, which requires a direct physical as well as ideological defeat of the working class, this "new" descent into barbarism operates in a slower, more insidious manner which can gradually engulf the working class and render it incapable of reconstituting itself as a class. The criterion for measuring the evolution of the balance of forces between the classes can no longer be that the proletariat holding back world war, and has in general become more difficult to gauge.

12. In the initial phase of the rebirth of the communist movement after 1968, the thesis of the decadence of capitalism won numerous adherents and would provide the programmatic bedrock of a revived communist left. Today this is no longer the case: the majority of new elements who look to communism as an answer to the problems facing humanity find all kinds of reasons to resist the concept of decadence. And when it comes to the notion of decomposition, which we define as the *final* phase of capitalist decline, the ICC is more or less on its own. Other groups accept the existence of the main *manifestations* of the new period – the inter-imperialist free-for-all, the return of deeply reactionary ideologies such as religious fundamentalism and rampant nationalism, the crisis in humanity's relationship with the natural world – but few if any draw the conclusion that this situation derives from an impasse in the balance of class forces, or agree that all these phenomena are the expressions of a qualitative shift in the decadence of capitalism, of a whole phase or period which cannot be reversed except by the proletarian revolution. This opposition to the concept of decomposition often takes the form of diatribes against the "apocalyptic" tendencies of the ICC, since we talk about it as the terminal phase of capitalism, or against our "idealism", since although we see the long-drawn out economic crisis as a key factor behind decomposition, we do not see purely economic factors as the decisive element in the onset of the new phase. Behind these objections is a failure to understand that capitalism, as the last class society in history, is doomed to this kind of historical impasse by the fact that, unlike previous class societies when they entered into decline, capitalism cannot give rise from within itself to a new and more dynamic mode of production, while the

only road to a higher form of social life must be built not on any automatic working out of economic laws, but on a conscious movement of the immense majority of humanity, which is by definition the hardest task ever undertaken in history.

13. Decomposition was the product of the stalemate in the battle between the two major classes. But has also revealed itself as an active factor in the increasing difficulties of the class since 1989. The very well-orchestrated campaigns about the death of communism which accompanied the fall of the Russian bloc – which showed the ability of the ruling class to use the manifestations of decomposition against the exploited – was a very important element in further undermining the self-confidence of the class and its capacity to renew its historic mission. Communism, marxism, even the class struggle itself, were declared over, no more than dead history. But the enormous and long lasting negative effects of the events of 1989 on the consciousness, combativeness and identity of the working class is not only the result of the gigantic scale of the anti-communist campaign. The effectiveness of this campaign must itself be explained. It can only be understood in the context of the specific development of revolution and counter-revolution from 1917 onwards. With the failure of the military counter-revolution against the USSR itself and at the same time the defeat of the world revolution, a completely unexpected, unprecedented constellation arose: that of a counter-revolution from within the proletarian bastion, and of a capitalist economy in the Soviet Union without any historically developed capitalist class. What resulted from this was not the expression of any higher historical necessity, but an historical aberration: the running of a capitalist economy by a counter-revolutionary bourgeois state bureaucracy completely unqualified and not adapted for such a task. Although the Stalinist command economy proved effective in getting the USSR through the ordeal of World War II, it completely failed, in the long run, in generating competitive national capitals.

Although the Stalinist regimes were particularly reactionary forms of decadent bourgeois society, not a relapse into any kind of feudal or despotic regime, they were in no sense of the term "normal" capitalist economies. A capitalist economy in which inefficient companies cannot be punished through elimination, and where workers cannot be laid off, cannot be a bourgeois success. To an important degree, it was thanks to this understanding of the specificities of Stalinism as an unexpected product of the counter-revolution that the ICC was able to understand the events of 1989; for instance that Stalinism had not

been brought down by workers' struggles, but by an economic and political implosion, and that the collapse in the east was not the harbinger of a pending similar collapse in the west. At the level of the balance of class forces, we understood that the demise of what in many ways was the worst enemy of the proletariat, would, for a considerable length of time, not be to the benefit of the working class. With its collapse, it rendered a last great service to the ruling class. Above all, its campaign about the death of communism seemed to find a confirmation in reality itself. The deviations of Stalinism from a properly functioning capitalism were so grave and far reaching that it indeed appeared to people not to have been capitalist. Prior to this, and as long as it was able to maintain itself, it appeared to prove that alternatives to capitalism are possible. Even if this particular alternative was anything but attractive for most workers, its existence nonetheless left a potential breach in the ideological armoury of the ruling class. The resurgence of the class struggle in the 1960s was able to profit from this breach to develop the vision of a revolution which would be at once anti-capitalist and anti-Stalinist and based, not on a state bureaucracy or a party state, but on workers' councils. During the 1960s and 70s, if, to many, the world revolution was seen as an unrealisable utopia, as "pie in the sky", it was because of the immense power of the ruling class, or what was seen as the inherent egoistic and destructive streak in our species. Such feelings of hopelessness however could and sometimes did find a counter-weight in the massive struggles and solidarity of the proletariat. After 1989, with the collapse of the "socialist" regimes, a qualitatively new factor emerged: the impression of the impossibility of a modern society not based on capitalist principles. Under these circumstances, it is more difficult for the proletariat to develop, not only its class consciousness and class identity, but even its defensive economic struggles, since the logic of the needs of the capitalist economy weigh much heavier if they appear to be without any alternative.

