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24th ICC Congress

**Understanding the historical situation and
preparing for the future**

Resolution on the international situation

**The pandemic and the development
of decomposition**

Report on the international class struggle

Report on the economic crisis

Report on imperialist tensions

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Understanding the historical situation and preparing for the future

Despite the difficulties resulting from the pandemic, the ICC held its 24th International Congress and we can draw a positive balance sheet from it. As we have always done, and in conformity with the practice of the workers' movement, we are providing a general overview of its work through this article and through a number of documents which will orient our activity and intervention in the two years ahead – reports and resolutions which have been on our website for several months. The Congress took place with a full recognition of the gravity of the current historical situation, characterised by one of the most dangerous pandemics in history, which is far from having been overcome.

The worst thing to do would be to underestimate this situation at a time when governments are proclaiming that “everything is under control” and that “we are back to normal”, while at the same time a horde of Covid deniers and anti-vaxxers (the other face, equally lying, of the government lies) who downplay reality with their talk of “conspiracies” and “dark manoeuvres”; who use a real fact – the strengthening of the totalitarian control of the state – to take things to absurd levels in the name of “the defence of democratic freedoms”, thus denying the very real dangers to human life that the pandemic entails.

The most serious thing about the pandemic has been how all the states have responded: in a completely irresponsible way, taking contradictory and chaotic measures, without the slightest plan, without any coordination, playing more cynically than ever with the lives of millions of people. And this did not happen in the states usually labelled as “rogue states”, but in the United States, Germany, Britain and France, the “most advanced” countries, where there is supposedly “civilization and progress”. The pandemic has brought to light the decadence and decomposition of capitalism, the rottenness of its social and ideological structures, the disorder and chaos emanating from its very relations of production, the “no future” of a mode of production gripped by increasingly violent contradictions that it cannot overcome.

Worse: the pandemic is the harbinger of new and deeper convulsions in all countries, imperialist tensions, ecological destruction, economic crisis... The world proletariat cannot be fooled by vague promises of a “return to normal”. It needs to look reality in the face, to understand that the face of barbarism has been clearly outlined by the pandemic and will be defined with even more virulence in the times to come.

The acceleration of capitalist decomposition

The 24th Congress of the ICC took place, like the congresses of revolutionary organisations throughout history, in a framework of fraternity and profound debate. It had the responsibility of confirming the framework of analysis of the decomposition of capitalism, rectifying possible errors or insufficiently elaborated appreciations. The Congress had to answer a series of necessary questions:

- Does the notion of decomposition and its progressive elaboration fully accord with the method of marxism?
- How are the effects of decomposition, its acceleration and intensification, and its interference on other planes of social life, mainly the economy, manifesting themselves?
- How does decomposition affect the class struggle and what is the perspective for its future development?
- Finally, what is the role of the organisation in this situation? How does it prepare for the future in the face of these challenges?

The method of analysis of capitalist decomposition

This Congress confirmed that the analysis of decomposition is in continuity with marxism. In 1914, with the outbreak of the First World War, marxists identified capitalism's entry into its epoch of decadence, an analysis confirmed in 1919 by the platform of the Communist International, which spoke of an “epoch of the breakdown of capital, its internal disintegration”. Faithful to this approach, the ICC more than three decades ago identified a specific and terminal phase of the decadence of

capitalism: its decomposition. This phase of decomposition is the accumulation of a series of contradictions that capitalist society has been unable to resolve, as described in point 3 of the Theses of Decomposition :

“To the extent that contradictions and expressions of decadent capitalism that mark its successive phases do not disappear with time, but continue and deepen, the phase of decomposition appears as the result of an accumulation of all the characteristics of a moribund system, completing the 75-year death agony of a historically condemned mode of production. Concretely, not only do the imperialist nature of all states, the threat of world war, the absorption of civil society by the state Moloch, and the permanent crisis of the capitalist economy all continue during the phase of decomposition, they reach a synthesis and an ultimate conclusion within it.”

This analysis, first developed 30 years ago, has been powerfully confirmed in all its gravity, leading us to conclude in the Resolution on the International Situation from the 24th ICC Congress “most of the important events of the last three decades have confirmed the validity of this framework, as witnessed by the exacerbation of the every man for himself at the international level, the ‘rebound’ of the phenomena of decomposition to the core areas of world capitalism through the growth of terrorism and the refugee crisis, the rise of populism and the loss of political control by the ruling class, the growing rot of ideology through the spread of scapegoating, religious fundamentalism and conspiracy theories... The current Covid-19 pandemic is a distillation of all the key manifestations of decomposition, and an active factor in its acceleration.”

Since our Congress completed its work, events have succeeded each other with an unprecedented virulence, clearly confirming our analysis: imperialist wars in Ethiopia, Ukraine, Yemen, Syria; intensification of the confrontation between the USA and China; huge imprint of the ecological crisis around the world, notably through the multiplication of catastrophic floods and wildfires. Today, the pandemic is seeing a new surge of infections and

the very dangerous threat of the Omicron variant; at the same time, the economic crisis is aggravating... The defence of the marxist framework of decomposition is today more necessary than ever faced with the blindness of other groups of the Communist Left and the infiltration into the revolutionary milieu of all kinds of modernist, sceptical, nihilist positions, which close their eyes to the reality of the situation. At this moment, we are seeing the unfolding in a number of countries of combative workers' struggles which more than ever need the strength and lucidity of this framework of analysis.

Accumulation and acceleration of the effects of decomposition

The 24th Congress was able to identify the **acceleration of capitalist decomposition** by examining in depth the roots and consequences of the pandemic, *"the first on such a scale since the Spanish flu outbreak of 1918... the most important moment in the evolution of capitalist decomposition since the period definitively opened up in 1989. The inability of the ruling class to prevent the resulting death toll of between 7 and 12 million confirms that the capitalist world system, left to itself, is dragging humanity towards the abyss of barbarism, towards its destruction; and that only the world proletarian revolution can halt this slide and lead humanity to a different future"*. The pandemic has demonstrated and confirmed the following realities:

- While capitalism is the first system in history whose relations of production have extended themselves and are dominant on a planetary scale, it is nonetheless the case that its rule is eminently chaotic because it is based on deadly competition for the domination of the world market between capitalist states. The world-wide character of capitalism does not enable it to achieve organised and coordinated action on a world scale – which would be the only rational and effective response to phenomena like the Covid pandemic – because it is not unified and centralised on a world-wide scale. On the contrary, the deadly competition for markets and for imperialist control of the globe has led to more and more aberrant and dangerous forms of behaviour on the part of the states, who have left populations defenceless against the pandemic and have even dramatically worsened it. China kept silent about the initial source of the pandemic in Wuhan; after that, big countries like the US, out of fear of their economies being paralysed, took a long time to react, which exacerbated the risks involved in the pandemic, then obliged them to

take hasty, extreme and disorganised measures like the lock-downs.

- The capitalist states, without exception, acted in the same way against the working class: restrictions without any kind of planning and based essentially on repression; closing of supply centres without bothering about the economic conditions of the workers; maintenance of production and service sectors without caring about the lives of the workers, as happened with the health workers in all countries (according to Amnesty International, 17,000 workers in this sector have died because of Covid and in America alone 570,000 were infected).
- After the Second World War, the WHO (World Health Organisation) was founded, which allowed a certain coordination between states to fight epidemics; however, in the face of the pandemic, the WHO has been ignored, each state has gone its own way, which has increased contagions and deaths and prevented any organised action. This is a clear expression of the advance of capitalist decomposition.
- The disputes over the production and distribution of the vaccine express the chaos and rottenness of the bourgeoisie. In the face of the economic crisis, such conflicts of interest within the ruling class will become more and more vicious.

The 24th Congress concluded that the pandemic cannot be reduced to a "calamity" or seen only as a health crisis (in the style of those that occurred periodically in pre-capitalist modes of production and in capitalism itself during the 19th century). It is a global crisis, manifesting itself at many levels: sanitary, economic, social and political, as well as moral and ideological. It is a crisis of capitalist decomposition: a product of the accumulation of contradictions of the system of the last 30 years, as expressed in our Report on the Pandemic and Decomposition for the 24th Congress. Specifically, the pandemic is the result:

- Of the dismantling of the health system in all the countries of the world. Since the beginning of the 21st century the capitalist states have known about the proliferation of epidemics such as EBOLA, SARS, etc. However, budgets have been decreased in health services and scientific research. This contrasts with the exorbitant increase in arms budgets and in the beefing up of the repressive forces.
- Viral diseases, such as Covid-19, are also the result of the living conditions of large sections of the working class in all

countries, forced to live in overcrowded and unsanitary conditions.

- The irrationality of capitalist production that exclusively privileges profit devastates forests, rivers, and oceans. In particular, the destruction of forests dangerously alters the "biological links" between animals, plants and humans, with unforeseeable consequences... The majority of scientists attribute the emergence of Covid to this factor.

"The ICC is more or less alone in defending the theory of decomposition. Other groups of the communist left reject it entirely, either, as in the case of the Bordigists, because they do not accept that capitalism is a system in decline (or at best are inconsistent and ambiguous on this point); or, for the Internationalist Communist Tendency, because talking about a 'final' phase of capitalism sounds far too apocalyptic, or because defining decomposition as a descent into chaos is a deviation from materialism, which, in their view, seeks to find the roots of every phenomenon in the economy and above all in the tendency of the rate of profit to fall" (Resolution on the International Situation, 24th Congress). The Activities Resolution of the 24th Congress underlined that *"The Covid Pandemic that began in early 2020 strikingly confirmed the acceleration of the impact of the period of the social decomposition of capitalism"*.

The pandemic crisis has shown that decomposition has gone further: 1) it has hit the central countries with particular force, especially the USA; 2) there is a combination and concomitance between the different effects of the decomposition, which is unlike previous periods when they were contained locally and did not influence each other. What this crisis announces is increasingly violent convulsions, a sharpening of the tendencies to the loss of control of society on the part of the state. The decade ahead appears full of serious uncertainties, of more frequent and interrelated catastrophes. The slide of capitalism towards barbarism will have an increasingly terrifying face.

The perspective for the class struggle

The perspectives for the proletariat must also be analysed in the framework of capitalist decomposition. The Resolution on the Balance of Class Forces adopted by our previous Congress identified the difficulties and weaknesses of the working class over the last 30 years. With the collapse of the Eastern bloc, the ICC identified the opening of the phase of decomposition and its consequences for the proletariat in terms of

increasing difficulties for the development of its struggles, difficulties which would be further aggravated by the campaigns about the “death of communism” and the “disappearance of the working class”. However, at its 24th Congress, the ICC argued, as it did at its previous Congresses, that the working class is not defeated:

“Despite the enormous problems facing the proletariat, we reject the idea that the class has already been defeated on a global scale, or is on the verge of such a defeat comparable to that of the period of counter-revolution, a defeat of a kind from which the proletariat would possibly no longer be able to recover. The proletariat, as an exploited class, cannot avoid going through the school of defeats, but the central question is whether the proletariat has already been so overwhelmed by the remorseless advance of decomposition that its revolutionary potential has been effectively undermined. Measuring such a defeat in the phase of decomposition is a far more complex task than in the period before the Second World War, when the proletariat had risen openly against capitalism and been crushed by a series of frontal defeats.” (Resolution on the International Situation)

Obviously, we have to sharpen our analytical skills in order to detect this “point of no return” because, *“the phase of decomposition indeed contains the danger of the proletariat simply failing to respond and being ground down over a long period – a ‘death by a thousand cuts’ rather than a head-on class confrontation”* (ibid).

However, the Congress affirmed that *“there is still sufficient evidence to show that, despite the undoubted ‘progress’ of decomposition, despite the fact that time is no longer on the side of the working class, the potential for a profound proletarian revival – leading to a reunification between the economic and the political dimensions of the class struggle – has not vanished.”*

The Congress also noted *“The small but significant signs of a subterranean maturation of consciousness, manifesting itself in efforts towards a global reflection on the failure of capitalism and the need for another society in some movements (particularly the Indignados in 2011), but also through the emergence of young elements looking for class positions and turning towards the heritage of the Communist Left”*.

We must also bear in mind that the situation facing the working class is not the same as that following the collapse of the Russian bloc and the confirmation of the phase of decomposition in 1989. At that time, the bourgeoisie was able to

present these events as proof of the death of communism, the victory of capitalism and the beginning of a bright future for humanity. Thirty years of decomposition have seriously undermined this ideological fraud, and the pandemic in particular has exposed the irresponsibility and negligence of all capitalist governments, the reality of a society plagued by deep economic divisions where we are by no means “all in it together”. On the contrary, the pandemic and the lockdown have revealed the conditions of the working class, both as the main victim of the health crisis and as the source of all labour and all material production and, in particular, as the force whose labour satisfies basic human needs. This can be the basis for a future recovery of class identity. And, along with the growing realisation that capitalism is a totally obsolete mode of production, this has already been an element in the emergence of politicised minorities whose motivation has been above all to understand the dramatic situation facing humanity.

Despite the social atomisation of decomposition, despite deliberate attempts to fragment the labour force through stratagems like the green economy, or ideological campaigns that aim to present the more educated sectors of the proletariat as “middle class” and encourage individualism, the workers remain a class that in recent years has increased and is globally interconnected; but with the advance of decomposition, it is also true that atomisation and social isolation intensifies. It is a factor that makes it difficult for the working class, for the time being, to experience its own class identity. Only through the struggles of the working class on its own class terrain will it be able to develop the collective strength that the proletariat will need on a world scale to overthrow capitalism.

The workers are brought together by capital in the production process; their associated work is carried out under coercion, but the revolutionary character of the proletariat means dialectically reversing these conditions in a collective struggle. The exploitation of common labour is transformed into the struggle against exploitation and for the liberation of the social character of labour, for a society that knows how to consciously use all the potential of associated activity. That society for which the world proletariat will have to fight is communist society.

Debate: a strength for the revolutionary organisation

“Contrary to the Bordigist view, the organisation of revolutionaries cannot be ‘monolithic’. The existence of divergences

within it is the manifestation that it is a living organ which has no ready-made answers to provide immediately to the problems arising in the class. Marxism is neither a dogma nor a catechism (...) Like all human reflection, that which presides over the development of proletarian consciousness is not a linear and mechanical process, but a contradictory and critical one, which necessarily poses the discussion and confrontation of arguments”.

Since before the 23rd International Congress divergences have been expressed on different questions: will the imperialist tensions lead to a new world war? Is the proletariat already defeated? What is the task of the hour for the organisation? This leads to the question of what does it mean to be active as a kind of fraction in the present phase of decomposition

The divergences on the analysis of the international situation had a first public expression in the document “Divergences with the Resolution on the international situation at the 23rd ICC Congress”. The Activities Resolution of our recent Congress underlines that *“the organisation has made an effort at every level - at Congresses, meetings of central organs, section meetings along with some 45 individual contributions in the internal bulletins over the last four years - to answer the divergences of the comrades and has also begun to express the debate externally. ...The organisation’s effort to confront divergences during this period expresses a positive will to strengthen the polemical defence of its positions and analyses.”*

The divergences were made more precise at the 24th Congress:

- Isn't the polarisation of imperialist tensions, mainly between the US and China, paving the way for a Third World War?
- Wouldn't the brutal measures taken by the states of confinement etc. be a covert means of preparing the populations for imperialist war?
- Is the pandemic a “socio-natural” phenomenon that the states can take advantage of for population control purposes or does it express and accelerate, above all, the general decomposition of capitalism?
- How can the proletariat face up to this grave historical situation? Does it first need a consciousness of itself and the development of its historical perspective? Or would this require the development of a struggle on its own class terrain, the maturing of its consciousness and the strengthening of the capacity of its communist organisations to intervene?

These and other questions have been addressed at the Congress and, with the aim of reaching as much clarity as possible in their expression, will be presented publicly in discussion documents. This is a practice of the workers' movement that the ICC has taken very seriously, as the above-mentioned text from *International Review* n° 33 points out:

"Insofar as the debates in progress in the organisation concern the proletariat as a whole, it is appropriate for the organisation to bring them to the outside world, respecting the following conditions:

- *that the debates concern general political questions that have reached sufficient maturity to make their publication a real contribution to the consciousness of the working class;*
- *that the place of the debates should not compromise the overall balance of the publications;*
- *that it is the organisation as a whole that decides and takes charge of the publication according to the criteria that guide the publication of any article in the press: clarity and editorial form, the interest they present for the working class as a whole".*

The pillars on which to build the organisation

The Congress drew a positive balance of the activity of the organisation in the last two years, in particular the solidarity with all the comrades affected by the pandemic or by the serious economic consequences of the confinement (a good number of comrades lost the means to earn a living).

This positive balance should not make us lower our guard. The communist organisation is subjected to multiple pressures, and acquisitions – which cost a lot to win – can quickly be lost. As the Activities Resolution adopted by the Congress points out *"The acceleration of decomposition poses important problems at the level of militancy, theory and organisational tissue"*.

These problems are not new, they are an expression of the impact of decomposition on the functioning and militancy of communist organizations since:

"The different elements which constitute the strength of the working class directly confront the various facets of this ideological decomposition:

- *solidarity and collective action are faced with the atomisation of 'look out for number one';*
- *the need for organisation confronts social decomposition, the disintegration*

of the relationships which form the basis for all social life;

- *the proletariat's confidence in the future and in its own strength is constantly sapped by the all-pervasive despair and nihilism within society;*
- *consciousness, lucidity, coherent and unified thought, the taste for theory, have a hard time making headway in the midst of the flight into illusions, drugs, sects, mysticism, the rejection or destruction of thought which are characteristic of our epoch."* (Thesis 13 of the Theses on Decomposition).

These dangers clearly show that our work is above all to prepare the future. The ICC's fundamental aim of building a bridge to the future world communist party of the proletariat has been set out since its founding Congress in 1975, and was reaffirmed at the 23rd Congress; but this has been brought into even shaper relief in recent years by several factors: the acceleration of decomposition, and the mounting difficulties faced by the proletariat's struggles intensify the challenges for the organisation of revolutionaries; ageing of comrades and at the same time the emergence of new militants who are joining the organisation in the context of decomposition; the growing attacks of parasitism against the organisation; the weight of opportunism and sectarianism in the groups coming from the Communist Left.

