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Presenting the *Review*

The Covid-19 pandemic reveals the delapidated condition of world capitalism

Healthcare provision in Soviet Russia

International leaflet

Generalised capitalist barbarism or world proletarian revolution

Biden presidency

The US and world capitalism on the road to nowhere

100 years after the foundation of the Communist International: What lessons can we draw for future combats? (part III)

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Bordiga and the big city

Fifty year since May 68

The difficult evolution of the proletarian political milieu (part II)

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Presenting the *Review*

Our previous issue of the *International Review* was entirely dedicated to the significance and implications of the outbreak of Corona Virus. We highlighted the historical relevance of this event, the most important since the collapse of the Eastern bloc in 1989, as well as its significance as a new stage in the downwards spiral of capitalism in the current phase of its decadence, that of decomposition. We also looked at the implications of the pandemic for the economic crisis – that a considerable acceleration of the economic crisis is leading to an even deeper recession than that of the 1930s – and its effect on the class struggle, creating increased difficulties for the working class because of the disruptive effects decomposition has on the daily life of society. This event makes it clear that the rhythm of development of the class struggle, compared to that of decomposition, is not currently at a sufficient level for a victorious revolution of the proletariat to take place where it would have to build a new society on the ruins of the existing society, which has been ravaged by more than a century of capitalist decadence.

The present issue of the *Review* continues our intervention on the pandemic from different angles and it includes some other articles.

A first article, “The Covid-19 pandemic reveals the dilapidated state of world capitalism”, highlights the very great difficulties for the bourgeoisie faced with the first wave of contagion from the virus, and shows that the new waves have left the bourgeoisie in a desperate state, unable to contain the pandemic and its social consequences. And its unpreparedness when the pandemic broke out is symptomatic of capitalism, especially in the final phase of decadence: no real anticipation of the acknowledged threat of pandemics before one of them – Covid-19 – broke out; the health care systems neglected because they are unprofitable from a capitalist point of view; and an exacerbation of every man for himself between national factions of the world bourgeoisie and inside national frontiers too... and all of this in the midst of the global trade war made worse by the crisis. The social balance sheet, attributable to capitalism and not to the pandemic, is that millions of workers have been thrown out of employment worldwide and that widespread poverty has spread and worsened dramatically. Confronted with the dangers of contagion and the reality of unemployment and being plunged into poverty, large sections of the world’s population, large masses living in very precarious conditions, are descending into the depths of despair.

In this regard, alongside this article, we are publishing a historical testimony, “**Health Conservation in Soviet Russia**” on how the proletariat of Soviet Russia showed an ability to deal with the health problem in the years 1918 and 1919, in extremely difficult conditions when the

country was under attack on its own territory from the international coalition of the bourgeoisie, in the form of the white armies, whose objective was to weaken and destroy the power of the proletariat.

As this presentation shows, the ICC has made an important theoretical effort to understand the historical significance of this pandemic, which cannot be reduced to a mere endless repetition of the laws of capitalism, but is both an expression of and an aggravating factor in the current phase of the decomposition of capitalism. The situation in the United States has vividly confirmed the weight of decomposition on the life of capitalism, and in particular with the episode at the Capitol Building when “*a mob attempted to violently prevent the democratic succession, encouraged by the sitting president himself – as in a banana republic as George W Bush recognised.*” Our article “**The US and World Capitalism on the road to nowhere**” shows how the current political crisis of US democracy, symbolised by the attack on Capitol Hill, comes on top of the chaotic and self-destructive consequences of US imperialist policy, and shows more clearly that the US, which is still the world’s most powerful nation, is today playing the leading role in the development of the decomposition of capitalism.

Also in this presentation of the *Review* we can point to the fact that in order to increase and sustain the audience for our intervention, we produced a leaflet, “**The COVID-19 Pandemic: Generalised Capitalist Barbarism or World Proletarian Revolution**”, which was physically distributed on the few occasions presented to us and which we have also tried to distribute as much as possible on the internet.

It is evident that the Covid-19 virus could have been transmitted from animal

to man particularly because of certain characteristics of the decomposition of capitalism: excessive deforestation, uncontrolled urbanisation, man and animals living in close proximity, making the transmission of viruses more possible, and poor hygiene standards... Confronted with all the aberrations of capitalism in its final phase, we think it is fitting to publish an article which shows what would be the approach taken by the dictatorship of the proletariat: “*The communist programme in the phase of decomposition of capitalism: Bordiga and the Big City*”, an article built on the basis of our own reflections and those prompted by an article by Bordiga entitled “The immediate programme of the revolution”, written in 1953. As our article says, Bordiga’s text “*retains considerable interest from its attempt to understand what would be the main problems and priorities of a communist revolution that would take place, not at the dawn of the decadence of capitalism, as in 1917-23, but after a whole century in which the slide towards barbarism has continued to accelerate, and in which the threat to the very survival of humanity is far greater than it was a hundred years ago*”. In relation to the current pandemic, the article shows the limits of all existing health services, even in the most powerful capitalist countries, not least because they do not escape the logic of competition between national capitalist states. Faced with such a situation, there is a need for medicine, health care and research that is not controlled by the state, but truly socialised, and not national, but extending “beyond borders”: in short, a global health service.

In this issue of the *Review*, we are continuing our series which was started on the occasion of the “**100 years after the foundation of the Communist International in 1919**”. The founding congress had been a real step forward for the unity of the world proletariat, nevertheless the method adopted at the time, privileging the majority viewpoint rather than the clarity of positions and political principles, did not arm the new world party. Worse still, it made it vulnerable to the opportunism rampant within the revolutionary movement. Contrary to what Lenin and the Bolsheviks had predicted, opportunism within the party deepened and, with the degeneration of the revolution, it ended up holding a dominant place, precipitating the end of the CI as a

class party. This is illustrated in this third part of this series.

The last article published in this issue of the *Review*, “**The difficult evolution of the proletarian political milieu since May 1968**” is the continuation of a series of two, the first of which was published in *International Review* n° 163. It covered the period 1968-1980, which had seen the most important developments within the international proletarian milieu, following the events of 1968 in France. If the resurgence of the class struggle had given a significant impetus to the revival of the proletarian political movement, and thus to the regrouping of its forces, this dynamic had begun to face some difficulties from the beginning of the 1980s. Already at this time, the proletarian political milieu was going through a major crisis, marked by the failure of the International Conferences of the Communist Left, the splits within the ICC and the implosion of the Bordigist International Communist Party (*Programme Communiste*). The general failure of the class to politicise its struggles also meant that the very significant growth of the proletarian political milieu at the end of the 1960s and in the 1970s had begun to slow down or stagnate. In this second part, we highlight the negative impact on the evolution of the proletarian milieu of a number of factors, in particular the decomposition of society and the development of political parasitism.

The revolutionary minority, as part of the class, is not unaffected by the pressures of a disintegrating social system that clearly has no future and gives rise to a flight towards seeking individual solutions, a loss of confidence in collective activity and the mistrust of revolutionary organisations and despair about the future.

Moreover, in the early 2000s, the ICC had been faced with a serious internal crisis behind which was a clan comprising militants who slandered certain comrades and spread rumours that one member of the organisation was a state agent manipulating the others. This clan would give rise to a totally parasitic organisation, the “Internal Fraction of the ICC”, whose members were expelled from the ICC for behaviour unacceptable from communist militants, including the theft of the organisation’s funds and the publication of sensitive internal information that could have put our militants at risk from the police.

Since then, this group, which subsequently changed its name to the International Group of the Communist Left, has provided new evidence showing it embodies a form of parasitism so despicable that it is impossible to distinguish its activities from those of the political police. Unfor-

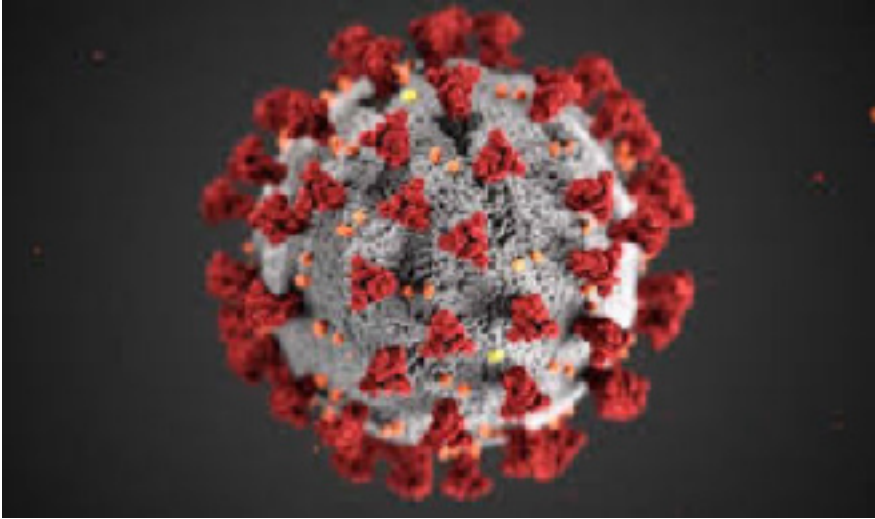
tunately, this situation has not produced an appropriate response from within the proletarian camp, one that expresses solidarity and the concern to exclude these practices (and those who engage in them), foreign to the workers’ movement, from the proletarian camp.

The period 2004-2011 had seen the emergence of new forces seeking revolutionary answers to explain the impasse of the social order. The ICC reacted to these developments as broadly as was possible, which was absolutely necessary, as without passing on the legacy of the communist left to a new generation, there can be no hope of a movement towards the future party. But there were important weaknesses in our intervention at that time and, in particular, opportunist ones, illustrated in particular by the hasty integration of those comrades who were to form the Turkish section of the ICC in 2009 and would then leave the ICC in 2015. This example has provided a significant lesson from which the organisations of the communist left camp should be able to benefit in its future integrations, as should be the case with all the lessons of its experiences since the historic revival of May 1968.

Despite the very concrete dangers of this final phase of capitalist decadence, we don’t think that the working class has said its last word or made its last response. A number of factors currently testify to a process of communist politicisation within a small but significant minority which is turning towards the positions of the communist left.

14 02 2021

The Covid-19 pandemic reveals the delapidated condition of world capitalism



For more than a year now the ruling class everywhere has been gripped by the Corona virus epidemic without any end to it really coming into sight. Up until now it was the poorest and least developed countries which paid the heaviest tribute to sicknesses, epidemics or endemic illnesses. Today it's the most developed countries which are being rocked to their foundations by the Covid-19 outbreak.

More than a century ago the outbreak of World War I signified the entry of capitalism into its period of decadence. The collapse of the Eastern Bloc in 1990, and the subsequent shock-wave which included the dissolution of the US bloc, constituted symptoms of the disintegration of world society, signalling the entry of capitalism into its ultimate phase of decadence – that of decomposition.

What follows capitalism then? If the global proletariat succeeds in overthrowing it before it's able to destroy humanity, there will be a unified humanity in a communist society which, faced with problems of sicknesses and other calamities, will be able to make a response that is not undermined by exploitation and the competition of capitalist anarchy.

The pandemic, a social phenomenon coming from a world in decay

In the United States, there are now at least 25 million people infected and more than 410,000 dead. There have been more Covid deaths than American soldiers killed in the Second World War! Last April, the number of dead had already exceeded the number of those killed during the Vietnam War. In the large metropolis of Los Angeles, 1 out of 10 inhabitants is contaminated. In California, the hospitals are full to bursting point. At the beginning of the health crisis, the entire American population was shocked by the huge trenches where “unclaimed” deaths were piled up in the state of New York, on Hart Island. In Europe, Sweden, which not long ago had a reputation for the “social

wellbeing” of its citizens, gambled at the beginning of the pandemic on the rapid accomplishment of a herd immunity. Sweden has just broken a national record - that of the number of deaths – held since the great famine of 1869.

The Covid-19 pandemic is not an unpredictable disaster resulting from the laws of chance and nature! Capitalism itself is responsible for this planetary catastrophe, for these millions of deaths. Contrary to pandemics from animal origins in the past (such as the plague in the Middle Ages spread by rats), today this pandemic is due essentially to the degraded state of the planet. Global warming and climate changes, de-forestation, the destruction of habitats for wildlife, have, with the proliferation of slums in the underdeveloped

countries, favoured all sorts of new viruses and contagious illnesses.

If this new virus has surprised and paralysed the bourgeoisie it is because scientific studies on coronaviruses were abandoned everywhere over a decade ago because the development of a vaccine was judged to be... “unprofitable”. Besides that, the necessary cutting-edge scientific research and technology, in the United States in particular, mainly prioritised products which had a full and guaranteed market or else were essentially given over to the military sector, which also includes research into bacteriological warfare.

Moreover, whereas the world is still far from getting on top of the present pandemic, even more terrifying threats arising from the same basic conditions – such as Nipah¹ – have already been identified: “*an epidemic of the Nipah virus in China, with a mortality rate of up to 75% could be the next great pandemic risk (...) Nipah could explode at any moment. The next pandemic could be an infection resistant to medicines (...) It is one of ten infectious diseases out of sixteen identified by the World Health Organisation as the greatest risks to public health about which there are no plans in the pipelines of the pharmaceutical companies*”.²

The bourgeoisie surprised by the first wave and driven to desperation by the next

Several vaccines have already been made in record time, which illustrates the pro-

1. Nipah appeared in the years 1995-1999 in Malaysia and Singapore among pig farmers. It reappeared in an episodic way in Bangladesh and eastern India in 2011 then in Cambodia in 2012 (very close to the tourist destination of the temples of Angkor Wat), then manifesting itself in China and Thailand in 2020, in the tropical forest zone of Asia. It is transmitted by the urine and saliva of bats who have been chased out of their natural habitat (by drought, fire, deforestation and agricultural practices) towards the nearby human environment and is also transmitted to humans via the rearing of pigs. As well as having symptoms similar to Covid, it also provokes terrible encephalitis (its mortality rate varies between 40 and 75%). Its period of incubation can last between 5 and 45 days, during which time the victim is very infectious. Source: World Health Organisation, Nipah Virus.

2. “Pharmaceutical giants not ready for next pandemic report warns”, *The Guardian* 26/01/21. The report is from the Dutch foundation Access to Medicine.



ductive capacities which could be put into the service of the well-being of humanity. Nevertheless today, just as at the beginning of this pandemic, several problems have hampered a real management of the sickness and they are a direct consequence of the fact that this system is clearly at the service of an exploiting class which is only preoccupied with the health of the population to the extent of preserving the labour power of those that it exploits.

In fact, health systems have been completely overwhelmed because, faced with the aggravation of the economic crisis in every country, governments of the right and the left have continued reducing social budgets for decades, i.e., budgets for health systems and for research. Since health systems are not very profitable, they have reduced bed numbers, closed local hospitals, cut jobs of ancillary staff, nurses and doctors, worsened their working conditions, destroyed stocks of PPE judged too expensive to maintain. And respirators were lacking in many hospitals.

In order to limit the spread of the pandemic, the bourgeoisie has not been capable of anything better than recourse to the methods of the Middle Ages like lock-downs. Everywhere curfews are imposed, social distancing is implemented and human faces masked. Borders are closed off and public and cultural links are shut down across most of Europe. Never since the Second World War has humanity lived through such a testing time.

Furthermore, competition between the different factions of the bourgeoisie, as much at an international level as within each country and exacerbated by the economic crisis, has clearly constituted an active factor in the deepening of the health crisis from the beginning of the pandemic, giving rise to open expressions of rivalries that are sometimes so bitter that they have been called “wars” by the media.

The “war of the masks” is an edifying example of the cynical and frantic competition in which all the capitalist states

are involved; each one of them trying to grab as much of this vital material as they could by over-bidding or even by pure and simple theft!

Then there’s the “war to be among the first to produce an effective vaccine”, in which each country in competition with all the others, jealously guards their work in order to win the race and give them access to a lucrative market. Such a situation of every man for himself prevents any international coordination and cooperation in eradicating the pandemic and increases delays of production greater than if it was the product of international cooperation.

In the “war to obtain the greatest quantity of vaccines”, the stakes are considerable. In fact, the countries which thanks to vaccination are the first to obtain a collective immunity will also be the first to be able to put their productive apparatus and economy back on its feet. The problem is that even if the vaccine begins to be produced in greater quantities in a certain number of countries, it is still insufficient in relation to the overall need. This situation has given rise to very important tensions between, for example, the European Union and the United Kingdom where the latter is unable to honour, in quantities and contractual deadlines, the orders for the AstraZeneca (Anglo-Swedish) vaccine going to the EU. This would have meant Britain reducing the domestic distribution of vaccines. Faced with this the European Union has upped the ante and Germany has gone so far as threatening to take measures of retaliation in “retaining” the BioNTech-Pfizer vaccines made on EU territory and destined for sale to the United Kingdom. A consequence of this hardening attitude is that new tensions have arisen between London and Brussels regarding the “Northern Ireland Protocol”, a crucial part of the Brexit Treaty.³

The European media congratulated itself on the good performance of Europe faced with the economic earthquake provoked by

3. “Nouvelles tensions entre Londres et Bruxelles à propos du ‘protocole nord-irlandais’, partie cruciale du traité du Brexit”. *Le Monde* 04/02/21.

the pandemic, notably thanks to obtaining certain agreements: one bearing on the mutualisation of new debts within the EU, the other delegating the European Commission to buy vaccines for members. But in the corridors, some of the stronger member states like Germany have exchanged specific contracts with Pfizer-BioNTech, Moderna and Curevac, which has provoked a storm in Brussels.⁴

An unexpected fact is that Germany, which up to now has had relatively good figures with its death-rates which are much lower compared with other industrialised countries, has begun to rival the incoherence of other developed countries such as France, Great Britain or the United States: “With close to 2.1 million infections in a year; Germany has shown a mortality rate of 2.4%, equivalent to that of France...”⁵ Half of the cases of excess deaths occurring during the two waves of the pandemic in Germany are linked to the infection of seniors. When the first vaccines arrived, there were very few of the industrialised countries in which capitalist anarchy and administrative cretinism were not involved in the calamitous management of their distribution to different vaccination centres; it was the same for needles and other medical supplies. The fact that governments in a certain number of countries had to bring in the military to support medical services by taking over the logistics of distribution, the tracking of orders and the protection the vaccines from theft is a significant indication of serious failings at the heart of society.

Whereas there is a shortage of vaccines in the most industrialised countries, they are absent from poorer nations who are essentially being provided with the Chinese vaccine⁶ whose efficacy is unproven. On the other hand, if Israel has been able to obtain the necessary doses in order to vaccinate all its population it’s because it purchased the Pfizer doses at a price 43% higher than the price negotiated by the EU.

4. “...it is stipulated that the participants do not engage in individual contracts with the same laboratories. Germany however has exchanged contracts with Pfizer-BioNTech and Curevac.” “Covid-19: après la Hongrie, le vaccin russe Spoutnik pourrait séduire d’autres pays européens.” *Le Monde*, 03/02/21.

5. “Coronavirus : les 50.000 morts qui font frémir l’Allemagne”, *Les Echos* 12/02/21.

6. “Already by September the NGO Oxfam estimated that the richest countries represented only 13% of the world’s population but held more than half (51%) of the doses of the main vaccines in the study”. “Essais cliniques, production, acheminement... Les six défis de la course au vaccin contre le Covid-19.” *Le Monde*, 13/11/20.

The agony of capitalism in its final stage of decomposition infests society

Millions of workers in the world have been brutally sacked from their jobs; poverty is spreading and deepening in a considerable fashion. Surrounded by the dangers of contagion, the reality of unemployment and the plunge into poverty, important parts of the world population find themselves in uncertain and unstable conditions and sinking into despair. In the industrial metropolises forced isolation resulting from various measures of lock-down has had consequences on the mental health of populations, as witnessed by the pressure on psychiatric services and the increases in suicides.

If, for important fractions of the working class the situation arising from the pandemic constitutes a final indictment of the bourgeoisie, for significant parts of the population any reflection is on the contrary polluted by all sorts of conspiracy theories. This is notably the case in the United States, the most developed country in the world and one at the avant-garde of science. When the pandemic was unfolding on the American continent, a great part of the population in this country imagined that the virus didn't exist and that it was all a plot to torpedo the re-election of Trump!

Other less excessive versions, but still based on fantastic theories, have flourished, seeing behind the measures of the restrictions of freedom of movement the hand of manipulators looking for a pretext to "confine" us or allow the pharmaceutical companies to make their money. Some demonstrations have taken place on this theme in some countries. In Spain, some chanted "the hospitals are empty", in Israel some ultra-orthodox Jews have been demonstrating. The extreme-right is also involved in these demonstrations, in Holland in particular. Some countries have seen real riots with some actions aimed at health centres.

This crisis is the product of the present phase of decomposition within the decadence of capitalism and an illustration of its manifestations: loss of control by the dominant class over its system; unprecedented aggravation of "every man for himself"; growth of the most irrational theories and ideologies. Such are the striking traits created by the eruption of the pandemic. Since the beginning of the collapse of the Eastern Bloc these symptoms have invaded society, signalled by the growth of the most irrational, reactionary and obscurantist ideologies and the growth of religious fanaticism, as seen in the rise of Islamic State with its young suicide



bombers enlisted into a Holy War in the name of Allah.

All these ultra-reactionary ideologies have been the manure which has fed the development of xenophobia and populism in the central countries and, above all, the United States. In the latter, this culminated in the assault on the Capitol, January 6, by Trump's shock-troops. This astonishing attack against the temple of American democracy has given the whole world a disastrous image of the world's greatest power the country of Freedom and Democracy looking like (and recognised by ex-President George Bush himself as such) a Third-World banana republic with the risk of armed confrontations within the civilian population.⁷

The accumulation of all these manifestations of decomposition, on a world scale and at all levels of society, shows that for thirty years capitalism has gone into its new historic period: the ultimate phase of decadence, the phase of decomposition.