In this sense, although it is certainly not necessary that the working class as a whole become marxist, or develop a clear vision about communism, in order to make a proletarian revolution, the immediate situation of the class struggle is altered considerably, and is dependent on whether or not wide sectors of the class see capitalism as something which can be put in question.

14. But working in a more underhand manner, the advance of decomposition in general and "by itself" gnawed away at

the working class, its class identity and its class consciousness. This was particularly evident among the long-term unemployed or partially employed layers "left behind" by the structural changes introduced by the 1980s: whereas in the past, the unemployed had been in the vanguard of the workers' struggle, in this period they were far more vulnerable to lumpenisation, gangsterism, and the spread of nihilistic ideologies like jihadism or neo-fascism. As the ICC predicted in the immediate aftermath of the events of 89, the class was about to enter into a long period of retreat. But the length and depth of this retreat have proved even greater than we ourselves expected. Important movements of a new generation of the working class in 2006 (the anti-CPE movement in France) and between 2009 and 2013 in numerous countries across the world (Tunisia, Egypt, Israel, Greece, USA, Spain...), together with a certain re-emergence of a milieu interested in communist ideas, made it feasible to think that the class struggle was once again taking centre stage and that a new phase in the development of the revolutionary movement was about to open up. But a number of developments over the last decade have shown just how profound are the difficulties facing the world proletariat and its revolutionary vanguard.

15. The struggles around 2011 were explicitly linked to the effects of the deepening economic crisis, their protagonists frequently referring, for example, to the precariousness of employment and the lack of opportunities for young people even after several years of university education. But there is no automatic link between the aggravation of the economic crisis and the qualitative development of the class struggle – a key lesson of the 1930s when the Great Depression tended to further demoralise an already defeated working class. And given the long years of retreat and disorientation that had preceded it, the financial earthquake of 2007-8 was to have a largely negative impact on the consciousness of the proletariat.

An important element in this was the proliferation of the very credit system that had been at the heart of the economic expansion of the 90s and 2000s but whose inbuilt contradictions now precipitated the crash. This process of "financialisation" now operated not only at the level of great financial institutions, but also in the lives of millions of workers. At this level, the situation is very different from that of the 1920s and 1930s, when for the most part the so-called middle classes (small property owners, the liberal professions etc.) but not the workers had savings to lose; and where the state insurances were barely enough to prevent the workers from starving. If,

on the one hand therefore, the immediate material situation of many workers in such countries is still less dramatic than it was eight or nine decades ago, on the other hand millions of workers precisely in such countries find themselves in a predicament which hardly existed in the 1930s: they have become debtors, often on an important scale. During the 19th century, and still to a large extent before 1945, the only creditors workers had were the local pub or café and the grocery store. They had to rely on their own class solidarity in times of particular hardship. The crediting of proletarians began on a large scale with housing and building credits, but then exploded in recent decades with the development of mass-scale consumer credits. The ever more refined, cunning and treacherous development of this credit economy for a large part of the working class has extremely negative consequences for proletarian class consciousness. The expropriation of working class income by the bourgeoisie is hidden and appears incomprehensible when it takes the form of devaluation of savings, the bankruptcy of banks or of insurance schemes, or the forfeiting of house ownership on the market. The increasing precariousness of "welfare state" insurances and their financing makes it easier to divide the workers between those who pay for these public systems, and those who are maintained by them without paying in equivalently. And the fact that of millions of workers have fallen into debt is a new, additional and powerful means of the disciplining of the proletariat.

Even though the net result of the crash has been austerity for the many and an ever more shameless transfer of wealth to a small minority, the overall result of the crash has not been to sharpen or extend an understanding of the workings of the capitalist system: resentment against growing inequality has been to a great extent directed against the "corrupt urban elite", a theme that has become a major selling point of right wing populism. And even when the reaction to the crisis and its attendant injustices gave rise to more proletarian forms of struggle, such as in the Occupy movement in the USA, the latter were also to a considerable extent weighed down by a tendency to put the blame on the greedy bankers or even on secret societies who had deliberately engineered the crash to strengthen their control over society.