At its 24th Congress, the ICC aimed to identify the perspectives, the difficulties and dangers we have to confront if we are to carry out this role of transmission. However, faced with this situation, the preparation of the future has to be clearly understood as going against the stream.

Historically, the marxist movement has only been able to develop by successfully confronting momentous events and therefore has always based itself on a fighting spirit, a desire to overcome all the obstacles that bourgeois society puts in its way. The ICC's experience is no different in this respect. The organisations which history requires to play a role of transmission have had to prove themselves through real trials by fire: the marxist current of the mid-19th century, despite the imprisonments, exile and great poverty of its militants after the defeats of 1848, provided the springboard for the creation of the 1st International in the 1860s. *Bilan* and the GCF went through the trials of the Stalinist counter-revolution of the 30s, 40s and 50s, fascism and anti-fascism, of the Second World War, to keep the revolutionary flame alive for future generations. It is clear that the period of decomposition is the ICC's own trial by fire.

The ability to analyse the world and historical situation is one of the pillars of our immediate perspectives; the marxist method of historical materialism and the constant reference to the heritage of previous acquisitions, as well as the confrontation of divergences, are part of the preparation for the future. Our activity in the spheres of intervention, of theoretical deepening, of the defence of the organisation, are founded on the transmission and development of the historic acquisitions of a century of the Communist Left and it is only on this solid basis that the future world communist party of the proletariat can be prepared.

As part of the preparation for the future, there is also the uncompromising fight against parasitism. The effort of the last years shows the necessity to continue the fight against parasitism, denouncing it as the ICC has done in front of the working class, our contacts and in front of the milieu of the Communist Left.

The struggle against opportunism within the organisations of the Communist Left, linked to the struggle against parasitism, is going to be important in the next period; there is a great danger that the potential of the future unity of the revolutionaries could be lost and atrophy. The experience of the last two years of the defence of the organisation against the attacks of parasitism and for breaking the cordon sanitaire it tries to erect around the ICC shows that the struggle against opportunism and sectarianism is synonymous with the knowledge and defence of our history.

In the coming period the ICC intends to improve its press. In the last decades, the concern for polemics with the proletarian political milieu within our ranks has diminished. In the next period the organisation intends to reverse this situation. Our fraction-like work, also involves preparing the future by widening polemics, inspired by those of the first phase of *Iskra* or the first issues of *Internationalisme* dedicated to the polemic against Vercesi and his opportunist drift. In response to the putrefaction of bourgeois ideology, to the obscurantist mystifications, the press must act as a reference point against the intoxication that emanates from the ideological decomposition of capitalism and offer the working class a rational and concrete perspective for the overthrow of capitalism; we must therefore strengthen the diffusion of our digital and printed press.

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Resolution on the international situation

This resolution is in continuity with the report on decomposition to the 22nd ICC Congress, the resolution on the international situation to the 23rd congress, and the report on the pandemic and decomposition to the 24th Congress. It is based on the proposition that not only does the decadence of capitalism pass through different stages or phases, but that we have since the late 1980s reached its ultimate phase, the phase of decomposition; furthermore, that decomposition itself has a history, and a central aim of these texts is to “test” the theoretical framework of decomposition against the evolution of the world situation. They have shown that most important developments of the last three decades have indeed confirmed the validity of this framework, as witness the exacerbation of every man for himself on an international level, the “rebound” of the phenomena of decomposition to the heartlands of world capitalism through the growth of terrorism and the refugee crisis, the rise of populism and a loss of political control by the ruling class, the advancing putrefaction of ideology through the spread of scapegoating, religious fundamentalism and conspiracy theories. And just as the phase of decomposition is the concentrated expression of all the contradictions of capital, above all in its epoch of decline, so the current Covid-19 pandemic is a distillation of all the key manifestations of decomposition, and an active factor in its acceleration.

The final phase of capitalist decline and the acceleration of chaos

1. The Covid-19 pandemic, the first on such a scale since the Spanish flu outbreak of 1918, is the most important moment in the evolution of capitalist decomposition since the period definitively opened up in 1989. The inability of the ruling class to prevent the resulting death toll of between 7 and 12 million confirms that the capitalist world system, left to itself, is dragging humanity towards the abyss of barbarism, towards its destruction; and that only the world proletarian revolution can halt this slide and lead humanity to a different future.

2. The ICC is more or less alone in defending the theory of decomposition. Other groups of the communist left reject it entirely, either, as in the case of the Bordigists, because they do not accept that capitalism is a system in decline (or at best are inconsistent and ambiguous on this point); or, for the Internationalist Communist Tendency, because talking about a “final” phase of capitalism sounds far too apocalyptic, or because defining decomposition as a descent into chaos is a deviation from materialism, which, in their view, seeks to find the roots of every phenomenon in the economy and above all in the tendency of the rate of profit to fall. All these currents seem to ignore the fact that our analysis is in continuity with the platform of the Communist International in 1919, which not only insisted that the world imperialist war of 1914-18 announced capitalism’s entry into the “*epoch of the breakdown of capital, its internal disintegration, the*

epoch of the communist revolution of the proletariat”, but also emphasised that “*The old capitalist ‘order’ has ceased to function; its further existence is out of the question. The final outcome of the capitalist mode of production is chaos. This chaos can only be overcome by the productive and most numerous class – the working class. The proletariat has to establish real order – communist order*”. Thus, the drama facing humanity was indeed posed in terms of order against chaos. And the threat of chaotic breakdown was linked to “*the anarchy of the capitalist mode of production*”, in other words, to a fundamental element in the system itself. According to marxism, the capitalist system, on a qualitatively higher level than any previous mode of production, involves the products of human labour becoming an alien power that stands above and against their creators. This decadence of the system, with its insoluble contradictions, is marked by a new spiral in this loss of control. And as the CI’s Platform explains, the necessity to try to overcome capitalist anarchy within each nation state – through monopoly and above all through state intervention – only pushes it onto new heights on a global scale, culminating in the imperialist world war. Thus, while capitalism can at certain levels and for certain phases hold back its innate tendency towards chaos (for example, through the mobilisation for war in the 1930s or the period of economic boom that followed the war), the most profound tendency is towards the “internal disinte-

gration” that, for the CI, characterised the new epoch.

3. While the Manifesto of the CI talked about the beginning of a new “epoch”, there were tendencies within the International to see the catastrophic situation of the post-war world as a final crisis in an immediate sense rather than an entire age of catastrophes that could last for many decades. And this is an error that revolutionaries have fallen into many times – not only because of errors in their analyses, but also because it is not possible to predict with certainty the precise moment when a major change will occur at the historical level. Such mistakes occurred, for example, in 1848, when the Communist Manifesto already proclaimed that the envelope of capital had become too narrow to contain the productive forces it had set in motion; in 1919-20 with theory of the imminent collapse of capital, developed in particular by the German communist left; or again, in 1938, with Trotsky’s notion that the productive forces had ceased to grow. The ICC itself has also underestimated the capacity of capitalism to expand and develop in its own manner, even in a general context of advancing decay, notably in the case of Stalinist China after the collapse of the Russian bloc. However, these errors are products of an immediate interpretation of the capitalist crisis, not an inherent fault in the theory of decadence itself, which sees capitalism in this period as a growing fetter on the productive forces rather than an absolute barrier. But capitalism has been in decline for over a century, and recognising that we are reaching the limits of the system is entirely consistent with an understanding that the economic crisis, despite ups and downs, has essentially become permanent; that the means of destruction have not only reached such a level that they could destroy all life on the planet, but are in the hands of an increasingly unstable world “order”; that capitalism has conjured up a planetary ecological disaster unprecedented in human history. In sum, the recognition that we are indeed in the ultimate stage of capitalist decadence is based on a sober appraisal of reality. Again, this should be seen on a historical, not a day-to-day time scale. But it does mean that this final phase is irreversible and there can be no exit from it other than communism or the destruction of humanity. This is the historical alternative of our time.

4. The Covid-19 pandemic, contrary to the

views propagated by the ruling class, is not a purely “natural” event, but results from a combination of natural, social and political factors, all of them linked to the functioning of the capitalist system in decay. The “economic” element is indeed crucial here, and again at more than one level. It is the economic crisis, the desperate hunt for profit, which has driven capital to invade every part of the world’s surface, to grab what Adam Smith called nature’s “free gift”, destroying the remaining sanctuaries for wild life and vastly increasing the risk of zoonotic diseases. In turn, the financial crash of 2008 led to a brutal scaling down of investment in research into new diseases, in medical equipment and treatment, which exponentially increased the deadly impact of the Corona virus, a situation that was further exacerbated by massive attacks on health systems (reductions in the number of beds and carers, etc.) that were overwhelmed at the time of the pandemic. And the intensification of “every man for himself” competition between companies and nations at the global level has severely retarded the provision of safety material and vaccinations. And contrary also to the utopian hopes of certain parts of the ruling class, the pandemic will not give rise to a more harmonious world order once it has been kept at bay. Not only because this pandemic is probably only a warning sign of worse pandemics to come, given that the fundamental conditions that generated it cannot be addressed by the bourgeoisie, but also because the pandemic has considerably worsened a world economic recession which was already looming before the pandemic struck. The result will be the opposite of harmony as national economies seek to cut each other’s throats in the fight for dwindling markets and resources. This heightened competition will certainly express itself at the military level. And the “return to normal” of capitalist competition will place new burdens on the backs of the world’s exploited, who will bear the main brunt of capitalism’s efforts to claw back some part of the gigantic debts it has incurred through its attempts to manage the crisis.

5. No state can pretend to be a model of managing the pandemic. If, in an initial phase, certain states in Asia have managed to face up to it more effectively (even though countries like China have engaged in falsifying the figures and the reality of the epidemic) this is because of their experience in confronting pandemics at the social and cultural level, since this continent has historically provided the soil for the emergence of new diseases, and above all because these states have maintained the means, institutions, and procedures of coordination set up during

the SARS epidemic in 2003. The spread of the virus at the planetary level, the international generation of new variants, straight away pose the problem at the level where the impotence of the bourgeoisie is exposed most clearly, especially its inability to adopt a unified and coordinated approach (as shown by the recent failure of the proposal to sign a treaty to struggle against pandemics) and to ensure that the whole of humanity obtains the protection of vaccines.

6. The pandemic, a product of the decomposition of the system, thus reveals itself as a formidable force in the further acceleration of this decomposition. Moreover, its impact on the most powerful nation on Earth, the USA, confirms what was already noted in the report to the 22nd Congress: the tendency for the effects of decomposition to return with added force to the very heart of the world capitalist system. In fact, the USA is now at the “centre” of the global process of decomposition. The catastrophic mishandling of the Covid crisis by the populist Trump administration has certainly been a significant factor in the US experiencing the highest death rates in the world from the disease. At the same time, the extent of divisions within the ruling class in the US were laid bare by the contested elections in November 2020, and above all by the storming of the Capitol by Trump supporters on 6 January 2021, egged on by Trump and his entourage. The latter event demonstrates that the internal divisions rocking the USA traverse the whole of society. Although Trump has been ousted from government, Trumpism remains a potent, heavily armed force, expressing itself on the streets as well as through the ballot box. And with the whole of the left wing of capital rallying behind the banner of anti-fascism, there is a real danger that the working class in the US will be caught up in violent conflicts between rival factions of the bourgeoisie.

7. The events in the USA also highlight the advancing decay of capitalism’s ideological structures, where again the US “leads the way”. The accession of the populist Trump administration, the powerful influence of religious fundamentalism, the growing distrust of science, have their roots in particular factors in the history of American capitalism, but the development of decomposition and in particular the outbreak of the pandemic has moved all kinds of irrational ideas to the mainstream of political life, accurately reflecting the complete lack of perspective for the future offered by the existing society. In particular, the US has become the nodal point for the radiation of “conspiracy theory” throughout the advanced capitalist world, notably via the internet and social media, which

have provided the technological means for further undermining the foundations of any idea of objective truth to a degree that Stalinism and Nazism could only have dreamed about. Appearing in different forms, conspiracy theory has certain common features: the personalised vision of secret elites who run society from behind the scenes, a rejection of scientific method and a deep distrust for all official discourse. Contrary to the mainstream ideology of the bourgeoisie, which presents democracy and the existing state power as true representatives of society, conspiracy theory has its centre of gravity in the hatred of the established elites, a hatred it directs against finance capital and the classical democratic facade of state capitalist totalitarianism. This misled representatives of the workers’ movement in the past to call this approach the “socialism of fools” (August Bebel, with reference to anti-Semitism)—a mistake still understandable before World War One, but which would be dangerous today. Conspiracy theory populism is not a warped attempt to approach socialism or anything resembling proletarian class consciousness. One of its main sources is the bourgeoisie itself: that part of the bourgeoisie which resents being excluded precisely from the elitist inner circles of its own class, backed up by other parts of the bourgeoisie which have lost or are losing their prior central position. The masses this kind of populism attracts behind it, far from being animated by any willingness to challenge the ruling class, by identifying with the struggle for power of those they support, hope in some way to share in that power, or at least to be favoured by it at the expense of others.

8. While the advance of capitalist decomposition, alongside the chaotic sharpening of imperialist rivalries, primarily takes the form of political fragmentation and a loss of control by the ruling class, this does not mean that the bourgeoisie can no longer resort to state totalitarianism in its efforts to hold society together. On the contrary, the more society tends to break apart, the more desperate becomes the bourgeoisie’s reliance on the centralising state power, which is the principal instrument for this most Machiavellian of all ruling classes. The reaction to the rise of populism by those factions of the ruling class who are more aware of the general interests of national capital and its state, is a case in point. The election of Biden, supported by a huge mobilisation of the media, parts of the political apparatus and even the military and the security services, express this real counter-tendency to the danger of social and political disintegration most clearly embodied by Trumpism. In the short term, such “successes” can

function as a brake on mounting social chaos. Faced with the Covid-19 crisis, the unprecedented lock-downs, a last resort to hold back the unrestrained spread of the disease, the massive recourse to state debt to preserve a minimum of living standards in the advanced countries, the mobilisation of scientific resources to find a vaccine, demonstrate the bourgeoisie's need to preserve the image of the state as the protector of the population, its unwillingness to lose credibility and authority in the face of the pandemic. But in the longer term, this recourse to state totalitarianism tends to further exacerbate the contradictions of the system. The semi-paralysis of the economy and the piling up of debt can have no other result than to accelerate the global economic crisis, while at the social level, the massive increase in police powers and state surveillance introduced to enforce the lock-down laws – and inevitably used to justify all forms of protest and dissent – are visibly aggravating distrust of the political establishment, expressed mainly on the anti-proletarian terrain of the “rights of the citizen”.

9. The evident nature of the political and ideological decomposition in the world's leading power does not mean that the other centres of world capitalism are able to constitute alternative fortresses of stability. Again, this is most clear-cut in the

case of Britain, which has been pummelled simultaneously by the highest Covid death rates in Europe and the first symptoms of the self-inflicted wound of Brexit, and which faces a real possibility of breaking up into its constituent “nations”. The current unseemly rows between Britain and the EU over the viability and distribution of vaccines offer further proof that the main trend in global bourgeois politics today is towards increasing fragmentation, not towards unity in the face of a “common enemy”. Europe itself has not been spared from these centrifugal trends, not only around the management of the pandemic, but also around the issue of “human rights” and democracy in countries like Poland and Hungary. It is remarkable that even central countries like Germany, which was previously considered a relative “safe haven” of political stability and was able to build on its economic strength, is now being affected by growing political chaos. The acceleration of decomposition in the historical centre of capitalism is characterised both by a loss of control and by increasing difficulties in generating political homogeneity. After the loss of its second largest economy, even if the EU is not in immediate danger of major splits, these threats continue to hang over the dream of a united Europe. And while Chinese state propaganda highlights the growing disunity and incoherence of

the “democracies”, presenting itself as a bulwark of global stability, Beijing's increasing recourse to internal repression, as against the “democracy movement” in Hong Kong and the Uighur Muslims, is actually evidence that China is a ticking time bomb. China's extraordinary growth is itself a product of decomposition. The economic opening up during the Deng period in the 1980s mobilised huge investments, especially from the US, Europe and Japan. The Tiananmen Massacre in 1989 made it clear that this economic opening was being implemented by an inflexible political apparatus which has only been able to avoid the fate of Stalinism in the Russian bloc through a combination of state terror, a ruthless exploitation of labour power which subjugates hundreds of millions of workers to a permanent migrant worker status, and a frenzied economic growth whose foundations are now looking increasingly shaky. The totalitarian control over the whole social body, the repressive hardening of the Stalinist faction of Xi Jinping, is not an expression of strength but a manifestation of the weakness of the state, whose cohesion is endangered by the existence of centrifugal forces within society and important struggles between cliques within the ruling class.

Capitalism's march towards the destruction of humanity

10. In contrast to a situation in which the bourgeoisie is able to mobilise society for war, as in the 1930s, the exact rhythm and forms of decomposing capitalism's drive towards the destruction of humanity are harder to predict because it is the product of a convergence of different factors, some of which may be partially hidden from view. The final result, as the “Theses on Decomposition” insist, is the same: *“Left to its own devices, (capitalism) will lead humanity to the same fate as world war. In the end, it is all the same whether we are wiped out in a rain of thermonuclear bombs, or by pollution, radioactivity from nuclear power stations, famine, epidemics, and the massacres of innumerable small wars (where nuclear weapons might also be used). The only difference between these two forms of annihilation lies in that one is quick, while the other would be slower, and would consequently provoke still more suffering”*. Today, however, the contours of this drive towards annihilation are becoming sharper. The consequences of capitalism's destruction of nature are becoming increasingly impossible to deny, as is the failure of the world bourgeoisie,

with all its global conferences and pledges to move towards a “green economy”, to halt a process which is inextricably linked to capitalism's need to penetrate every last corner of the planet in its competitive pursuit of the accumulation process. The Covid pandemic is probably the most significant expression so far of this profound imbalance between humanity and nature, but other warning signs are also multiplying, from the melting of polar ice to the devastating fires in Australia and California and the pollution of the oceans by the detritus of capitalist production.