More than ever the survival of humanity depends on the capacity of the proletariat to overthrow capitalism before it makes social life on this planet impossible. Further, the characteristics of a future communist society would render impossible such a level of vulnerability in the face of a major disease, in contrast to the way capitalism is dealing with Covid-19.

How a future communist society would face up to pandemics

We can't, in the framework of this short article, go into considerations of the type "why is such a society possible today

whereas it's never been achieved in the past?" or again "how will the revolutionary proletariat undertake the overthrow of capitalism on a world scale and the transformation of its relations of production?" The ICC has already given over numerous articles to this question.⁸ Nor are we going to risk imagining what life would be like for members of a society freed from the alienation of class society. However, we can affirm that alienation and each for themselves are taking on more and more brutal and inhuman forms in capitalism's death agony. We will limit ourselves here to the economic aspect and its direct social consequences.

Communism is not only an old dream of humanity or the simple product of human will: it's the only form of society capable of overcoming the contradictions that are strangling capitalist society. From this, its economic characteristics will be the following:

- the only motivation of production is the satisfaction of human need;
- the goods produced cease to be commodities, values for exchange, in order to become solely values for use; in other words, production is for the needs of humanity and not for the market;
- private ownership of the means of production, whether individually as in the beginnings of capitalism or by the state as in decadent capitalism (whether in its Stalinist, fascist or democratic forms), gives way to their socialisation. That's to say the end of all ownership and hence the end of the existence of social classes and, thus, all exploitation.

In looking at the factors which underlie the very great difficulties faced by present-

7. Regarding the situation in the United States, see "Biden presidency: The US and world capitalism on the road to nowhere", published on the ICC website on 19/01/21.

8. These have recently been republished online under the general heading "Communism is not just a nice idea but a material necessity".

day society in its efforts to defend itself from Covid-19, and also to face up to the tragic social consequences of it, we have to ask ourselves about the weight that these same factors would have in a communist society. In fact they wouldn't exist.

At the origin of the pandemic is the degradation of the planet which was made worse with capitalism's decadence, more particularly since the Second World War, where: *"the pitiless destruction of the environment by capital takes another dimension and another quality, an epoch in which all the capitalist nations are obliged to compete with each other in a saturated world market; consequently an epoch of the permanent war economy (...) an epoch characterised by the desperate pillage of natural resources for each nation trying to survive in a merciless free-for-all for the world market"*.⁹ Once the bourgeoisie is defeated on a world scale a priority task will be to repair the damage that capitalism has inflicted on the planet and make it amenable to the expansion of life on Earth. The elimination of the appearance of Covid-type pandemics will thus become a possibility.

Nevertheless, there's no guarantee that other pandemics of a different origin to that of Covid-19 couldn't appear in the future! That's the reason why, concerned for the survival and well-being of its members, the new society will develop its scientific knowledge with a view to better anticipating any eventual unknown sicknesses. Such an effort by society would be considerable compared to what capitalism can do today, inasmuch as society will no longer be subjected to the realisation of profit but will be aiming at the satisfaction of human needs. There will be distribution and centralisation of knowledge at the global level and not the "protection" and retention of scientific knowledge motivated by the realisation of profits and the consequence of competition. Sicknesses and the risks that they imply will not be hidden so that the "wheels of the economy continue to turn"; instead, the reaction will be collective and responsible without any submission to economic laws "above" humanity.

Contrary to the present situation, since health institutions will no longer be submitted to the law of profit, they can be permanently ameliorated and not left to rot.

However, even in a communist society one cannot exclude the possibility, despite the importance given to prevention, that humanity will face unknown challenges through, for example, the necessity to make a vaccine or a treatment at short notice. Since communist society would

be free of competition between its different parts, it could mobilise in the service of this objective the associated forces of the whole of humanity; quite the contrary to what's happened with the production of the vaccine against Covid. In fact, it is not speculation to affirm that humanity will be confronted with very real dangers resulting from the damage – some of it perhaps irreversible – that decadent and decomposing capitalism has bequeathed to future generations. Faced with this the proletariat will have to take all the necessary sanitary and restorative measures for an environment in which humanity will live free from the blind laws of capitalism.

And if, despite a still greater effort against anything that could threaten the human species, humanity should find itself affected by the hardest of tests and challenges, it is through solidarity, by acting as a single unit, that it will face up to them and not by abandoning a part of itself, as today where millions are thrown on the scrap heap and forced to rely on the "good will" of capitalism.

Between the moment when the proletariat begins to overthrow the political power of the bourgeoisie in a certain number of countries, then at the global scale (a world without frontiers), and the time when a society without social classes, exploitation and money is installed, the proletariat will have to take the transformation of society in this direction... and that will take much time. Nevertheless, even if it's not possible to begin to transform society before taking power on a world scale, the revolutionary proletariat will have a different attitude to diseases to that of the bourgeoisie. This is illustrated in the article elsewhere in this issue, "Health provision in Soviet Russia", which is about the measures taken by the Soviets between July 1918 and July 1919.

Yes, communist transformation is necessary, but revolution is also possible

Up to now we've put the accent on the dangers that the decomposition of capitalism holds for society and the very prospect of proletarian revolution. It's our responsibility because it's up to revolutionaries to talk clearly to the working class without hiding from it the difficulties with which it will be confronted. But it's also incumbent upon them to insist that a revolutionary outcome to the present situation exists, particularly given the ambient scepticism. This will result partly from the fact that, despite great difficulties, the working class has not submitted to an important defeat that prevents it from reacting to the attacks of the

bourgeoisie, unlike what happened in the 1930s. And if these attacks are raining down already, they are only at a beginning.

In fact, the health crisis can only aggravate the economic crisis even more. And we are seeing it already with firms going bust and growing numbers of job losses since the beginning of the pandemic. Faced with the aggravation of poverty and the degradation of all its living conditions in every country, the working class has no other choice than to struggle against the attacks of the bourgeoisie. Even if today the working class is suffering the shock of this pandemic, even if social decomposition makes the development of its struggles more difficult, it has no other choice than to fight to survive. With the explosion of unemployment in the most developed countries, fight or die will be the only alternatives posed to the growing masses of proletarians and the younger generations!

It is in its future combats, where it fights on its own class terrain despite the corrupting atmosphere of social decomposition, that the proletariat will have to re-discover and affirm its revolutionary perspective.

Despite all the suffering that it engenders, still today the economic crisis remains the best ally of the proletariat. Thus, we shouldn't only see misery in misery but also the conditions for overcoming this misery.

Sylver 17.2.21

9. "Truth and lies about ecology: It's capitalism that's poisoning the earth". *International Review* n° 63.

Healthcare provision in Soviet Russia

We publish below an article relating to the evolution of the health situation in Soviet Russia in July 1919, one year after the establishment of the Public Hygiene Commissariat. It was in a very unfavourable context that this health policy was implemented since, after the seizure of power by the proletariat in October 1917, Russia had suffered the counter-revolutionary activities on its territory supported by the Entente governments. Thus, at the beginning of 1919, Russia was completely isolated from the rest of the world and confronted with the activities of both the white armies and the troops of the “western democracies”. Despite all this, in the most difficult material conditions that it is possible to imagine, the method implemented by the proletariat – our method, in every way opposed to that of the bourgeoisie today confronted with the coronavirus pandemic – achieved results which, at the time, were a considerable step forward. If it seems appropriate to us to underline how the two methods are opposed, – that of the proletariat and of the bourgeoisie – it is not only to highlight the incapacity of the bourgeoisie to bring humanity out of the barbarism into which it plunges the world. It is also to defend the honour and the achievements of the revolutionary working class when it set out to conquer the world during the first world revolutionary wave which, since its defeat, the lies of the Stalinist and democratic bourgeoisie have never ceased, each in their own way, to soil and distort its objectives.

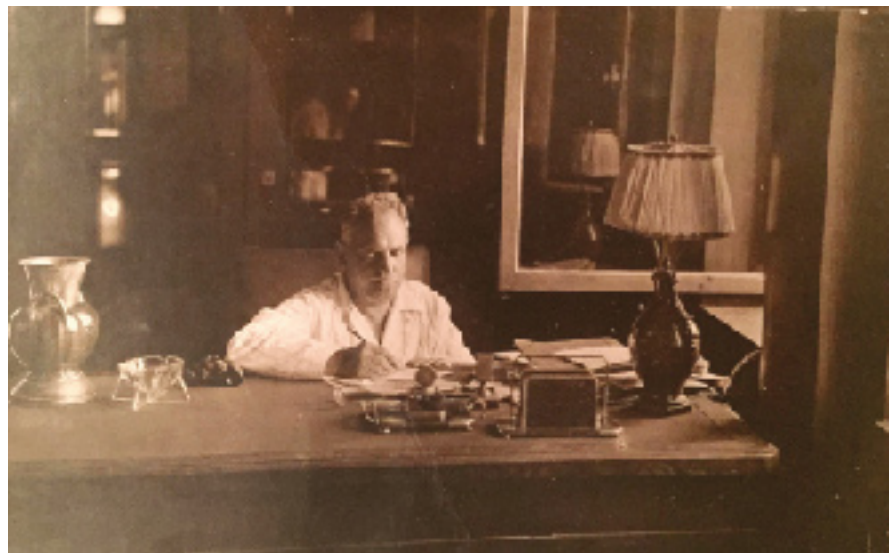
Certainly, there are concepts and formulations appearing in the article which we don't share today: for example, the idea of nationalisation as a step towards socialism or even the claim that capitalist exploitation had already been abolished in Russia, as well as some of the “medical” language (“abnormal” or “retarded” children etc). The measures taken by the Soviet power in this period were essentially of an emergency character and they could not on their own escape the pressures of a still dominant capitalist world system. But despite this the determination of the new Soviet power to centralise, repair and rapidly improve health services, to take them out of the hands of the exploiters and make them freely available to the entire population, flowed from a fundamentally proletarian method which remains valid today and for the future.

The conservation of health in Soviet Russia (N.A. Semashko)

General working conditions of the Public Hygiene Commissariat

The Public Hygiene Commissariat, created by the decree of the Council of People's Commissars on 21 July 1918, drew up a balance sheet of its annual work in July 1919.

The unfavourable external conditions in which the work of the People's Commissariats is accomplished has had visible repercussions on the most sensitive apparatus intended to protect what is dearest to man: his life and his health. The heavy legacy bequeathed to us by the capitalist regime and the imperialist war, while hampering the work of soviet creation, has weighed very heavily on the medical and health organisation. The difficulties encountered in supply, economic disorganisation, the blockade of Soviet Russia by the imperialists, the civil war – all these have painfully thwarted measures taken to prevent and cure diseases. It is difficult to implement preventive health measures when insufficient food weakens the human organism and predisposes it to diseases, when the population lacks the things most essential to the accomplishment of the elementary proscriptions of hygiene; or to organise a rational medical treatment, when, thanks to the blockade maintained by the “allies”,



N. A. Semashko, People's Commissar of Public Health 1918-1930

we are deprived of the most essential drugs, and the difficulties in the food supply do not allow us to organise dietetic treatment.

And nevertheless, the state of health of Soviet Russia is at this moment just as good and even much better than that of those bordering territories under the yoke of White Guard “supreme governors”, countries abundantly supplied and largely provided with products of all kinds, in

drugs and medical personnel. This summer, Soviet Russia had almost no cases of cholera; while in Denikin's satrapy, cholera, comparable to a large torrent, wreaked havoc. Soviet Russia this summer almost completely came to an end of the typhus epidemic. In Siberia, in the Urals, in the territories we liberated from Kolchak, the typhus is raging; almost all prisoners of Kolchak's army are infected with epidemic

diseases. We easily endured the Spanish flu epidemic, much more easily even than Western Europe; the cholera epidemic of the past year was relatively short, and only the typhus epidemic last winter assumed a fairly serious character. The reasons why we have fought with some success – in spite of difficult conditions, against epidemics and diseases, those inevitable by-products of imperialist slaughter – consist in the new methods applied by the Soviet power.

Epidemics, at all times and in all places, wreak their devastation above all among the poor, among the labouring classes. The Soviet power is the power of the workers. By defending the interests of the underprivileged class, it at the same time protects the health of the people. The abolition of capitalist exploitation made it possible to establish regulations for occupational health protection: it made it possible to use the most effective measures for the protection of motherhood and childhood; the abolition of movable and landed property made it possible to fairly resolve the question of housing: the monopoly of bread resulted in allowing the distribution of the reserves available first of all to the working classes; the nationalisation of pharmacies made it possible to distribute fairly and economically the meagre reserves of drugs, snatching them from the hands of speculators, etc... It can be said that no other provider in the present difficult circumstances could have overcome the immeasurable and apparently invincible obstacles which existed in the field of public health protection. However, there is one more circumstance which facilitated our work in these conditions: it is the concentration of all the medical services in the hands of a single duly authorised body: the Public Hygiene Commissariat. A single body had been created which led the struggle according to a unified plan with the greatest economy of force and means. This organ replaced the disorderly and fragmented work of the various institutions, the ill-combined actions of the various organs which dealt with the health of the people. Science and medical practice have long demonstrated the need for such centralisation of work in a single competent body. This subject was especially hotly debated before the war in Russian and international specialist works. Thus, the French doctor Mirman wrote in 1913 in *Hygiene*:

“Very often it happens that a prefect is interested in public health and wants to help. Wishing to gain the support of the government, he had to visit all the ministries in Paris and meet with all the heads of service of a dozen administrations. It takes great perseverance not to give up the journey, not to throw the handle after the

	Before the October revolution Approximate no	Current Approximate no.
Number of hospital beds (exclusively for civilian population use)	8,000	22,000
Medical beds	100,000	150,000
Ambulances	15,000	46,000
Sanitary doctors	20,000	34,000
Assistants to these doctors	0	50,000
Food inspection doctors	10,000	29,000
School sanitary doctors	31,000	37,000

axe, so much does one end up being made desperate by all these formalities. This mainly concerns the fight against social diseases, tuberculosis and alcoholism, for example. Let us see in which ministerial department the fight against tuberculosis can be prepared, started and organised. It currently depends on: the Ministry of Labour (low-cost housing, mutual insurance, hygiene of workshops and shops), the Ministry of Agriculture (food hygiene and milk analysis), the Ministry of the Interior (sanitary requirements for municipalities and disinfection), the Ministry of Public Education (medical inspection of schools). When the government will be questioned on the measures it intends to undertake for the defence of the race against its most bitter enemy, four ministers will have to take part in the debates (not counting the army, the navy and the colonies); in short, as a result of the distribution of public health services between different ministries and administrations, there is no one among the members of the government who is directly responsible for hygiene and public health. The organisation of a Ministry of Public Health will bring order to this chaos and create a system instead of the current arbitrariness.”

This centralisation of medical work was carried out in Russia by the decree of the Soviet government of 21 July 1918. This created “the Commissariat of Public Hygiene” endowed with all the rights of an independent ministry and comprising the following sections: Sanitary-Epidemiological Section, Medical Treatment Section, Pharmaceutical Section, Medical and General Supplies Section, Social Disease Control Section (Venereal Diseases, Prostitution and Tuberculosis), Child Protection Section (school health inspection, special care for abnormal children, organisation of physical culture, etc ...), Section of military health services and communication routes, etc...

The practical administration of all medical and health work is in the hands of the

workers’ organisations of the Soviets of Workers’ Deputies and Red Army Deputies. All the fundamental health measures are carried out with the energetic assistance of the workers’ organisations (let us recall, for example, the work known to the Commissariat, work which has rendered the most invaluable services in the liquidation of cholera and typhus).

These are the fundamental causes, creating new conditions in health and medicine work and which, despite the particularly difficult external conditions, facilitate the work. In the next chapter, we will give a brief overview of the work of the Commissariat. Here, we will compare, as a concrete example, the medical and health organisation of the city of Moscow before the October revolution with this same organisation in its current state, after two years of existence of the Soviet power.

To this must be added the new medical and health organisations created by the Soviet power for the use of the poorest population; free home assistance (this question was on the agenda for 10 years and before October 1917 it was still under discussion). Currently, 80 doctors and nearly 160 nurses are engaged in this assistance and are distributed across the various districts of the city; it is also necessary to cite first aid stations for urgent cases, and for this purpose permanent medical services and medical vehicles have been established. Let us also mention the recent struggle against tuberculosis and syphilis, as social diseases; an important action, intended to popularise health knowledge; free and widely organised assistance for dental treatment (10 ambulances with 25 chairs); making psychiatric assistance available to the population (treatment by means of rays); the management of nationalised pharmacies, as well as the good distribution of their products, etc...

And this enumeration of examples does not yet exhaust all that was newly created by the Soviet power in Moscow in the

field of public health during its two-year existence. What has just been mentioned relates to the quantity. As for the quality, it has been equalised by the fact that the use which divided medicine into two classes has been eliminated: that known as “first order” for the rich and “third order” for the poor. The best specialists in Moscow now receive patients in city hospitals; and it can be said that there is not a great specialist – doctor or professor – who any inhabitant of the Soviet capital cannot turn to for free advice.

This medical aid is organised on a similar basis, but naturally on a different scale, in all the other towns. This is how the Soviet power was able to organise medico-sanitary work during the past two years, in the midst of essentially unfavourable conditions.

A year of work

The development of the work of the Public Hygiene Commissariat, its organising work and the fight against the epidemics which followed one after the other, were simultaneous. Last summer, a wave of the Spanish flu swept through Russia. Commissions were sent to various places to study this still little-known disease, as well as to combat it effectively; a whole series of scientific conferences were organised and surveys were carried out on the spot. As a result of these studies, it was possible to establish the relationship of the Spanish flu to influenza (flu); special works were published dealing with this disease in a scientific and popular form.

The Spanish flu epidemic passed very quickly and relatively well. Much longer and much more difficult was the fight against the typhus epidemic which spread widely, especially during the winter of 1918-1919. Suffice it to say that before the summer of 1919 nearly a million and a half people were affected by this disease. This epidemic having been foreseen, the Public Hygiene Commissariat was not caught unawares. As early as the autumn of 1918, a series of consultations with representatives of local sections and with specialist bacteriologists took place; the plan of the struggle was sketched out, which made it possible to send precise instructions to the provinces. A decree on measures to be taken in the fight against typhus was submitted for ratification by the Council of People's Commissars. Scientific meetings were organised at the same time as experiments were attempted with the application of a serum to prevent and treat typhus. Numerous scientific pamphlets, popular books, and typhus literature were published. The cholera epidemic which had spread noticeably in the summer and

autumn of 1918 and which was expected in 1919 did not spread widely that year, in spite of the direct danger of contamination which came to us from the troops of Denikin where cholera was raging. As a preventive measure drinking water was purified (chlorination), at the same time as cholera vaccinations were carried out on a larger scale. Finally, a decree on compulsory vaccination was promulgated and confirmed by the Council of People's Commissars on 10 April 1919, thus filling a major gap in our health legislation. The purpose of this decree was to prevent an epidemic of smallpox which threatened to develop in 1918-1919; to implement this decree, instructions were drawn up for local institutions, regulations on maintenance, stables for the rearing of young calves intended for the preparation of the vaccine. Nearly 5.5 millions were assigned to carry out this decree and nearly 5 million vaccines were distributed against smallpox.

It was materially impossible in our republic, isolated from Europe, to obtain medical vaccines and serums. The Commissariat of Public Hygiene promptly nationalised all the important bacteriological institutes, as well as the stables where the calves intended for the preparation of the vaccine were raised; special stables were created (especially in the Saratov region): they were provided with everything necessary, their work was extended; the supply of these institutions with the necessary material was centralised and organised so that, during epidemics, the country did not lack either serum or vaccine.

It should above all be emphasised that the whole practical fight against epidemics was carried out on new principles, namely, on the principles of the direct participation of the whole population and above all, of the working masses and peasants....

Generalised capitalist barbarism or world proletarian revolution

We are publishing this international statement of the ICC on the current Covid-19 crisis in the form of a “digital leaflet” because under the conditions of the lock-down it is clearly not possible to distribute a printed version in large numbers. We are asking all our readers to use all the means at their disposal to disseminate this text - social media, internet forums, and so on - and to write to us with information about any of the reactions and discussions that this provokes, and of course with their own views on the article. It is more than ever necessary for all who fight for the proletarian revolution to express their solidarity with each other and maintain their connections. While we have to isolate ourselves physically for the time being, we can still come together politically!

Thousands are dying every day, the hospitals are on their knees, there is a horrible “triage” between the young and the old among the sick, health workers are exhausted, infected, and some are dying. Everywhere a lack of medical equipment. Governments involved in a terrible competition in the name of the “war against the virus” and the “national economic interest”. Financial markets in free fall, surreal heists in which states are robbing each other of deliveries of masks. Tens of millions of workers thrown into the hell of unemployment, a torrent of lies from the state and its media...this is the awful spectacle offered by the world of today. This pandemic represents one of the most serious health catastrophes since the Spanish flu of 1918-19, even though, since that time, science has made extraordinary steps forward. Why such a disaster? How did it come to this?

We are told that this virus is different, that it's much more contagious than the others, that its effects are much more pernicious and deadly. All that is probably true but it doesn't explain the scale of the catastrophe. The underlying responsibility for this planet-wide chaos, for the hundreds of thousands of deaths, lies with capitalism itself. Production for profit and not for human need, the permanent search for cost effectiveness at the price of ferocious exploitation of the working class, the increasingly violent attacks on the living conditions of the exploited, the frenzied competition between companies and states – it is these basic characteristics of the capitalist system which have come together to culminate in the present disaster.