16. The revolutionary wave of 1917-23, like previous insurrectionary movements of the class (1871, 1905), was sparked off by imperialist war, leading revolutionaries to consider that war provided the most favourable conditions for the proletarian revolution. In reality, the defeat of the

revolutionary wave showed that war could create profound divisions in the class, in particular between those of the ‘victor’ and ‘vanquished’ nations. Furthermore, as the events at the end of World War Two demonstrated, the bourgeoisie has drawn the necessary lessons from what happened in 1917, and has shown its capacity to limit the possibilities of proletarian reactions to imperialist war, not least by developing strategies and forms of military technology that make fraternisation between opposing armies increasingly difficult.

Contrary to the promises of the western ruling class after the fall of the Russian imperialist bloc, the new historic phase it opened up was by no means one of peace and stability, but of spreading military chaos, of increasingly intractable wars that have ravaged whole swathes of Africa and the Middle East and even shook the gates of Europe. But while the barbarity displayed in Iraq, Afghanistan, Rwanda and now Yemen and Syria has certainly aroused horror and indignation among sizeable sectors of the world proletariat – including those in the capitalist centres whose own bourgeoisies have been directly implicated in these wars – the wars of decomposition have only very rarely given rise to proletarian forms of opposition. In the countries most directly affected, the working class has been too weak to organise itself against the local military gangsters and their imperialist sponsors. This is most evident in the current war in Syria, which has seen not only the merciless decimation of the population by aerial and other forms of bombardment, above all by the official forces of the state, but also the derailing of an initial social discontent by the creation of military fronts and the enrolment of opponents of the regime into a myriad of armed gangs, each one more brutal than the next. In the capitalist centres, such appalling scenarios have mainly produced feelings of despair and helplessness – not least because it can seem as though any attempt to rebel against the present system can only end in an even worse situation. The grim fate of the “Arab Spring” can easily be used as a new argument against the possibility of revolution. But the savage dismemberment of entire countries on the peripheries of Europe has over the past few years begun to have a boomerang effect on the working class in the centres of the system. This can be summarised by two questions: on the one hand, the worldwide and increasingly chaotic development of a refugee crisis which is truly planetary in its scope; and on the other, by the development of terrorism.

17. The trigger moment of the refugee crisis in Europe was the opening of the borders of Germany (and Austria)

to refugees from the “Balkan route” in summer 2015. The motives for this decision of chancellor Merkel were twofold. Firstly the economic and demographic situation of Germany (a thriving industry faced with the prospect of a shortage of qualified and “motivated” labour power). Secondly the danger of the collapse of law and order in south-east Europe through the concentration of hundreds of thousands of refugees in countries unable to manage them. The German bourgeoisie however had miscalculated the consequences of its unilateral decision on the rest of the world, in particular Europe. In the Middle East and in Africa, millions of refugees and other victims of capitalist misery started to make plans to set off for Europe, in particular Germany. In Europe, EU regulations such as “Schengen” or the “Dublin Refugee Pact” made Germany’s problem that of Europe as a whole. One of the first results of this situation, therefore, was a crisis of the European Union – perhaps the most serious in its history to date.

The arrival of so many refugees to Europe was met initially with a spontaneous wave of sympathy within broad sectors of the population – an impulse which still is strong in countries like Italy or Germany. But this impulse was soon smothered by the rise of xenophobia in Europe. It was led not only by the populists, but also by the security forces and the professional defenders of bourgeois law and order, who were alarmed by the sudden and uncontrolled influx of often not identified persons. The fear of an influx of terrorist agents went hand in hand with the fear that the arrival of so many Muslims would enforce the development of immigrant sub-communities within Europe not identifying with the nation state of the country they live in. These fears were reinforced by the increase of terrorist attacks in France, Belgium and Germany. In Germany itself, there was a sharp increase of right wing terror attacks against refugees. In parts of the former GDR a veritable pogrom atmosphere developed. In western Europe as a whole, after the economic crisis, the “refugee crisis” became the second major factor (augmented by fundamentalist terror) fanning the flames of right wing populism. Just as the economic crisis after 2008 opened up serious divisions within the bourgeoisie about how best to manage the world economy, summer 2015 marked the beginning of the end of its consensus on immigration. The basis of this policy, until now has been the principle of the semi-permeable border. The Wall against Mexico which Donald Trump wants to build, already exists, as does the one around Europe (also in the form of military patrol boats or airport prisons). But the purpose

of the present walls is to slow down and regulate immigration, not prevent it. Making immigrants enter illegally criminalises them, thus obliging them to work for a pittance under abominable conditions without any social benefit rights. Moreover, by obliging people to risk their lives to gain admission, the frontier regime becomes a kind of barbaric selection mechanism, where only the most daring, determined and dynamic get in