11. At the same time, “massacres from innumerable small wars” are also proliferating as capitalism in its final phase plunges into an increasingly irrational imperialist free for all. The ten year agony in Syria, a country now utterly ruined by a conflict involving at least five rival camps, is perhaps the most eloquent expression of this terrifying “basket of crabs”, but we are seeing similar manifestations in Libya, the Horn of Africa and Yemen, wars that have been accompanied and aggravated by the emergence of regional powers such as Iran, Turkey and Saudi Arabia, none

of whom can be relied upon to accept the discipline of the main global powers: these second or third level powers may forge contingent alliances with the most powerful states only to find themselves on opposite sides in other situations (as in the case of Turkey and Russia in the war in Libya). The recurring military confrontations in Israel/Palestine are also testimony to the intractable nature of many of these conflicts, and in this case the slaughter of civilians has been exacerbated by the development of a pogrom atmosphere within Israel itself, showing the impact of decomposition at both the military and social levels. At the same time, we are seeing a sharpening of conflict between the global powers. The exacerbation of rivalries between the USA and China was already evident under Trump but the Biden administration will continue in the same direction, even if under different ideological pretexts, such as China's human rights abuses; at the same time the new administration has announced that it will no longer “roll over” in the face of Russia, who have now lost their point of support in the White House. And even if Biden has promised to reinsert the US into

a number of international institutions and accords (on climate change, Iran's nuclear programme, NATO...), this does not mean that the US will forgo its capacity to act alone in defence of its interests. The military strike against pro-Iranian militias in Syria by the Biden administration only weeks after the election was a clear statement to this effect. The pursuit of every man for himself will make it increasingly difficult, if not impossible, for the United States to impose its leadership, an illustration of each against all in the acceleration of decomposition.

12. Within this chaotic picture, there is no doubt that the growing confrontation between the US and China tends to take centre stage. The new administration has thus demonstrated its commitment to the "tilt to the east" (now supported by the Tory government in Britain) which was already a central axis of Obama's foreign policy. This has been concretised in the

development of the "Quad", an explicitly anti-China alliance between the US, Japan, India and Australia. However, this does not mean that we are heading towards the formation of stable blocs and a generalised world war. The march towards world war is still obstructed by the powerful tendency towards indiscipline, every man for himself and chaos at the imperialist level, while in the central capitalist countries capitalism does not yet dispose of the political and ideological elements - including in particular a political defeat of the proletariat - that could unify society and smooth the way towards world war. The fact that we are still living in an essentially multipolar world is highlighted in particular by the relationship between Russia and China. While Russia has shown itself very willing to ally with China on specific issues, generally in opposition to the US, it is no less aware of the danger of subordinating itself to its eastern neighbour, and is one of

the main opponents of China's "New Silk Road" towards imperialist hegemony.

13. This does not mean that we are living in an era of greater safety than in the period of the Cold War, haunted as it was by the threat of a nuclear Armageddon. On the contrary, if the phase of decomposition is marked by a growing loss of control by the bourgeoisie, this also applies to the vast means of destruction - nuclear, conventional, biological and chemical - that has been accumulated by the ruling class, and is now more widely distributed across a far greater number of nation states than in the previous period. While we are not seeing a controlled march towards war led by disciplined military blocs, we cannot rule out the danger of unilateral military outbreaks or even grotesque accidents that would mark a further acceleration of the slide towards barbarism.

An unprecedented economic crisis

14. For the first time in the history of capitalism outside of a world war situation, the economy has been directly and profoundly affected by a phenomenon - the Covid 19 pandemic - which is not directly related to the contradictions of the capitalist economy. The magnitude and importance of the impact of the pandemic, as the product of a completely obsolete system in full decomposition, illustrates the unprecedented fact that the phenomenon of capitalist decomposition is now also affecting, massively and on a global scale, the entire capitalist economy.

This irruption of the effects of decomposition into the economic sphere is directly affecting the evolution of the new phase of open crisis, ushering in a completely unprecedented situation in the history of capitalism. The effects of decomposition, by profoundly altering the mechanisms of state capitalism which up till now have been set up to "accompany" and limit the impact of the crisis, are introducing a factor of instability and fragility, of growing uncertainty.

The chaos which is seizing hold of the capitalist economy confirm Rosa Luxemburg's view that capitalism will not undergo a purely economic collapse. *"The more ruthlessly capital sets about the destruction of non-capitalist strata, at home and in the outside world, the more it lowers the standard of living for the workers as a whole, the greater also is the change in the day-to-day history of capital. It becomes a string of political and social disasters*

*and convulsions, and under these conditions, punctuated by periodical economic catastrophes or crises, accumulation can go on no longer. But even before this natural economic impasse of capital's own creating is properly reached it becomes a necessity for the international working class to revolt against the rule of capital".*¹

15. Hitting a capitalist system which since the beginning of 2018 had already been entering a clear slowdown, the pandemic quickly concretised the prediction of the ICC's 23rd Congress that we were heading for a new dive into the crisis.

The violent acceleration of the economic crisis - and the fears of the bourgeoisie - can be measured by the height of the enormous wall of debt, hastily erected to preserve the apparatus of production from bankruptcy and to maintain a minimum of social cohesion.

One of the most important manifestations of the gravity of the current crisis, unlike past situations of open economic crisis, and unlike the crisis of 2008, resides in the fact that the central countries (Germany, China and the US) have been hit simultaneously and are among the most affected by the recession. In China this has meant sharp drop in the rate of growth in 2020. The weakest states are seeing their economies strangled by inflation, the fall in the value of their currency and impoverishment.

After four decades of resorting to credit and debt to counter-act the growing tendency towards overproduction, punctuated by increasingly profound recessions and increasingly limited recoveries, the crisis of 2007-9 already marked a further step in capitalism's descent into irreversible crisis. While massive state intervention was able to save the banking system from utter ruin, pushing debt up to even more staggering levels, the causes of the crisis of 2007-09 were not overcome. The contradictions underneath the crisis moved onto a higher level with a crushing weight of debt on states themselves. Attempts to relaunch economies didn't lead to a real recovery: an element which was without precedent since the Second World War was that, apart from the US, China, and to a lesser extent Germany, production levels in all the other main countries stagnated or even fell between 2013 and 2018. The extreme fragility of this "recovery", by piling up all the conditions for a further significant deterioration of the world economy, already presaged the current situation.

Despite the historic scale of recovery plans, and because the relaunch of the economy is taking place in such a chaotic manner, it is not yet predictable how - and to what degree - the bourgeoisie will manage to stabilise the situation, since it is characterised by all kinds of uncertainties, above all about the evolution of the pandemic itself.

Unlike what the bourgeoisie was able to do in 2008, when it brought together the G7

1. *Accumulation of Capital*, chapter 32.

and the G20, made up of the main states, and was able to agree on a coordinated response to the credit crisis, today each national capital is reacting in dispersed order, without any other concern than reviving its own economic machinery and its survival on the world market, without concertation between the principal components of the capitalist system. Every man for himself has become decisively predominant.

The apparent exception to this, the European recovery plan, which includes the mutualisation of debts between EU countries, is a product of the awareness of the two main EU states of the need for a minimum of cooperation between them as a precondition for avoiding a major destabilisation of the EU in order to face up to their main rivals China and the United States, on pain of risking an accelerated downgrading of their position in the global arena. The contradiction between the necessity to contain the pandemic and to avoid the paralysis of production led to the “war of masks” and the “war of vaccines” The present war of vaccines, the way they are being fabricated and distributed, is a mirror to the disorder-afflicted world economy.

After the collapse of the eastern bloc, the bourgeoisie did everything it could to maintain a certain collaboration between states, in particular by relying on the organs of international regulation inherited from the period of the imperialist blocs. This framework of “globalisation” made it possible to limit the impact of the phase of decomposition at the level of the economy, by pushing to its extreme the possibility of “associating” nations at different levels of the economy – financial, productive, etc.

With the aggravation of the crisis and imperialist rivalries, these multilateral institutions and mechanisms were already being put to the test by the fact that the main powers were increasingly developing their own policies, in particular China, by constructing its vast parallel network, the New Silk Road, and the US, which was tending to turn its back on these institutions because of the growing inability of these organisms to maintain their dominant position. Populism was already coming forward as a factor worsening the deteriorating economic situation by introducing an element of uncertainty faced with the torments of the crisis. Its accession to power in different countries accelerated the deterioration of the means imposed by capitalism since 1945 to avoid any drift towards a withdrawal behind national borders, which can only lead to an uncontrolled contagion of the economic crisis.

The unleashing of every man for himself derives from the contradiction in capitalism between the more and more global scale

of production and the national structure of capital, a contradiction exacerbated by the crisis. By provoking growing chaos within the world economy (with the tendency towards the fragmentation of chains of production and breakdown of the world market into regional zones, towards the strengthening of protectionism and the multiplication of unilateral measures), this totally irrational move of each nation towards saving itself at the expense of everyone else is counter-productive for each national capital and a disaster at the world level, a decisive factor in worsening the entire global economy.

This rush by the most “responsible” bourgeois factions towards an increasingly irrational and chaotic management of the system, and, above all, the unprecedented advance of this tendency towards every man for himself, reveals a growing loss of control of its own system by the ruling class.

16. The only nation to have a positive growth rate in 2020 (2%), China has not emerged triumphant or strengthened from the pandemic crisis, even though it has momentarily gained ground at the expense of its rivals. On the contrary. The continuing deterioration in the growth of its economy, which is the most heavily indebted in the world, and which also has a low rate of utilisation of capacities and a proportion of “zombie enterprises” of more than 30%, is testimony to the incapacity of China from now on to play the role it did in 2008-11 in the relaunch of the world economy.

China is confronted with a reduction of markets across the world, with the desire of numerous states to free themselves from dependence on Chinese production, and with the risk of insolvency facing a number of those countries who are involved in the Silk Road project and which are most affected by the economic consequences of the pandemic. The Chinese government is therefore pursuing an orientation towards the internal economic development of the “Made in China 2025” plan, and of the “dual circulation” model, which is also aimed at compensating for the loss of external demand by stimulating domestic demand. This policy shift does not, however, represent an “inward turn”; Chinese imperialism will not and cannot turn its back on the world. On the contrary, the goal of this shift is to gain national autarky at the level of key technologies in order to be all the more able to gain ground beyond its own borders. It represents a new stage in the development of its war economy. All this is provoking powerful conflicts within the ruling class, between partisans of the direction of the economy by the Chinese Communist Party and those linked to the

market economy and the private sector, between the “planners” of the central authority and local authorities who want to guide investment themselves. Both in the United States (in relation to the “GAFA” technology giants from Silicon Valley) and - even more resolutely - in China (in relation to Ant International, Alibaba etc.) there is a strong move of the central state apparatus towards cutting down to size companies become too big (and too powerful) to control.

17. The consequences of the frenzied destruction of the environment by decomposing capitalism, the phenomena resulting from climate disturbance and the destruction of biodiversity, are in the first place leading to further pauperisation of the most deprived parts of the world population (sub-Saharan Africa and Southern Asia) or of those prey to military conflicts. But they are more and more affecting all economies, the developed countries at their head.

We are currently seeing the multiplication of extreme meteorological phenomena, extremely violent rainfall and flooding, vast fires leading to huge financial losses in city and countryside through the destruction of vital infrastructure (towns, roads, river installations). These phenomena disrupt the functioning of the industrial production apparatus and also weaken the productive capacity of agriculture. The global climate crisis and the resulting increased disorganisation of the world market in agricultural products are threatening the food security of many states.

Capitalism in decomposition does not possess the means to really fight against global warming and ecological devastation. These are already having an increasingly negative impact on the reproduction of capital and can only act as an obstacle to the return to economic growth.

Motivated by the necessity to replace obsolete heavy industries and fossil fuels, the “green economy” does not represent a way out for capital, whether on the ecological or the economic level. Its production networks are no more green and no less polluting. The capitalist system does not have the capacity to engage in a “green revolution”. The actions of the ruling class in this area also inevitably sharpen destructive economic competition and imperialist rivalries. The emergence of new and potentially profitable sectors, such as the production of electric vehicles, could at best benefit certain parts of the stronger economies, but given the limits of solvent markets and the increasing problems encountered by the ever more massive use of money creation and debt, they will not be able to act as a locomotive for the economy as a whole. The “green economy” is also a

privileged vehicle for powerful ideological mystifications about the possibility of reforming capitalism, and a choice weapon against the working class, justifying plant closures and lay-offs.

18. In response to mounting imperialist tensions, all states are increasing their military effort, in terms of both volume and duration. The military sphere is extending to more and more “zones of conflict”, such as cyber-security and the growing militarisation of space. All the nuclear powers are discreetly relaunching their atomic programmes. All states are modernising and adapting their armed forces.

This insane arms race, to which every state is irredeemably condemned by the demands of inter-imperialist competition, is all the more irrational given that the increasing weight of the war economy and arms production is absorbing a considerable proportion of national wealth: this gigantic mass of military expenditure on a world scale, even if it constitutes a source of profit for the arms merchants, represents a sterilisation and destruction of global capital. The investments realised in the production and sales of weapons and military equipment in no way form a point of departure or the source of the accumulation of new profits: once they have been produced or acquired weapons serve only to sow death and destruction or stand idle in silos until they become obsolete and have to be replaced. The economic impact of these completely unproductive expenses “*will be disastrous for capital. In the face of already unmanageable budget deficits, the massive increase in military spending, which the growth of inter-imperialist antagonisms makes necessary, is an economic burden which will only accelerate capitalism's descent into the abyss.*”²

19. After decades of gigantic debts, the massive injection of liquidity contained in the most recent economic support plans go well beyond the volume of previous interventions. The billions of dollars released by the American, European and Chinese plans have brought world debt to a record 365% of world GDP.

Debt, which has again and again been used by capitalism throughout its epoch of decadence as a palliative to the crisis of overproduction, is a way of putting things off to the future at the cost of even more serious convulsions. It has now soared to unprecedented levels. Since the Great Depression, the bourgeoisie has shown its determination to keep alive a system increasingly threatened by overproduction, by the diminishing availability of markets, through more and more sophisticated

means of state intervention, aimed at exerting an overall control over its economy. But it has no way of dealing with the real causes of the crisis. Even if there is not a fixed, predetermined limit to the headlong flight into debt, a point at which this would become impossible, this policy cannot go on indefinitely without grave repercussions on the stability of the system, as shown by the increasingly frequent and widespread nature of the crises of the last decade. Furthermore, such a policy has proven to be, at least for the last four decades, less and less effective in reviving the world economy.

Not only does the weight of debt condemn the capitalist system to ever more devastating convulsions (bankruptcy of enterprises and even of states, financial and monetary crises, etc) but also, by more and more restraining the capacity of states to cheat the laws of capitalism, it can only hinder their ability to relaunch their respective national economies.

The crisis that has already been unfolding over decades is going to become the most serious of the whole period of decadence, and its historic import will go beyond even the first crisis of this epoch, the crisis which began in 1929. Ripening after more than 100 years of capitalist decadence, with an economy ravaged by the military sector, weakened by the impact of the destruction of the environment, profoundly altered in its mechanisms of reproduction by debt and state manipulation, prey to the pandemic, increasingly suffering from all the other effects of decomposition, it is an illusion to think that in these conditions there will be any easy or durable recovery of the world economy.

20. At the same time, revolutionaries should not be tempted to fall into a “catastrophist” vision of a world economy on the verge of a final collapse. The bourgeoisie will continue to fight to the death for the survival of its system, whether by directly economic means (such as the exploitation of untapped resources and potential new markets, typified by China's New Silk Road project) or political, above all through the manipulation of credit and cheating the law of value. This means that there can still be phases of stabilisation in between economic convulsions with increasingly profound consequences.

21. The return of a kind of “neo-Keynesianism” initiated by the huge spending commitments of the Biden administration, and initiatives for corporate tax increases – though also motivated by the need to hold bourgeois society together, and by the equally pressing need to face up to sharpening imperialist tensions – shows the willingness of the ruling class to experiment

with different forms of economic management, not least because the deficiencies of the neo-liberal policies launched in the Thatcher-Reagan years have been severely exposed under the glare of the pandemic crisis. However, such policy changes cannot rescue the world economy from oscillating between the twin dangers of inflation and deflation, new credit crunches and currency crises, all leading to brutal recessions.

22. The working class is paying a heavy tribute to the crisis. First because it is most directly exposed to the pandemic and is the principal victim of the spread of infection, and secondly because the downward dive in the economy is unleashing the most serious attacks since the Great Depression, at all levels of working and living conditions, although not all sectors of the class will be affected in the same way.

The destruction of jobs was four times greater in 2020 than in 2009, but it has not yet revealed the full extent of the huge increase in mass unemployment that lies ahead. Although the public subsidies handed out in some countries to those who are partially unemployed are aimed at mitigating the social shock (in the United States, for example, during the first year of the pandemic, the average income of wage earners, according to official statistics, actually increased – for the first time ever, during a recession, in the history of capitalism) millions of jobs are going to disappear very soon.

The exponential increase in precarious working and the general lowering of wages will lead to a gigantic increase in impoverishment, which is already hitting many workers. The number of victims of famine in the world has increased two-fold and hunger is reappearing in the western countries. For those who keep a job the workload and the rhythm of exploitation will worsen.

The working class can expect nothing from the efforts by the bourgeoisie to “normalise” the economic situation except lay-offs and wage cuts, added stress and fear, drastic increases in austerity measures at all levels, in education as well as health pensions and social benefits. In short, we will see a degradation of living and working conditions at a level which none of the post-Second World War generations have hitherto experienced.

23. Since the capitalist mode of production entered its period of decadence, the pressure to fight against this decline with state capitalist measures has grown constantly. However, the tendency to strengthen state capitalist organs and forms is anything but a strengthening of capitalism; on the con-

2. “Report on the International Situation”, *International Review* n° 35.

trary, they express the increasing contradictions on the economic and political terrain. With the acceleration of decomposition in the wake of the pandemic, we are also

witnessing a sharp increase in state capitalist measures. These are not an expression of greater state control over society but rather an expression of the growing dif-

ficulties in organising society as a whole and preventing its increasing tendency to fragmentation.