The criminal negligence of capitalism

Those who run this society, the bourgeois class with its states and its media, tell us with a concerned air that this epidemic could not have been predicted. This is a lie on the same level as those put forward by the climate change deniers. Scientists have been warning about the threat of pandemics like Covid-19 for a long time now. But governments have refused to listen to them. They even refused to listen to a report by the CIA in 2009 (“What will tomorrow's world be like?”) which describes with startling accuracy the characteristics of the present pandemic. Why such blindness on the part of the states and the bourgeois class they serve? For a very simple reason: investments have to produce profits, and as quickly as possible. Investing in the future of humanity doesn't pay, and just depresses share prices. Investments also have to reinforce the positions of each national bourgeoisie against others on the imperialist arena. If the crazy sums which are invested into military research and spending had been devoted to the health and well-being of the populations, such an epidemic would never have been able to develop. But instead of taking measures against this predictable health disaster, governments have not stopped attacking health systems, both at the level of research and of technical and human resources.

If people are dying like flies today, at the very heart of the most developed countries, it is in the first place because everywhere governments have cut budgets destined for research into new diseases. Thus in May

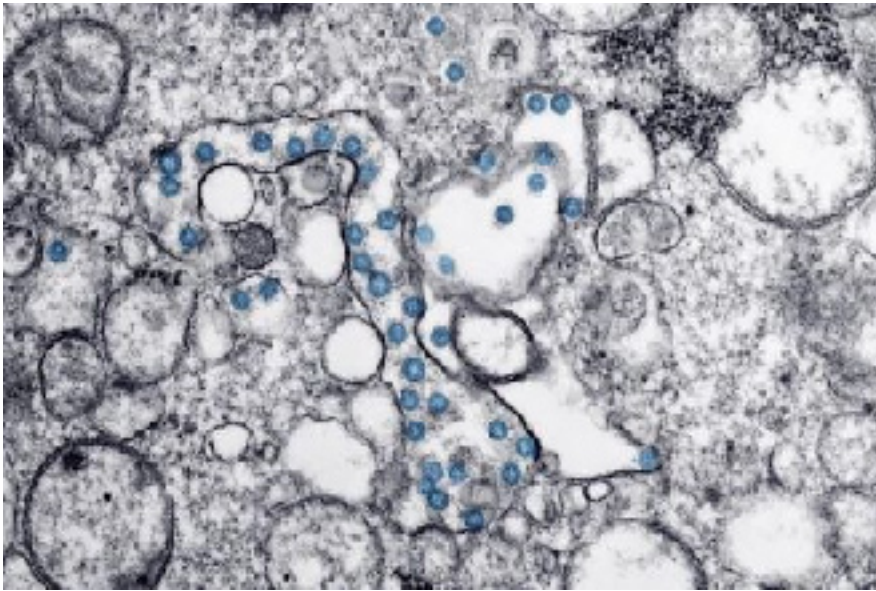
2018 Donald Trump got rid of a special unit of the National Security Council, composed of eminent experts and created to fight against pandemics. But Trump's attitude is only a caricature of what all the leaders have been doing. Thus, scientific research into the coronavirus were abandoned everywhere 15 years ago because of the development of a vaccine was judged not to be “cost effective”!

Similarly, It is totally disgusting to see the bourgeois leaders and politicians, on the right and the left, weeping over the saturation of the hospitals and the catastrophic conditions in which health workers are forced to work, when the bourgeois states have been methodically imposing the norms of profit over the last 50 years, and particularly since the great recession of 2008. Everywhere they have been limiting access to health services, reducing the number of hospital beds, and intensifying the work load of health workers. And what are we to make of the generalised scarcity of masks and other protective garments, disinfectant gel, testing equipment, etc? Over the last few years, most states have got rid of stocks of these vital items in order to save money. In the last few months, they have not been anticipating the rapid spread of Covid19, even though, since November 2019, some of them have been claiming that masks are of no use to non-carers – in order to hide their criminal irresponsibility.

And what about chronically deprived regions of the world like the continents of Africa or Latin America? In Kinshasa, in the Democratic Republic of Congo, 10 million inhabitants can count on 50 ventilators! In Central Africa, leaflets were given out giving advice on how to wash your hands when the population doesn't have enough water to drink! Everywhere the same cry of distress: “*we lack everything in the face of this pandemic!*”

Capitalism is the war of each against all

The fierce rivalry between each state in the world arena is blocking the minimum cooperation to contain the virus. When it



Magnified image of the Covid-19 virus

first got going, the Chinese bourgeoisie judged it more important to do all it could to hide the gravity of the situation, in order to protect its economy and its reputation. The state didn't hesitate to persecute the doctor who tried to sound the alarm, and left him to die. Even the semblance of international regulation which the bourgeoisie has set up to deal with the lack of equipment has fallen apart: the World Health Organisation has been unable to impose its directives while the European Union has been incapable of introducing concerted measures. This division is considerably aggravating the chaos and the loss of control over the evolution of the pandemic. The dynamic of "every man for himself" and the exacerbation of generalised competition have become the dominant feature of the reactions of the ruling class.

The "war of the masks", as the media call it, is an edifying example of this. Each state is grabbing the material it can through speculation, bidding wars, and even out-and-out theft. The US has been nabbing plane-loads of Chinese masks promised to France. France has confiscated cargoes of masks heading by air for Sweden. The Czech Republic has seized at its customs barriers ventilators and masks destined for Italy. Germany has made masks heading for Canada disappear. This is the true face of the "great democracies": thieves and gangsters of the worst kind!

Unprecedented attacks on the exploited

For the bourgeoisie "*profits are worth more than our lives*" as striking car workers shouted in Italy. In all countries, it

delayed as long as possible putting in place measures of confinement to protect the population in order to keep national production going at any cost. It was not the threat of a sharply rising death toll which in the end led to the lock-downs. The many imperialist massacres that have been going on for over a century, fought in the name of the national interest, have definitively proved the contempt that the ruling class has for the lives of the exploited. No, our rulers don't care about our lives! Especially when the virus has the "advantage", as far as the bourgeoisie is concerned, of mowing down the sick and the elderly, those it sees as "unproductive". Letting the virus spread and do its "natural" work in the name of "herd immunity" was actually the initial choice of Boris Johnson and other leaders. In each country, what tipped the scales in favour of the lock-downs was the fear of the disorganisation of the economy and, in certain countries, the threat of social disorder, the mounting anger in response to the negligence and the rising death tolls. What's more, even if they involve half of humanity, the social isolation measures are in many cases a total farce: millions of people have been obliged to crowd together every day on trains, tubes and buses, in the factories and supermarkets. And already the bourgeoisie is looking to end the lock-downs as quickly as possible, at the very time when the pandemic is hitting hardest, trying to find ways to provoke the least discontent by sending workers back to work sector by sector, firm by firm.

The bourgeoisie is perpetuating and planning new attacks, even more brutal conditions of exploitation. The pandemic has already thrown millions of workers into unemployment: ten million in three

weeks in the US. Many of them, who have irregular, precarious or temporary jobs, will be deprived of any income. Others, who have some meagre social benefits to live on, are faced with no longer being able to pay rent and the costs of medical care. The economic ravages have started to accelerate the world recession which was already looming: explosion in the food prices, massive lay-offs, wage cuts, growing job insecurity etc. All states are adopting measures of "flexibility" by calling for sacrifices in the name of "national unity in the war against the virus".

The national interest that the bourgeoisie is invoking today is not our interest. It's this same defence of the national economy and this same generalised competition which has, in the past, led it to carry out budget cuts and attacks against the living conditions of the exploited. Tomorrow, it will serve up the same lies when, following the economic devastation caused by the pandemic, it will call on the exploited to pull their belts in further, to accept even more poverty and exploitation. This pandemic is an expression of the decadent character of the capitalist mode of production, of the many expressions of the rotting of present day society, along with the destruction of the environment, pollution and climate change, the proliferation of imperialist wars and massacres, the inexorable descent into poverty of a growing portion of humanity, the number of people obliged to become migrants or refugees, the rise of populist ideology and religious fanaticism, etc¹ It's an indicator of the dead-end that capitalism has reached, showing the direction in which this system is leading humanity: towards chaos, misery, barbarism, destruction and death.

Only the proletariat can change the world

Certain governments and media argue that the world will never be the same as it was before this pandemic, that the lessons of the disaster will be drawn, that in the end states will move towards a more humane and better managed form of capitalism. We heard the same refrain after the 2008 recession: with hand on their hearts, the states and leaders of the world declared "war on rogue finance", promising that the sacrifices demanded to get out of the crisis would be rewarded. You only have to look at the growing inequality in the world to recognise that these promises to "reform" capitalism were just lies to make us swallow a new deterioration in our living conditions.

¹ See our text "Theses on the decomposition of capitalism" published in International Review n° 62 and on our internet site.

The exploiting class cannot change the world and put human lives and social needs above the pitiless laws of its economy: capitalism is a system of exploitation, in which a ruling minority draws its profits and its privileges from the work of the majority. The key to the future, the promise of another world, a truly human world without nations or exploitation, lies solely in the international unity and solidarity of the workers in struggle!

The wave of spontaneous solidarity within our class in response to the intolerable situation inflicted on the health workers is being derailed by the governments and politicians of the whole world into the campaign of applause on doorsteps and balconies. Of course this applause will warm the hearts of the workers who, with courage and dedication, in dramatic working conditions, are looking after the sick and saving lives. But the solidarity of our class, of the exploited, can't be reduced to a five minute round of applause. It means, in the first place, denouncing the governments of all countries, no matter their political colouring. It means demanding masks and all the necessary protective equipment. It means, when it's possible, going on strike and affirming that, as long as health workers don't have the material they need, as long as they are being hurled towards their deaths with uncovered faces, the exploited who are not in the hospitals will not work.

Today, while the lock-down lasts, we can't wage massive struggles against this murderous system. We can't gather together to express our anger and our solidarity through massive struggles, through strikes and demonstrations. Because of the lock-down, but not only that. Also because our class has to recover its real source of strength, which it has shown so many times in history but which it has since forgotten: the potential for uniting in struggle, for developing massive movements against the ruling class and its monstrous system.

The strikes that broke out in the automobile sector in Italy or in supermarkets in France, in front of New York hospitals or those in the north of France, the enormous indignation of workers refusing to serve as "virus fodder", herded together without masks, gloves or soap, for the sole benefit of their exploiters, can today only be scattered reactions and cut off from the strength of an entire united class. Nonetheless, they show that the workers are not prepared to accept, like some kind of inevitability, the criminal irresponsibility of those who exploit us.

It's this perspective of class battles that we have to prepare for. Because after Covid-19 there will be the world economic crisis,

massive unemployment, new "reforms" which are nothing but further sacrifices. So, right now, we must prepare our future struggles. How? By discussing, exchanging experiences and ideas, on different internet channels on forums, on the phone, as much as possible. Understanding that the greatest scourge is not Covid-19 but capitalism, that the solution is not to rally behind the killer state but to stand against it; that hope resides not in the promises of this or that politician but in the development of workers' solidarity in the struggle; that the only alternative to capitalist barbarism is the world revolution!

THE FUTURE BELONGS TO THE CLASS STRUGGLE!

International Communist Current,
10/4/20

The US and world capitalism on the road to nowhere

The Trump administration had already caused a series of humiliating but lethal fiascos for the US bourgeoisie – not least by actively worsening the Covid pandemic 2020 – but there was always hope among the saner factions of the American ruling class that having an incompetent narcissist in supreme power was only a passing nightmare, from which they would soon awake. But the electoral victory of the Democratic Party wasn't the landslide that was hoped for – either for the new administration of Joe Biden or for the new Congress.

Worse still, a televised riot took place in the Capitol, the sacred venue of US democracy, incited by the outgoing head of state who rejected the official, validated, results of the presidential election! A mob attempted to violently prevent the democratic succession, encouraged by the sitting president himself – as in a banana republic as George W Bush recognised. Truly it is a politically defining moment in the decomposition of world capitalism. The populist self-harming of the UK through Brexit may look merely absurd to other countries, because Britain is a secondary power, but the threat of instability represented by the insurrection on Capitol Hill of the US has caused shock and fear throughout the international bourgeoisie.

The subsequent attempt to impeach Trump for a second time may well fail again,¹ and in any case it will galvanise the millions of his supporters in the population, including a large part of the Republican Party.

The inauguration of the new President on January 20th, usually an occasion for a show of national unity and reconciliation, won't be: Trump will not attend, contrary to the custom with outgoing presidents, and Washington DC will be under military lockdown to prevent further armed resistance from Trump supporters. The perspective then is not the smooth, long term re-establishment of traditional democratic order and ideology by a Biden administration, but an accentuation – of an increasingly violent nature – of the divisions between classical bourgeois democracy and populism, the

latter not disappearing with the end of the Trump regime.

The US – from the world's biggest superpower to the epicentre of decomposition

Since 1945 US democracy has been the flagship of world capitalism. Having played a decisive role in the Allied victory in World War II, and making a major contribution to reducing Europe and Japan to ruins, it was then able to drag the world out of the rubble and reconstruct it in its own image during the Cold War. In 1989, with the defeat and disintegration of the rival totalitarian Russian bloc, the US seemed to be at the apex of its global dominance and prestige. George Bush Snr announced the coming of a New World Order after the collapse of the Russian bloc in 1989. Washington thought it could maintain its supremacy by preventing any new power emerging as a serious contender for its world leadership. But instead, the assertion of its military superiority has accelerated a world disorder with a series of pyrrhic victories (Kuwait, the Balkans in the 1990s) and expensive foreign policy failures in Iraq, Afghanistan and Syria. The US has increasingly undermined the alliances on which its former world leadership rested and this has encouraged other powers to act on their own account.

Moreover US power and wealth has been unable to attenuate the increasing convulsions of the world economy: the spark of the 2008 crisis emanated from Wall Street and engulfed the US and the world in the most serious downturn since the open crisis re-emerged in 1967.

The social and political consequences of these US reverses, and the absence of alternatives, is that the divisions and disarray in the bourgeois state, and in the population generally, has been increased, leading to the growing discredit of the established political norms of the US democratic political system.

The previous presidencies of Bush and Obama failed to forge a lasting consensus for the traditional democratic order among the population as a whole. Trump's "solution" to this problem was not to resolve this disunity but to accentuate it even more with a raucous and incoherent policy of vandalism that further shredded the political consensus domestically and ripped up military and economic agreements with its former allies on the world stage. All this was done under the banner of "America First" – but in reality it served to increase the USA's loss of status.

In a word, the ongoing political crisis of US democracy, symbolised by the storming of the Capitol, complements the chaotic and self-destructive consequences of US imperialist policy and makes it clearer that the still-strongest world power is at the centre of, and the major player in, the decomposition of world capitalism at all levels.

China can't fill the vacuum

China, despite its increasing economic and military power, won't be able to fill the vacuum of world leadership created by the disorientation of the US. Not least because the latter is still capable and determined to prevent the growth of Chinese influence as a major objective with or without Trump. For example one of the plans of the Biden Administration will be to step up this anti-China policy with the formation of a D10, an alliance of the democratic powers (the G7 plus South Korea, India, and Australia). The role this will play in the worsening of imperialist tensions need hardly be explained.

1. Since this was written the House of Representatives voted to impeach Trump but the Senate failed to reach the two-thirds majority necessary to convict him.

But these tensions cannot be channelled into the formation of new blocs for obvious reasons. The worsening decomposition of capitalism makes the possibility of a generalised world war increasingly unlikely.

The dangers for the working class

In 1989 we predicted that the new period of the decomposition of capitalism would bring increased difficulties for the proletariat. The recent events in the US vindicate this prediction again.

The most important of these in relation to the present US situation is the danger that sections of the working class will be mobilised behind the increasingly violent contests of the opposing factions of the bourgeoisie, i.e., not just on the electoral terrain but in the streets. Parts of the working class can be misled into choosing between populism and the defence of democracy, the two false alternatives offered by capitalist exploitation.

Connected to this is the fact that in the present situation other layers of the non-exploiting population are increasingly propelled into political action by a whole series of factors: the effects of the economic crisis, the worsening of the ecological catastrophe, the strengthening of state repression and its racist nature, which leads them to act as a conduit for bourgeois campaigns such as the Black Lives Matter movement, or as a medium for inter-classist struggles.

Nevertheless the working class internationally in the period of decomposition has not been defeated as in the manner of the 1930s. Its reserves of combativity remain intact and the further economic attacks on its living standards that are coming – which will include the bill for the economic damage done by the Covid pandemic – will oblige the proletariat to respond on its class terrain.

The challenge for revolutionary organisations

The revolutionary organisation has a limited but very important role to play in the current situation because, while it has little influence yet, and probably will not have for a lengthy period to come, the situation of the working class as a whole is nevertheless bringing a small minority to revolutionary class positions, notably in the US itself.

The successful work of transmission to this minority rests on a number of needs. Significant in the present context is the combination, on the one hand, of a long term programmatic rigour and clarity,

linked on the other hand to the ability of the organisation to have a coherent, developing analysis of the entire world situation: its historical setting and perspectives.

The world situation over the past year has increasingly broken new records in the putrefaction of world capitalism – the Covid pandemic, the economic crisis, the political crisis in the US, the ecological catastrophe, the plight of refugees, the destitution of ever-larger parts of the world population. The dynamic of chaos is speeding up and becoming more unpredictable, offering new, more frequent challenges to our analyses and requiring an ability to change and adapt them according to this acceleration without forgetting our fundamentals.

ICC, 16/0121

100 years after the foundation of the Communist International: What lessons can we draw for future combats? (part III)



Baku Congress, 1920: “support for colonial revolutions” really meant grave concessions to nationalism by the Comintern

In the previous parts of this article,¹ we began by identifying the conditions in which the Third or Communist International was formed in March 1919. In a very complicated context, the revolutionaries of that time did not manage to clarify all the new questions and challenges facing the proletariat.

Furthermore, the process of regroupment of revolutionary forces was marked by the lack of a firm attitude to revolutionary principles at the foundation of the International. This is one of the lessons which the Italian Fraction of the communist left grouped around the review *Bilan*, and then above all by the Gauche Communiste de France (*Internationalisme*) drew from the experience of the CI: “*the ‘broad’ method, with its concern above all to rally the greatest possible numbers straight away at the expense of precise principles and programme, led to the formation of mass parties, real giants with feet of clay, which were to fall under the sway of opportunism.*”²

While the founding Congress was a real step forward in the unification of the world proletariat, the evolution of the CI in the years that followed was marked essentially

by regressions which disarmed the revolution in the face of the counter-revolutionary forces which were more and more gaining ground. The rampant opportunism within the ranks of the party was not eliminated as Lenin and the Bolsheviks envisaged. On the contrary, with the degeneration of the revolution, it ended up taking a preponderant place and hastened the end of the CI as a class party. This opportunist dynamic, already visible by the Second Congress, only deepened after that, both on the programmatic and organisational levels, as we will try to show in this article.

1920-21: The retreat of the revolutionary wave

Following the Third Congress of the CI,³ revolutionaries were beginning to understand that the revolution would be more difficult than they had thought. A few

³ This Congress took place between June 21 and the beginning of July 1921.

days after the end of the Congress, Trotsky analysed the situation thus:

*“The Third Congress took note of the further falling apart of the economic foundations of bourgeois rule. But it has at the same time forcibly warned the advanced workers against any naive conceptions that this will lead automatically to the death of the bourgeoisie through an uninterrupted offensive by the proletariat. Never before has the bourgeoisie’s class instinct of self-preservation been armed with such multiform methods of defence and attack as today. The economic preconditions for the victory of the working class are at hand. Failing this victory, and moreover unless this victory comes in the more or less near future, all civilisation is menaced with decline and degeneration. But this victory can be gained only by the skilled conduct of battles and, above all, by first conquering the majority of the working class. This is the main lesson of the Third Congress.”*⁴

This is far removed from the overweening enthusiasm of the Founding Congress, where, in his closing speech, Lenin asserted that “*the victory of the proletarian revolution on a world scale is assured. The founding of an international Soviet republic is on the way*”. In the intervening period, the assaults launched by the proletariat in a number of countries had come up against the riposte of the bourgeoisie. And in particular we saw the failure of the attempt to take power in Germany in 1919, whose significance was underestimated by revolutionaries.

As the great majority in the ranks of the CI saw it, the crisis of capitalism and its fall into decadence could only hurl the masses onto the road of revolution. However, a consciousness of the scale of the goal to be attained and the means to reach it was well below the level required. This situation was particularly visible after the Second Congress, marked by a series of

⁴ “The main lessons of the Third Congress”, July 1921. The idea of winning over the majority of the working class, in the context of the day, already contained the germs of the idea of conquering the masses at the expense of principles, as we aim to show in this article.

1. See *International Review* n° 162 and 163.

2. *Internationalisme* n° 7, 1945. “The left fraction, method for forming the party”, *International Review* n° 162.

difficulties which were further isolating the proletariat in Russia:

- In western Europe, workers' struggles had not achieved the hoped-for victories. In Italy the bourgeoisie had succeeded in channelling and sterilising the movement. In Germany, the adventurist action of March 1921,⁵ piloted by the KPD with the support of the CI, ended in a crushing and demoralising failure.
- On the military level, the offensive of the Red Army in Poland ended in defeat and the retreat from Warsaw, preventing the establishment of a bridge between the working class in Russia and the working class in western Europe.
- In Russia itself, the civil war had given rise to serious food shortages and a dramatic economic and social situation which made it necessary to put an end to the war economy and its nationalisations and restore a certain level of commodity exchange. The New Economic Policy (NEP) was adopted in March 1921.

At the same moment, the repression of the uprising of the Kronstadt sailors took place. An error which had disastrous consequences for the relations between the masses and the Communist Party in Russia.