Summer 2015 was in fact the beginning of the collapse of the existing immigration system. The disequilibrium between the ever-growing number seeking access on the one hand, and the shrinking demand for wage labourers in the country they are entering on the other (Germany is something of an exception) has become untenable. And as usual, the populists have an easy solution to hand: the semi-permeable border must be made impermeable, whatever the levels of violence required. Here again, what they propose seems very plausible from the bourgeois point of view. It amounts to nothing more or less than the application of the logic of “gated communities” at the scale of entire countries..

Here again, the effects of this situation for the consciousness of the working class are, for the moment, very negative. The collapse of the eastern bloc was presented as proof of the ultimate triumph of western democratic capitalism. In face of this, there was hope, from the point of view of the proletariat, that the development of the crisis of capitalist society, at all levels, would eventually help to undermine this image of capitalism as the best possible system. But today – and in spite of the development of the crisis – the fact that many millions of people (not only refugees) are ready to risk their lives to gain access to the old capitalist centres which are Europe and North America, can only enforce the impression that these zones (at least in comparison) are, if not a paradise, at least islands of relative prosperity and stability.

Unlike during the Great Depression of the 1930s, when the breakdown of the world economy was centred on the USA and Germany, today, thanks to a global state capitalist management, the central capitalist countries seem likely to break down last. In this context, a situation resembling that of a besieged fortress has arisen in particular (but not only) in Europe and the United States. The danger is real that the working class in these zones, even if it is not actively mobilised behind the ideology of the ruling class, seeks protection from its “own” exploiters (“identification with the aggressor”, to use a psychological term) against what is perceived as being a com-

mon danger coming from outside.

18. The “blow-back” of terrorist attacks from the wars in the Middle East began well before the current refugee crisis. The attacks by Al Qaida on the Twin Towers in 2001, followed by further atrocities on the transport systems of Madrid and London, already showed that main capitalist states would reap the whirlwind they had sown in Afghanistan and Iraq. But the more recent spate of murders attributed to Islamic State in Germany, France, Belgium, Turkey, the USA and elsewhere, despite often having an apparently more amateurish and even random character, in which it becomes increasingly difficult to distinguish a trained terrorist “soldier” from an isolated and disturbed individual, and occurring in conjunction with the refugee crisis, has further intensified feelings of suspicion and paranoia among the populations, leading them to turn to the state for protection from an amorphous and unpredictable “enemy within”. At the same time, the nihilistic ideology of Islamic State and its emulators offers a brief moment of glory to disaffected immigrant youths seeing no future for themselves in the semi-ghettos of the big western cities. Terrorism, which in the phase of decomposition has more and more become a means of warfare between states and proto-states, also makes the expression of internationalism much more difficult.

19. The current populist upsurge has thus been fed by all these factors – the 2008 economic crash, the impact of war, terrorism and the refugee crisis – and appears as a concentrated expression of the decomposition of the system, of the inability of either of the two major classes in society to offer humanity a perspective for the future. From the point of view of the ruling class, it signifies the exhaustion of the “neo-liberal” consensus which has enabled capitalism to maintain and even extend accumulation since the onset of the open economic crisis in the 70s, and in particular the exhaustion of the Keynesian policies which had presided over the post-war boom. In the wake of the 2008 crash, which widened the already immense wealth gap between the very rich few and the vast majority, deregulation and globalisation, the “free movement” of capital and labour in a framework devised by the world’s most powerful states, has been called into question by a growing section of the bourgeoisie, typified by the populist right, even though it can simultaneously put forward neo-liberalism and neo-Keynesianism in the same campaign speech. The essence of populist politics is the political, administrative and judicial formalisation of the inequality of bourgeois society. What the 2008 crisis in particular helped to make clear, is that

this formal equality is the real basis of an ever more glaring social inequality. In a situation in which the proletariat is unable to put forward its revolutionary solution – the establishment of a society without classes – the populist reaction is to want to replace the existing hypocritical pseudo-equality by an open and “honest” system of legal discrimination. This is the kernel of the “conservative revolution” advocated by president Trump’s adviser, Steve Bannon.