The perspectives for the class struggle

24. The ICC recognised at the beginning of the 90s that the collapse of the eastern bloc and the definitive opening of the phase of decomposition would create growing difficulties for the proletariat: the lack of political perspective, the inability to come to grips with its political and historical perspective which had already been a central element in the difficulties of the class movement in the 1980s, would be seriously aggravated by the deafening campaigns about the death of communism; linked to this, the proletariat's sense of class identity would be severely weakened in the new period, both by the atomising and divisive effects of social decomposition, and by the conscious efforts of the ruling class to exacerbate these effects through ideological campaigns (the "end of the working class") and the "material" changes brought about by the policy of globalisation (break up of traditional centres of class struggle, relocation of industries to regions of the world where the working class did not have the same degree of historical experience, etc).

25. The ICC has tended to underestimate the depth and duration of this retreat in the class struggle, often seeing signs that the reflux was about to be overcome and that we would see in a relatively short period of time new international waves of struggle as in the period after 1968. In 2003, on the basis of new struggles in France, Austria and elsewhere, the ICC predicted a revival of struggles by a new generation of proletarians who had been less influenced by the anti-Communist campaigns and would be faced by an increasingly uncertain future. To an important degree these predictions were confirmed by the events of 2006-2007, notably the struggle against the CPE in France, and of 2010-2011, in particular the Indignados movement in Spain. These movements displayed important advances at the level of solidarity between generations, self-organisation through assemblies, culture of debate, real concerns about the future facing the working class and humanity as a whole. In this sense, they showed the potential for a unification of the economic and political dimensions of the class struggle. However, it took us a long time to understand the immense difficulties that confronted this new generation, "raised" in the conditions of decomposition, difficulties which would

prevent the proletariat from reversing the post-89 retreat during this period.

26. A key element in these difficulties was the continued erosion of class identity. This had already been apparent in the struggles of 2010-11, particularly the movement in Spain: despite the important advances made at the level of consciousness and organisation, the majority of the Indignados saw themselves as "citizens" rather than as part of a class, leaving them vulnerable to the democratic illusions peddled like the likes of *Democratia Real Ya!* (the future *Podemos*), and later to the poison of Catalan and Spanish nationalism. Over the next few years, the reflux that followed in the wake of these movements was deepened by the rapid rise of populism, which created new divisions in the international working class – divisions that exploited national and ethnic differences, and fuelled by the pogromist attitudes of the populist right, but also political divisions between populism and anti-populism. Throughout the world, anger and discontent were growing, based on serious material deprivation and real anxieties about the future; but in the absence of a proletarian response much of this was channelled into inter-classist revolts such as the Yellow Vests in France, into single issue campaigns on a bourgeois terrain such as the climate marches, into movements for democracy against dictatorship (Hong Kong, Belarus, Myanmar etc) or into the inextricable tangle of racial and sexual identity politics which serve to further conceal the crucial issue of proletarian class identity as the only basis for an authentic response to the crisis of capitalist mode of production. The proliferation of these movements – whether they appear as inter-classist revolts or openly bourgeois mobilisations – has increased the already considerable difficulties not only for the working class as a whole but for the communist left itself, for the organisations which have the responsibility to define and defend the class terrain. A clear example of this was the inability of the Bordigists and the ICT to recognise that the anger provoked by the police murder of George Floyd in May 2020 had immediately been diverted into bourgeois channels. But the ICC has also encountered important problems in the face of this often bewildering array of movements, and, as part of its critical review of the past 20 years, will have to

seriously examine the nature and extent of the errors it made in the period from the Arab spring of 2011, via the so-called candlelight protests in South Korea, to these more recent revolts and mobilisations.

27. The pandemic in particular has created considerable difficulties for the working class:

- The majority of workers recognise the reality of this disease and the real dangers posed by gathering together in large numbers, inhibiting the possibility of general assemblies and workers' demonstrations; the proletariat is confronted, not only by the bourgeoisie, but also, and in a more immediate sense, by the virus. In general, situations in which natural catastrophes play a paramount role, are not conducive to the development of the class struggle. The indignation of Voltaire against nature because of the Lisbon earthquake did not generalise. Unlike the "social earthquake" of the mass strike of 1905 in Russia, the earthquake of 1906 in San Francisco did not advance the cause of the proletariat, any more than that of 1923 in Tokyo.
- As always, the bourgeoisie does not hesitate to use the effects of decomposition against the working class. While the lockdowns have been motivated primarily by the bourgeoisie's understanding that it had no other recourse to prevent the spread of the disease, it will certainly take advantage of the situation to enforce the atomisation and exploitation of the working class, in particular through the new model of "working from home". This new step in the atomisation of the working population has been a source of growing psychological suffering, especially among the young, even to the point of increasing cases of suicide.
- By the same token, the ruling class has used the conditions of the pandemic to step up its systems of mass surveillance and to introduce new repressive laws restricting protests and demonstrations, alongside increasingly overt police violence against all expressions of social discontent.
- The massive increase in unemployment resulting from the lockdown will not, in this situation and in the short term, be a factor in the unification of workers'

struggles but rather will tend to further reinforce atomisation.

- Although the lockdown has provoked a great deal of social discontent, when this has expressed itself openly, as in Spain in February and Germany in April 2021, it has overwhelmingly taken the form of protests “for individual freedom” which are a total dead end for the working class.
- More generally, the period of the pandemic has seen a further upsurge of “identity politics”, in which dissatisfaction with life under the present system is fragmented into a maelstrom of clashing identities based on race, gender, culture, etc, and which constitute a major threat to the recovery of the only identity capable of unifying and liberating the whole of humanity behind it: proletarian class identity. Moreover, behind this chaos of competing identities penetrating the whole population, lies the competition between different bourgeois factions of right and left, carrying with it the danger of dragging the working class into new forms of reactionary “culture wars” and even violent civil war.

28. Despite the enormous problems facing the proletariat, we reject the idea that the class has already been defeated on a global scale, or is on the verge of such a defeat comparable to that of the period of counter-revolution, a defeat of a kind from which the proletariat would possibly no longer be able to recover. The proletariat, as an exploited class, cannot avoid going through the school of defeats, but the central question is whether the proletariat has already been so overwhelmed by the remorseless advance of decomposition that its revolutionary potential has been effectively undermined. Measuring such a defeat in the phase of decomposition is a far more complex task than in the period before the Second World War, when the proletariat had risen openly against capitalism and been crushed by a series of frontal defeats, or the period after 1968 when the main obstacle to the bourgeoisie’s drive towards a new world war was the revival of struggles by a new and undefeated generation of proletarians. As we have already recalled, the phase of decomposition indeed contains the danger of the proletariat simply failing to respond and being ground down over a long period – a “death by a thousand cuts” rather than a head-on class confrontation. Nevertheless, we affirm that there is still sufficient evidence to show that, despite the undoubted “progress” of decomposition, despite the fact that time is no longer on the side of the working class, the potential for a profound proletarian revival – leading to a reunification between the economic and the

political dimensions of the class struggle have not vanished, as witness:

- The persistence of important proletarian movements that have appeared in the phase of decomposition (2006-7, 2010-11, etc).
- The fact that, just prior to the pandemic, we saw several embryonic and very fragile signs of a reappearance of the class struggle, especially in France 2019. And even if this dynamic was then largely blocked by the pandemic and the lockdowns, there were workers’ protests in several countries even during the pandemic, particularly around issues of health and safety at work.
- The small but significant signs of a subterranean maturation of consciousness, manifesting itself in efforts towards a global reflection on the failure of capitalism and the need for another society in some movements (particularly the Indignados in 2011), but also through the emergence of young elements looking for class positions and turning towards the heritage of the communist left.
- More importantly, the situation facing the working class is not the same as it was following the collapse of the eastern bloc and the opening of the phase of decomposition in 1989. At that time, it was possible to present these events as proof of the death of communism and of the victory of capitalism and the beginning of a bright future for humanity. Thirty years of decomposition have severely undermined this ideological fraud of a brighter future, and the pandemic in particular has uncovered the irresponsibility and negligence of all capitalist governments and the reality of a society riven by deep economic divisions where we are by no means “all in it together”. On the contrary, the pandemic and the lockdown have tended to reveal the condition of the working class both as the main victim of the health crisis but also as the source of all “essential” labour and all material production, and in particular of basic necessities. This can be one of the bases for a future recovery of class identity. And, together with the growing understanding that capitalism is a totally obsolete mode of production, this has already been an element in the appearance of the politicised minorities whose motivation has above all been to understand the dramatic situation facing humanity.
- Finally, on a broader historical level, the process of decomposition has not eliminated the associated character of labour under capitalism. This remains the case despite the social atomisation

engendered by decomposition, despite deliberate attempts to fragment the workforce through stratagems such as the “gig economy”, despite ideological campaigns aiming to present the more educated sectors of the proletariat as “middle class”. Capital mobilises more and more workers worldwide, the process of proletarianisation and thus the exploitation of living labour continues unabated. The working class today is larger and more interconnected than ever, but with the progress of decomposition social atomisation and isolation intensify. This is also expressed in the difficulties of the working class to experience its own class identity. Only through the struggles of the working class on its own class terrain is it able to create its “associative” power which expresses an anticipation of the associated labour of communism. The workers are brought together by capital in the production process, where the combination of labour is realised under compulsion, but the revolutionary character of the proletariat means dialectically reversing these conditions in a collective struggle. The exploitation of common labour is turned around in the struggle against exploitation and for the liberation of the social character of labour, for a society that knows how to consciously use the full potential of associated labour.

Thus, the defensive struggle of the working class contains the seeds of the qualitatively higher social relations which are the final goal of the class struggle – what Marx called the “freely associated producers”. Through association, through the bringing together of all its components, capacities and experiences, the proletariat can become powerful, can become the ever more conscious and united combatant for and harbinger of a liberated humankind.

29. Despite the tendency for the process of decomposition to react on the economic crisis, the latter remains the “ally of the proletariat” in this phase. As the “Theses on Decomposition” put it: “*The inexorable aggravation of the capitalist crisis constitutes the essential stimulant for the class struggle and development of consciousness, the precondition for its ability to resist the poison distilled by the social rot. For while there is no basis for the unification of the class in the partial struggles against the effects of decomposition, nonetheless its struggle against the direct effects of the crisis constitutes the basis for the development of its class strength and unity. This is the case because:*

- while the effects of decomposition (eg pollution, drugs, insecurity) hit the different strata of society in much the

same way and form a fertile ground for aclassist campaigns and mystifications (ecology, anti-nuclear movements, anti-racist mobilisations, etc), the economic attacks (falling real wages, layoffs, increasing productivity, etc) resulting directly from the crisis hit the proletariat (ie the class that produces surplus value and confronts capitalism on this terrain) directly and specifically;

- *unlike social decomposition which essentially effects the superstructure, the economic crisis directly attacks the foundations on which this superstructure rests; in this sense, it lays bare all the barbarity that is battenning on society, thus allowing the proletariat to become aware of the need to change the system radically, rather than trying to improve certain aspects of it". (Thesis 17)*

30. Consequently, we must reject any tendency to downplay the importance of the “defensive”, economic struggles of the class, which is a typical expression of the modernist outlook which only sees the class as an exploited category and not equally as a historic, revolutionary force. It is of course true that the economic struggle alone cannot hold back the tides of decomposition: as the “Theses on Decomposition” put it, *“The workers’ resistance to the effects of the crisis is no longer enough: only the communist revolution can put an end to the threat of decomposition”*. But it is a profound mistake to lose sight of the constant, dialectical interaction between

the economic and political aspects of the struggle, as Rosa Luxemburg emphasised in her work on the 1905 mass strike; and again, in the heat of the German revolution of 1918-19, when the “political” dimension was out in the open, she insisted that the proletariat still needed to develop its economic struggles as the only basis for organising and unifying itself as a class. It will be the combination of a renewed defensive struggle on a class terrain, coming up against the objective limits of decomposing bourgeois society, and fertilised by the intervention of the revolutionary minority, that will enable the working class to recover its revolutionary perspective, to move towards the fully proletarian politicisation that will arm it to lead humanity out of the nightmare of decomposing capitalism.

31. In an initial period, the rediscovery of class identity and class combativity will constitute a form of resistance against the corrosive effects of capitalist decomposition – a bulwark against the working class being further fragmented and divided against itself. Without the development of the class struggle, such phenomena as the destruction of the environment and the proliferation of military chaos tend to reinforce feelings of powerlessness and the resort to false solutions such as ecologism and pacifism. But at a more developed stage of the struggle, in the context of a revolutionary situation, the reality of these threats to the survival of the species can become a factor in understanding that capitalism has indeed reached the terminal

phase of its decline and that revolution is the only way out. In particular, capitalism’s war-drive – above all when it involves the great powers directly or indirectly – can be an important factor in the politicisation of the class struggle since it brings with it both a very concrete increase in exploitation and physical danger, but also further confirmation that society is faced with the momentous choice between socialism and barbarism. From factors of demobilisation and despair, these threats can strengthen the proletariat’s determination to do away with this dying system.

“Similarly, in the period to come, the proletariat cannot hope to profit from the weakening that decomposition provokes within the bourgeoisie itself. During this period, it must aim to resist the noxious effects of decomposition in its own ranks, counting only on its own strength and on its ability to struggle collectively and in solidarity to defend its interests as an exploited class (although revolutionary propaganda must constantly emphasise the dangers of social decomposition). Only in the revolutionary period, when the proletariat is on the offensive, when it has directly and openly taken up arms for its own historic perspective, will it be able to use certain effects of decomposition, in particular of bourgeois ideology and of the forces of capitalist power, for leverage, and turn them against capital” (Theses on Decomposition).

Continued from page 4

The perspective of communism is in the preparation of the future.

The central aim of the 24th Congress was the preparation of the future through drawing the lessons of past mistakes, relentlessly combating parasitism and opportunism, understanding as rapidly as possible the constant developments of historical evolution, defending the organisation and its united, fraternal and centralised functioning. This means firmly and critically basing

ourselves upon the historical continuity of the communist organisations, as the Activities Resolution of the Congress put it:

*“In the stormy transition to the future of ‘wars and revolutions’ Rosa Luxemburg declared at the founding congress of the German Communist Party in 1919 that they were ‘returning under the banner of marxism’. As the working class in Russia prepared for the first time in history to overthrow the bourgeois state Lenin recalled the acquisitions on the question of the state from Marx and Engels in **State and Revolution**...*

“The ICC, as it prepares for the unprecedented instability and unpredictability of the putrefaction of world capitalism must recover the heritage, the militant example, and the organisational experience of MC, thirty years after his death. That is, return to the tradition and method of the Communist Left which the ICC inherited...

“This tradition lives on and must be critically reappropriated, in fact it is the only one which can guide the ICC and the working class through the test of fire that is to come.”

ICC, December 2021

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at 8.3% up to 2020. Despite government support measures, wages fell in 2020 by 56.2% in Peru, 21.3% in Brazil, 6.9% in Vietnam, 4.0% in Italy, 2.9% in the UK and 9.3% in the USA (ILO data).

The above-mentioned ILO report warns that *“the crisis has had a particularly devastating impact on many vulnerable*

groups and sectors around the world. Young people, women and low-skilled workers and low-wage earners will find it more difficult to benefit from an early recovery and are at a very high risk of suffering long-term consequences and exclusion from the labour market.”

The incredible level of national indebtedness cannot be sustained indefinitely; from a certain point onwards, it will necessarily lead to the adoption of drastic auster-

ity measures affecting education, health, pensions, subsidies, social benefits, etc.

Nothing can be expected from the “intelligent management” of state capitalism: only austerity, misery, chaos and no future. The future of humanity is in the hands of the proletariat, its resistance against brutal austerity, and the politicisation of this resistance will be key in the coming period.

The pandemic and the development of decomposition

In a way, “the communist left finds itself in a similar situation today to that of Bilan in the 1930s, in the sense that it is obliged to understand a new and unprecedented historical situation”.¹ This observation, now more appropriate than ever, required intense debates between organisations of the proletarian political milieu (PPM) in order to analyse the meaning of the Covid-19 crisis in the history of capitalism and the consequences which flow from it. Now, in the face of the rapid extension of events, the groups of the PPM appear totally helpless and disarmed: instead of seizing the marxist method as a living theory, they reduce it to an invariant dogma where class struggle is seen as an immutable repetition of eternally valid schemas, without being able to show not only what persists but also what has changed. Thus, the Bordigist or councilist groups stubbornly ignore the entry of the system into its phase of decadence. On the other hand, the International Communist Tendency (ICT) rejects decomposition as a cataclysmic vision and limits its explanations to the truism that profit is responsible for the pandemic and to the illusory idea that the latter is only a trivial event, a parenthesis, in the bourgeoisie’s attacks to maximise its profits. These PPM groups merely recite the patterns of the past without analysing the specific circumstances, timing and impact of the health crisis. As a result, their contribution to the assessment of the balance of forces between the two antagonistic classes in society, of the dangers or opportunities facing the class and its minorities, is today derisory.

A firm marxist approach is all the more necessary since mistrust of official discourse is currently giving rise to the emergence of many false and fanciful “alternative explanations” of events. Conspiracy theories, each more fanciful than the other, are emerging and are shared by millions of followers: The pandemic and today’s mass vaccination are a Chinese plot to ensure their supremacy, a conspiracy of the world bourgeoisie to prepare for war or restructure the world economy, a seizure of power by a secret international of virologists or a nebulous world conspiracy of the elites (under the leadership of Soros or Gates)... This general atmosphere even provokes a disorientation of the political milieu, a veritable “Corona blues”.

For the ICC, marxism is a “living thought enriched by each important historical event. [...] Revolutionary organisations and militants have the specific and fundamental responsibility of carrying out this effort of reflection, always moving forward, as did our predecessors such as Lenin, Rosa, Bilan, the French Communist Left, etc, with both caution and boldness:

- basing ourselves always and firmly on the basic acquisitions of marxism,
- examining reality without blinkers, and developing our thought “without ostrac-

cism of any kind” (Bilan).