If the international bourgeoisie did not succeed in totally annihilating the proletarian revolution at this point, it was nevertheless the case that the heart of the revolution, Russia of the Soviets, was particularly isolated. Although Lenin described the situation as “a state of equilibrium which, although highly unstable and precarious, enables the Socialist Republic to exist – not for long, of course – within the capitalist encirclement”,⁶ with hindsight we can affirm that the multiple failures and difficulties which appeared between 1920 and 1921 already heralded the defeat of the revolutionary wave. It is in this particularly difficult context that we propose to analyse the policies of the CI. Policies which, on a number of points, expressed an increasingly opportunist retreat.

The disastrous consequences of support for “national liberation movements”

A question that had not yet been settled in the workers' movement

The national question was one of the unresolved questions in the revolutionary movement at the time the CI was constituted. While it is true that during the ascendant

5. “The March Action 1921: the danger of petty bourgeois impatience”, *International Review* n° 93.

6. “Theses for a report on the tactics of the RCP”, presented to the Third Congress of the CI.

period of capitalism revolutionaries had sometimes supported national struggles, this was not a matter of principle. The debate had arisen again in the years preceding the First World War. Rosa Luxemburg was one of the first to understand that the entry of capitalism into its phase of decadence also meant that every nation state had an imperialist nature. Consequently, the struggle of one nation to liberate itself from another aimed only at defending the interests of one bourgeoisie against another and in no way the interests of the working class.

The Bolsheviks adopted a position which was that of the social democratic centre, since the right of peoples to self-determination had appeared in the 1903 programme. “*The tenaciousness with which the Bolsheviks clung to this position, despite opposition from without and from within, is best explained by the fact that Tsarist Russia was the perpetrator of national oppression par excellence (‘the prison-house of nations’) and that as a mainly ‘Great Russian’ party in geographical terms the Bolsheviks considered that granting nations oppressed by Russia the right to secede as the best way of winning the confidence of the masses in these countries. This position, though it proved to be erroneous, was based on a working class perspective. In a period in which the Social Imperialists of Germany, Russia, and elsewhere were arguing against the right of peoples oppressed by German or Russian imperialism to struggle for national liberation, the slogan of national self-determination was put forward by the Bolsheviks as a way of undermining Russian and other imperialisms and of creating the conditions for a future unification of the workers in both oppressing and oppressed nations.*”⁷ While Lenin considered that the “right of nations to self-determination” had become an obsolete demand in the western countries, the situation was different in the colonies where the blossoming of national liberation movements was part of the formation of an independent capitalism which contributed to the appearance of a proletariat. In these conditions, national self-determination remained a progressive demand in the eyes of Lenin and the majority of the Bolshevik party.

Understanding that imperialism was not simply a form of pillage perpetrated by the developed countries at the expense of backward nations but the expression of the totality of capitalist relations on a global scale, Rosa Luxemburg was able to develop the most lucid critique of national liberation struggles in general and the position of the Bolsheviks in particular. In opposition to the fragmented vision of the Bolsheviks which considered that the

7. ICC pamphlet, *Nation or Class?*

proletariat could have different tasks in a given geographic location, Rosa Luxemburg adopted an approach which described a global process, in the context of a world market which would increasingly come up against insurmountable obstacles: “*In this context it was impossible for any new nation state to enter into the world market on an independent basis, or to undergo the process of primitive accumulation outside this barbaric global chessboard*”.⁸ Consequently, “*In the contemporary imperialist milieu there can be no wars of national defence.*”⁹

This ability to grasp the fact that any national bourgeoisie could only operate inside the imperialist system led her to criticise the national policy of the Bolsheviks after 1917, when the Soviets accepted the independence of Ukraine, Finland, Lithuania, etc, in order to “win over the masses”. The following lines admirably prophesy the consequences of the national policy of the CI in the 1920s: “*One after another, these ‘nations’ used the freshly granted freedoms to ally themselves with German imperialism against the Russian revolution as its mortal enemy, and under German protection, to carry the banner of counter-revolution into Russia itself.*”¹⁰

The Baku Congress

The national question was raised for the first time in the CI during the Second World Congress. Beginning from the erroneous conception of imperialism held by the Bolsheviks in particular, the Congress considered that “*a policy must be pursued that will achieve the closest alliance, with Soviet Russia, of all the national and colonial liberation movements. The form of this alliance should be determined by the degree of development of the communist movement in the proletariat of each country, or of the bourgeois-democratic liberation movement of the workers and peasants in backward countries or among backward nationalities.*”¹¹

The Congress of the Peoples of the East, held in Baku between the 1st and the 8th of September 1920, was given the task of putting into practice the orientations of the Second World Congress which had finished a few weeks earlier. Nearly 1900 delegates, coming mainly from the Near

8. Ibid. The rise of China as a major imperialist contender at the end of the 20th century does not overturn this overall analysis: first because it arose in the specific circumstances brought about by capitalist decomposition, and secondly because its emergence as a highly militarised and expansionist state has no progressive content whatever.

9. Rosa Luxemburg, *Junius Pamphlet*, 1915.

10. Rosa Luxemburg, *The Russian Revolution*, 1918.

11. “Theses on the national and colonial question”, Second Congress of the CI.

East and Asia, met together. While nearly two thirds of the organisations represented proclaimed themselves to be communist, their adherence was extremely superficial. “The national elites were more attracted to the organisation and effectiveness of the modes of action proposed by the Bolsheviks than by communist ideology”¹² This is why the assembly was a grand bazaar made up of multiple classes and social strata, coming for all sorts of reasons, but very few with the firm intention of working consciously for the development of the world proletarian revolution. The description of the composition of the Congress given by Zinoviev to the Executive Committee of the CI after his return from Baku needs no comment: “The Baku Congress was composed of a communist fraction and a much bigger non-party fraction. The latter was in turn divided into two groups: one effectively made up of non-party elements, including the representatives of the peasants and the semi-proletarian population of the towns, the other formed by people who defined themselves as non-party but in fact belonged to bourgeois parties.”¹³

For a number of delegations, the building of a revolutionary communist movement in the East was secondary and even of no interest. For many of them, it was a question of ensuring the aid of Soviet Russia in order to kick out British colonialism and realise their own dreams of national sovereignty.

What was the attitude of the representatives of the CI towards these evidently bourgeois demands? Instead of defending proletarian internationalism with the greatest firmness, the CI delegation insisted on its support for bourgeois nationalist movements, and called on the peoples of the East to join “the first truly Holy war, under the red banner of the Communist International”, in order to wage a crusade against “the common enemy, British imperialism”.

The important concessions accorded to the nationalist parties and the whole policy carried out at Baku was already dictated by the need to defend the Soviet Republic rather than by the interests of the world revolution. This central position of the CI, established at the Second Congress, showed how far the opportunist tendency had gained ground. There were of course criticisms of these attempts to reconcile nationalism and proletarian internationalism: Lenin warned against “painting nationalism red”, and John Reed, who had been present at Baku, also objected

to “this demagoguery and this parade”, but “such responses failed to address the roots of the opportunist course being followed, remaining instead on a centrist terrain of conciliation with more open expression of opportunism, and hiding behind the Theses of the Second Congress, which, to say the least, covered a multitude of sins in the revolutionary movement.”¹⁴

Little by little, the CI becomes an instrument of Russian imperialism

The retreat of the revolution in western Europe and the isolation of the proletariat in Russia in the most dramatic conditions gradually led the CI to become an instrument of Bolshevik foreign policy – the Bolsheviks themselves, as the years passed, turning into the administrators of Russian capital.¹⁵ While this fatal evolution was partly linked to the Bolsheviks’ erroneous ideas about the relationship between class, party and state in the period of transition, the main reason lay in the irreversible degeneration of the revolution from the 1920s on.¹⁶

It was first and foremost in the name of the defence of the Soviet State that the Bolsheviks and the CI would make alliances with or directly support national liberation movements. From 1920, the world party gave its support to the movement of Kemal Atatürk, whose interests were very far from the policies of the International, as Zinoviev admitted. But this alliance was a means to push the British out of the region. Even though this nationalist movement would shortly execute the leaders of the Communist Party of Turkey, the CI continued to see potential in it, and maintained its alliance with a country whose geographical position was strategically important to the Russian state. This didn’t stop Kemal from turning on his ally and making an alliance with the Entente in 1923.

If the policy of support for national liberation movements was, for a certain period, an erroneous position within the workers’ movement, by the end of the 1920s it had become the imperialist strategy of a capitalist power like all the others. The CI’s support for the Kuomintang nationalists in China which led to the massacre of the workers of Shanghai in 1927 was a decisive episode in this process of degeneration. Before that, the CI had supported the nationalist movement led by Abd El-Krim in the war of the Rif (1921-26) and the Druze in Syria in 1926. Consequently “such overt acts of treason demonstrated that the Stalinist faction, which had by

then won almost complete dominion over the CI and its parties, was no longer an opportunist current within the workers’ movement but a direct expression of the capitalist counter-revolution.”¹⁷

Winning the masses at the expense of principles

The formation of “mass” Communist Parties in the West

As we showed in the first part of this study,¹⁸ only a handful of properly constituted Communist Parties were present at the Founding Congress of the CI in March 1919. In the weeks that followed, the International undertook a whole work aimed at forming Communist Parties: “The Communist International does not aim to form small communist sects seeking to exert influence on the working masses through propaganda and agitation. Rather, from the earliest days after its formation, it has clearly and unambiguously pursued the goal of taking part in the struggles of the working masses, leading these struggles in a communist direction, and, through the struggle, forming large, tested, mass revolutionary Communist Parties”.¹⁹ This orientation was based on the conviction that there would be a rapid extension of the revolution in western Europe, and consequently that there was a pressing need to equip the working class in different countries with parties that would make it possible to guide the revolutionary action of the masses.

Thus the Bolsheviks pushed not only for the formation of mass Communist Parties as quickly as possible, but also on the basis of a compromise between the left wing of the workers’ movement and the centrist current which had not broken with the views and weaknesses of the Second International. In the majority of cases, these parties were not engendered out of nothing but emerged from a decantation within the Socialist Parties of the Second International. This was notably the case with the Communist Party of Italy, formed at the Livorno Congress of January 1921, or of the French Communist Party which saw the light of day at the Tours Congress of December 1920. Thus, from their inception, the parties carried within themselves a whole series of organisational detritus and weaknesses which could only further compromise the capacity of these organisations to give a clear orientation to the masses. While Lenin and the main animators of the International were fully

12. Edith Chabrier, “Les délégués du premier Congrès des peuples d’Orient (Bakou, 1er-8 septembre 1920)” in *Cahiers du monde russe et soviétique*, vol. 26, n° 1, January March 1985, pp21-42.

13. Ibid.

14. “Communists and the National Question”, part three, *International Review* n° 42.

15. Ibid.

16. See “The degeneration of the Russian revolution” in *International Review* n° 3.

17. “Communists and the National Question”, part three, *International Review* n° 42.

18. “100 years after the foundation of the Communist International: What lessons can we draw for future combats?”, *International Review* n° 162.

19. “Theses on Tactics”, Third Congress of the CI.

aware of these concessions being made and the danger this could represent, they counted on the capacity of the parties to fight against them. In reality, Lenin seriously underestimated the danger. The adoption of the 21 conditions for joining the CI at the Second World Congress, which was rightly considered a step forward in the struggle against reformism, was not really followed up. Lenin's whole approach was based on the idea that the march towards the revolution could not be interrupted, that the development of the CI at the expense of the Second International and the Two and Half International was more or less an accomplished fact.²⁰

In a situation where the masses were not yet ready to take power, “the Communist Parties’ current task consists not in accelerating the revolution, but in intensifying the preparation of the proletariat.”²¹ For these reasons, one of the orientations of the Second Congress was to “unite the scattered Communist forces, to form a single Communist Party in every country (or to reinforce or renovate the already existing Party) in order to increase tenfold the work of preparing the proletariat for the conquest of political power – political power, moreover, in the form of the dictatorship of the proletariat. The ordinary socialist work conducted by groups and parties which recognise the dictatorship of the proletariat has by no means undergone that fundamental reorganisation, that fundamental renovation, which is essential before this work can be considered communist work and adequate to the tasks to be accomplished on the eve of proletarian dictatorship.”²² A correct orientation but based on an erroneous practice.

This explains the aberration of the fusion between the USPD²³ and the KPD at the Halles Congress of 12 October 1920. The most significant example is probably the creation of the French Communist Party (PCF). The latter was formed in December 1920 following a split with the SFIO (Socialist Party) whose main leaders had

20. “The parties of the Communist International will become mass revolutionary parties only when they overcome the remnants and traditions of opportunism in their ranks. This can be done by seeking close ties with the struggling masses of workers, deducing their tasks from the proletariat’s ongoing struggles, rejecting the opportunist policy of covering up and concealing the unbridgeable antagonisms, and also avoiding revolutionary verbiage that obstructs insight into the real relationship of forces and overlooks the difficulties of the struggle.” “Theses on Tactics”, Third Congress of the CI.

21. “The fundamental tasks of the Communist International”, Second Congress of the CI, July 1920.

22. Ibid.

23. Independent Social Democratic Party of Germany, the majority of which had not broken from reformism and in fact rejected the dictatorship of the proletariat and organisation in workers’ councils.

rallied to the “Union Sacrée” during the First World war. Its birth was the result of a compromise, encouraged by the CI, between the left (a weak minority) and a centrist current which was strongly in the majority. As we have shown in our pamphlet *How the PCF passed over to the service of capital*,²⁴ “this tactic was a disaster because membership was not – unlike all the other European CPs – based on the Twenty One conditions for joining the CI, which demanded in particular a complete and definitive break with the opportunist policy of centrism towards reformism, social patriotism and pacifism, but on much less selective criteria. The objective of this tactic of the CI was to draw the majority to separate from the right wing of social democracy, an openly patriotic party which had participated in capitalist governments... The centrist majority of the new party was infested with opportunists, who had more or less ‘repented’ of having joined the Union Sacrée... At the same time, the party was also joined by another important component, saturated with anarchist-type federalism (represented in particular by the Federation of the Seine), which on every occasion, on the organisational level, lined up with the centre against the left to oppose international centralisation and above all the orientations of the CI towards the young French party”. Gangrened by opportunism, the PCF would submit fully to the degeneration of the CI, which began to weigh heavily at the Third Congress. It was to become one of the principal agents of Stalinism.²⁵ It was the same in Italy since, following a split with the Socialist Party of Italy at the Livorno Congress, the CP of Italy was made up of a marxist, communist left wing resolutely committed to the struggle against opportunism in the CI, and a centre led by Gramsci and Togliatti, incapable of understanding the political role of the soviets as centralised organs of power, and underestimating the political role of the party. The centre of the party was then to act as the support for the CI in the exclusion of the left during the period of “Bolshevisation”.

Finally, the most caricatural example was perhaps that of the CP of Czechoslovakia, formed around the Šmeral tendency which had supported the Hapsburg monarchy during the imperialist war of 1914–18.

How can we explain such compromises? How can we explain that the Bolsheviks, who for years had waged a hard battle to preserve intransigent principles, came to accept such concessions? The Communist

24. *Comment le PCF est passé au service du capital*, ICC pamphlet in French.

25. For more details see the pamphlet *Comment le PCF est passé au service du capital*.

Left of Italy attentively examined this episode and put forward an initial response: “It is evident that this was not a sudden conversion of the Bolsheviks to another approach towards the formation of Communist Parties, but essentially based on a historic perspective which envisaged the possibility of avoiding the difficult path that led to the foundation of the Bolshevik Party. In 1918–20, Lenin and the Bolsheviks were counting on the immediate outbreak of the world revolution and, because of this, saw the foundation of Communist Parties in different countries as so many support bases for the revolutionary action of the Russian state, which seemed to them to be the essential element in the overthrow of the capitalist world”.²⁶

Undoubtedly, the halt in the advance of the revolution during this period and the desperate efforts to deal with it led Lenin and the Bolsheviks to lower their guard on the defence of principles and so to fall into opportunism. But it was also the persistence of errors on the tasks of the party and its relationship to the class which contributed to forcing the formation of CPs on a totally confused basis in a period marked by the first retreats of the proletariat.

The creation of “phantom” Communist Parties in the East

The opportunist method through which its member parties were formed found its ultimate expression in the birth of Communist Parties in the colonial world.

After the Baku Congress, the Executive of the CI set up a central bureau for Asia, in charge of work towards the Middle East and as far as India. This organ, composed of Sokolnikov, Grefor Safarov and MN Roy, was installed in Tashkent in Uzbekistan. Then in January 1921, a CI secretariat of the Far East was set up in Irkutsk. Thus, faced with the retreat of the revolution in western Europe, the CI wanted to give itself the means to “accelerate” the revolution in the East. With this objective, between 1919 and 1923, in the East and the Far East, Communist Parties were formed on extremely fragile theoretical and political bases.

Before this period, CPs had arisen in Turkey, Iran, Palestine and Egypt, but as the Trotskyist historian Pierre Broué observed, “There was no lack of problems between the International and these Communist Parties who knew nothing about communism and represented countries where properly proletarian strata were insignificant. Which didn’t prevent their leaders from claiming a doctrinal purity and a rigorously workerist schema for the revolution which they

26. “En marge d’un anniversaire”, *Bilan* n°4, February 1934.

believed to be at hand".²⁷

In India, the elements who were moving towards the International all had a nationalist past. The best known was MN Roy. The CI ordered the group formed around the latter to enter into the nationalist Congress Party led by Gandhi, initially by making an alliance with the so-called "revolutionary" and "communist" left wing, then with all the factions opposed to Gandhi following the violent clashes that took place on 4 February 1922 during a campaign of civil disobedience launched by Gandhi himself.²⁸ Roy was led to defend an openly opportunist programme within the Congress Party: national independence, universal suffrage, abolition of large landed property, nationalisation of public services. What's more, the goal was not to get its programme adopted but to provoke its rejection by the leadership of the party which would thus "unmask" itself. This enterprise ended in utter failure. Roy's programme didn't receive any favourable echo and the life of the "communist" group very quickly degenerated into internal quarrels. After that the communists were very harshly repressed. They were arrested and then convicted of conspiracy, which put an end to the policies of the CI in India.²⁹

In east Asia, the CI more or less adopted the same irresponsible approach. The structuring of a communist movement in China was led by the Far Eastern Bureau through making contact with intellectuals and students who had been won over to "Bolshevism". The Communist Party of China was constituted at a conference held in Shanghai in July 1921. Made up of a few dozen militants it then went through a significant phase of growth, reaching nearly 20,000 members in 1927. While this numerical reinforcement did express the revolutionary spirit which animated the Chinese working class in a period of intense social struggles, it nevertheless remained the case that militants joined the party on very superficial theoretical and political bases. Again, the same irresponsible method opened the door to the disarming of the party faced with the opportunist policy of the CI towards the Kuomintang. In January 1922, the Conference of the Peoples of the East held in Moscow laid the bases for class collaboration through an "anti-imperialist bloc". At the instigation of the CI's Executive, the Chinese CP launched the slogan of a the "anti-imperialist united front with the Kuomintang" and called for communists to join the latter as individuals.

27. Pierre Broué, *Histoire de l'Internationale Communiste*, 1919-1943, Fayard, 1997.

28. Although Roy himself was opposed to this tactic.

29. Op Cit *Histoire de l'Internationale Communiste*.

This policy of class collaboration was the result of secret negotiations between the USSR and the Kuomintang. In June 1923 the Third Congress of the Chinese CP voted for its members to join the Kuomintang. At first this policy of subordinating itself to a bourgeois party met with opposition from within the young party, and this included part of its leadership.³⁰ But the political fragility and inexperience of this opposition rendered it incapable of effectively combating the erroneous and suicidal directives of the International. And so "this policy had disastrous consequences for the working class movement in China. While strike movements and demonstrations arose spontaneously and impetuously, the Communist Party, merged with the Kuomintang, was incapable of orientating the working class, of putting forward independent class politics, despite the incontestable heroism of the communist militants who were frequently found in the front ranks of the workers' struggles. Equally bereft of unitary organisations of political struggle, such as the workers' councils, at the demand of the CPC itself the working class put its confidence in the Kuomintang, in other words in the bourgeoisie."³¹

We could give many more examples of Communist Parties formed in backward countries where the working class was very weak and which, in the wake of defeats, very quickly became bourgeois organisations. For now it's necessary to insist that the formation of "mass parties", in the West as well as the East, was a factor aggravating the difficulties of the proletariat to face up to the reflux of the revolutionary wave, making it impossible to conduct a retreat in good order.

The policy of the United Front

At its Third Congress, the CI adopted the policy of the "Workers' United Front".³² This involved making alliances with the organisations of social democracy, carrying out common actions with similar demands, with the idea that this would unmask the

30. One of the founding members of the party, Chen Duxiu made a lucid critique of this orientation. "The main reason for our opposition was this: entering the Kuomintang brought confusion into the class organisation, obstructed our politics and meant subordinating it to those of the Kuomintang. The CI delegate literally told us that 'the present period is one in which communists have to do coolie work for the Kuomintang'. From that point on, the party was no longer the party of the proletariat. It transformed itself into the extreme left of the bourgeoisie and began to descend into opportunism" (Chen Duxiu, "Letter to all the comrades of the Chinese CP", 10 December 1929, in Broué, op cit).

31. "China's 'revolution' of 1949: a link in the chain of imperialist war", *International Review* n° 81.

32. The "Open Letter" of 7 January 1921 addressed by the KPD Centrale to other organisations (SPD, USPD, KAPD), calling for common action among the masses and the struggles to come, was one of the premises of this policy.

counter-revolutionary role of these organisations in the eyes of the masses.