A first indication of what is meant by slogans such as “America First” is given by the “France d’abord” electoral programme of the Front National. It proposes to privilege French citizens, at the levels of employment, taxation and social benefits, in relation to people from other European Union countries, who in turn would have priority over other foreigners. There is something of a similar debate in Britain about whether or not, after Brexit, EU citizens should be given an intermediate status between natives and other foreigners. In the UK, the main argument put forward in favour of Brexit was not objections to the EU trade policies, or any British protectionist impulses towards continental Europe, but the political will to “regain national sovereignty” regarding immigration and the national labour market. The logic of this argumentation is that, in the absence of a longer-term perspective of growth for the national economy, the living conditions of the natives can only be more or less stabilised by discriminating against everybody else.

20. Instead of being an antidote to the long and deep reflux of class consciousness, class identity and combativeness after 1989, the so-called finance and euro crisis had the opposite effect. In particular, the pernicious effects of the loss of solidarity within the ranks of the proletariat were increased significantly. In particular, we are seeing the rise of the phenomenon of scapegoating, of ways of thinking which blame persons – onto whom all of the evil of the world is projected – for whatever goes wrong in society. Such ideas open the door to the pogrom. Today populism is the most striking, but far from being the only manifestation of this problem, which tends to permeate all social relations. At work and in the everyday life of the working class, it increasingly weakens cooperation, and favours atomisation and the development of mutual suspicion and of mobbing.

The marxist workers’ movement has long defended the theoretical insights which help to counter-weigh this tendency. The two most essential insights were a) that under capitalism exploitation has become non-personal, since it functions

according to the “laws” of the market (law of value). The capitalists themselves are obliged to obey these laws; b) despite this machine-like character, capitalism is a social relation between classes, since this “system” is based and maintained by an act of will of the bourgeois state (the creation and enforcement of capitalist private property). The class struggle, therefore, is not personal but political. Instead of combating persons, it is directed against a system – and the class which embodies it – in order to transform social relations. These insights never immunised even the more class conscious layers of the proletariat against scapegoating. But it made it more resilient. They partly explain why, even in the midst of the counter-revolution, and even in Germany, the proletariat resisted the upsurge of anti-semitism more and for longer than other parts of society. These proletarian traditions continued to have positive effects, even where the workers no longer in any conscious manner identified with socialism. The working class remains the only real barrier to the spread of this kind of poison, even if certain parts of the class have been seriously affected by it.

21. All of this has led to a changing political disposition of bourgeois society as a whole; one however which, for the moment, is not at all in favour of the proletariat. In countries like the United States or Poland, where populists are now in government, large scale protests on the streets have above all been in defence the existing capitalist democracy and its “liberal” regulations. Another issue mobilising masses is the struggle against corruption like in Brazil, South Korea, Romania or Russia. The Five Star movement in Italy is mainly animated by the same issue. Corruption, endemic in capitalism, assumes epidemic proportions in its terminal phase. To the extent that this hampers productivity and competitiveness, those who struggle against it are among the best defenders of the interests of the national capital. The masses of national flags on display at such protests are thus no coincidence. There is also a renewal of interest in the bourgeois electoral process. Some parts of the working class fall prey to voting for the populists, under the influence of the retreat of solidarity, or as a kind of protest against the established political class. One of the barriers to the development of the cause of emancipation today is the impression these workers have that they can shock and pressurise the ruling class more through a populist vote than by proletarian struggle. The perhaps biggest danger however is that the most modern and globalised sectors of the class, at the heart of the production process, might out of indignation against vile populist exclusionism, and out of a more or less clear

understanding that this political current puts in danger the stability of the existing order, fall for the trap of defending the reigning democratic capitalist regime.

22. The rise of populism, and of anti-populism, has certain similarities with the 1930s, when the working class was caught between the vice of fascism and antifascism. But despite these similarities, the present historic situation is not the same as in the 1930s. At that time, the proletariat in the Soviet Union and in Germany had suffered not only a political reverse but also a physical defeat. As opposed to this, the situation today is not one of counter-revolution. For this reason, the likelihood that the ruling class would even try to impose a physical defeat on the proletariat is, at the present time, remote.

There is another difference with the 1930s: the ideological adherence of proletarians to populism or anti-populism is not at all definitive. Many workers who today vote for populist candidates can from one day to the next find themselves struggling alongside their class brothers and sisters, and the same goes for workers caught up in anti-populist demonstrations.

The working class today, above all in the old centres of capitalism, is not ready to sacrifice its life for the interests of the nation, despite the increased influence of nationalism on certain sectors of the class; nor has it lost the possibility of fighting for its own interests, and this potential continues to come to the surface, even in a much more dispersed and ephemeral manner than in the 68-89 period and the struggles between 2006 and 2013. At the same time, a process of reflection and maturation among a minority of proletarians continues despite difficulties and set-backs, and this in turn reflects a more subterranean process taking place among wider layers of the proletariat.