“In particular, faced with such historic events, it is important that revolutionaries should be capable of distinguishing between those analyses which have been overtaken by events and those which still remain valid, in order to avoid a double trap: either succumbing to sclerosis, or ‘throwing the baby out with the bath water’”.²

Consequently, the Covid-19 crisis requires the ICC to confront the salient elements of this major event with the framework of decomposition that the organisation has been putting forward for more than 30 years, in order to understand the evolution of capitalism. This framework is clearly recalled in the resolution on the international situation of the 23rd International Congress of the ICC (2019):

“Thirty years ago, the ICC highlighted the fact that the capitalist system had entered the final phase of its period of decadence, that of decomposition. This analysis was based on a number of empirical facts, but at the same time it provided a framework for understanding these facts: ‘In this situation, where society’s two decisive - and antagonistic - classes confront each other without either being able to impose its own definitive response, history nonetheless does not just come to a stop. Still less for capitalism than for

preceding social forms, is a “freeze” or a “stagnation” of social life possible. As crisis-ridden capitalism’s contradictions can only get deeper, the bourgeoisie’s inability to offer the slightest perspective for society as a whole, and the proletariat’s inability, for the moment, openly to set forward its own historic perspective, can only lead to a situation of generalised decomposition. Capitalism is rotting on its feet’ (“Decomposition, the final phase of the decadence of capitalism”, Point 4, *International Review* n° 62).

“Our analysis took care to clarify the two meanings of the term ‘decomposition’: on the one hand, it applies to a phenomenon that affects society, particularly in the period of decadence of capitalism and, on the other hand, it designates a particular historical phase of the latter, its ultimate phase:

“... it is vital to highlight the fundamental distinction between the elements of decomposition which have infected capitalism since the beginning of the century [the 20th century] and the generalised decomposition which is infecting the system today, and which can only get worse. Here again, quite apart from the strictly quantitative aspect, the phenomenon of social decomposition has today reached such a breadth and depth that it has taken on a new and unique quality, revealing decadent capitalism’s entry into a new and final phase of its history: the phase where decomposition becomes a decisive, if not the decisive factor in social evolution.” (Ibid, Point 2).

“It is mainly this last point, the fact that decomposition tends to become the decisive factor in the evolution of society, and therefore of all the components of the world situation - an idea that is by no means shared by the other groups of the communist left - that constitutes the major thrust of this resolution.”³

In this context, the aim of this report is to assess the impact of the Covid-19 crisis on the deepening of the contradictions within the capitalist system and its implications for the deepening of the phase of decomposition.

1.. “Resolution on the international situation of the 13th ICC Congress”, *International Review* n° 97, 1999.

2. “Orientation text on militarism and decomposition”, *International Review* n° 64, 1991.

3. *International Review* n° 164, 2020.

The Covid-19 crisis reveals the depth of capitalism's putrefaction

The pandemic is at the heart of capitalism: a first, then a second, and even a third wave of infections are sweeping across the world and in particular the industrialised countries; their hospital systems are on the verge of implosion and they are forced to repeatedly impose more or less radical lockdowns. After one year of the pandemic, the official figures, which are largely underestimated in many countries, count more than 500,000 deaths in the USA and more than 650,000 in the European Union and Latin America.

During the last twelve months, in this mode of production with unlimited scientific and technological capacities, the bourgeoisie, not only in peripheral countries but also especially in the main industrialised countries, have shown itself to be unable:

- to prevent the spread of the pandemic and then its resumption through a second, third, etc., wave;
- to avoid saturation of hospital systems, as in Italy, Spain, but also in Great Britain or the USA;
- to put in place techniques and instruments to control and stem the different waves;
- to co-ordinate and centralise vaccine research and to set up a planned and well-thought-out production, distribution and vaccination policy for the entire planet.

On the contrary, they have competed in taking inconsistent and chaotic measures and have resorted, in desperation, to measures dating from the distant past, such as lockdown, quarantine or curfews. They have condemned hundreds of thousands of people to death by selecting Covid patients admitted to overcrowded hospitals or by postponing the treatment of other serious illnesses to a distant date.

The catastrophic unfolding of the pandemic crisis is fundamentally linked to the relentless pressure of the historic crisis of the capitalist mode of production. The impact of austerity measures, which have been further accentuated since the recession of 2007-11, the ruthless economic competition between states, and the priority given, particularly in industrialised countries, to maintaining production capacities at the expense of the health of populations in the name of the primacy of the economy, have favoured the extension of the health crisis and constitute a permanent obstacle to its containment. This immense catastrophe represented by the pandemic is not the product of destiny or the inadequacy of

scientific knowledge or health techniques (as may have been the case in previous modes of production); nor does it come like a thunderbolt in a serene sky, nor is it a passing digression. It expresses the fundamental impotence of the declining capitalist mode of production, which goes beyond the carelessness of this or that government, but which is on the contrary indicative of the blockage and putrefaction of bourgeois society. And above all it reveals the extent of this phase of decomposition which has been deepening for 30 years.

Its emergence highlights 30 years of sinking into decomposition

The Covid-19 crisis did not arise out of nowhere; it is both the expression and the result of 30 years of decomposition which marked a tendency towards the multiplication, deepening and increasingly clear convergence of the various manifestations of capitalism's putrefaction.

a) The importance and the significance of the dynamics of decomposition.

These were understood by the ICC from the end of the 1980s: *"As long as the bourgeoisie doesn't have a free hand to impose its 'solution' – generalised imperialist war – and as long as the class struggle isn't sufficiently developed to allow its revolutionary perspective to come forward, capitalism is caught up in a dynamic of decomposition, a process of rotting on its feet which is experienced at all levels:*

- *degradation of international relations between states as manifested in the development of terrorism;*
- *repeated technological and so-called natural catastrophes;*
- *destruction of the ecosphere;*
- *famines, epidemics, expressions of the generalisation of absolute pauperisation;*
- *explosion of 'nationalities', or ethnic conflicts;*
- *social life marked by the development of criminality, delinquency, suicide, madness, individual atomisation;*
- *ideological decomposition marked among other things by the development of mysticism, nihilism, the ideology of 'everyone for himself', etc ...*"⁴

b) The implosion of the Soviet bloc

This marked a spectacular acceleration of the process despite the campaigns to conceal it. The collapse from within of one of the two imperialist blocs facing

⁴ "Resolution on the international situation of the 8th ICC Congress", *International Review* n° 59, 1989.

each other, without this being the product either of a world war between the blocs or of the offensive of the proletariat, can only be understood as a major expression of capitalism's entry into the phase of decomposition. However, the tendencies towards the loss of control and the exacerbation of "every man for himself" expressed by this implosion was largely concealed and countered in the first instance by the revival of the prestige of "democracy" because of its "victory over communism" (campaigns on the "death of communism" and the superiority of the democratic mode of government), then by the First Gulf War (1991), fought in the name of the United Nations against Saddam Hussein, which allowed Bush senior to impose an "international coalition" of states under the leadership of the United States and thus to curb the tendency towards every man for himself; finally, by the fact that the economic collapse resulting from the implosion of the Eastern bloc only affected the former Russian bloc countries, a particularly backward part of capitalism, and largely spared the industrialised countries.

c) The beginning of the 21st century

The spread of decomposition manifested itself above all in the explosion of every man for himself and chaos on the imperialist level. The attack on the Twin Towers and the Pentagon by al-Qaida on 11 September 2001, and the unilateral military response of the Bush administration, further opened the Pandora's box of decomposition: with the attack and invasion of Iraq in 2003 in defiance of international conventions and organisations and without taking into account the opinion of its main "allies", the world's leading power went from being the gendarme of world order to the principal agent of every man for himself and chaos. The occupation of Iraq and then the civil war in Syria (2011) would powerfully stir up the imperialist every man for himself, not only in the Middle East but all over the world. They also accentuated the declining trend of US leadership, while Russia began coming back to the forefront, especially through a "disruptive" imperialist role in Syria, and China was rapidly rising as a challenger to the US superpower.

d) The first two decades of the 21st century,

The quantitative and qualitative growth of terrorism, fostered by the spread of chaos and warlike barbarity in the world, is taking a central place in the life of society as an instrument of war between states. This led to the establishment of a new state, the "Islamic state" (Daesh), with its army,

police, administration and schools, for which terrorism is the weapon of choice and which has triggered a wave of suicide attacks in the Middle East as well as in the metropolises of the industrialised countries. *“The establishment of Daesh in 2013-14 and the attacks in France in 2015-16, Belgium and Germany in 2016 represent another step in this process”*.⁵ This expansion of “kamikaze” terrorism goes hand in hand with the spread of irrational and fanatical religious radicalism throughout the world, from the Middle East to Brazil, from the USA to India.

e) In 2016-17, the Brexit referendum in Britain and the advent of Trump in the USA revealed the populist tsunami as a particularly salient new manifestation of deepening decomposition.

“The rise of populism is an expression, in the current circumstances, of the bourgeoisie’s increasing loss of control over the workings of society, resulting fundamentally from what lies at the heart of its decomposition, the inability of the two fundamental classes of society to provide a response to the insoluble crisis into which the capitalist economy is sinking. In other words, decomposition is fundamentally the result of impotence on the part of the ruling class, an impotence that is rooted in its inability to overcome this crisis in its mode of production and that increasingly tends to affect its political apparatus.

*“Among the current causes of the populist wave are the main manifestations of social decomposition: the rise of despair, nihilism, violence, xenophobia, associated with a growing rejection of the ‘elites’ (the ‘rich’, politicians, technocrats) and in a situation where the working class is unable to present, even in an embryonic way, an alternative.”*⁶

If this populist wave affects in particular the bourgeoisies of the industrialised countries, it is also found in other regions of the world in the form of the coming to power of strong and “charismatic” leaders (Orban, Bolsonaro, Erdogan, Modi, Duterte...), often with the support of sects or extremist movements of religious inspiration (evangelist churches in Latin America or Africa, the Muslim Brotherhood in Turkey, racist Hindu identity movements in the case of Modi).

The decomposition phase already has 30 years of history and the brief overview of the latter shows how the decomposition of capitalism has spread and deepened

through phenomena that have gradually affected more and more aspects of society, and which constitute the ingredients that caused the explosive nature of the Covid-19 global crisis. Admittedly, during these 30 years, the progression of the phenomena has been uneven, but it has taken place at different levels (ecological crisis, imperialist every man for himself, fragmentation of states, terrorism, social riots, loss of control of the political apparatus, ideological decomposition), increasingly undermining the attempts of state capitalism to counter its advance and maintain a certain shared framework. However, if the different phenomena reached an appreciable level of intensity, they appeared until then as *“a proliferation of symptoms with no apparent interconnection, unlike previous periods of capitalist decadence which were defined and dominated by such obvious landmarks as world war or proletarian revolution”*.⁷ It is precisely the significance of the Covid-19 crisis to be, like the implosion of the Eastern bloc, highly emblematic of the phase of decomposition by accumulating all the factors of putrefaction of the system.

The pandemic results from the interaction of the manifestations of decomposition

Like the various manifestations of decadence (world wars, general economic crises, militarism, fascism and Stalinism...), there is therefore also an accumulation of manifestations of the phase of decomposition. The scale of the impact of the Covid-19 crisis is explained not only by this accumulation but also by the interaction of ecological, health, social, political, economic and ideological expressions of decomposition in a kind of spiral never before observed, which has led to a tendency to lose control over more and more aspects of society and to an outbreak of irrational ideologies, extremely dangerous for the future of humanity.

a) Covid-19 and the destruction of nature

The pandemic is clearly an expression of the breakdown in the relationship between humanity and nature, which has reached an intensity and a planetary dimension unequalled with the decadence of the system and, in particular, with the last phase of this decadence, that of decomposition, more specifically here through uncontrolled urban growth and concentration (proliferation of overcrowded shantytowns) in the peripheral regions of capitalism, deforestation and climate change. Thus, in the case of Covid-19, a recent study by researchers

from the Universities of Cambridge and Hawaii and the Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact Research (in the journal *Science of the Total Environment*) would indicate that climate change in southern China over the past century has favoured the concentration in the region of bat species, which carry thousands of coronaviruses, and allowed the transmission of SARS-CoV-2, probably via pangolins, to humans.⁸

For decades, the irretrievable destruction of the natural world has been generating a growing danger of environmental as well as health disasters, as already illustrated by the SARS, H1N1 or Ebola epidemics, which fortunately did not become pandemics. However, although capitalism has such technological strengths that it is capable of sending men to the moon, of producing monstrous weapons capable of destroying the planet dozens of times over, it has not been able to equip itself with the necessary means to remedy the ecological and health problems that led to the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic. Man is increasingly separated from his “organic body” (Marx) and social decomposition is accentuating this trend.

b) Covid-19 and economic recession

At the same time, austerity and restructuring measures in research and health systems, which have been further intensified since the recession of 2007-11, have reduced hospital availability and slowed, if not stopped, research into viruses of the Covid family, even though various previous epidemics had warned of their dangerousness. On the other hand, during the pandemic, the primary objective of the industrialised countries has always been to keep production capacities intact as long as possible (and, by extension, crèches, day-care and primary education to enable parents to go to work), while being aware that companies and schools constitute a not insignificant source of contagion despite the measures taken (wearing a mask, keeping one’s distance, etc.). In particular, during the pause in lockdown in the summer of 2020, the bourgeoisie cynically played with the health of the population in the name of the primacy of the economy, which has always prevailed, even if this risked

5. “Report on decomposition today” (22nd ICC Congress), *International Review* n° 164, 2020.

6. “Resolution on the international situation: Imperialist conflicts, life of the bourgeoisie, economic crisis” (23rd ICC Congress), *International Review* n° 164, 2020.

7. “Report on the Covid-19 pandemic and the period of capitalist decomposition”, *International Review* n° 165, 2021.

8. This text was written in April 2021 and could not have taken into account recent information which considers as plausible the thesis that the epidemic had its origin in an accident at the Wuhan laboratory in China (see the article “Origines du Covid-19: l’hypothèse d’un accident à l’Institut de virologie de Wuhan relancée après la divulgation de travaux inédits” *Le Monde*, 14/05/21). This said, this hypothesis, if it is verified, does not at all call into question our analysis according to which the pandemic is a product of the decomposition of capitalism. On the contrary, it would show that this process does not spare scientific research in a country whose headlong growth in the last few decades bears all the hallmarks of decomposition.

contributing to the emergence of a new wave of the pandemic and to the return of lockdowns, to the increase in the number of hospitalisations and deaths.

c) Covid-19 and the imperialist every man for himself

The emphasis on “every man for himself” between states has from the outset been a powerful incentive for the spread of the pandemic and has even encouraged its exploitation for hegemonic purposes. First, China’s initial attempts to cover up the emergence of the virus and its refusal to pass on information to the WHO greatly favoured the initial expansion of the pandemic. Secondly, the persistence of the pandemic and its various waves, as well as the number of victims, were favoured by the refusal of many countries to “share” their stocks of sanitary equipment with their neighbours, by the growing chaos in cooperation between the various countries, including and especially within the EU, to harmonise contamination control policies or vaccine design and purchasing policies, and again by the “vaccine race” between competing pharmaceutical giants (with juicy profits for the winners) instead of bringing together all the available expertise in medicine and pharmacology. Finally, the “vaccine war” is raging between countries: for example, the European Commission had initially refused to reserve 5 million additional doses of vaccine proposed by Pfizer-BioNTech under pressure from France, which demanded an equivalent additional order for the French company Sanofi; the AstraZeneca/Oxford University vaccine is reserved in priority for Britain to the detriment of EU orders; moreover, Chinese (Sinovac), Russian (Sputnik V), Indian (BBV152) or American (Moderna) vaccines are widely exploited by these states as instruments of imperialist policy. The competition between states and the explosion of every man for himself have accentuated the frightening chaos in the management of the pandemic crisis.

d) Covid-19 and the loss of control of the bourgeoisie over its political apparatus

The loss of control over the political apparatus was already one of the characteristics marking the implosion of the Eastern bloc, but it appeared then as a specificity linked to the particular character of the Stalinist regimes. The refugee crisis (2015-16), the emergence of social riots against the corruption of the elites and above all the populist tidal wave (2016), all manifestations that were certainly already present but less prominent in past decades, would from the second half of the decade 2010-2020 highlight the importance of this phenomenon as an expression of the progression of decomposition. This dimension would

play a determining role in the spread of the Covid-19 crisis. Populism and in particular populist leaders such as Bolsonaro, Johnson or Trump have favoured the expansion and lethal impact of the pandemic through their “vandalist” policies: they have trivialised Covid-19 as a simple flu, have favoured the inconsistent implementation of a policy of limiting contamination, openly expressing their scepticism towards it, and have sabotaged any international collaboration. Thus, Trump openly transgressed the recommended health measures, openly accused China (the “Chinese virus”) and refused to cooperate with the WHO.

This “vandalism” is an emblematic expression of the bourgeoisie’s loss of control over its political apparatus: after initially proving incapable of limiting the spread of the pandemic, the various national bourgeoisies failed to co-ordinate their actions and set up a broad system of “testing” and “track and tracing” in order to control and limit new waves of Covid-19 contagion. Finally, the slow and chaotic deployment of the vaccination campaign once again underscores the states’ difficulties in adequately managing the pandemic. The succession of contradictory and ineffective measures has fuelled growing scepticism and mistrust among the population towards government directives: *“It is clear that, compared to the first wave, it is more difficult for citizens to adhere to the recommendations.”*⁹ This concern is very present among governments in industrialised countries (from Macron to Biden), urging the population to follow the recommendations and directives of the authorities.

e) Covid-19 and the rejection of elites, irrational ideologies and rising despair

Populist movements are not only opposed to the elites but also favour the progression of nihilist ideologies and the most retrograde religious sectarianisms, already reinforced by the deepening of the decomposition phase. The Covid-19 crisis has provoked an unprecedented explosion of conspiratorial and anti-scientific visions, which are fuelling the contestation of state health policies. Conspiracy theories abound and spread totally fanciful conceptions of the virus and the pandemic. On the other hand, populist leaders such as Bolsonaro or Trump have openly expressed their contempt for science. The exponential spread of irrational thinking and the questioning of scientific rationality during the pandemic is a striking illustration of the acceleration of decomposition.