This orientation was fully concretised at the Fourth Congress and marked a complete about-turn with regard to the founding Congress, in which the new International announced its clear determination to fight against all the forces of the social democratic current, inviting "the workers of all countries to struggle energetically against the Yellow International and protect the broad masses from this lying and fraudulent organisation".³³ What was it that, only two years later, pushed the CI to adopt a policy of alliances with parties which had been turned into the most effective agents of the counter-revolution?

Had they made an honourable amends and repented of their former crimes? Quite obviously not. Here again it was a question of "not cutting ourselves off from the masses": "The argument of the CI to justify the necessity for the United Front was based mainly on the fact that the reflux had reinforced the weight of social democracy, and that, to fight against it, it was necessary not to cut yourself off from the masses who were prisoners of this mystification. It was necessary to work towards a denunciation of social democracy via alliances with it, in the case of the strongest Communist Parties (In Germany, the CP came out in favour of a unified proletarian front and recognised the possibility of supporting a united workers' government), or via entrism for the weaker parties ('The British Communists must launch a vigorous campaign for their admittance to the Labour Party', as it said in the Theses on the United Front from the Fourth Congress)".³⁴

This opportunist line was combated and sharply denounced by the groups on the left of the CI. The KAPD began the struggle at the Third Congress prior to being expelled from the CI shortly afterwards. The left of the CP of Italy followed it at the Fourth Congress, declaring that the party would not accept "being part of organisms made up of different political organisations... it would thus avoid participating in joint declarations with political parties when these declarations contradicted its programme and are presented to the proletariat as the result of negotiations aiming at finding a common line of action"³⁵ Miasnikov's Workers' Group also rejected the United Front. In its Manifesto it defended a position towards the parties of the Second International that was clearly in conformity with the interests

33. "Attitude towards the Socialist currents and the Berne Conference", First CI Congress.

34. "Front unique, front anti-proletarien", *Révolution Internationale* n° 45, January 1978.

35. Intervention of the delegation of the CP of Italy at the Fourth Comintern Congress, in our book *The Italian Communist Left*.

of the revolution: *“It will not be the United Front with the Second International or the Two and a Half International which will lead to the victory of the revolution, but the war against them. That is the slogan of the future world social revolution”*. History would confirm the foresight and intransigence of the groups of the left. With the inversion of the balance of forces, the dominant ideology regained its hold over the masses. In these circumstances, the role of the party was not to follow the direction of the class but to defend the revolutionary programme and principles within it. In the period of the decadence of capitalism, the return to a “minimum programme”, even on a temporary basis, had become impossible. This was another lesson drawn later on by the Communist Left of Italy: *“In 1921, the change in the situation did not alter the fundamental characteristic of the epoch as the revolutionary turbulence of 1923, 1925, 1927 and 1934 (to name only the most important) was to fully confirm... Such a change in the situation would obviously have consequences for the Communist Parties. But the problem was the following: was it necessary to modify the substance of the politics of the Communist Parties, or to deduce from the unfavourable circumstances the need to call on the masses to come together around partial struggles while remaining oriented to a revolutionary outcome,³⁶ once the defeats suffered made it impossible to call directly for the insurrection? The Third Congress, the Enlarged Executive of 1921 and more overtly the Fourth Congress gave a solution to this problem which was prejudicial to the interests of the cause. This was above all through the question of the United Front.”³⁷*

Conclusion

As we have just seen, the period from the Second to that after the Third Congress was marked by a significant penetration of opportunism into the ranks of the Comintern. This was the direct consequence of the erroneous policy of “conquering the masses” at the price of compromises and concessions: support for national liberation struggles, alliance with the traitor parties of the IInd International, participation in parliament and the trade unions, formation of mass parties... The CI was turning its back on what had been the strength of the left fractions within the IInd International: the intransigent defence of communist principles and programme. This is what

36. Given that the conditions for the extension of the revolution were becoming less favourable, it would have been more pertinent to talk about “partial struggles...oriented to a revolutionary perspective”.

37. *Bilan*, April 1934.

Herman Gorter pointed out to Lenin in 1920: *“Now you are working in the Third International differently from the time when you were the party of maximalism. The latter was kept very ‘pure’ and perhaps it still is. Whereas according to you we must now welcome into the International all those who are half, quarter, maybe even one eighth communists... The Russian revolution triumphed through ‘purity’, through the firmness of its principles... Instead of now applying this proven tactic to all the other countries, and thus strengthening the Third International from within, now you are making a volte-face and just like social democracy of yesterday, are going over to opportunism. This is what we are now told to enter: the unions, the Independents, the French centre, a portion of the Labour Party.”³⁸*

The fundamental error of the Communist International was to consider that, merely by its own efforts, it was possible to “conquer” the working masses, to free them from the influence of social democracy and thus raise their level of consciousness and lead them to communism.

From this flowed the policy of the United Front to unmask and denounce social democracy; participation in parliament to make use of the divisions among the bourgeois parties; work in trade unions in order to bring them back to the proletarian camp and the side of the revolution.³⁹ None of the attempts had the hoped-for results. On the contrary, they only precipitated the CI towards betraying the proletarian camp. Instead of raising class consciousness, these tactics simply spread confusion and disorientation among the masses, rendering them more vulnerable to the traps of the bourgeoisie. Although the groups on the left of the CI never managed to unite, they all agreed on the suicidal nature of this policy which they saw as leading to the defeat of the workers’ movement and the death of the revolution. At root these groups defended a very different vision of the relationship between party and class.⁴⁰ The role of the

38. Herman Gorter, “Reply to comrade Lenin on ‘Left Wing Communism, an Infantile Disorder’”, 1920.

39. The union question was already examined in the first part of this series so we won’t return to it here. Let’s recall however that whereas the First Congress had registered the bankruptcy of the unions as well as of social democracy (although the debate on the class nature of the unions in the wake of the First World War was not closed), the CI reversed its position and advocated the regeneration of the unions by fighting within them, in order to banish their leadership and win the masses to communism. This illusory tactic was put forward at the Third Congress with the call for the formation of the Red International of Trade Unions. It was opposed by certain left groups (particularly the German left), who rightly considered that the unions were no longer organs of proletarian struggle.

40. Despite the fact that a large part of the German and Dutch left later on moved towards denying the need for the party, forming the councilist current.

party was not to fuel the illusions in the class and still less to embroil it in dubious and dangerous tactics but rather to raise its level of consciousness through a defence of proletarian principles and to ensure that no concessions were made on matters of principle. This was the only real compass that could point in the direction of revolution at a time when the wave unleashed by October 1917 in Russia was going through its first retreats. (To be continued).

Najek, 16 June 2020

The communist programme in the phase of the decomposition of capitalism

Bordiga and the big city

“*Bright lights, big city, gone to my baby’s head*” - Jimmy and Mary Reed, 1961



This article is being written in the midst of the global Covid-19 crisis, a startling confirmation that we are living through the terminal phase of capitalist decadence. The pandemic, which is a product of the profoundly distorted relationship between humanity and the natural world under the reign of capital, highlights the problem of capitalist urbanisation which previous revolutionaries, notably Engels and Bordiga, have analysed in some depth. Although we have looked at their contributions on this question in previous articles in this series,¹ it thus seems opportune to raise the issue again. Furthermore, we have recently passed the 50th anniversary of Bordiga’s death in July 1970, so the article can also serve as part of our tribute to a communist whose work we value very highly, despite our disagreements with many of his ideas. With this article, we begin a new “volume” of the series on communism, specifically aimed at looking at the possibilities and problems of the proletarian revolution in the phase of capitalist decomposition.

Revolution in the face of capitalist decomposition

In an earlier part of this series, we published a number of articles which looked at the way that the communist parties which emerged during the great revolutionary wave of 1917-23 had tried to take the communist programme from the abstract to the concrete – to formulate a series of measures to be taken by the workers’ councils in the process of taking power out of the hands of the capitalist class.² And we think that

1. “The transformation of social relations”, *International Review* n° 85. “Damen, Bordiga, and the passion for communism”, *International Review* n° 158.

2 “1918: The programme of the German Communist Party”, *International Review* n° 93. “1919: the

it is still perfectly valid for revolutionaries to pose the question: what would be the fundamentals of the programme that the communist organisation of the future – the world party – would be obliged to put forward in an authentic revolutionary upsurge? What would be the most urgent tasks confronting the working class when it is moving towards the taking of political power on a global scale? What would be the key political, economic and social measures to be implemented by the dictatorship of the proletariat, which remains the necessary political precondition for the construction of a communist society?

programme of the dictatorship of the proletariat” *International Review* n° 95. “The programme of the KAPD”, *International Review* n° 97.

The revolutionary movements of 1917-23, like the world imperialist war which fuelled them, were clear proof that capitalism had entered its “epoch of social revolution”, of decadence. Henceforward the progress and even survival of humanity would be increasingly under threat unless the capitalist social relation was overcome on a world scale. In this sense the fundamental aims of a future proletarian revolution are in full continuity with the programmes that were put forward at the onset of the period of decadence. But this period has now lasted over a century and in our view the contradictions accumulated over this century have opened up a terminal phase of capitalist decline, the phase we call decomposition, in which the continuation of the capitalist system contains the growing danger that the very conditions for a future communist society are being undermined. This is particularly evident at the “ecological” level: in 1917-23 the problems posed by pollution and the destruction of the natural environment were far less developed than they are today. Capitalism has so distorted the “metabolic exchange” between man and nature that at the very least, a victorious revolution would have to dedicate an enormous amount of human and technical resources simply to cleaning up the mess that capitalism will have bequeathed to us. Similarly, the whole process of decomposition, which has exacerbated the tendency towards social atomisation, towards the attitude of “every man for himself” inherent in capitalist society, will leave a very damaging imprint on the human beings who will have to construct a new community founded on association and solidarity. We also have to recall a lesson from the Russian revolution: given the certainty that the bourgeoisie will resist the proletarian revolution with all its might, the victory of the latter will involve a civil war which could cause incalculable damage, not only in terms of human lives and further ecological destruction, but also at the level of consciousness, since the military terrain is not at all the most propitious for the flowering of proletarian self-organisation, consciousness and morality. In Russia in 1920, the Soviet state emerged victorious in the civil war, but the proletariat had largely

lost control over it. Thus, when trying to understand the problems of communist society “just as it emerges from capitalist society; which is thus in every respect, economically, morally and intellectually, still stamped with the birth marks of the old society from whose womb it emerges”,³ we must recognise that these birthmarks will probably be far uglier and potentially more damaging than they were in the days of Marx and even of Lenin. The first phases of communism will thus not be an idyllic waking up on a May morning, but a long and intense work of reconstruction from the ruins. This recognition will have to inform our understanding of all the tasks of the transitional period, even if we continue to base our anticipations of the future on the conviction that the proletariat can indeed carry out its revolutionary mission—despite everything.

The historic context of Bordiga's “The immediate programme of the revolution”

Throughout this long series we have tried to understand the development of the communist project as the fruit of the real historical experience of the class struggle, and of the reflection on that experience by the most conscious minorities of the proletariat. And in this article we want to proceed with this historical method, by looking at an attempt to elaborate an updated version of the “immediate programmes” of 1917-23, one which has itself become part of the history of the communist movement. We refer to the text written by Amadeo Bordiga in 1953 and published in *Sul Filo del Tempo*, “The immediate programme of the revolution”, which we have already mentioned in a previous article in this series⁴ with the promise of returning to it in more detail. In our view, it is essential that any future attempts to formulate such an “immediate programme” bases itself on the strengths of these previous efforts while radically criticising their weaknesses. The whole text, which has the merit of being very succinct, now follows.

“1. *With the resurgence of the movement which occurred on a world scale after the First World War and which was expressed in Italy by the founding of the PCI, it became clear that the most pressing question was the seizure of political power, which the proletariat could not accomplish by legal means but through violence, that the best opportunity for reaching that end was the military defeat of one's own country, and that the political form after victory was to be the dictatorship of the proletariat,*

which in turn is the first precondition for the following task of socio-economic overthrow.

2. *The Communist Manifesto clearly pointed out the different measures are to be grasped as gradually possible and 'despotic' - because the road to complete communism is very long - in dependence upon the level of development of the productive forces in the country in which the proletariat first attains victory and in accordance with how quickly this victory spreads to other countries. It designates the measures which in 1848 were the order of the day for the advanced countries and it emphasises that they are not to be treated as complete socialism but as steps which are to be identified as preliminary, immediate and essentially 'contradictory'.*

3. *Later in some countries many of the measures at that time considered to be those of the proletarian dictatorship were implemented by the bourgeoisie itself: i.e. free public education, a national bank etc.*

This was one of the aspects which deceived those who did not follow a fixed theory, but believed it required perpetual further development as a result of historical change. That the bourgeoisie itself took these specific measures does not mean that the exact laws and predictions on the transition from the capitalist to the socialist mode of production have to be changed in their entire economic, political and social configuration; It only means that the first post-revolutionary, the lower and final higher stages of socialism (or total communism) are still antecedent periods, which is to say that the economics of transition will be somewhat easier.

4. *The distinguishing mark of classical opportunism was to make believe that the bourgeois democratic state could accomplish all these measures from first to last if only the proletariat brought enough pressure to bear, and that it was even possible to accomplish this in a legal manner. However these various 'corrections' - insofar as they were compatible with the capitalist mode of production - were in that case in the interest of the survival of capitalism and their implementation served to postpone its collapse, while those which were not compatible were naturally not applied.*

5. *With its formula of an always more widely developed popular democracy within the context of the parliamentary constitution contemporary opportunism has taken up a different and more evil duty.*

Not only does it make the proletariat think that a state standing over classes and parties is capable of carrying out some of its own fundamental tasks (which is to say it diffuses defeatism with regards to dictator-

ship - like social democracy before it), it deploys the masses it organises in struggles for 'democratic and progressive' social arrangements in diametrical opposition to those which proletarian power has set as its goal since 1848 and the Manifesto.

6. *Nothing better illustrates the full magnitude of this retrogression than a listing of the measures to take after the seizure of power in a country of the capitalist West. After a century these “corrections” are different from those enumerated in the Manifesto, however their characteristics are the same.*

7. *A listing of these demands looks like this:*

- a) *'De-investment of capital': means of production are assigned a smaller proportion in relation to consumer goods*
- b) *Increase of production costs' - so that as long as wages, money and the market still exist - more remuneration is exchanged for less labour time.*
- c) *'Drastic reduction of labour time' - by at least half as unemployment and socially useless and damaging activities will shortly become things of the past.*
- d) *A reduction in the mass of what is produced through an 'under-production plan' which is to say the concentration of production on what is necessary as well as an 'authoritarian regulation of consumption' by which the promotion of useless, damaging and luxury consumption goods is combated and activities which propagate a reactionary mentality are violently prohibited.*
- e) *Rapid 'dissolution of the boundaries of the enterprise' whereby decisions on production are not assigned to the workforce, but the new consumption plan determines what is to be produced.*
- f) *'Rapid abolition of social services' whereby the charity handouts characteristic of commodity production are replaced by a social (initial minimum) provision for those incapable of work.*
- g) *'Construction freeze' on the rings of housing and workplaces around major and small cities in order to spread the population more and more equally throughout the land area of the country. With a ban on unnecessary transportation, limitation of traffic and speed of transportation.*
- h) *'A decisive struggle against professional specialisation' and the social division of labour though the removal of any possibility of making a career or obtaining a title.*
- i) *Immediate politically determined*

3. Marx, *Critique of the Gotha Programme*.

4. “Damen, Bordiga and the Passion for communism”, see note 1.

measures to put the schools, the press, all means of communication and information, as well as the entire spectrum of culture and entertainment under the control of the communist state.

2. It is not surprising that the Stalinists and those akin to them, together with their parties in the West today demand precisely the reverse - not only in terms of the 'institutional' and also political-legal objectives, but even in terms of the 'structural' which is to say socio-economic objectives.

The cause of this is their coordination with the party which presides over the Russian state and its fraternal countries, where the task of social transformation remains that of transition from precapitalist forms to capitalism: With all the corresponding ideological, political, social, and economic demands and pretensions in their baggage aiming towards a bourgeois zenith - they turn away with horror only from a medieval nadir.

Their Western cronies remain nauseating renegades insofar as the feudal danger (which is still material and real in insurgent areas of Asia) is non-existent and false with regards to the bloated super-capitalism across the Atlantic and for the proletarians who stagnate under its civilised, liberal and nationalist knout it is a lie."

The text was published in the year after the split in the Internationalist Communist Party which had been formed in Italy during the war following an important wave of workers' struggles.⁵ The split, however - like the dissolution of Marc's group the Gauche Communiste de France, which also took place in 1952 - was an expression of the fact that, contrary to the hopes of many revolutionaries, the war had not given rise to a new proletarian upsurge but to the deepening of the counter-revolution. The disagreements between the "Damenists" and the "Bordigists" in the Partito Comunista Internazionalista in Italy were partly about different appreciations of the postwar period. Bordiga and his followers tended to have a better grasp of the fact that the period was one of mounting reaction.⁶ And yet here we have Bordiga formulating a list of demands that would be more suited to a moment of open revolutionary struggle. This text thus appears more as a kind of thought experiment than a platform to be taken up by a mass movement. This might to some degree explain some of the more obvious weaknesses and lacunae in

5. We should point out that the text was adopted as a "party document" of the new organisation rather than being simply an individual contribution.

6. But the Damenists were much clearer about many of the lessons of the defeat of the Russian revolution and the positions of the proletariat in capitalism's decadent era. See "Damen, Bordiga and the passion for communism", *International Review* n°158.

the document, although in a deeper sense they are the product of contradictions and inconsistencies which were already embedded in the Bordigist world view.

Reading the remarks that introduce and conclude the text, we can also see that it was written as part of a broader polemic against what the Bordigists describe as the "reformist" currents, in particular the Stalinists, those false inheritors of the tradition of Marx, Engels and Lenin. The main reason that the Bordigists described the official Communist parties as reformist was not so much that they shared the illusions of the Trotskyists that these were still workers' organisations, but more because the Stalinists had increasingly become partisans of forming national fronts with the traditional bourgeois parties and were advocating a gradual "transition" to socialism through the formation of "popular democracies" and various parliamentary coalitions. Against these aberrations, Bordiga reaffirms the fundamentals of the *Communist Manifesto* which takes as its starting point the necessity for the violent conquest of power by the proletariat (in retrospect, we can also point out here the gulf that separates Bordiga from many who "speak in his name", notably the "communisation" currents who often cite Bordiga but who gag on his insistence on the need for the proletarian dictatorship and a communist party). At the same time, still with his sights trained on the Stalinists, Bordiga makes it clear that while the specific "transitional" measures advocated at the end of the second chapter of the 1848 *Manifesto* - heavy progressive income tax, formation of a state bank, state control of communication and key industries etc - may form the backbone of the economic programme of the "reformists", they should not be seen as eternal verities: the *Manifesto* itself emphasised that they were "*not to be treated as complete socialism but as steps which are to be identified as preliminary, immediate and essentially contradictory*", and corresponded to the low level of capitalist development at the time they were drawn up; and indeed quite a few of them have already been implemented by the bourgeoisie itself.

You might be forgiven for taking this to be a refutation of invariance, the idea that the communist programme has remained essentially unchanged since at least 1848. In fact, Bordiga castigates the Stalinists because they "*did not follow a fixed theory, but believed it required perpetual further development as a result of historical change*". And again, he argues that his proposed "corrections" to the immediate programme "*are different from those enumerated in the 'Manifesto'; however their characteristics are the same*". We

find this contradictory and unconvincing. While it's true that certain key elements of the communist programme, such as the necessity for the proletarian dictatorship, do not change, historical experience has indeed brought profound developments in the understanding of how this dictatorship can come about and the political forms that will compose it. This has nothing to do with the "revisionism" of the social democrats, the Stalinists or others who may indeed have used the excuse of "changing with the times" to justify their desertion of the proletarian camp.

Many cons, but some important pros

Examining Bordiga's "corrections" to the measures proposed by the *Manifesto*, you might also be forgiven for only seeing their weaknesses, most notably:

- Despite all the lessons of the revolutionary movements of 1905-23, there is no indication at all of the forms of proletarian political power most suited to implementing the transition to communism. No reference to the soviets, no attempt to build on examples like the KPD programme of 1918 which lays particular emphasis on the need to dismantle the institutions of the bourgeois state, local and central, and to install in their place the power of the workers' councils; no lessons drawn from the degeneration of the Russian revolution about the relationship between party and class, or party and state. Indeed the only mention of any form of political power following the revolution is the "communist state", an atrocious contradiction in terms, as the previous article in this series argued via the contributions of Marc Chirik.⁷ Again, we are faced with the underlying weaknesses of the Bordigist "doctrine" here: organisational forms are not important, what matters is the content injected by the party, which is destined to exercise the dictatorship of the proletariat on behalf of the masses. Furthermore, while Bordiga is of course right to insist in point 5 that production and consumption will be based on a global plan, his ignoring of the question of how the working class will take and hold power in its own hands at every level, from the most local to the most global, implies a top-down vision of centralisation. This is most evident with the paragraph dealing with the spheres of education and culture, where a kind of state monopoly is clearly advocated. We can contrast this with Trotsky's

7. "Marc Chirik and the state in the period of transition", published on the ICC website as part of *International Review* n° 165.

view that the post-revolutionary state should have an “anarchist” approach on the question of art and culture – by which he meant that the state should interfere as little as possible in questions of artistic style, taste or creativity, and should not demand that all art should serve as propaganda for the revolution. More generally, there is little sign in his list of measures of the need for a vast political, moral and cultural struggle to overcome the habits and attitudes inherited not only from capitalism but from thousands of years of class society. He does talk about the need to struggle against “*professional specialisation and the social division of labour*”, but such a struggle demands something more than a ban on titles, while the call to remove “*the possibility of making a career*” only makes sense in the context of a wholesale reorganisation of production and the elimination of the wage system.