In these conditions, the attempt to terrorise the class would be politically dangerous and most probably counter-productive. It would strongly dent the existing illusions of the workers in democratic capitalism, which constitutes one of the most important ideological advantages of the exploiters.

For all of these reasons, it is much more in the objective interest of the capitalist class to use the negative effects of decomposing, dead-end capitalism to weaken the working class.

III 1917, 2017 and the perspective of communism

23. One of the main lines of attack by the “liberal” bourgeoisie against the October revolution of 1917 has been, and will con-

tinue to be, the alleged contrast between the democratic hopes of the February uprising and the October “coup d’Etat” by the Bolsheviks, which plunged Russia into disaster and tyranny. But the key to understanding the October revolution is that it was based on the necessity to break the imperialist war front, which was maintained by all factions of the bourgeoisie not least its “democratic” wing, and thus strike the first blow for the world revolution. It was the first clear answer of the world proletariat to capitalism’s entry into its epoch of decline, and it is at this level above all that October 1917, far from being a ruin from a lost age, is the signpost to humanity’s future.

Today, after the all the counter-blows it has received from the world bourgeoisie, the working class may seem very far away from recapturing its revolutionary project. And yet *“In a sense the question of communism is at the very heart of the predicament of humanity today. It presently dominates the world situation in the form of the void it has created through its absence”* (Report on the World Situation, 22nd ICC Congress). The multiple barbarisms of the 20th and 21st centuries, from Hiroshima and Auschwitz to Fukushima and Aleppo are the heavy price humanity has paid for the failure of the communist revolution all those decades ago; and if, at this late hour in the decadence of bourgeois civilisation, the hopes of revolutionary transformation are definitively dashed, the consequences for the survival of human society will be even more grave. And yet we are convinced that these hopes are still alive, still founded on real possibilities.

On the one hand, they are based on the *objective possibility and necessity* for communism, which is contained in the sharpening clash between the forces of production and relations of production. This clash has grown more acute precisely because capitalism in decadence decomposition, in contrast to previous class societies which endured whole epochs of stagnation, has not stopped expanding globally and penetrating every pore of social life. This can be seen at several levels:

- In the contradiction between the potential contained in modern technology and its actual use under capitalism: the development of information technology and artificial intelligence, which could be used to help free mankind from drudgery and greatly shorten the working day, has led to the decimation of employment on the one hand, and the prolonging of the working day on the other.
- In the contradiction between the worldwide, associated character of capitalist production, and its private ownership, which on the one hand highlights the

participation of millions of proletarians in producing social wealth and its appropriation by a tiny minority whose arrogance and wastefulness becomes an affront to the stagnating living conditions or outright impoverishment facing the vast majority. The objectively global character of labour association has increased in a spectacular manner in recent decades, in particular with the industrialisation of China and other Asian countries. These new proletarian battalions, which have often showed themselves to be extremely militant, potentially constitute a vast new source of strength for the global class struggle, even if the proletariat of western Europe retains the key to the political maturation of the working class towards a revolutionary confrontation with capital.

- In the contradiction between use value and exchange value, which expresses itself above all in the crisis of overproduction and all the means capitalism uses to overcome it, in particular the massive recourse to debt. Overproduction, that unique absurdity of capitalism, points simultaneously to the possibility of abundance and the impossibility of achieving it under capitalism. Again an example of technological development highlights this absurdity: the internet has made it possible to distribute all kinds of goods free of charge (music, books, films etc) and yet capitalism, because of the need to maintain the profit system, has to create a huge bureaucracy to ensure that any such free distribution is curtailed or operates mainly as a forum for advertising commodities. Moreover, the crisis of overproduction results in continuous attacks on the living standards of the working class and the impoverishment of the mass of humanity.
- In the contradiction between capital’s global extension and the impossibility of going beyond the nation state. The particular phase of globalisation that began in the 1980s has brought us ever closer to the point predicted by Marx in the *Grundrisse*: *“the universality towards which it irresistibly strives encounters barriers in its own nature, which will, at a certain stage of its development, allow it to be recognised as being itself the greatest barrier to this tendency, and hence will drive towards its own overcoming”*. This contradiction, of course, could already be perceived by revolutionaries at the time of the First World War, since the war itself was the first clear expression that while the nation state has outlived itself, capital cannot really go beyond it. And today we know that the overcoming – in fact, the downfall – of capital will not take a

purely economic form: the closer it gets to an economic dead-end, the greater will be the drive towards “survival” at the expense of others through military means. The openly nationalist belligerence of the Trumps, Putins et al signifies that capitalist globalisation, far from unifying mankind, is pushing us ever closer to self-destruction, even if this descent into the abyss may not necessarily take the form of a world war