Populist rejection of elites and irrational ideologies have exacerbated an increas-

9. D. Le Guludec, President of the French National Authority for Health, LMD 800, November 2020.

ingly violent, purely bourgeois challenge to government measures such as curfews and lockdowns. This anti-elite and anti-state rage has stimulated the rise of rallies (Denmark, Italy, Germany) or “vandalist”, nihilist and anti-state riots against restrictions (to the cries of “Freedom!”, “for our rights and life”), against “lockdown tyranny” or the “fraud of a virus that doesn’t exist”, such as those that broke out in January in Israel, Lebanon, Spain and especially in many cities in the Netherlands.

The pandemic marks the concentration of manifestations of decomposition in the central countries of capitalism

The effects of the decomposition phase first hit the peripheral areas of the system hard: Eastern countries with the implosion of the Soviet bloc and former Yugoslavia, wars in the Middle East, war tensions in the Far East (Afghanistan, Korea, Sino-Indian border conflict), famines, civil wars, chaos in Africa. This changed with the refugee crisis, which has led to a massive flow of asylum seekers to Europe, or with the exodus of desperate populations from Mexico and Central America to the USA, then with the jihadist attacks in the USA and in the heart of Europe, and finally with the populist tsunami of 2016. In the second decade of the 21st century, the centre of the industrialised countries is increasingly affected and this trend is dramatically confirmed with the Covid-19 crisis.

The pandemic is hitting the heart of capitalism, especially the US. Compared to the crisis of 1989, the implosion of the Eastern bloc, which opened the phase of decomposition, a crucial difference is precisely that the crisis of Covid-19 does not affect a particularly backward part of the capitalist mode of production, that it cannot therefore be presented as a victory of “democratic capitalism” since it impacts the centre of the capitalist system, the democracies of Europe and the US. Like a boomerang, the worst effects of decomposition, which capitalism had pushed for years to the periphery of the system, are coming back to the industrialised countries, which are now at the centre of the turmoil and far from being rid of all its effects. This impact on the central industrialised countries had certainly already been underlined by the ICC in terms of the control of the political game, in particular from 2017 onwards, but today, the American, British and German bourgeoisies (and following them those of the other industrialised countries) are at the heart of the pandemic hurricane and its consequences at the health, economic, political, social and ideological levels.

Among the central countries, it is the most powerful of them, the US superpower, which is suffering most from the impact of the Covid-19 crisis: the highest absolute number of infections and deaths in the world, a deplorable health situation, a “vandal” presidential administration that has catastrophically mismanaged the pandemic and internationally isolated the country from its alliances, an economy in great difficulty, a president who has undermined the credibility of elections, called for a march on parliament, deepened divisions within the country and fuelled mistrust of science and rational data, described as “fake news”. Today, the US is the epicentre of decomposition.

How can it be explained that the pandemic does indeed seem to affect the “periphery” of the system less this time (number of infections, number of deaths), and in particular Asia and Africa? There are of course a series of circumstantial reasons: climate, population density or

geographical isolation (as shown by the cases of New Zealand, Australia or Finland in Europe) but also the relative reliability of the data: for example, the figure for deaths by Covid-19 in 2020 in Russia turns out to be three times higher than the official figure (185,000 instead of 55,000) according to one of the deputy prime ministers, Tatiana Golikova, on the basis of excess mortality.¹⁰

More fundamentally, the fact that Asia and Africa have previous experience in managing pandemics (N1N1, Ebola) certainly played in their favour. Then, there are various explanations of an economic nature (the more or less high density of international exchanges and contacts, the choice of limited lockdown allowing economic activity to continue), social (an elderly population parked by the hundreds in “retirement homes”), medical (a more or less high average lifespan: cf. France: 82.4 / Vietnam: 76 / China: 76.1 / Egypt: 70.9 /

10. *De Morgen*, 29/12/2020.

Philippines: 68.5 / Congo: 64.7 and a more or less high resilience to disease). In addition, African, Asian and Latin American countries are and will be heavily impacted indirectly by the pandemic e.g. through delays in vaccination in the periphery, the economic effects of the Covid-19 crisis and the slowdown in world trade, as indicated by the current danger of famine in Central America due to the economic downturn. Finally, the fact that European countries and the US avoid as much as possible imposing drastic and brutal lockdowns and controls, such as those decreed in China, is no doubt also linked to the prudence of the bourgeoisie towards a working class, disoriented but not beaten, which is not ready to let itself be “locked up” by the state. The loss of control of its political apparatus and the anger among a population confronted with the collapse of health services and the failure of health policies make it all the more necessary for it to act with circumspection.

The Covid-19 crisis heralds a powerful acceleration of the process of decomposition

Faced with a proletarian political milieu which, after having denied past expressions of decomposition, considers the pandemic crisis as a transitional episode, the ICC must stress on the contrary that the scale of the Covid-19 crisis and its consequences implies that there will be no “return to normal”. Even if the deepening of decomposition, as was the case with decadence, is not linear, even if the departure of the populist Trump and the coming to power of Biden in the world’s leading power may initially present the image of an illusory stabilisation, one must be aware that various trends that manifested themselves during the Covid-19 crisis mark an acceleration of the process of capitalism rotting on its feet, of the self-destruction of the system.

The decomposition of superstructures is now infecting the economic base

In 2007, our analysis still concluded that:

“Paradoxically, the economic situation of capitalism is the aspect of this society which is the least affected by decomposition. This is the case mainly because it is precisely the economic situation which, in the last instance, determines the other aspects of the life of this system, including those that relate to decomposition. [...] Today, despite all the speeches about the triumph of liberalism and the free play of the market, the states have not renounced intervening in the economies of their respective countries, or the use of structures whose task is to regulate as far as

*possible the relations between them, even creating new ones such as the World Trade Organisation.”*¹¹

Until then, economic crisis and decomposition had been separated by state action, the former not seeming to be affected by the latter.

In fact, the international mechanisms of state capitalism, deployed within the framework of the imperialist blocs (1945-89), had been maintained from the 1990s on the initiative of the industrialised countries as a palliative to the crisis and as a protective shield against the effects of decomposition. The ICC understood the multilateral mechanisms of economic cooperation and a certain co-ordination of economic policies not as a unification of capital at the world level, nor as a tendency to super-imperialism, but as a collaboration between bourgeoisies at the international level in order to regulate and organise the market and world production, to slow down and reduce the pace of the plunge into crisis, to avoid the impact of the effects of decomposition on the nerve centre of the economy, and finally to protect the heart of capitalism (USA, Germany...). However, this mechanism of resistance against the crisis and decomposition was tending to erode more and more. Since 2015, several phenomena have begun to express such an erosion: a trend towards a considerable weakening of co-ordination between countries, particularly with regard

to economic recovery (and which is in clear contrast to the co-ordinated response to the 2008-2011 crisis), a fragmentation of relations between and within states. Since 2016, the vote in favour of Brexit and the Trump presidency have increased the paralysis and risk of fragmentation of the European Union and intensified the trade war between the US and China, as well as the economic tensions between the US and Germany.

A major consequence of the Covid-19 crisis is the fact that the effects of decomposition, the accentuation of every man for himself and the loss of control, which until then had essentially affected the superstructure of the capitalist system, now tend to have a direct impact on the economic basis of the system, its capacity to manage economic jolts as it sinks into its historic crisis.

*“When we developed our analysis of decomposition, we considered that this phenomenon affected the form of imperialist conflicts (see “Militarism and decomposition”, International Review n° 64) and also the consciousness of the proletariat. On the other hand, we considered that it had no real impact on the evolution of the crisis of capitalism. If the current rise of populism were to lead to the coming to power of this current in some of the main European countries, such an impact of decomposition will develop.”*¹²

Indeed, the perspective put forward in 2017 has quickly materialised, and now we

11. “17th Congress of the ICC: Resolution on the international situation”, *International Review* n° 130, 2007.

12. “Report on decomposition today” (22nd ICC Congress), *International Review* n° 164, 2020.

have to consider that the economic crisis and decomposition increasingly interfere with and influence each other.

Thus, budgetary restrictions in health policies and hospital care have favoured the expansion of the pandemic, which in turn has led to a collapse of world trade and economies, particularly in the industrialised countries (the GDPs of the main industrialised countries in 2020 will be negative at levels not seen since the Second World War). The economic recession will in turn provide a stimulus to deepen the decomposition of the superstructure. On the other hand, the growing “every man for himself” mentality and loss of control that marked the Covid-19 crisis as a whole is now also infecting the economy. The lack of international consultation between central economic countries is striking (no G7, G8 or G20 meeting in 2020) and the failure of economic and health policy co-ordination between EU countries is also evident. Faced with the pressure of economic contradictions within the core countries of capitalism; faced with China’s hesitations about its policy (whether to continue opening up to the world or to initiate a strategic nationalist withdrawal to Asia), the shocks at the level of the economic base will tend to become increasingly strong and chaotic.

Central countries at the heart of the growing instability of relations within and between bourgeoisies

In previous years, we have seen an exacerbation of tensions within and between bourgeoisies. In particular, with the coming to power of Trump and the implementation of Brexit, this has manifested itself intensely at the level of the bourgeoisies. The American and British bourgeoisies were hitherto regarded as the most stable and experienced in the world, but the consequences of the Covid-19 crisis can only sharpen these tensions even more:

- The British bourgeoisie enters the post-Brexit fog having lost the support of the US big brother because of Trump’s defeat, while at the same time suffering the full consequences of the pandemic. As far as Brexit is concerned, dissatisfaction with the fuzzy agreement with the EU appears as much among those who did not want it (the Scots, the Northern Irish) as among those who wanted a hard Brexit (the fishermen), while there is no agreement (or not yet?) with the EU on services (80% of trade), and tensions between the EU and the UK are growing (over vaccines, for example). As for the Covid-19 crisis, Britain has had to lockdown again in a hurry, has passed the 120,000 deaths mark and is under

terrible pressure on its health services. Meanwhile, the situation is having a deleterious impact on its main political parties, the Tories and Labour, both of which are in the throes of a serious internal crisis.

- The exacerbation of tensions between the US and other states was evident under the Trump administration: *“The vandalising behaviour of a Trump, who can denounce American international commitments overnight in defiance of established rules, represents a new and powerful factor of uncertainty, providing further impetus towards ‘each against all’. It is a further indication of the new stage in which capitalism is sinking further into barbarism and the abyss of untrammelled militarism”*.¹³ But within the US bourgeoisie itself, tensions are also high. This had already manifested itself over the strategy for maintaining its supremacy during the catastrophic Iraqi adventure of Bush junior:

*“The accession of the ‘Neo-Cons’ to the head of the American state represents a real catastrophe for the American bourgeoisie. [...] In fact, the arrival of the team of Cheney, Rumsfeld and Co. to the reins of the state was not the simple result of a monumental mistake in casting by the ruling class. While it has considerably worsened the situation of the US on the imperialist level, it was already the expression of the impasse facing the US, given the growing weakening of its leadership and more generally given the development of ‘every man for himself’ in international relations which characterises the phase of decomposition.”*¹⁴

But with Trump’s “vandalist” policy and the Covid-19 crisis, the oppositions within the US bourgeoisie appeared to be much broader (immigration, economy); and above all, the capacity of the political apparatus to maintain the cohesion of a fragmented society seems to have been undermined. Indeed, national “unity” and “identity” have congenital weaknesses that make them vulnerable to decomposition. For example: the existence of large ethnic and migrant communities, who have suffered racial discrimination from the very beginning of the USA and some of whom are excluded from “official” life; the weight of churches and sects spreading irrational and anti-scientific thinking; the considerable autonomy of the states of the “Ameri-

can Union” from the federal government (there is, for example, an independence movement in Texas); the increasingly sharp opposition between the states on the East and West coasts (California, Oregon, Washington, New York, Massachusetts, etc.) taking full advantage of “globalisation”, and the southern (Tennessee, Louisiana, etc.), rust belt (Indiana, Ohio, etc.) and deep-central (Oklahoma, Kansas, etc.) states, who are much more favourable to a more protectionist approach – all tend to favour a fragmentation of American society, even if the federal state is still far from having lost control of the situation. However, the vaudeville of contesting the process and results of the last presidential elections, as well as the “storming” of the Capitol by Trump supporters in front of the whole world, as in any banana republic, confirms the accentuation of this trend towards fragmentation.

Concerning the future exacerbation of tensions within and between bourgeoisies, two points need to be clarified:

a) Biden’s appointment does not change the basis of US problems

The advent of the Biden administration in no way signifies the reduction of intra- and inter bourgeois tensions and in particular the end of the imprint on domestic and foreign policy of Trump’s populism: on the one hand, four years of unpredictability and vandalism by Trump, most recently with regard to the catastrophic management of the pandemic, profoundly affect the domestic situation in the USA and the fragmentation of American society, as well as its international positioning. Moreover, Trump will have done everything during the last period of his presidency to make the situation even more chaotic for his successor (cf. the letter from the last 10 Defense Secretaries enjoining Trump not to involve the army in the contestation of the election results in December 2020; the occupation of Congress by his supporters). Secondly, Trump’s election result shows that about half of the population shares his ideas and in particular his aversion to political elites. Finally, the hold of Trump and his ideas on a large part of the Republican Party heralds a difficult management for the unpopular (apart from among the political elites) Biden administration. His victory is due more to an anti-Trump polarisation than to enthusiasm for the new president’s programme.

Thus, while in form and in certain areas, such as climate policy or immigration, the Biden administration will tend to break with Trump’s policy, its internal policy of “revenge” by the elites on both coasts against “Deep America” (the issues of fossil fuels and the “Wall” are precisely linked

13. Point 13, “Resolution on the international situation: Imperialist conflicts, life of the bourgeoisie, economic crisis” (23rd ICC Congress), *International Review* n° 164, 2020.

14. “17th Congress of the ICC: Resolution on the international situation”, *International Review* n° 130, 2007.

to this) and an external policy marked by the maintenance of Trump's attitudes in the Middle East and a strengthening of the confrontation with China (cf. Biden's harsh attitude towards Xi in their first telephone conversation and the US demand that the EU review its trade treaty with China) can only lead in the long run to increased instability within the US bourgeoisie and between bourgeoisies.

b) China is not the great victor in this situation

Officially, China presents itself as the "country that defeated the pandemic". What is its situation in reality? To answer this question, it is necessary to assess the short-term (effective control of the pandemic) and medium-term impact of the Covid-19 crisis.

China has an overwhelming responsibility for the emergence and expansion of the pandemic. After the SARS outbreak in 2003, protocols were established for local authorities to warn the central authorities; already with the swine fever epidemic in 2019 it became clear that this was not working because, in Stalinist state capitalism, local officials fear for their career/promotion if they announce bad news. The same was true at the beginning of Covid-19 in Wuhan. It was the "democratic citizen oppositions" who after much delay finally got the news through to the central level. The central level was in turn initially conspicuous by its absence: it did not notify the WHO and, for three weeks, Xi was absent from the scene: three precious weeks of lost time. Since then, moreover, China has still refused to provide the WHO with verifiable data on the development of the pandemic on its territory.

The short-term impact is above all indirect. At the direct level, the official figures for contamination and deaths are unreliable (these range from 30,000 to several million) and, according to the New York Times, the Chinese government itself may be unaware of the extent of the epidemic as local authorities lie about the number of infections, tests and deaths for fear of reprisals from the central government. However, the imposition of ruthless and barbaric lockdowns on entire regions, literally locking millions of people in their homes for weeks (imposed again regularly in recent months), has totally paralysed the Chinese economy for several weeks, leading to massive unemployment (205 million in May 2020) and disastrous crop failure (in combination with droughts, floods and locust invasions). For 2020, China's GDP is down by more than 4% compared to 2019 (+6.1% to +1.9%); domestic consumption has been maintained by a massive release of credits from the State.

In the longer term, the Chinese economy is faced with the relocation of strategic industries by the United States and European countries and the difficulties of the "New Silk Road" because of the financial problems linked to the economic crisis and accentuated by the Covid-19 crisis (with its impact on Chinese financing but above all because of the level of indebtedness of "partner" countries such as Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Nepal, etc.) but also by growing mistrust on the part of many countries and anti-Chinese pressure from the United States. So, it should come as no surprise that in 2020 there has been a collapse in the financial value of the investments injected into the "New Silk Road" project (-64%).

The Covid-19 crisis and the obstacles encountered by the "New Silk Road" have also accentuated the increasingly evident tensions at the head of the Chinese state, between the "economist" faction, which relies above all on economic globalisation and "multilateralism" to pursue China's capitalist expansion, and the "nationalist" faction, which calls for a more muscular policy and puts forward force ("China defeated Covid") in the face of internal threats (the Uighurs, Hong Kong, Taiwan) and external threats (tensions with the USA, India and Japan). In the perspective of the next People's Congress in 2022, which should appoint the new (former?) president, the situation in China is therefore also particularly unstable.

State capitalism as a factor exacerbating contradictions

*"As the GCF pointed out in 1952 state capitalism is not a solution to the contradictions of capitalism, even if it can delay their effects, but is an expression of them. The capacity of the state to hold a decaying society together, however invasive it becomes, is therefore destined to weaken over time and in the end become an aggravating factor of the very contradictions it is trying to contain. The decomposition of capitalism is the period in which a growing loss of control by the ruling class and its state becomes the dominant trend of social evolution, which Covid reveals so dramatically."*¹⁵

The pandemic crisis expresses in a particularly acute way the contradiction between the need for massive intervention by state capitalism in an attempt to limit the effects of the crisis and an opposite tendency to loss of control, to fragmentation, itself exacerbated by these attempts by the state to maintain its control. The

15. "Report on the Covid-19 pandemic and the period of capitalist decomposition", *International Review* n° 165, 2021.