- Bordiga was perfectly aware that abolishing “*wages, money and the market*” is a central characteristic of communism,⁸ and we know that it will not be possible to dispense with them all overnight. But apart from advocating “*more remuneration for less labour time*”, Bordiga gives us no indication of what measures can be taken – and taken from the very start of the revolution – that will lead towards the elimination of these key categories of capitalism. In this sense Bordiga’s corrections fail to build on, or coherently criticise, the proposals made by Marx in the *Critique of the Gotha Programme* (the system of labour time vouchers, which we will have to return to in another article).

And yet the document retains considerable interest for us in trying to understand what would be the principal problems and priorities facing a communist revolution that would be taking place not at the dawn of capitalism’s decadence, as in 1917-23, but after an entire century in which the slide towards barbarism has continued to accelerate, and the threat to humanity’s very survival is far greater than it was a hundred years ago.

The methods of communist reconstruction

Bordiga’s document makes no attempt to draw a balance sheet of the successes and failures of the Russian revolution at the political level, and indeed only makes a cursory reference to the revolutionary wave that followed the First World War. However, in one respect, it does seek to apply an important lesson from the eco-

nomic policies adopted by the Bolsheviks: Bordiga’s proposals are pertinent because they recognise that the road to material abundance and a classless society cannot be based on a programme of “socialist accumulation”, in which consumption is still subject to “production for production’s sake” (which is actually production for the sake of value), living labour subjected to dead labour. To be sure, communist revolution has become a historic necessity because capitalist social relations have become a fetter on the development of the productive forces. But from the communist point of view, the development of the productive forces has a very different content from its application in capitalist society, where it is driven by the profit motive and thus the urge to accumulate. Communism will certainly make full use of the scientific and technological advances achieved under capitalism, but it will turn them to human use, so that they become servants of the real “development” posited by communism: the full flowering of the productive, i.e. the creative powers of the associated individuals. One example will suffice here: with the development of computerisation and robotisation, capitalism has promised us an end to drudgery and a “leisure society”. In reality, these potential boons have brought the misery of unemployment or precarious work to some, and an increased work-load to others, with the mounting pressure on employees to carry on working at their computers anywhere and at any time of the day.

In concrete terms, the first four points of his programme involve: a demand to stop focusing on the production of machines to produce more machines, and the gearing of production towards direct consumption. Under capitalism, of course, the latter has meant the production of ever more “useless, damaging and luxury consumption goods” – exemplified today in the production of more and more sophisticated computers or mobile phones which are designed to fail after a limited period and cannot be repaired, or by the immensely polluting automobile and fast fashion industries, in which “consumer demand” is driven to the point of frenzy by advertising and social media. For the working class in power the reorientation of consumption will focus on the urgent need to provide all human beings, across the planet, with the fundamental necessities of life. We will have to return to these questions in other articles but we can mention some of the most obvious:

- Nourishment. Capitalism in decay has presented humanity with a gigantic contradiction between the possibilities of producing enough food for all, and the real and permanent undernourishment

that haunts large parts of the planet, including sectors of the population in the most advanced countries, while both in the central and more peripheral countries millions suffer from obesity and poor quality diet deliberately maintained by the food producing and marketing corporations, which also contribute enormously to global carbon emissions, deforestation and other threats to the world’s ecology such as plastic pollution. The world’s supply of water has also become a fundamental problem exacerbated by global warming. The working class will thus have to feed the world but without resorting to the capitalist methods that have led us to this impasse, not least contemporary “factory farming” with its disgusting cruelty to animals and its probable connection to pandemic disease. It will have to resolve the antagonism between plentiful food and healthy eating. And all this on the basis of a social-economic transformation that cannot be solved immediately: it is one thing, for example, to expropriate the big “agribusiness” and state owned sources of food production, another to integrate the small-holding farmers or peasants into cooperative and then associated production, which will take time and will make it impossible to immediately overcome exchange relations between the socialised sector and the small holders.

- Housing: homelessness has become endemic in all capitalist countries, not least the cities of the capitalist centre; millions are herded together in the vast slums that surround the cities of the “global south” (and again, also in parts of the “global north”); and in the last few decades the proliferation of war and ecological destruction has created a refugee problem of proportions not seen since the end of the Second World War, with further millions living in desperate conditions in camps which provide little protection from the elements, from disease, and from all kinds of exploitation, including modern forms of slavery. At the same time, the great cities of the world have engaged in a frenzy of building mainly devoted to speculation, luxury apartments and economic activities which would have no place in a communist society. Large scale expropriation of such misused and misconceived buildings can provide a temporary solution to the worst expressions of homelessness, but in the long term the housing of communist humanity cannot be based on patching up already inadequate and increasingly dilapidated housing stock where residents are squeezed into cage-like compartments. The re-housing of

8. See “Damen, Bordiga...”, op cit.

much of the world population poses a much greater challenge: the overcoming of the contradiction between town and country, which has nothing in common with the untrammelled expansion of the cities that we are witnessing in this phase of capitalism. We will return to this below.

- Health care: health, as every report on public health concludes, is a social, class question. Those who are poorly fed and badly housed, with limited access to healthcare, die much sooner than those who eat well, have decent housing and can receive adequate medical treatment when they are ill. The current Covid-19 pandemic, however, is exposing the limits of all existing “health services”, even in the most powerful capitalist countries, not least because they cannot escape the logic of competition between national capitalist units, whereas a pandemic has no respect for national borders and underlines the necessity for something that can only be a nightmare for “Big Pharma” and the Trumps of this world, but also for that left wing version of nationalism which does not want us to see beyond “our National Health Service”: medicine, healthcare and research that is not state-run, but truly socialised, and not national but “without borders”: in short, a planetary health service.

Waste not, want not

But at the same time, these admittedly immense tasks, which are merely the starting point for a new human culture, cannot be envisaged as the result of a brutal increase in the working day. On the contrary, they must be linked to a drastic reduction in labour time, without which, we should add, the direct participation of the producers in the political life of general assemblies and councils will not be feasible. And this reduction is to be achieved to a large extent by the elimination of waste: the waste of unemployment and of “socially useless and damaging activities”.

Already at the beginning of capitalism, in a speech at Elberfeld in 1845, Engels stigmatised the way that capitalism could not avoid a terrible misuse of human energy and insisted that only a communist transformation could solve the problem.

“From the economic point of view the present arrangement of society is surely the most irrational and unpractical we can possibly conceive. The opposition of interests results in a great amount of labour power being utilised in a way from which society gains nothing, and in a substantial amount of capital being unnecessarily lost without reproducing itself. We already see

this in the commercial crises; we see how masses of goods, all of which men have produced with great effort, are thrown away at prices which cause loss to the sellers; we see how masses of capital, accumulated with great effort, disappear before the very eyes of their owners as a result of bankruptcies. Let us, however, discuss present-day trade in a little more detail. Consider through how many hands every product must go before it reaches the actual consumer. Consider, gentlemen, how many speculating, swindling superfluous middlemen have now forced themselves in between the producer and the consumer! Let us take, for example, a bale of cotton produced in North America. The bale passes from the hands of the planter into those of the agent on some station or other on the Mississippi and travels down the river to New Orleans. Here it is sold — for a second time, for the agent has already bought it from the planter — sold, it might well be, to the speculator, who sells it once again, to the exporter. The bale now travels to Liverpool where, once again, a greedy speculator stretches out his hands towards it and grabs it. This man then trades it to a commission agent who, let us assume, is a buyer for a German house. So the bale travels to Rotterdam, up the Rhine, through another dozen hands of forwarding agents, being unloaded and loaded a dozen times, and only then does it arrive in the hands, not of the consumer, but of the manufacturer, who first makes it into an article of consumption, and who perhaps sells his yarn to a weaver, who disposes of what he has woven to the textile printer, who then does business with the wholesaler, who then deals with the retailer, who finally sells the commodity to the consumer. And all these millions of intermediary swindlers, speculators, agents, exporters, commission agents, forwarding agents, wholesalers and retailers, who actually contribute nothing to the commodity itself — they all want to live and make a profit — and they do make it too, on the average, otherwise they could not subsist. Gentlemen, is there no simpler, cheaper way of bringing a bale of cotton from America to Germany and of getting the product manufactured from it into the hands of the real consumer than this complicated business of ten times selling and a hundred times loading, unloading and transporting it from one warehouse to another? Is this not a striking example of the manifold waste of labour power brought about by the divergence of interests? Such a complicated way of transport is out of the question in a rationally organised society. To keep to our example, just as one can easily know how much cotton or manufactured cotton goods an individual colony needs, it will be equally easy for the central authority to determine how much all the villages and

*townships in the country need. Once such statistics have been worked out — which can easily be done in a year or two — average annual consumption will only change in proportion to the increasing population; it is therefore easy at the appropriate time to determine in advance what amount of each particular article the people will need — the entire great amount will be ordered direct from the source of supply; it will then be possible to procure it directly, without middlemen, without more delay and unloading than is really required by the nature of the journey, that is, with a great saving of labour power; it will not be necessary to pay the speculators, the dealers large and small, their rake-off. But this is still not all — in this way these middlemen are not only made harmless to society, they are, in fact, made useful to it. Whereas they now perform to the disadvantage of everyone else a kind of work which is, at best, superfluous but which, nevertheless, provides them with a living, indeed, in many cases even with great riches, whereas they are thus at present directly prejudicial to the general good, they will then become free to engage in useful labour and to take up an occupation in which they can prove themselves as actual members, not merely apparent, sham members, of human society, and as participants in its activity as a whole”.*⁹

Engels then goes to enumerate other examples of this wastage: the need, in a society based on competition and inequality, to maintain vastly expensive but entirely unproductive institutions such as standing armies, police forces and prisons; the human labour poured into servicing what William Morris termed “the swinish luxury of the rich”; and last but not least the huge waste of labour power engendered by unemployment, which rises to particularly scandalous levels during the periodic “commercial” crises of the system. He then contrasts the wastefulness of capitalism with the essential simplicity of communist production and distribution, which is calculated on the basis of what human beings need and the overall time needed for the labour that will satisfy this need.

All these capitalist ailments, observable during the period of rising and expanding capitalism, have become far more destructive and dangerous during the epoch of capitalist decline: war and militarism have increasingly seized hold of the entire economic apparatus, and constitute such a menace to humanity that certainly one of the most urgent priorities facing the proletarian dictatorship (one which Bordiga doesn’t mention, even though the “atomic age” had already clearly dawned by the

⁹ Frederick Engels, “Speeches at Elberfeld”, February 8th 1845. *Collected Works* vol.4.

time he wrote this text) will be to rid the planet of the weapons of mass destruction accumulated by capitalism – especially because there is no guarantee that, faced with its definitive overthrow by the working class, the bourgeoisie or factions of it will prefer to destroy humanity than sacrifice their class rule.

A militarised capitalism can also only operate through the cancerous growth of the state, with its own standing army of bureaucrats, policemen and spies. The security services, in particular, have swollen to gigantic proportions, as have their mirror image, the mafia gangs which enforce their brutal order in many countries of the capitalist periphery.

Similarly, capitalist decadence, with its vast apparatus of banking, finance and advertising which are more than ever essential to the circulation of actually produced goods, has vastly inflated the number of people involved in fundamentally pointless forms of daily activity; and successive waves of “globalisation” have made the absurdities involved in the planet-wide circulation of commodities even more apparent, not to mention its mounting cost at the ecological level. And the amount of labour devoted to the demands of what is today called the “super rich” is no less shocking than it was in Engels’ day – not only in their inexhaustible need for servants but also in their thirst for truly useless luxuries like private jets, yachts and palaces. And at the opposite pole, in an epoch in which the economic crisis of the system has itself tended to become permanent, unemployment is less a cyclical scourge than a permanent one, even when it is disguised through the proliferation of short-term jobs and underemployment. In the so-called third world, the destruction of traditional economies has resulted in some areas of intensive capitalist development, but it has also created a gigantic “sub-proletariat” living the most precarious existence as shack-dwellers in the townships of Africa or the “favelas” of Brazil and Latin America.

Thus Bordiga – even if he was not coherent in his understanding of the decadence of the system – had understood that implementing the communist programme in this epoch does not mean advancing towards abundance through a very rapid process of industrialisation, as the Bolsheviks had tended to assume, given the “backward” conditions they faced in Russia after 1917. Certainly, it will require the development and application of the most advanced technologies, but it will initially take shape as a planned dismantling of everything that is harmful and useless in the existing apparatus of production, and

a global reorganisation of the real human resources which capitalism continually squanders and destroys.

The communist movement today – even if it has been late in recognising the scale of the problem – cannot help but be aware of the ecological cost of capitalist development in the past century, and above all since the end of the Second World War. It is more evident to us than it was to the Bolsheviks that we can’t arrive at communism through the methods of capitalist industrialisation, which sacrifices both human labour power and natural wealth to the demands of profit, to the idol of self-expanding value. We now understand that one of the primary tasks facing the proletariat is that of halting the threat of runaway global warming and clearing up the gigantic mess that capitalism will have bequeathed to us: the wanton destruction of forests and wilderness, the poisoning of the air, land and water by the existing system of production and transportation. Some parts of this “inheritance” will take many years of patient research and labour to overcome – the pollution of the seas and food chain by plastic waste is just one example. And as we have already mentioned, satisfying the most basic needs of the world population (food, housing, health, etc) will have to be consistent with this overall project of harmonisation between man and nature.

It is to Bordiga’s credit that he was already becoming aware of this problem in the early 1950s: his intuition of the centrality of this dimension is shown above all in his position on the problem of the “great cities”, which is fully in line with the thinking of Marx and especially of Engels.

Breaking up the megacities

The city and civilisation derive from the same roots, historically and etymologically. Sometimes the term “civilisation” is extended back to include the entirety of human culture and morality:¹⁰ in this sense the hunter gatherers of Australia or Africa also constitute a civilisation. But there is no question that the transition to living in cities, which is the more generally used definition of civilisation, represented a qualitative development in human history: a factor in the advancement of culture and the recording of history itself, but also the definitive beginnings of class exploitation and the state. Even before capitalism, as Weber shows, the city is also inseparable from trade and the money economy.¹¹ But the bourgeoisie is the urban class par excel-

lence, and the mediaeval cities became the centres of resistance to the hegemony of the feudal aristocracy, whose wealth was above all based on land ownership and the exploitation of the peasants. The modern proletariat is no less an urban class, formed from the expropriation of the peasants and the ruin of the artisans. Driven into the hastily constructed conurbations of Manchester, Glasgow, or Paris, it was here that the working class first became aware of itself as a distinct class opposed to the bourgeoisie and began to envisage a world beyond capitalism.

At the level of man’s relationship with nature, the city presents the same dual aspect: the centre of scientific and technological development, opening up the potential for liberation from scarcity and disease. But this growing “mastery of nature”, taking place in conditions of mankind’s alienation from itself and from nature, is also inseparable from the destruction of nature and from a series of ecological catastrophes. Thus, the decay of the Sumerian or Mayan city cultures has been explained as the result of the city overreaching itself, exhausting the surrounding milieu of forests and agriculture, the collapse of which delivered terrible blows to the hubris of civilisations which had begun to forget their intimate dependence on nature. So too the cities, to the extent that they pressed human beings together like sardines, failed to solve the basic problem of waste disposal, and inverted age-old relationships between humans and animals, became the breeding ground for plagues such as the Black Death in the period of feudal decline or the cholera and typhus which ravaged the industrial cities of early capitalism. But again, we have to consider the other side of the dialectic: the rising bourgeoisie was able to understand that the diseases which strike down its wage slaves could also reach the capitalists’ doorsteps and undermine their whole economic edifice. It was thus able to begin and carry through astonishing feats of engineering in the construction of sewage systems that are still operating today, while rapidly evolving medical expertise was applied to the elimination of hitherto chronic forms of illness.

In the work of Friedrich Engels in particular, we can find the fundamental elements for a history of the city from a proletarian standpoint. In *The Origins of the Family, Private Property and the State*, he charts the dissolution of the old “gens”, the tribal organisation based on kinship ties, to the new territorial organisation of the city, which marks the irreversible division into antagonistic classes and with it the emergence of the state power, whose task is to prevent these divisions tearing society apart. In *The Condition of*

10. See for example “On Patrick Tort’s *The Darwin Effect*”, published on the ICC website April 2009.

11. Max Weber, *The City*, 1921

the *Working Class in England*, he draws a picture of the hellish living conditions of the young proletariat, the day-to-day dirt and disease of the Manchester slums, but also the stirrings of class consciousness and organisation which would, in the end, play the decisive role in compelling the ruling class to grant meaningful reforms to the workers.

In two later works, the *Anti-Dühring* and *The Housing Question*, Engels embarks on a discussion about the capitalist city in a phase when capitalism has already triumphed in the heartlands of Europe and the USA and is about to conquer the entire globe. And it is noticeable that he already concludes that the great cities have overreached themselves and will have to disappear in order to fulfil the demand of the *Communist Manifesto*: abolition of the separation between town and country. Here we should recall that by the 1860s, Marx was also becoming increasingly concerned about the destructive impact of capitalist agriculture on the fertility of the soil, and noted, in the work of Liebig, that the annihilation of forest cover in parts of Europe was having an impact on the climate, raising local temperatures and decreasing rainfall.¹² In other words: just as Marx discerned signs of the political decadence of the bourgeois class after its crushing of the Paris Commune, and, in his correspondence with Russian revolutionaries towards the end of his life was looking for ways that the regions where capitalism was yet to triumph fully could avoid the purgatory of capitalist development, both he and Engels had started to wonder whether, as far as capitalism was concerned, enough is enough.¹³ Perhaps the material foundations for a global communist society had already been laid, and further “progress” for capital would have an increasingly destructive result? We know that the system, through its imperialist expansion in the last decades of the 19th century, would prolong its life for several more decades and provide the basis for a staggering phase of growth and development, leading some elements in the workers’ movement to question the marxist analysis of the inevitability of capitalist crisis and decline, only for the unresolved contradictions of capital to explode into the open in the war of 1914-18 (which Engels had also anticipated). But the searching questions about the future that they had begun to pose precisely when capitalism had reached its zenith were perfectly valid at the time and are more than ever relevant today.

12. See Kohei Saito, *Karl Marx’s Ecosocialism*, New York, 2017

13. On Marx and the Russian question, see a previous article in this series, “The mature Marx: past and future communism”, *International Review* n° 81.

In “The transformation of social relations”, *International Review* n° 85, we looked at how the revolutionaries of the 19th century – particularly Engels, but also Bebel and William Morris – had argued that the growth of the big cities had already reached the point where the abolition of the antagonism between town and country had become a real necessity, hence that the expansion of the great cities must come to an end in favour of a greater unity between industry and agriculture and the more even distribution of human dwellings across the Earth. It was a necessity not only to solve pressing problems such as waste disposal and the prevention of overcrowding, pollution and disease, but also as the basis for a more human pace of life in harmony with nature.

In “Damen, Bordiga and the passion for communism”, *International Review* n° 158, we showed that Bordiga – perhaps more than any other Marxist in the 20th century – had remained loyal to this essential aspect of the communist programme, citing for example his 1953 article “Space Versus Cement”,¹⁴ which is a passionate polemic against the contemporary trends in architecture and town planning (an area in which Bordiga himself was professionally qualified), which were driven by capital’s need to herd as many human beings as possible into increasingly restricted spaces – a trend typified by the rapid construction of tower blocks supposedly inspired by the architectural theories of Le Corbusier. Bordiga is merciless about the purveyors of modern town planning ideology:

“Anyone who applauds such tendencies should not be considered only as a defender of capitalist doctrines, ideals and interests, but as an accomplice in the pathological tendencies of the supreme stage of capitalism in decay and dissolution” (no hesitations about decadence here, then!). Elsewhere in the same article he affirms:

“Verticalism, this deformed doctrine is called; capitalism is verticalist. Communism will be ‘horizontalist’”. And at the end of the article he joyfully anticipates the day when “the cement monsters will be ridiculed and suppressed” and the “giant cities deflated” in order to “make the density of life and work uniform over the inhabitable land”.

In another work, “The Human Species and the Earth’s Crust”,¹⁵ Bordiga cites extensively from Engels’ *On the Housing Question*, and we cannot avoid the temptation to do the same. This is from the last

14. *Il Programma Comunista*, n° 1 of 8-24 January 1953.

15. *Il Programma Comunista* n° 6, 18 December 1952.

section of the pamphlet, where Engels lays into Proudhon’s follower Mühlberger for claiming that it is utopian for wanting to overcome the “inevitable” antagonism between town and country:

“The abolition of the antithesis between town and country is no more and no less utopian than the abolition of the antithesis between capitalists and wage workers. From day to day it is becoming more and more a practical demand of both industrial and agricultural production. No one has demanded this more energetically than Liebig in his writings on the chemistry of agriculture, in which his first demand has always been that man shall give back to the land what he takes from it, and in which he proves that only the existence of the towns, and in particular the big towns, prevents this. When one observes how here in London alone a greater quantity of manure than is produced by the whole kingdom of Saxony is poured away every day into the sea with an expenditure of enormous sums, and when one observes what colossal works are necessary in order to prevent this manure from poisoning the whole of London, then the utopian proposal to abolish the antithesis between town and country is given a peculiarly practical basis. And even comparatively insignificant Berlin has been wallowing in its own filth for at least thirty years.