- In the contradiction between capitalist production and nature, which was considered a “free gift” from the onset of capitalism (Adam Smith), and has reached unprecedented levels in the phase of decomposition. This is most obviously expressed in the open vandalism of the climate change deniers in control of the US, and in the rise of their arch-enemy, China, where the feverish hunt for growth at any cost has given birth to cities where the air cannot be breathed, greatly added to the danger of run-away global warming, and – in a bizarre combination of ancient superstition and modern gangster capitalism – accelerated the destruction of entire species in Africa and elsewhere, prized for the magical healing properties of their horns or skin. Capitalism cannot exist without this mania for growth but it is incompatible with the health of the natural environment in which mankind lives and breathes. Thus the very perpetuation of capitalism threatens the existence of the human species not only at the military level, but also on the level of its interchange with nature.

The unbearable sharpening of the contradictions cited above all point to one solution: associated world production for use not profit, an association not only between human beings but also between human beings and nature. Perhaps the main expression of the potential for this transformation is that, within the central and most modern sectors of the world proletariat, the young generation, although increasingly aware of the seriousness of the historical situation, no longer shares the “no future” hopelessness of the previous decades. This confidence is based on the awareness of one’s own associated productiveness: on the potential represented by scientific and technological progress, on the “accumulation” of knowledge and of the means of access to it, and on the growth of a more profound and critical understanding of the inter-action between humankind and the rest of nature. At the same time, this part of the proletariat – as we saw in the movements in Western Europe in 2011 which at their height raised the slogan of “world revolution” – is much more aware of the international character of labour

association today, and thus better able to grasp the possibilities of the international unification of struggles.

But the global unification of the proletariat is a solution which capital must avoid at all costs, even when it must adopt means which show the inherent limits of production for exchange. The development of state capitalism in the decadent epoch is in a sense a kind of a desperate search for a way of trying to hold a society together by totalitarian means, an attempt by the ruling class to exert control over economic life in a period in which the unfolding of the “natural laws” of the system push towards its own collapse.

24. While capitalism cannot conjure away the necessity for communism, we know that this new mode of production cannot arise automatically, but requires the conscious intervention of the revolutionary class, the proletariat. Despite the extreme difficulties facing the working class today, its apparent inability to renew its “ownership” of the communist project, we have already outlined our reasons for insisting that this renewal, this reconstitution of the proletariat as the class for communism, is still possible today. Because just as it cannot conjure away the objective need for communism, neither can it ever entirely suppress the subjective longing for a new society, or the search to understand how to achieve it, among the class of association, the proletariat.

The memory of what Red October really meant, and indeed the memory that the German revolution and the world-wide revolutionary wave set in motion by October ever happened at all, cannot entirely disappear. It has been, so to speak, repressed, but all repressed memories are fated to reappear when the conditions are ripe. And there is always, within the working class, a minority who have sustained and elaborated the real story and its lessons on a conscious level, ready to fertilise the reflection of the class when it recovers the need to make sense of its own history.

The class cannot reach this level of inquiry on a mass scale without going through the hard school of practical struggles. These struggles in response to the growing attacks of capital are the granite basis for the development of the self-confidence and unrestricted solidarity which are generated by the reality of associated labour.

But the impasse reached in the proletariat’s purely defensive, economic battles since 1968 also necessitates, on the one hand, a *theoretical* struggle, a quest to understand its “deep” past and its possible future, a quest which can only point to the need for the class movement to pass from

the local and national to the universal, from the economic to the political, from the defensive to the offensive. While the immediate struggle of the class is more or less a fact of life in capitalism, there is no guarantee that this next vital step will be taken. But it is indicated, in no matter how limited and confused a manner, by the struggles of the present generation of proletarians, above all in movements like that of the Indignados in Spain which was indeed an expression of a genuine indignation against the entire system – an “obsolete” system as demonstrators proclaimed on their banners, of a desire to understand how this system works, and what might replace it; and, at the same time, to discover the organisational means which may be used to break out of the institutions of the existing order. And lo and behold, these means were not essentially new: the generalisation of the mass assemblies, the election of mandated delegates, was a clear echo from the days of the soviets in 1917. This was a clear demonstration of the workings of the “Old Mole” deep in the underground of social life.

It also gave a first glimpse of a potential for the development of what we can call the political-moral dimension of the proletarian struggle: the emerging of a deep seated rejection of the existing way of life and behaviour on the part of wider sectors of the class. The evolution of this moment is a very important factor of the preparation and maturation both of massive struggles on a class terrain, and of a revolutionary perspective.