Covid-19 crisis in particular marked an acceleration in the loss of credibility of the state apparatus. While state capitalism intervened on a massive scale to deal with the effects of the pandemic crisis (health measures, lockdown, mass vaccination, generalised financial compensation to cushion the economic impact, etc.), the measures taken at the various levels have often proved ineffective or have led to new contradictions (vaccination exacerbates the anti-state opposition of the "anti-vaxxers", economic compensation for one sector causes discontent in others). Consequently, if the state is supposed to represent society as a whole and maintain its cohesion, society sees it less and less in this way: in the face of the growing carelessness and irresponsibility of the bourgeoisie, increasingly evident in central countries too, the tendency is to see the state as a structure at the service of corrupt elites, as well as a force of repression. As a result, it is having more and more difficulty in imposing rules: in many European countries, for example in Italy, France or Poland, and also in the USA, demonstrations have taken place against government measures to close down businesses or to impose lockdowns. Everywhere, especially among young people, social media campaigns are appearing to oppose these rules, such as the hashtag "I don't want to play the game anymore" in Holland.

The inability of states to deal with the situation is both symbolised and affected by the impact of populist "vandalism". The disruption of the political game of the bourgeoisie in the industrialised countries manifested itself in an explicit way from the beginning of the 21st century with populist movements and parties, often close to the extreme right. Thus, let us note the surprise rise of Le Pen in the final round of the 2002 presidential election in France, the dazzling and spectacular breakthrough of the "Pim Fortuyn list" in the Netherlands in 2001-2002, the Berlusconi governments with the support of the extreme right in Italy, the rise of Jörg Haider and the FPÖ in Austria, or the rise of the Tea Party in the USA. Even then, the ICC tended to link the phenomenon to the weakness of the bourgeoisies:

*"They depend on the strength or weakness of the national bourgeoisie. In Italy, the bourgeoisie's weaknesses and internal divisions, even from the imperialist viewpoint, have led to the upsurge of a substantial populist right. In Britain on the contrary, the virtual non-existence of a specific far right party is due to the British bourgeoisie's greater experience and superior grip over its own political game."*¹⁶

16. "Rise of the far right in Europe: does the 'fascist threat' exist?", *International Review* n° 110, 2002.

While the trend of loss of control is global and has marked the periphery (countries like Brazil, Venezuela, Peru in Latin America, the Philippines or India in Asia), it is now hitting the industrialised countries, the historically strongest bourgeoisies (Britain) and today especially the US. While the populist wave is focused on contesting the establishment, the coming to power of populists is further undermining and destabilising state structures through their “vandalist” policies (cf. Trump, Bolsonaro, but also the Five Star and Lega “populist government” in Italy), as they are neither willing nor able to responsibly take over the affairs of state.

These observations go against the thesis that the bourgeoisie, through these measures, is mobilising and subduing the population in order to march towards a generalised war. On the contrary, the chaotic health policies and the inability of the states to face the situation express the difficulty of the bourgeoisies of the central countries to impose their control on society. The development of this tendency can alter the credibility of democratic institutions (without this implying in the present context the slightest strengthening of the class terrain) or, on the contrary, stimulate the development of campaigns to defend them, or even to restore “real democracy”: thus, regarding the assault on the Capitol, we see a clash between those who want to reconquer democracy “taken hostage by the elites” (“the Capitol is our home”) and those who defend democracy against a populist putsch.

The fact that the bourgeoisie is less and less able to present a perspective for society as a whole also generates a frightening expansion of irrational alternative ideologies and a growing disregard for a scientific and reasoned approach. Certainly, the decomposition of the values of the ruling class is not new. It appeared at the end of the 1960s, but the deepening of the decomposition, chaos and barbarism favours the advent of hatred and violence of nihilist ideologies and the most retrograde religious sectarianism. The Covid-19 crisis stimulates the large-scale spread of these. Movements such as QAnon, Wolverine Watchmen, Proud Boys or the Boogaloo movement in the USA, evangelical sects in Brazil, Latin America or Africa, Sunni or Shiite Muslim sects but also Hindu or Buddhist ones spread conspiracy theories and totally fanciful conceptions about the virus and the pandemic, and about the origin (creationism) or future of society. The exponential spread of irrational thinking and the rejection of the contributions of science will tend to accelerate.

The proliferation of anti-state riots and inter-classist movements

Explosions of popular revolts against misery and warlike barbarity were present from the beginning of the phase of decomposition and are becoming more pronounced in the 21st century: Argentina (2001-02), the French suburbs in 2005, Iran in 2009, London and other British cities in 2011, the outbreak of riots in the Maghreb and the Middle East in 2011-12 (the “Arab Spring”). A new wave of social riots broke out in Chile, Ecuador or Colombia (2019), Iran (in 2017-18 and again in 2019-20), Iraq, Lebanon (2019-20), but also in Romania (2017) in Bulgaria (2013 and 2019-20) or in France with the “yellow vests” movement (2018-19) and, with specific characteristics, in Ferguson (2014) and Baltimore (2016) in the USA. These revolts manifest the growing despair of populations suffering from the breakdown of social relations, subjected to the traumatic and dramatic consequences of impoverishment linked to economic collapse or endless wars. They are also increasingly targeting the corruption of ruling cliques and more generally political elites.

In the aftermath of the Covid-19 crisis, such outbursts of anger multiplied, taking the form of demonstrations and even riots. They tend to crystallise around three poles:

- a) inter-classist movements, expressing revolt at the economic and social consequences of the Covid-19 crisis (example of the “Yellow Vests”);
- b) identity movements, whether of populist (MAGA) origin or as expressions of partial struggles, tending to exacerbate tensions between components of the population (such as revolts about race, eg Black Lives Matter), but also religiously inspired movements (in India, for example);
- c) anti-establishment and anti-state movements in the name of “individual freedom”, of a nihilistic type, without any real “alternatives”, such as “anti-vax” or conspiracy movements (“get my institutions back from the hands of the elites”).

These types of movements often lead to riots and looting, serving as an outlet for gangs of young people from neighbourhoods undermined by decomposition. While these movements highlight the significant loss of credibility of the political structures of the bourgeoisie, none of them offer in any way a perspective for the working class. Any revolt against the state is not always a favourable terrain for the proletariat: on the contrary, they divert

it from its class terrain to a terrain that is not its own.

The exploitation of the ecological threat by the bourgeoisie's campaigns

The pandemic illustrates the dramatic worsening of environmental degradation, which is reaching alarming levels, according to the findings and forecasts that are now unanimously accepted in scientific circles and which the majority of the bourgeois sectors of all countries have taken up (Paris Agreement, 2015): urban air pollution and ocean water pollution, climate change with increasingly violent meteorological phenomena, the advance of desertification, and the accelerated disappearance of plant and animal species that increasingly threaten the biological balance of our planet.

“The scale and the proliferation of all these economic and social calamities, which spring generally speaking from the decadence of the system itself, reveals the fact that this system is trapped in a complete dead-end, and has no future to propose to the greater part of the world population other than a growing and unimaginable barbarity. This is a system where economic policy, research, investment are all conducted to the detriment of humanity's future, and even to the detriment of the system itself.”¹⁷

The ruling class is unable to implement the necessary measures because of the very laws of capitalism and more specifically because of the exacerbation of contradictions caused by the sinking into decomposition; consequently, the ecological crisis can only worsen and lead to new catastrophes in the future. However, in recent decades, the bourgeoisie has tried to recuperate the ecological dimension in an attempt to put forward a perspective of “reforms within the system”. In particular, the bourgeoisies in the industrialised countries are placing the “ecological transition” and the “green economy” at the centre of their current campaigns to gain acceptance for a perspective of drastic austerity as part of their post-Covid economic policies aimed at restructuring and strengthening the competitive position of the industrialised countries. Thus, they are at the centre of the European Commission's “recovery plans” for EU countries and the Biden administration's stimulus package in the US. In the coming years, therefore, the question of ecology will be more than ever be the source of major mystifications to be fought by revolutionaries.

17. Point 7, “Theses on Decomposition”, *International Review* n° 62, 1990.

Conclusions

This report has shown that the pandemic does not open a new period, but that it is first of all a revelation of the level of putrefaction reached during the 30 years of the phase of decomposition, a level that has often been underestimated until now. At the same time, the pandemic crisis also heralds a significant acceleration of various effects of decomposition in the period ahead, which is illustrated in particular by the impact of the Covid-19 crisis on the management of the economy by states and by its devastating effects on the central industrial countries, and in particular on the US superpower. There are possibilities for occasional countertrends, which may impose a pause or even a certain resumption of control by state capitalism, but these specific events will by no means mean that the historical dynamics of sinking into the phase of decomposition, highlighted in this report, will be called into question.

If the perspective is not for a generalised world war (between imperialist blocs), the current plunge into every man for himself and fragmentation nevertheless brings the sinister promise of a multiplication of murderous warlike conflicts, revolts

without perspectives or catastrophes for humanity.

*“The course of history cannot be turned back: as its name suggests, decomposition leads to social dislocation and putrefaction, to the void. Left to its own devices, it will lead humanity to the same fate as world war. In the end, it is all the same whether we are wiped out in a rain of thermonuclear bombs, or by pollution, radioactivity from nuclear power stations, famine, epidemics, and the massacres of innumerable small wars (where nuclear weapons might also be used). The only difference between these two forms of annihilation lies in that one is quick, while the other would be slower; and would consequently provoke still more suffering”.*¹⁸

The progression of the phase of decomposition can also lead to a decline in the capacity of the proletariat to carry out its revolutionary action. The proletariat is thus engaged in a race against time against the sinking of society into the barbarity of a historically obsolete system. Of course, workers’ struggles cannot prevent the development of decomposition, but they

18. “Theses on Decomposition”, point 11.

can stop the effects of it, of every man for himself. As a reminder, “*capitalism’s decadence was necessary for the proletariat to be able to overthrow the system; by contrast, the appearance of this specific phase of decomposition as a result of the continuation of the decadent period without its leading to a proletarian revolution, is in no way a necessary stage for the proletariat on the road towards its emancipation.*” (Point 12, Theses on Decomposition).

The Covid-19 crisis is therefore creating an even more unpredictable and confusing situation. Tensions on different levels (health, socio-economic, military, political, ideological) will generate major social upheavals, massive popular revolts, destructive riots, intense ideological campaigns, such as the one around ecology. Without a solid framework for understanding events, revolutionaries will not be able to play their role as the political vanguard of the class, but will on the contrary contribute to its confusion, to the decline of its ability to carry out its revolutionary action.

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this report, the ICC’s recognition that the concept of the historic course no longer applies in the phase of decomposition means that it becomes much harder to assess the overall dynamic of events, and in particular to reach the conclusion that the door to a revolutionary future has been definitively closed, since decomposition can overwhelm the proletariat in a gradual process, without the bourgeoisie having to defeat it directly, in a face to face combat, as it did in the period of the revolutionary wave. It is therefore difficult to know what comrade S means by a “*political defeat on a scale such as which it may need a generation to recover from*”. If the proletariat has yet to take on the class enemy in an openly political struggle, as it did in 1917-23, what criteria are we using to judge that the retreat of the class struggle over the past three decades has reached such a point; and furthermore, since such a defeat would presumably be followed by a major acceleration of barbarism, and - in comrade S’s view - by a world war, or at least a “limited” nuclear holocaust - what possibilities for “recovery” would be left for the next generation?

On a final point: comrade S claims that

we see the situation of the class being “better” than in the wake of the collapse of the blocs. This is inaccurate. We have certainly said that the conditions for future class confrontations are thus inevitably maturing, and, as the report on the class struggle to the RI Congress pointed out, this is in a context very different from the situation at the beginning of the phase of decomposition:

- whereas 1989 could be presented as the defeat of communism and the victory of capitalism, the pandemic cannot be presented as a vindication of the superiority of the present system. On the contrary, despite all the mystifications surrounding the origins and nature of the pandemic, it provides further evidence that the capitalist system has become a danger to humanity, even if for the moment only a small minority have grasped this clearly;
- whereas the events of 1989 constituted a major blow to class combativity and consciousness, and although the development of decomposition has tended to aggravate the loss of class identity, the pandemic has broken out in the context of a certain revival of the class struggle, while the bourgeoisie’s willingness to sacrifice health and life in the interest

of profit, as well as its chaotic handling of the pandemic, tends to provoke an awareness that we are not “all in it together” - that the working class and the poor are the prime victims of the pandemic and the criminal negligence of the ruling class.

But all these “plus points” come on top of 30 years of decomposition - a period in which time is no longer on the side of the proletariat, which continues to suffer the accumulating wounds inflicted by a society that is rotting on its feet. In some ways, we would agree that the situation is “worse” than it was in the 1980s. But we will fail in our task as a revolutionary minority if we ignore any of the signposts that point towards a revival of the class struggle - of a proletarian movement that contains the possibility of preventing society from taking a definitive plunge into the abyss.

Report on the international class struggle

At its 23rd International Congress, the ICC made it clear that we have to draw a distinction between the concept of the balance of forces between the classes, and the concept of the historic course. The first applies to all phases of the class struggle, in ascendance as well as decadence, whereas the second only to decadence and then only in the period between the lead-up to the First World War and the collapse of the eastern bloc in 1989. The idea of a historic course only makes sense in phases where it becomes possible to predict the general movement of capitalist society towards either world war or decisive class confrontations. Thus, in the 1930s, the Italian Left was able to recognise that the prior defeat of the world proletariat in the 1920s had opened a course towards World War Two, while after 1968 the ICC was correct to argue that, without a frontal defeat of a resurgent working class, capitalism would not be able to enlist the proletariat for a Third World War. By contrast, in the phase of decomposition, product of a historic stalemate between the classes, even if world war has been taken off the agenda for the foreseeable future by the disintegration of the bloc system, the system can slide into other forms of irreversible barbarism without a head-on confrontation with the working class. In such a situation, it becomes much more difficult to recognise when a “point of no return” has been reached and the possibility of a proletarian revolution has been buried once and for all.

But the “unpredictability” of decomposition by no means signifies that revolutionaries are no longer concerned with assessing the global balance of forces between the classes. This point is obviously affirmed by the title of the 23rd Congress resolution on the class struggle: “Resolution on the balance of forces between the classes”.

Building on the work of our 23rd Congress

There are two key elements of this resolution which we need to stress here:

- a) “*in the balance of forces between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, it is always the ruling class that is on the offensive, except in a revolutionary situation*” (point 10). At certain moments the defensive struggles of the working class may be able to push back the attacks of the bourgeoisie, but in decadence the tendency is for such victories to become increasingly limited and short-lived: this is a central factor in ensuring that the proletarian revolution becomes a necessity as well as a possibility in this epoch;
- b) the primary means to “measure” the balance of forces is the observation of the tendency for the working class to develop its class autonomy and pose its own solution to the historic crisis of the system. In short, the tendency towards politicisation – the development of class consciousness to the point where the working class understands the necessity to confront and overthrow the political machinery of the ruling class and replace it with its own class dictatorship.

These themes are the “red thread” running through the resolution, as announced in the opening section:

“By the late 1960s, with the exhaustion of the post-war economic boom and in the face of deteriorating living conditions,

the working class had re-emerged on the social scene. The workers’ struggles that exploded on an international scale put an end to the longest period of counter-revolution in history, opening a new historical course towards class confrontations, thus preventing the ruling class from putting in place its own response to the acute crisis of capitalism: a Third World War. This new historical course had been marked by the emergence of massive struggles, particularly in the central countries of Western Europe with the May 1968 movement in France, followed by the ‘hot autumn’ in Italy in 1969 and many others such as Argentina in spring 1969 and Poland in winter 1970-71. In these massive movements, large sectors of the new generation who had not experienced war once again raised the perspective of communism as a real possibility.

“In connection with this general movement of the working class in the late 1960s and early 1970s, we must also highlight the international revival, on a very small but no less significant scale, of the organised communist left, the tradition that remained faithful to the flag of world proletarian revolution during the long night of counter-revolution. In this process, the constitution of the ICC represented an important impetus for the communist left as a whole.

“Faced with a dynamic towards the politicisation of workers’ struggles, the bourgeoisie (which had been surprised by

*the May 1968 movement) immediately developed a large-scale and long-term counter-offensive in order to prevent the working class from providing its own response to the historical crisis of the capitalist economy: the proletarian revolution”.*¹

The resolution then traces in broad lines how the bourgeoisie, the Machiavellian class par excellence, used all the means at its disposal to block this dynamic:

- “*In an initial period, by offering the working class a purely bourgeois political alternative. In the late 60s and early 70s, by derailing its aspirations towards the false dawn of left wing governments capable of humanising capitalism and even bringing in a socialist society, and from the late 70s onwards, through the division of labour between a hard right in power carrying out the brutal reductions in working class living standards demanded by the economic crisis, and a ‘left in opposition’ better placed to soak up the threat posed by the waves of struggle that characterised this period.*- “*The extensive use of the extreme left of capital (Maoists, Trotskyists etc) to recuperate the growing search for political answers by a significant minority of the new generation.*- “*The use of radical trade unionism and even ‘extra union’ forms of organisation manipulated by the extreme left to derail the workers’ growing disenchantment with the trade unions and the danger of workers arriving at a political understanding of the role of trade unions in the decadent epoch.*- “*The use of corporatist and nationalist ideology to isolate important workers’ struggles and, where necessary, to crush them through direct state repression (cf the miners’ strike in Britain and, on a much bigger scale, the mass strike in Poland in 1980).*- “*The conscious re-organisation of global production and exchange which took flight from the 1980s onwards: the policy of ‘globalisation’, though fundamentally determined by the need to respond to the economic crisis, also contained a directly anti-working class element in that it sought to break up traditional centres of proletarian combativity and undermine class identity.*- “*Turning the very decomposition of capitalist society against the working class. Thus, the tendency towards ‘every man*

1. International Review n° 164.

for himself' magnified in this new phase was used to reinforce social atomisation and corporatist divisions. Above all, the collapse of 'really existing socialism' in the Eastern bloc was the launch-pad for a gigantic campaign around the death of communism, which deepened and extended the difficulties of the working class to develop its own revolutionary perspective".