“On the other hand, it is completely utopian to want, like Proudhon, to transform present-day bourgeois society while maintaining the peasant as such. Only as uniform a distribution as possible of the population over the whole country, only an integral connection between industrial and agricultural production together with the thereby necessary extension of the means of communication – presupposing the abolition of the capitalist mode of production – would be able to save the rural population from the isolation and stupor in which it has vegetated almost unchanged for thousands of years”.¹⁶

Several strands of thought are suggested in this passage, and Bordiga is well aware of them. First, Engels insists that overcoming the antagonism between town and country is intimately linked to overcoming the general capitalist division of labour – a theme developed further in *Anti-Dühring*, in particular the division between mental and manual labour which appears to be so unbridgeable in the capitalist production process. Both these separations, no less than the division between the capitalist and the waged worker, are indispensable to the emergence of a fully rounded human being. And contrary to the schemes of the backward-

16. Frederick Engels *The Housing Question*, 1872. Collected Works vol.23.

gazing Proudhonists, the abolition of the capitalist social relation does not involve the preservation of the small-scale property of peasants or artisans; transcending the city-country, industry-agriculture divides will rescue the peasant from isolation and intellectual vegetation as much as it will free the city-dwellers from overcrowding and pollution.

Second, Engels raises here, as he does elsewhere, the simple but oft-avoided problem of human excrement. In their first, “savage” forms, the capitalist cities made almost no provision for dealing with human waste, and very rapidly paid the price in the generation of epidemic disease, notably dysentery and cholera – scourges which still haunt the shanty towns of the capitalist periphery, where basic hygiene facilities are notoriously absent. The construction of the sewage system certainly represented a step forward in the history of the bourgeois city. But simply flushing away human waste is itself a form of waste since it could be used as a natural fertiliser (as indeed it was in the earlier history of the city).

Looking back to the London or Manchester of Engels’ day, one might easily say: they thought these cities had already grown much too large, much too separated from their natural environment. What would they have made of the modern avatars of these cities? It has been estimated by the UN that around 55% of the world’s population now inhabit big cities, but if the current growth of the cities continues this figure will rise to around 68% by 2050.¹⁷

This is a true example of what Marx already posited in the *Grundrisse*: “development as decay”, and Bordiga was prescient in seeing this in the period of reconstruction after the Second World War. The anthropologists who to seek define the opening of the period of what they call the “Anthropocene Era” (which basically means the era in which human activity has had a fundamental and qualitative impact on the planet’s ecology) usually trace it back to the spread of modern industry in the early 19th century – in short to the victory of capitalism. But some of them also talk about a “Great Acceleration” which took place after 1945, and we can see the juggernaut speeding up even more after 1989 with the rise of China and other “developing” countries.

The consequences of this growth are well-known: the contribution of the megacity to global heating through untrammelled construction, energy consumption, and the emissions of industry and transport, which are also making the air unbreathable in

many cities (already noted by Bordiga in the “The Human Species and the Earth’s Crust”: “*As for bourgeois democracy, it has stooped so low as to renounce the freedom to breathe*”). The uncontrolled spread of urbanisation has been a primary factor in the destruction of natural habitats and species extinction; and last but not at all least, the megacities have revealed their role as incubators of new pandemic diseases, the deadliest and most contagious of which – Covid-19 – is at the time of writing paralysing the world economy and leaving a world-wide trail of death and suffering. Indeed the last two “contributions” have probably come together in the Covid-19 epidemic, which is one of a number where a virus has jumped from one species to another. This has become a major problem in countries like China and in many parts of Africa where animal habitats are being obliterated, leading to a considerable expansion in the consumption of “bush meat”, and where the new cities, built to serve China’s frenzy of economic growth, have minimal hygiene controls.

Overcoming the antagonism

In the list of revolutionary measures contained in Bordiga’s article, point 7 is the most relevant to the project of abolishing the antagonism between city and country:

“‘Construction freeze’ on the rings of housing and workplaces around major and small cities in order to spread the population more and more equally throughout the land area of the country. With a ban on unnecessary transportation, limitation of traffic and speed of transportation”.

This point seems especially contemporary today, when virtually every city is the theatre of relentless “vertical” elevation (the construction of huge skyscrapers, particularly in city centres) and “horizontal” extension, eating up the surrounding countryside. The demand is simply this: stop. The bloating of the cities and the unsustainable concentration of the population within them is the result of capitalist anarchy and is therefore essentially unplanned, un-centralised. The human energy and technological possibilities currently engaged in this cancerous growth must, from the very beginning of the revolutionary process, be mobilised in a different direction. Even though the world population has grown considerably since Bordiga calculated, in *Space versus Cement*, that “on average our species has one square kilometre for every twenty of its members”,¹⁸ the possibility of a far more

rational and harmonious spreading of the population across the planet remains, even taking into account the necessity to preserve large areas of wilderness – a need understood better today because the immense importance of preserving bio-diversity across the planet has been scientifically established, but it was something already envisaged by Trotsky in *Literature and Revolution*.¹⁹

The abolition of the city-country antagonism was distorted by Stalinism into meaning: pave over everything, build “workers’ barracks” and new factories over every field and forest. For authentic communism it will mean cultivating fields and planting forests in the middle of cities, but also that viable communities can be located in an astonishing variety of locations without destroying everything around them, and they will not be isolated because they will have at their disposal the means of communication which capitalism has indeed developed at bewildering speed. Engels had already referred to this possibility in *The Housing Question* and Bordiga takes it up again in “Space versus Cement”:

“*The most modern forms of production, using networks of stations of all kinds, such as hydroelectric power stations, communications, radio, television, increasingly give a unique operational discipline to workers spread out in small groups over enormous distances. Combined work remains, in ever larger and more marvellous weaves, and autonomous production disappears more and more. But the technological density mentioned above is constantly decreasing. The urban and productive agglomeration remains therefore not for reasons dependent on the optimum of production, but for the durability of the profit economy and the social dictatorship of capital*”.

Digital technology, of course, has further advanced this potential. But under capitalism the overall result of the “internet revolution” has been to accelerate the atomisation of the individual, while the trend towards “working from home” – particularly highlighted by the Covid-19 crisis and the accompanying measures of social isolation – has not at all reduced the tendency towards urban agglomeration. The conflict between, on the one hand, the desire to live and work in association with others, and on the other hand the need to find space in which to move and breathe, can only be resolved in a society where the individual is no longer at odds with the community.

17. See “Two thirds of global population will live in cities by 2050, UN says”, published on the CNBC website in 2018.

18. Bordiga gave the figure of 2.5 billion, today it is more like 6.8 billion. Figure taken from the Quora

website.

19. See also *International Review* n° 111, “Trotsky and the culture of communism”.

Reduce your speed

As with the construction of human habitations, so it is with the mad rush of modern transport: stop, or at least, slow down!

Here again, Bordiga is ahead of his time. The methods of capitalist transportation on land, sea and air, based overwhelmingly on the burning of fossil fuels, account for over 20% of global carbon dioxide emissions,²⁰ while in the cities, they have become a leading source of heart and lung disease, particularly affecting children. The yearly world death toll from traffic accidents stands at a staggering 1.35 million, more than half of them “vulnerable” road users: pedestrians, cyclists and motorcyclists.²¹ And these are only the most obvious disadvantages of the present system of transport. The constant noise it generates gnaws away at the city dweller’s nerves, and the subordination of town planning to the needs of the car (and the car industry, so central to the existing capitalist economy) produces cities that are endlessly fragmented, with residential areas divided from each other by the ceaseless flow of traffic. Meanwhile social atomisation, an essential characteristic of bourgeois society and of the capitalist city in particular, is not only illustrated but reinforced by the lone car owner and driver competing for road space with millions of similarly separated souls.

Of course, capitalism has had to take measures to try to mitigate the worst effects of all this: “carbon offsetting” to make up for excessive flights, “traffic calming” and car-free walk-ways in city centres, the move towards the electric car.

None of these “reforms” go anywhere near solving the problem because none of them address the capitalist social relationship which lies at its root. Take the electric car for example: the car industry has seen the writing on the wall and is tending to switch more and more towards this form of transport. But even setting aside the problem of extracting and disposing of the lithium needed for the batteries, or the need to increase electricity production to power these vehicles, all of which has a substantial ecological cost, a city full of electric vehicles would be marginally quieter and somewhat less polluted but still dangerous to walk in and carved up by roads.

It’s possible that communism will indeed make extensive (though doubtless not

exclusive) use of electric vehicles. But the real issue lies elsewhere. Capitalism needs to operate at break-neck speed because time is money and transport is driven by the needs of accumulation, which includes “turnover” time and thus transportation in its overall calculations. Capitalism is equally driven by the need to sell as many products as possible, hence the constant pressure for each individual to have their own personal possession – again typified by the private car which has become a symbol of personal wealth and prestige, the key to the “Freedom of the Road” in an era of incessant traffic jams.

The pace of life in today’s cities is far greater (even with the traffic jams) than it was in the second part of the 19th century, but in *Woman and Socialism*, first published in 1879, August Bebel was already looking forward to the city of the future, where “*the nerve-racking noise, crowding and rushing of our large cities with their thousands of vehicles of all sorts ceases substantially: society assumes an aspect of greater repose*”.

The rushing and congestion that make city life so stressful can only be overcome when the drive to accumulate has been suppressed, in favour of production planned to freely distribute necessary use values. In working out the transport networks of the future, a key factor will obviously be to greatly keep carbon emissions and other forms of pollution to a minimum, but the need to achieve “greater repose”, a certain degree of peace and quiet both for residents and travellers, will certainly be factored in to the overall plan. Since there is much less pressure to get from A to B at the quickest possible rate, travellers will have more time to enjoy the journey itself: perhaps, in such a world, the horse will return to parts of the land, sailboats to the sea, airships to the sky, while it will also be possible to use much faster means of transport when needed.²² At the same time, the volume of traffic will be greatly reduced if the addiction to personal ownership of vehicles can be broken, and travellers can have access to free public transport of various kinds (buses, trains, boats, taxis and ownerless self-drive vehicles). We should also bear in mind that, in contrast to the many western capitalist cities where half of all apartments are occupied by single owners or tenants, communism will be an experiment in more communal forms of living; and in such a society travelling in the company of others can become a pleasure rather than a desperate race between hostile competitors.

We should also bear in mind that many

22. Of course, people might still enjoy the thrill of travelling at dizzying speed but perhaps in a rational society such pleasures will mainly be obtained in arenas set aside for the purpose.

of the journeys that clog up the transport system, those that involve travelling to pointless jobs such as those linked to finance, insurance or advertising, will have no place in a moneyless society. The daily rush hour will be a thing of the past. At the same time, production of useful objects can be re-designed and re-located to avoid the need for transporting products over long distances, which under capitalism is very often only determined by the aim of finding lower paid workforces or other advantages (for capital) such as lack of environmental regulation. The entire production and distribution of the use values we need will be reorganised and so many journeys between places of production and dwellings will no longer be necessary.

Thus the streets of a town where the angry roar of traffic has been reduced to a purr will regain some of their older advantages and uses— as playgrounds for children for example.

Again, we don’t underestimate the magnitude of the tasks involved here. Although the possibility of living in a more communal or associated way is contained in the transition to a communist mode of production, the egoistic prejudices that have been greatly exacerbated by several hundred years of capitalism, will not disappear in an automatic manner and will indeed often operate as serious obstacles to the process of communisation. As Marx put it,

“*Private property has made us so stupid and one-sided that an object is only ours when we have it, when it exists for us as capital or when we directly possess, eat, drink, wear, inhabit it etc, in short when we use it. Although private property conceives all these immediate realisations of possession only as means of life, and the life they serve is the life of private property, labour and capitalisation. Therefore all the physical and intellectual senses have been replaced by the simple estrangement of all these senses - the sense of having.*”²³

Rosa Luxemburg always maintained that the struggle for socialism was not just about “bread and butter” issues but that “*morally ... the working-class struggle denotes the cultural renovation of society*”.²⁴ This cultural and moral aspect of the class struggle, and above all the fight against the “sense of having”, will certainly continue throughout the transition to communism.

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20. See International Panel on Climate Change: *Climate change 2014. Mitigation of climate change. Working Group III contribution to the fifth assessment report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change*, Chapter 8: “Transport”.

21. See “Road Safety Facts” published on the website of the Association for Safe International Road Travel.

23. *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*, chapter on “Private property and communism”.

24. “Stagnation and progress of marxism”, 1903.

Fifty years since May 68

The difficult evolution of the proletarian political milieu (part II)

In the first part of this article¹ we looked at some of the most important developments in the international proletarian milieu after the events of May 68 in France. We noted that, while the resurgence of the class struggle gave a significant impetus to the revival of the proletarian political movement, and thus to the regroupment of its forces, this dynamic had begun to run into difficulties by the beginning of the 80s. We take up the story from this point. This “history” by no means claims to be exhaustive and we make no apology for the fact that it is presented from the ICC’s “partisan” point of view. It can be supplemented in future by contributions from those who may have different experiences and perspectives.

The mass strike in Poland in 1980 demonstrated the capacity of the working class to organise itself independently of the capitalist state, to unify its struggles across an entire country, to unite economic with political demands. But as we said at the time: as in Russia in 1917, the problem could be posed in Poland, but it could only be resolved on an international scale. The working class of Western Europe in particular had been issued a challenge: faced with the irreversible deepening of the capitalist crisis, it would be necessary to attain the same heights of self-organisation and unification of its struggles, but at the same time to go beyond the movement in Poland at the level of politicisation. The Polish workers, fighting a brutal regime which claimed that the sacrifices it demanded were all steps on the way to a communist future, had, at the political level, not been able to reject a whole series of bourgeois political mystifications, in particular the idea that their conditions could best be improved by installing a democratic regime which allowed “free trade unions” to organise the working class. It was the specific task of the workers in the west, who had been through many years of bitter experience of the fraud of parliamentary democracy and the sabotaging role of trade unions that were formally separate from the capitalist state, to develop a genuinely proletarian perspective: the mass strike maturing into a direct confrontation with the capitalist system, the goal of an authentically communist society.

And there is no doubt that the workers in the west did take up the challenge in the sense of fighting back against a whole new round of attacks on their living standards, masterminded largely by right

wing regimes in power prepared to force through massive levels of unemployment in order to “trim down” the bloated economic apparatus inherited from the post-war Keynesian period. In Belgium in 1983 the workers took important steps towards the extension of the struggle – relying not on the deliberations of union officials but sending massive delegations to other sectors to call on them to join the movement. In the following two years, the strikes by car workers, steel workers, printers and above all miners in the UK were the response of the proletariat to the new “Thatcherite” regime. They contained a real potential for unification if only they could rid themselves of the obsolete trade unionist notion that you can defeat the capitalist enemy by holding out for as long as possible in the confines of a single sector. Elsewhere in Europe – among the railway and the health workers in France, or the education workers in Italy – workers went further in trying to break away from the numbing grip of the trade unions, organising themselves in general assemblies with elected and revocable strike committees, and making tentative efforts towards coordinating these committees.

As we argued in the first part of this article, it was absolutely necessary for the small revolutionary organisations which existed at that time, even with their limited means, to participate in these struggles, to make their voices heard through the press, through leaflets, through speaking up at demonstrations, at picket lines and in general assemblies, to make concrete proposals for the extension and self-organisation of the struggle, to play a part in the formation of groups of militant workers seeking to stimulate the struggle and draw out its most important lessons. The ICC devoted a good deal of its resources in the 1980s to carrying out these tasks, and we produced a

number of polemics with other proletarian organisations which, in our view, had not sufficiently grasped the potential of these struggles, above all because they lacked a general, historic vision of the “line of march” of the class movement.²

And yet, as we have also accepted elsewhere,³ we ourselves were less clear about the growing difficulties of the struggle. We tended to underestimate the significance of the heavy defeats suffered by emblematic sectors like the miners in the UK and the real hesitation of the class to reject trade union methods and ideology. Even when there was a strong tendency to organise outside the trade unions, the extreme left wing of the bourgeoisie set up false rank and file unions, even extra-union “co-ordinations”, to keep the struggle inside the bounds of sectionalism and ultimately of trade unionism. Above all, despite the determination and militancy of these struggles, there was not much progress towards the elaboration of a revolutionary perspective. The politicisation of the movement remained at best embryonic.

Since the end of the 1980s we have been arguing that this situation – of a working class strong enough to resist the drive towards another world war, and yet not capable of offering humanity the perspective of a new form of social organisation – constituted a kind of social stalemate which opened up what we call the phase of social decomposition. The collapse of the eastern bloc in 1989, which marked the definitive onset of this new phase in the decline of capitalism, was like an alarm bell which made us reflect deeply on the destiny of the international class movement which had appeared in successive waves since 1968. We began to understand that the new period would pose considerable difficulties for the working class, not least (but not only) because of the furious ideological assault of the bourgeoisie which proclaimed the death of communism and the final refutation of marxism.

2. See for example: *International Review* n° 55, “Decantation of the proletarian political milieu and the oscillations of the IBRP”; *International Review* n° 56, “20 Years since May 68, The evolution of the proletarian political milieu”, part iii.

3. See for example, the report on the class struggle to the 21st ICC Congress, in *International Review* n° 156.

1. See *International Review* n° 163.

In the first part of this article we noted that, already at the beginning of the 80s, the proletarian political milieu had gone through a major crisis, signalled by the collapse of the international conferences of the communist left, the splits in the ICC and the implosion of the Bordigist International Communist Party (Communist Program). The main political organisations of the working class thus entered this new and uncertain period in a weakened, dispersed condition. The overall failure of the class to politicise its struggles also meant that the very noticeable growth of the proletarian political milieu in the late 60s and 70s had begun to slow down or stagnate. Furthermore, in our view, none of the existing organisations apart from the ICC had the theoretical framework which would enable them to understand the characteristics of the new phase of decadence: some of them, such as the Bordigists, more or less rejected the concept of decadence altogether, while others, like Battaglia and the Communist Workers Organisation (now regrouped as the International Bureau for the Revolutionary Party) had a concept of decadence but no interest in gauging the historic balance of forces between the classes (what we referred to as the question of the “historic course”). The idea of a social stalemate thus had no meaning for them.

The impact of decomposition

The principal danger of decomposition for the working class is that it gradually undermines the very basis of its revolutionary nature: its capacity, indeed its fundamental need, for association. The tendency towards “every man for himself” is inherent in the capitalist mode of production, but it takes on a new intensity, even a new quality, in this final phase of capitalist decay. This tendency may be driven by both material and ideological factors - by the physical dispersal of proletarian concentrations as a result of mass lay-offs and relocations, and by the deliberate stirring up of divisions between workers (national, racial, religious etc); by competition over employment or social benefits and by ideological campaigns about the “joys” of consumerism or democracy. But its overall effect is to gnaw away at the capacity of the proletariat to see itself as a class with distinct interests, to come together as a class against capital. This is intimately linked to the actual diminution of working class struggles in the past three decades.

The revolutionary minority, as a part of the class, is not spared the pressures of a disintegrating social system which clearly has no future. For revolutionaries, the principle of association is expressed in the

formation of revolutionary organisations and the commitment to organised militant activity. The counter-tendency is the flight into individual solutions, towards a loss of confidence in collective activity, distrust in revolutionary organisations and despair about the future. When the eastern bloc fell and the prospect of a profound retreat in the class struggle began to reveal itself, our comrade Marc Chirik, who had experienced the full force of the counter-revolution and had resisted its impact through his militant activity in the fractions of the communist left, said once that “now we will see who the real militants are”. Unfortunately, Marc, who died in 1990, would not be around in person to help us adapt to conditions where we would often be swimming against the tide, although he had certainly done all he could to transmit the principles of organisation which would serve as our best means of defence against the coming storms.

In part one of this article we already explained that crises are an inevitable product of the situation of revolutionary organisations in capitalist society, of the ceaseless bombardment of bourgeois ideology in its various forms. The ICC has always been open about its own difficulties and internal differences, even if it aims to present them in a coherent manner rather than simply “putting everything on the table”. And we also insisted that crises should always oblige the organisation to learn from them and thus strengthen its own political armoury.

The advancing decomposition of capitalist society tends to make such crises more frequent and more dangerous. This was certainly the case in the ICC in the 90s and at the turn of the century. Between 1993 and 1995, we were faced with the necessity to confront the activities of a clan that had become deeply entrenched in the international central organ of the ICC, an “organisation within the organisation” that bore a strange resemblance to the International Brotherhood of the Bakuninists inside the First International, including the leading role played by a political adventurer, JJ, steeped in the manipulative practises of freemasonry. Such predilections for occultism were already an expression of the powerful tide of irrationality that tends to sweep across society in this period. At the same time, the formation of clans inside a revolutionary organisation, whatever their specific ideology, parallels the search for false communities which is a much broader social characteristic of this period.

The ICC’s response to these phenomena was to bring them into the light of day and to deepen its knowledge of the way the marxist movement in had defended itself against them. We thus produced an orien-

tation text on functioning which rooted itself in the organisational battles in the First International and the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party,⁴ and a series of articles on the historical fight against sectarianism, adventurism, freemasonry, and political parasitism.⁵ In particular, the series identified Bakunin as an example of the declassed adventurer who uses the workers’ movement as a springboard for his own personal ambitions, and the International Brotherhood as an early example of political parasitism – of a form of political activity which, while superficially working for the revolutionary cause, carries out a work of denigration and destruction which can only serve the class enemy.