At the same time, the failure of the Indignados movement to restore a real class identity points to the necessity to link this incipient politicisation on the streets and the squares to the economic struggle, to the movement in the workplaces where the working class still has its most distinct existence. The revolutionary future lies not in a “negation” of the economic struggle as the modernists proclaim, but in a true synthesis of the economic and the political dimensions of the class movement, as observed and advocated in Luxemburg’s *Mass Strike*.

25. In developing this capacity to see the link between the economic and political dimensions of their movement, communist political organisations have an indispensable role to play, and this is why the bourgeoisie will do all it can to discredit the role of the Bolshevik party in 1917, presenting it as a conspiracy of fanatics and intellectuals interested only in winning power for themselves. The task of the communist minority is not to provoke struggles, or organise them in advance, but to intervene within them in

order to elucidate the methods and goals of the movement.

The defence of Red October also of course demands the demonstration that Stalinism, far from representing any continuity with it, was the bourgeois counter-revolution against it. This task is all the more important today in face of the weight of ideas that the collapse of Stalinism proved the economic unfeasibility of communism. The negative effects of this on politically searching minorities – the unstable milieu between the communist left and the left of capital – are considerable. Whereas before 1989 confused but recognisably anti-capitalist ideas, for instance of a councilist or autonomist variety, were relatively influential in such circles, since then there has been an important advance of conceptions based on forming networks of mutual exchange at the local level, on preserving and extending areas of subsistence economy or the still existing “commons”. The advance of such ideas indicates that even the more politicised layers of the proletariat today are often unable to even imagine a society beyond capitalism. Under these circumstances, one of the necessary factors preparing the emergence of a future generation of revolutionaries is that the existing revolutionary minorities today expound in the most profound and convincing manner possible (without falling into utopianism) why communism today is not only a necessity, but a very real and practicable possibility.

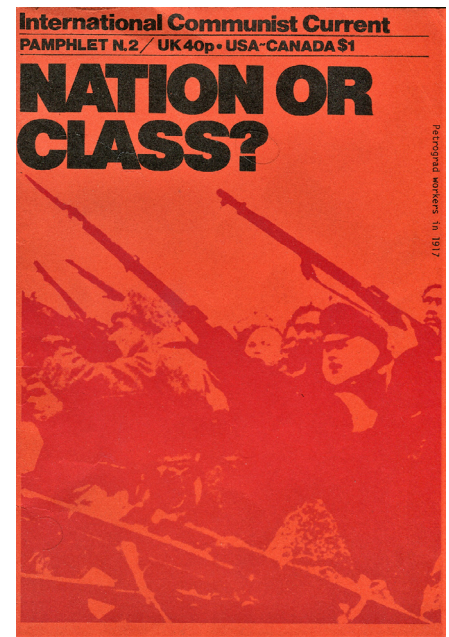
Given the extremely reduced and dispersed nature of today’s communist left, and of the enormous difficulties faced by a wider milieu of elements searching for political clarity, it is evident that a huge distance has to be travelled between today’s small revolutionary movement and any future capacity to act as an authentic vanguard in massive class movements. The revolutionaries and the politicised minorities are not purely passive products of this situation, since their own confusions serve to further aggravate their disunity and disorientation. But fundamentally, the weakness of the revolutionary minority is an expression of the weakness of the class as a whole, and no organisational recipes or activist slogans will be able to overcome this.

Time is no longer on the side of the working class, but it cannot leap beyond its shadow. Indeed, it is compelled today to retrieve much of what it has lost not only since 1917, but also from the struggles of 1968-89. For revolutionaries, this demands a long-term, patient work of analysing the real movement of the class and the perspectives revealed by the crisis of the capitalist mode of production; and on the

basis of this theoretical effort, providing answers to the questions posed by those elements edging towards communist positions. And the most important aspect of this work is that must be seen as part of the political and organisational preparation of the future party, when the objective and subjective conditions once again pose the problem of the revolution. In other words, the tasks of the revolutionary organisation today are similar to those of a communist fraction, as elaborated most lucidly by the Italian Fraction of the Communist left in the 1930s.

ICC, April 2017

ICC Publications



Nationalism has weighed on the working class for over a hundred years. It helped to draw it into two world wars and countless subsequent wars. The ruling class uses it to enlist one part of the working class in bloody slaughter against another. It is no less dangerous today, whether in the election of Trump in the US, in the Brexit vote in Britain or the chaos in Catalonia. This pamphlet attempts to set out the Marxist position on this question, showing the role that nationalism played first in the development of capitalism and then in its decline. Today nationalism in all its forms and wherever it appears can only undermine and divide the working class and its struggle against capitalism.

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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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