The aim of these texts was not only to arm the ICC against being infected by the morality and methods of classes alien to the proletariat, but to stimulate a debate in the whole proletarian milieu around these questions. Unfortunately, we received little or no response to these contributions from the serious groups of the milieu, such as the IBRP, who tended to see them as no more than strange hobbyhorses of the ICC. Those who were already overtly hostile to the ICC – such as the remnants of the Communist Bulletin Group – seized on them as final proof that the ICC had degenerated into a bizarre cult that should be avoided at all cost.⁶ Our efforts to provide a clear framework for understanding the growing phenomenon of political parasitism – the Theses on Parasitism published in 1998⁷ – met with the same kind of reaction. And very quickly, the milieu’s lack of understanding of these problems did not merely result in an attitude of neutrality towards elements who can only play a destructive role towards the revolutionary movement. As we shall see, it led from “neutrality” to tolerance and then to active cooperation with such elements.

The growth of political parasitism

At the beginning of the 2000s the ICC was again faced with a grave internal crisis. A certain number of militants of the organisation, again members of the international central organ, who had played an active part in exposing the activities of the JJ clan, coalesced into a new clan which took up some of the same themes as the previous one – particularly their targeting of comrades who had stood most firmly for the defence of organisational principles, even

4. *International Review* n° 109, “The question of organisational functioning in the ICC”.

5. Published in *International Review* n° s 84, 85, 87 and 88.

6. *International Review* n° 83, “Political Parasitism: The ‘CBG’ Does the Bourgeoisie’s Work”.

7. *International Review* n° 94, “Theses on parasitism”.

spreading the rumour that one of them was a police agent who was manipulating the others.

The “Internal Fraction of the International Communist Current” has since amply demonstrated that there is often a thin line between the activity of a clan inside the organisation and of a fully-fledged parasitic organisation. The elements who made up the IFICC were excluded from the ICC for actions unworthy of communist militants, which included theft from the organisation’s funds and the publication of sensitive internal information that could have put our militants in danger from the police. Since then, this group, which has subsequently changed its name to the International Group of the Communist Left, has given further evidence that it embodies a form of parasitism so rabid that it is indistinguishable from the activities of the political police. In 2014 we were obliged to publish a denunciation of this group which had again managed to steal internal material from the ICC and was seeking to use it to denigrate our organisation and its militants.⁸

Clearly a group which behaves in this manner is a danger to all revolutionaries, regardless of the formally correct political positions it defends. The response of a communist milieu which understood the need for solidarity between its organisations would be to exclude such practises, and those who engage in them, from the proletarian camp; at the very least, it would have to renew the traditions of the workers’ movement which held that behaviour of this sort, or accusations against the probity of a revolutionary militant or organisation, required the formation of a “Jury of Honour” to establish the truth about such forms of conduct or such accusations.⁹ In 2004, however, a series of events which we have referred to as the “Circulo” affair showed how far today’s proletarian political movement has strayed from these traditions.

In 2003, the ICC entered into contact with a new group in Argentina, the Nucleo Comunista Internacionalista. After intensive discussions with the ICC, there was a definite movement towards the positions of our organisation and the question of eventually forming an ICC section in Argentina was posed. However, a member of this group, who we have called “B”, held a monopoly of the computer

equipment available to the comrades and thus of communication with other groups and individuals, and it had become clear during the course of our discussions that this individual regarded himself as a kind of political guru who had arrogated to himself the task of representing the NCI as a whole. During the visit of the ICC’s delegation in 2004, B demanded that the group should immediately be integrated into the ICC. Our response was that that we were interested above all in political clarity and not in the foundation of commercial franchises and that a good deal of discussion was still necessary before such a step could be taken. His ambition to use the ICC as a springboard for his personal prestige thus thwarted, B then made an abrupt volte face: unbeknown to the other members of the NCI, he had entered into contact with the IFICC and with their support suddenly declared that the entire NCI had broken with the ICC because of its Stalinist methods and had formed a new group, the Circulo de Comunistas Internacionistas. Jubilation from the IFICC who happily published this great news in their bulletin. But the worst of this was that the IBRP – who had also entered into contact with the IFICC, no doubt flattered by the IFICC’s declaration that the IBRP, “now that the ICC had thoroughly degenerated”, was now the true pole of regroupment for revolutionaries – also published the Circulo’s statement on their website, in three languages.

The ICC’s response to this lamentable affair was very thorough. Having established the facts of the matter – that the new group was in fact a pure invention of B, and that the other members of the NCI had known nothing of the alleged split with the ICC – we wrote a series of articles denouncing the adventurist behaviour of B, the parasitic activity of the IFICC and the opportunism of the IBRP, which was prepared to take a whole heap of slanders against the ICC at face value, without any attempt at investigation, with the idea of demonstrating that “something was moving in Argentina” ... away from the ICC and towards themselves. It was only when the ICC proved beyond a shadow of a doubt that B was indeed a political impostor, and when the NCI comrades themselves made a statement denying that they had broken with the ICC, that the IBRP quietly deleted the offending Circulo material from their website, without offering any explanation and still less any self-criticism. A similarly ambiguous attitude was exhibited around the same time when it became evident that the IBRP had made use of a list of ICC contact addresses stolen by the IFICC when they were expelled from the ICC to adver-

tise an IBRP public meeting in Paris.¹⁰

This affair demonstrates that the problem of political parasitism is not a mere invention of the ICC, and still less a means of shutting up those who oppose our analyses, as some people have claimed. It is a real danger for the health of the proletarian milieu and serious obstacle to the formation of the future class party. And thus our theses on parasitism conclude that:

“What was valid in the time of the IWA remains valid today. The struggle against parasitism constitutes one of the essential responsibilities of the communist left and is part of the tradition of its bitter struggles against opportunism. Today it is one of the basic components in the preparation of the party of tomorrow, and in fact is one of the determining factors both of the moment when the party can arise and its capacity to play its role in the decisive battles of the proletariat”.

The parasitic groups have the function of sowing divisions in the proletarian camp by spreading rumours and slanders, introducing into it practices which are alien to proletarian morality, such as theft and behind-the-scenes manoeuvres. The fact that their principal aim has been to build a wall around the ICC, to isolate it from other communist groups and turn newly emerging elements away from engaging with us does not mean that they are only damaging the ICC – the whole milieu and its capacity to cooperate with a view to the formation of the party of the future is weakened by their activity. Furthermore, since their nihilistic and destructive attitudes are a direct reflection of the growing weight of social decomposition, we can expect them to have a growing presence in the coming period, above all if the proletarian milieu remains blithely ignorant of the danger they represent.

2004-2011: the emergence of new political forces, and the difficulties they encountered

The article on our experience with the NCI talks about revival of class struggle and appearance of new political forces. The ICC had noted signs of this recovery in 2003, but the clearest proof that something was shifting was provided by the struggle of students against the Contrat Première Embauche (CPE) legislation in France in 2006, a movement which showed a real capacity for self-organisation in assemblies and which threatened to spread

8. “Communiqué to our readers: The ICC under attack from a new agency of the bourgeois state”. Published on the ICC website, May 2014.

9. “The Jury of Honour: a weapon for the defence of revolutionary organisations” (Part 1); “The Jury of Honour: a weapon for the defence of revolutionary organisations” (Part 2). Published on the ICC website February 2005.

10. On the “Circulo” affair, see for example, *International Review* n° 120, “Nucleo Comunista Internacional: an episode in the proletariat’s striving for consciousness”; *International Review* n° 121, “IBRP: An opportunist policy of regroupment that leads to nothing but ‘abortions’”.



Demonstration in France in March 2006 against the CPE

to the employed sectors, thus obliging the government to cancel the CPE. In the same year the assembly form was adopted by the steel workers of Vigo who also showed a real will to incorporate other sectors into the movement. And in the wake of the financial crash of 2008, in 2010, we saw a significant struggle by university and college students around fees and grants in the UK, and a movement against pension “reforms” in France. The next year, 2011, saw the outbreak of the “Arab spring”, a wave of social revolts where the influence of the proletariat varied from country to country but which in Egypt, Israel and elsewhere provided the world with the example of the occupation of public squares and the holding of regular assemblies - an example taken up by the Occupy movement in the US, by assemblies in Greece and most importantly by the Indignados movement in Spain. The latter in particular provided the basis for a definite degree of politicisation through animated debates about the obsolescence of capitalism and the need for a new form of society.

This politicisation at a more general level was accompanied by the appearance of new forces looking for revolutionary answers to the impasse of the social order. A number of these forces were oriented towards the positions and organisations of the communist left. Two different groups from South Korea were invited to ICC congresses during this period, as well as the EKS group in Turkey and new contacts from the USA. Discussions began with groups or discussion circles in South America, the Balkans and Australia; some of these groups and circles became new sections of the ICC (Turkey, Philippines, Ecuador, Peru). The ICT has also gained new forces since this period

There was also a sizeable development of an internationalist current in anarchism, which could be seen for example in the discussions on the libcom internet forum, and in the growth of new anarcho-syndicalist groups which were critical of the “institutionalised” syndicalism of organisations like the CNT.

The ICC responded to these developments as widely as possible, and this was absolutely necessary: without passing on the heritage of the communist left to a new generation, there can be no hope of a movement towards the party of the future.

But there were important weaknesses in our intervention. When we say that opportunism and sectarianism are diseases of the workers’ movement, the result of the constant pressure of the ideology of other classes on the proletariat and its political organisations, we do not use this merely as a means for criticising other organisation, but as a yardstick for assessing our own capacity to resist this pressure and hold onto the methods and acquisitions of the working class in all areas of our activity.

The Turkish section of the ICC, integrated in 2009, left the ICC in 2015 to form a short-lived group, Pale Blue Jadal. In our attempt to draw a balance sheet of this failure, we turned the light on our own opportunist errors in the process of their integration:

“Our integration of the EKS group as the ICC’s Turkish section was a process infested with opportunism. We do not propose here to go into the reasons for this: suffice it to say that we tried to force the pace of history, and this is a classic recipe for opportunism.

‘Forcing the pace’, of course, was at our own small level; principally, it meant

the decision to ‘fast-track’ the discussions with the EKS group which was to become our section in Turkey. In particular we decided:

To drastically reduce the time spent on organisational discussion with the members of EKS before their integration, on the grounds that the art of building an organisation is learnt essentially from experience.

*To integrate EKS as a group, not as individuals. Although our statutes provide for this, it holds the danger that the new militants will see themselves, not first and foremost as individual militants of an international organisation but as members of their original group”.*¹¹

As we argued in the first part of this article, opportunism and sectarianism often go together. And some retrospective elements of our response to the Circulo affair can certainly be seen as sectarian. Given the rise of new political forces on the one hand, given the latest evidence of the difficulty of the ICT in behaving in a principled manner, and the unalterably rigid sectarianism of the Bordigists, there was a certain tendency in the ICC to conclude that the “old milieu” was already washed up and that our hopes for the future would have to reside in the new forces we were beginning to encounter.

This was the sectarian side of our reaction. But again, it also had an opportunist side. In order to convince the new milieu that we were not sectarian, in 2012 we made fresh overtures to the ICT, arguing for a resumption of discussions and common work that had been disrupted ever since the collapse of the international conferences at the beginning of the 80s. This was correct in itself, and was a continuation of a policy we had, without much success, carried on throughout the 80s and 90s.¹² But in order to get this process underway, we accepted at face value the ICT’s explanation for their behaviour over the Circulo affair: that it had essentially been the work of one comrade who had subsequently died. Apart from the dubious morality of such an approach on their part, it brought absolutely no clarification by the ICT about their willingness to form an alliance with elements who really had no place in the proletarian milieu. And in the end the discussions we started with the ICT soon foundered on this so far unbridgeable gap on the ques-

11. “Reply to the ex-members of our Turkish section”. Published on ICC website November 2015.

12. For example, appeals to the proletarian milieu issued from our congresses in 1983, 1991 and 1999, the latter two accompanied with a proposal for a joint intervention against the wars in the Gulf and in the Balkans; the holding of a common meeting with the CWO on the question of class consciousness in 1984 and on the Russian revolution in 1997, etc.

tion of parasitism – the question of which groups and elements can be considered as legitimate components of the communist left. And this was not the only example of a tendency on the ICC's part to push to one side this vital question because it was decidedly unpopular in the proletarian milieu. It also included the integration of the EKS who never agreed with us on the question of parasitism, and approaches to groups which we ourselves considered to be parasitic, such as the CBG (approaches which led nowhere).

The ICC's articles during this period show an understandable optimism about the potential contained in the new forces (see for example the article on our 18th congress¹³). But there was at the same time an underestimation of many of the difficulties facing these new elements who had appeared in the phase of decomposition.

As we have said, a number of the elements coming from this upsurge came towards the communist left and some integrated into its main organisations. At the same time, many of these elements did not survive for very long – not only the ICC's Turkish section, but also the NCI, the discussion group formed in Australia,¹⁴ and a number of contacts who appeared in the US. More generally, there was a very pervasive influence of anarchism on this new wave of "seekers" – to some extent an expression of the fact that the trauma of Stalinism and the impact it has had on the notion of the revolutionary political organisation was still an operative factor in the second decade after the collapse of the Russian bloc.

The development of the anarchist milieu in this period was not wholly negative. For example, the internet forum libcom, which was a focus for a lot of international political debate in the first decade of its existence, was run by a collective which tended to reject leftist and life-stylist forms of anarchism and to defend some of the basics of internationalism. Some of them had come through the superficial activism of the "anti-capitalist" milieu of the 1990s and had begun to look to the working class as the force for social change. But this quest was to a large extent blocked by the development of anarcho-syndicalism, which reduces the entirely valid recognition of the revolutionary role of the working class to an economist outlook unable to integrate the political dimension of the class struggle, and which replaces activism limited to the street to activism in the workplace (the notion of training "organisers" and forming

13. *International Review* n° 136: "ICC's 18th Congress: towards the regroupment of internationalist forces".

14. "An internationalist voice in Australia". Published on ICC website April 2010.

"revolutionary unions"). Paradoxical as it may seem, this milieu was also influenced by the theories of "communisation", which is a very explicit expression of a loss of conviction that communism can only come about through the struggle of the working class. But the paradox is more apparent than real, since both syndicalism and communisation reflect an attempt to by-pass the reality that a revolutionary struggle is also a struggle for political power, and demands the formation of a proletarian political organisation. More recently, libcom and other expressions of the anarchist movement have been sucked into various forms of identity politics, which continues the slide away from a proletarian standpoint.¹⁵ Meanwhile, other sectors of the anarchist movement were completely suckered by the claims of Kurdish nationalism to have established some kind of revolutionary Commune in Rojava.

It must also be said that the new milieu – and even the established revolutionary groups – had few defences against the noxious moral atmosphere of decomposition and in particular the verbal aggression and posturing that often infests the internet. On libcom, for example, members and sympathisers of left communist groups, and the ICC in particular, had to fight hard to get through a wall of hostility in which the slanders of parasitic groups like the CBG were usually taken as read. And while some progress at the level of the culture of debate seemed to be taking place in libcom's early years, the atmosphere took a definite turn for the worse following the entanglement of the libcom collective in the scandal of "Aufhebgate", in which the majority of the collective adopted a cliquish stance of defending one of their friends in the Aufheben group who had been clearly shown to be cooperating with police strategies against street protests.¹⁶

Other examples of this kind of moral decay among those professing the cause of communism could be given – the member of the Greek communisation group Blaumachen who became a minister in the Syriza government being perhaps one of the most evident.¹⁷ But the groups of the communist left were not spared from such difficulties either: we have already mentioned the dubious alliances the ICT has established with certain parasitic groups. And more recently, the ICT was first compelled to dissolve its section in Canada which had adopted an apologetic attitude to one of its members who had engaged

15. "On recent attacks on the ICC on libcom". Published on the ICC website February 2018.

16. "Aufhebgate". Published on ICC website May 2013.

17. See article "Minister of sic" on the Dialectical Delinquents website.

in sexual abuse, while a group of Greek sympathisers lapsed into the most rabid nationalism in the face of the immigration crisis.¹⁸ And the ICC itself experienced what we called a "moral and intellectual crisis" when one of our comrades, most vociferous in opposing the opportunist policies we had adopted in certain of our activities (and who had previously been the target of the clans from the 90s) was subjected to a campaign of scapegoating.¹⁹ A "Jury of Honour" established within the organisation found all the charges against her to be null and void. These events demonstrate that the question of behaviour, of ethics and morality, has always been a key element in the construction of a revolutionary organisation worth its name. The revolutionary movement will not be able to overcome its divisions without confronting this question.

Contemporary problems and future perspectives

The signs of a revival of the class struggle which appeared in 2006–2011 have largely been eclipsed by a wave of reaction which has taken the form of the rise of populism and the installation of a series of authoritarian regimes, notably in a country like Egypt which was at the centre of the "Arab Spring". The resurgence of chauvinism and xenophobia has affected some of the very areas where, in 2011, the first shoots of a new internationalist flowering seemed to be appearing – most notably, the wave of nationalism in Catalonia, which had previously been at the heart of the Indignados movement. And while the growth of nationalism highlights the danger of bloody imperialist conflicts in the period ahead, it also underlines the total incapacity of the existing system, riven by rivalry and competition, to address the mounting threat of environmental destruction. All of this contributes to widespread moods either of denial about the apocalyptic future capitalism has in store for us, or of nihilism and despair.

In short, the sombre social and political atmosphere does not seem to be propitious for the development of a new revolutionary movement, which can only be presaged on a conviction that an alternative future is possible.

And again, little progress has been made towards improving relations between the existing communist groups, where it seems to be a case of one step forwards, two steps

18. "ICT statement on the dissolution of the GIO (Canada)". Published on the ICT website January 2016. "Under a false flag". Published on the ICT website March 2017.

19. "News of our death is greatly exaggerated". Published on ICC website September 2014.

back: thus, while in November 2017 the CWO accepted the ICC's invitation to make a presentation at our day of discussion on the October revolution, since then they have consistently rejected any further initiatives of this type.

Does this mean, as a member of the CWO recently claimed, that the ICC has lapsed into demoralisation and pessimism about the future of the class struggle and the potential for the formation of the party of tomorrow?²⁰

We certainly see no sense in denying the very real difficulties facing the working class and in developing a communist presence within it. A class which has increasingly lost a sense of its own existence as a class will not easily accept the arguments of those who, against all the odds, continue to insist that the proletariat not only exists but holds the key to the survival of humanity.

And yet, despite the very tangible dangers of this last phase of capitalist decadence, we do not think that the working class has said its last word. There remain a number of elements pointing to the possibilities of an eventual recovery of class identity and class consciousness among new generations of the proletariat, as we argued at our 22nd Congress in our resolution on the international class struggle.²¹ And we are also seeing a renewed process of communist politicisation in a small but significant minority of this new generation, often taking the form of a direct interaction with the communist left. Individuals searching for clarification as well as new groups and circles have appeared in the USA in particular, but also in Australia, Britain, South America... This is a real testimony to the fact that Marx's "old mole" continues to burrow away beneath the surface of events.

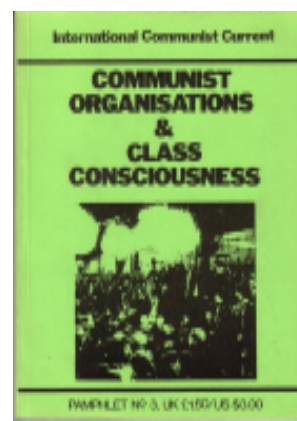
Like the new elements who appeared a decade or so ago, this emerging milieu is faced by many dangers, not least from the diplomatic offensive towards them of certain parasitic groups and the indulgence

shown towards the latter by proletarian organisations like the ICT. It is especially hard for many of these young comrades to understand the necessarily long-term character of revolutionary commitment and the need to avoid impatience and precipitation. If their appearance expresses a potential that still resides deep in the entrails of the working class, it is vital for them to recognise that their current debates and activities only make sense as part of a work towards the future. We will return to this question in subsequent articles.

Evidently, the existing organisations of the communist left have a key role in the fight for the long-term future of these new comrades. And they themselves are not immune from dangers, as we have already mentioned with regard to the previous wave of "searching elements". In particular, they must avoid courting any facile popularity by avoiding discussion about difficult questions or watering down their positions with the aim of "gaining a wider audience". A central task of the existing communist organisations is basically the same as it was for the fractions which detached themselves from the degenerating Communist International in order to lay the bases for a new party when the evolution of the objective, and above all the subjective, conditions placed this on the agenda: an intransigent combat against opportunism in all its forms, and for the maximum rigour in the process of political clarification.

Amos

ICC Pamphlet



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

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

What are the implications for the revolutionary process?

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20. "And where is the ICC today? A demoralised and defeated remnant of a once larger organisation built on the illusion that revolution was just around the corner. Today it consoles itself with talk of chaos and decomposition (which is true but is a result of the deepening capitalist crisis and not some paralysis in the class war as the ICC maintain). When the ICC maintains that today they are just a "fraction" (and then openly lies by saying it has always only been a fraction!) what they are saying is that there is nothing to be done but write silly polemics to other organisations (but then that has been ICC methodology since 1975)". Post signed by the forum's editor Cleishbotham on the ICT forum following a discussion about the balance of class forces with a sympathiser of the ICC. Published on the ICT website January 2019.

21. *International Review* n° 159, "Resolution on the international class struggle".

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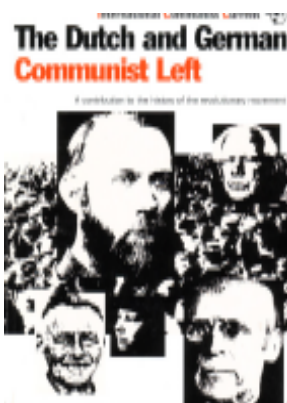
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Unions against the working class
International Communist Current
Pamphlet N°1



Why trade unions can no longer be used as the organisational form for working class struggle. How the unions consistently sabotage independent class action.

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The Dutch communist left is one of the major components of the revolutionary current which broke away from the degenerating Communist International in the 1920s. Well before Trotsky's Left Opposition, and in a more profound way, the communist left had been able

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

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

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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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