While these difficulties were already growing in the 1980s – and were at the root of the stalemate between the classes – the events of 1989 not only definitively opened up the phase of decomposition but brought about a profound retreat in the class at all levels: in its combativity, in its consciousness, in its very capacity to recognise itself as a specific class in bourgeois society. Furthermore, it accelerated all the negative tendencies of social decomposition which had already begun to play a role in the previous period: the cancerous growth of egoism, nihilism and irrationality which are the natural products of a social order which can no longer offer humanity any perspective for its future.²

The resolution from the 23rd conference, it should be noted, also reaffirms that, despite all the negative factors of the phase of decomposition weighing on the scales, there were still signs of a proletarian counter-tendency. In particular, the students' movement against the CPE in France in 2006, and the Indignados movement in Spain in 2011, together with the re-emergence of new elements looking for genuinely communist positions, provide concrete evidence that the phenomenon of the subterranean maturation of consciousness, the digging of the "Old Mole", still operates in the new phase. The quest of a new generation of proletarians to understand the impasse of capitalist society, the renewed interest in previous movements

2. In his first article laying out his disagreements with the 23rd Congress resolutions on the international situation, comrade S. argues that the resolution on the balance of class forces showed that the ICC was abandoning its view that the proletariat's inability to develop its revolutionary perspective during the period 1968-89 was a primary cause of the phase of decomposition. In our reply, we already pointed out what we are saying again in this report: that the resolution on the balance of class forces places the question of politicisation – in other words, the development of a proletarian alternative for the future of society – at the very heart of its understanding of the current stalemate between the two major classes. It's true that the resolution could have been more explicit about the fact that the stalemate was the product not only of the bourgeoisie's inability to mobilise society for world war, but also of the inability of the working class – particularly of its central battalions in the wake of the Polish mass strike – to understand and take up the political goals of its struggle. We think this point – which is simply the basic element in our analysis of decomposition – has been clarified in our published response to the comrade. "Internal Debate in the ICC on the international situation", published 25/08/20. See ICC Online.

which had raised the possibility of a revolutionary alternative (1917-23, May 68 etc) confirmed that the perspective of a future politicisation had not been drowned under the sludge of decomposition. But before advancing any further towards a

better understanding of the balance of class forces in the last decade or so, and above all in the wake of the Covid pandemic, it is necessary to go deeper into what exactly is meant by the term politicisation.

The meaning of politicisation

Throughout its history, the marxist vanguard of the workers' movement has fought to clarify the inter-relationship between different aspects of the class struggle: economic and political, practical and theoretical, defensive and offensive. The profound connection between the economic and the political dimensions were emphasised by Marx in his first polemic with Proudhon:

"Do not say that social movement excludes political movement. There is never a political movement which is not at the same time social.

*"It is only in an order of things in which there are no more classes and class antagonisms that social evolutions will cease to be political revolutions"*³

This polemic continued in the days of the First International in the struggle against the doctrines of Bakunin. In this period, the need to affirm the political dimension of the class struggle was mainly linked to the struggle for reforms, and thus to intervention in the bourgeoisie's parliamentary arena. But the conflict with the anarchists, as well as the practical experience of the working class, also raised questions relating to the offensive stage of the struggle, above all the events of the Paris Commune, the first example of working class political power.

During the period of the Second International, above all its phase of degeneration, a new battle was launched: the struggle of the left currents against the growing tendency to rigidly separate the economic dimension, seen as the speciality of the trade unions, and the political dimension, increasingly reduced to the party's efforts to win seats in bourgeois parliaments and local municipalities.

With the dawn of capitalism's decadent epoch, the dramatic appearance of the mass strike in 1905 in Russia, and the emergence of the soviets, reaffirmed the essential unity of the economic and political dimensions, and the necessity for independent class organs which combined both aspects. As Luxemburg put it in her pamphlet on the mass strike, which was essentially a polemic against the outmoded conceptions of the social democratic right and centre:

*"There are not two different class struggles of the working class, an economic and a political one, but only one class struggle, which aims at one and the same time at the limitation of capitalist exploitation within bourgeois society, and at the abolition of exploitation together with bourgeois society itself".*⁴

However, it is necessary to recall that these two dimensions, while forming part of a unity, are not identical, and their unity is often not grasped by the workers engaged in actual struggles. Thus, even when a strike around economic demands may rapidly be confronted with the active opposition of organs of the bourgeois state (government, police, trade unions, etc) the "objectively" political context of the struggle may well be apparent only to a militant minority of the workers involved.

Furthermore, this emphasises that within the movement towards consciousness of the political implications of the struggle, two different dynamics are at play: on the one hand, what could be called the politicisation of struggles, and on the other hand, the emergence of politicised minorities who may or may not be linked to the immediate upsurge of the open struggle.

And again, in the first case, we are looking at a process which moves through different phases. In decadence, while there can no longer be a proletarian intervention in the bourgeois political sphere, there can still be defensive political demands and debates which do not yet pose the question of political power or of a new society, for example when proletarians discuss how to respond to police violence, as during mass strikes in Poland in 1980 or the anti-CPE movement in 2006. It is only at a very advanced stage in the struggle that the workers can envisage the seizure of political power as a real goal of their movement. Nevertheless, what generally characterises the politicisation of struggles is the outburst of a massive culture of debate, where the workplace, the street corner, the public square, universities and schools are the scene of passionate discussions about how to take the struggle forward, about who are the enemies of the struggle, about its methods of organisation and overall objectives,

4. *The Mass Strike, the Party and the Trade Unions*, 1906.

3. *Poverty of Philosophy*, 1847.

such as Trotsky and John Reed described in their books on the Russian revolution of 1917, and which were perhaps the main “warning sign” to the bourgeoisie about the dangers posed by the events of May-June 1968 in France.

For marxism, the communist minority is an emanation of the working class, but of the working class seen as a historic force in bourgeois society; it is not a mechanical product of its immediate struggles. Certainly, the experience of bitter class conflict may drive individual workers towards revolutionary conclusions, but communists can also be “made” by reflecting on the general conditions of the proletariat and of capitalism generally, and they may also have their sociological origins in strata outside the proletariat. This is how Marx expresses it in *The German Ideology*:

“In the development of productive forces there comes a stage when productive forces and means of intercourse are brought into being, which, under the existing relationships only cause mischief, and are no longer productive but destructive forces... and connected with this a class is called forth, which has to bear all the burdens of society without enjoying its advantages, which, ousted from society, is forced into the most decided antagonism to all other classes; a class which forms the majority of all members of society, and from which emanates the consciousness of the necessity of a fundamental revolution, the communist consciousness, which may, of course, arise among the other classes too through the contemplation of the situation of this class.”

Obviously, the convergence of the two dynamics – the politicisation of struggles and the development of the revolutionary minority – is essential for a revolutionary situation to emerge; and we can even say that such a convergence, as noted by the opening section of the resolution with regard to May ‘68 in France, can be the expression of a shift in the course of history towards major class confrontations. Similarly, the advances in the general struggle of the working class, and the appearance of politicised minorities are both, at root, products of the subterranean maturation of consciousness, which can continue even when the open struggle has vanished from sight. But to mix up the two dynamics can also lead to false conclusions, particularly an overestimation of the immediate potential of the class struggle. As the English expression has it: a single swallow does not a summer make.

The resolution (point 6) also warns us about the very considerable difficulties that stand in the way of the working class becoming aware that it is “revolutionary

or nothing”. It talks about the nature of the working class as an exploited class subject to all the pressures of the dominant ideology, so that “*class consciousness cannot advance from victory to victory but can only develop unevenly through a series of defeats*”; it also notes that the class faces added difficulties in decadence, for example: the non-permanence of mass organisations in which workers can maintain and develop a political culture; the non-existence of a minimum programme, which means that the class struggle has to scale the dizzy heights of the maximum programme; the use of former instruments of the working class organisations against the class struggle which – in the case of Stalinism in particular – has helped to create a gulf between genuine communist organisations and the mass of the working class. Elsewhere, the resolution, echoing our “Theses on Decomposition”, stresses the new difficulties imposed by the particular conditions of the final phase of capitalist decline.

One of these difficulties is considered at some length in the resolution: the danger posed by inter-classist struggles like the

The central danger of interclassism

“Because of the current great difficulty of the working class in developing its struggles, its inability for the moment to regain its class identity and to open up a perspective for the whole of society, the social terrain tends to be occupied by inter-classist struggles particularly marked by the petty bourgeoisie... These inter-classist movements are the product of the absence of any perspective which affects society as a whole, including an important part of the ruling class itself... The struggle for the class autonomy of the proletariat is crucial in this situation imposed by the aggravation of the decomposition of capitalism:

- *against inter-classist struggles;*
- *against partial struggles put forward by all kinds of social categories giving a false illusion of a ‘protective community’;*
- *against the mobilisations on the rotten ground of nationalism, pacifism, ‘ecological’ reform, etc”.*⁵

Recurrent difficulties in analysing the nature of social movements which have appeared in recent years

Interclassist struggles and partial struggles are obstacles to the development of the workers’ struggle. We have seen recently

5. “Resolution on the balance of class forces” 23rd ICC Congress.

Yellow Vests in France or the popular revolts provoked by the increasing immiseration of the masses in the less “developed” countries. In all these movements, in a situation where the working class has a very low level of class identity and is still far from gathering its forces to the point where it can give a perspective to the anger and discontent building up throughout society, the proletarians participate not as an independent social and political force but as a mass of individuals. In some cases, these movements are not merely inter-classist, mixing up proletarian demands with the aspirations of other social strata (as in the case of the Yellow Vests) but espouse openly bourgeois goals, such as the democracy protests in Hong Kong, or the illusion of sustainable development or racial equality inside capitalism, as in the case of the Youth for Climate marches and the Black Lives Matter protests. The resolution is not altogether precise about the distinction to be made here, a reflection of wider problems in the ICC’s analyses of such events: hence the need for a specific section of this report clarifying these issues.

how hard the ICC has found it to master these two questions:

- With regard to the Yellow Vests, the movement was seen at the beginning as having positive elements for the class struggle (through the issue of the rejection of the unions).
- In the youth movement around the climate question, which is a partial struggle, the mobilisation of the young people was seen as something positive, forgetting point 12 of the platform.
- On the murder of George Floyd, there were tendencies to see it as an interclassist movement when the indignation it provoked led to a mobilisation on a directly bourgeois terrain, calling for a more democratic police and judiciary

Long-standing difficulties

The balance sheet of the movements in the Middle East: a question to be clarified

The presentation on the class struggle to the 23rd Congress recalled that the analysis of the movements of the Arab Spring had not been included in the critical balance sheet we have been undertaking since the 21st Congress despite the existence of unresolved differences, in particular

“questions of opportunist slidings we have made in the past towards for example the inter-classist movements of the Arab Spring and others”⁶

Going back to our analysis of the movements of 2011

If the organisation, in its intervention, didn’t use the term “interclassism” to qualify these movements, it described them in a way which developed all the characteristics of an interclassist movement, showing that it was not totally in the dark about their nature: “The working class has not yet presented itself in these events as an autonomous force capable of assuming the leadership of the movements, which have often taken the form of revolts by the whole non exploiting population, from ruined peasants to middle strata on the road to proletarianisation”.⁷

The position developed at the time – “The working class has, in general, not been in the leadership of these rebellions but it has certainly had a significant presence and influence which can be discerned both in the methods and forms of organisation thrown up by the movement and, in certain cases, by the specific development of workers’ struggles, such as the strikes in Algeria and above all the major wave of strikes in Egypt”⁸ – did not succeed in precisely situating the class terrain on which they were developing or in drawing out the dynamic of the working class component which could be found in these movements;

- Our analysis was based on an approach marked by empiricism: the comparison with Iran in 1979, certainly inspiring, was used without placing them in the new situation, without recontextualising them with the aid of our framework: “In trying to understand the class nature of these rebellions, we therefore have to avoid two symmetrical errors: on the one hand, a blanket identification of all the masses in movement with the proletariat (a position most characteristic of the *Groupe Communiste Internationaliste*), and on the other hand a rejection of anything positive in revolts which are not explicitly working class.”⁹ The second part of the quote makes concessions to an approach that looks at “positive

points” and “negative points” without basing it on their class nature.

- An overestimation of these movements: “All these experiences are important stepping stones towards the development of a genuinely revolutionary consciousness. But the road in that direction is still a long one, and is obstructed by many and obvious illusions and ideological weaknesses”;¹⁰ “All of these revolts constitute a formidable bank of experience on the road that leads to revolutionary consciousness”.¹¹

Weaknesses in the application of our political framework

Forgetting the framework of the critique of the weak link

Although the organisation was right to point out that the Indignados movement and the uprisings of the exploited classes and particularly of the working class in the Middle East had a common origin in the effects of the world economic crisis, it did so by putting all the movements, whether they came from the central countries or the peripheral countries, on the same level, or by amalgamating them. That’s to say without placing them in the framework of the critique of the theory of the weak link (see the resolution on the international situation from the 20th congress).¹²

The ICC defined the Indignados¹³ move-

10. Ibid.

11. “Social revolts in North Africa and the Middle East, nuclear catastrophe in Japan, war in Libya: Only the proletarian revolution can save humanity from the disaster of capitalism”, *International Review* n° 145.

12. “The metaphor of the five streams:

1) Social movements of young people in precarious work, unemployed or still studying, which began with the struggle against the CPE in 2006, continued with the youth revolt in Greece in 2008 and culminated with the movement of the Indignados and Occupy in 2011;

2) Movements which were massive but which were well contained by the bourgeoisie preparing the ground in advance, as in France 2007, France and Britain in 2010, Greece in 2010-12, etc;

3) Movements which suffered from a weight of interclassism, like Tunisia and Egypt in 2011;

4) Germs of massive strikes as in Egypt in 2007, Vigo (Spain) in 2006, China in 2009;

5) The development of struggles in the factories or in localised industrial sectors but which contained promising signs, such as Lindsey in 2009, Tekel in 2010, electricians in the UK in 2011.

These five streams belong to the working class despite their differences; each one in its own way expresses an effort by the proletariat to find itself again, despite the difficulties and obstacles which the bourgeoisie puts in its way. Each one contained a dynamic of research, of clarification, of preparing the social soil. At different levels they are part of the search ‘for the word that will lead us to socialism’ (as Rosa Luxemburg put it, referring to the workers’ councils) via the general assemblies”. (Resolution on the international situation, 20th ICC Congress, *International Review* n° 152).

13. “The Indignados in Spain, Greece and Israel: From

ment as a movement of the working class marked:

- by a loss of class identity: “This partly explains why the participation of the proletariat as a class has not been dominant even though it was present through the participation of individual workers (employed, unemployed, students, retired...) who attempted to clarify, to get involved according to their instincts, but who lacked the strength, cohesion and clarity there would be if the class participated collectively as a class”.
- by a “strong presence of non-proletarian social strata, especially a middle layer that is in the throes of proletarianisation”. “If the movement appears vague and poorly defined, this cannot put into question its class character, especially if we view things in their dynamic, in the perspective of the future... The presence of the proletariat is visible neither as a force leading the movement, nor through a mobilisation in the workplace. It lies in the dynamic of searching, clarification, preparation of the social terrain, of recognition of the battle that is being prepared. That is where its importance is found, despite the fact that this is only an extremely fragile small step forward.”

Our texts from this period do not make a distinction between the Indignados movement in Spain and the revolts in the Arab countries. However, there are very important differences: in Spain, even if the proletarian wing didn’t dominate the Indignados movement, it did fight for its own autonomy faced with the efforts of “Democracy Now” to destroy it. In the Arab countries, the proletariat, at best, was not able to maintain itself on its own terrain, or to use its own methods of combat to develop its consciousness, allowing itself to be mobilised behind nationalist and democratic factions.¹⁴

Absence of the framework of decomposition

Without ever denying its existence or the weight of the profound difficulties in these movements, by stressing the “positive aspects” of the social revolts,¹⁵ the analysis of

indignation to the preparation of class struggles”, *International Review* n° 147.

14. As the title of the article from *International Review* n° 147 indicates, the movements in Greece and Israel in 2011 (but also the protests in Turkey and Brazil in 2013) were analysed in a very similar way to the Indignados in Spain. A critical review of all our articles from this period is therefore required.

15. A question to be re-examined is also the existence of ambiguities and confusions about the positive impact of hunger riots for the development of class consciousness (cf *International Review* n° 134 “Food crisis, hunger riots: Only the class struggle of the proletariat can put an end to famines”).

6. Comrade J’s contribution in our internal bulletin in 2011.

7. “Social revolts in North Africa and the Middle East, nuclear catastrophe in Japan, war in Libya: Only the proletarian revolution can save humanity from the disaster of capitalism”, *International Review* n° 145. The resolution of the 21st Congress has one still ambiguous line on the movements in the Middle East as being “marked by interclassism”.

8. “What’s happening in the Middle East?”, *International Review* n° 145.

9. Ibid.

these movements in the Arab countries was not placed in the context of decomposition.¹⁶ This led to lessening the firm denunciation of the democratic and nationalist poison which was so powerful in these countries, and the danger that this represented above all in these parts of the world, but also and above all faced with the propaganda of the western bourgeoisies towards the European proletariat, underlining the necessity for democracy in the Arab countries.

More general weaknesses of the organisation determining its analyses and statements of position

Impatience to see everywhere and rapidly an exit from the retreat after 1989 following the revival of struggles in 2003 was a heavy burden: *“The present international wave of revolts against capitalist austerity is opening the door to another solution altogether: the solidarity of all the exploited across religious or national divisions; class struggle in all countries with the ultimate goal of a world-wide revolution which will be the negation of national borders and states. A year or two ago such a perspective would have seemed completely utopian to most. Today, increasing numbers are seeing global revolution as a realistic alternative to the collapsing order of global capital.”*¹⁷

The position of the ICC was marked not only by a general overestimation of the situation, but within that an overestimation of the significance of the movements in the Arab countries for the development of a proletarian perspective. Similarly, the tendency to neglect the importance of debate in the proletarian political milieu also had a negative influence: whereas the contribution of the Nucleo Comunista Internacional to the analysis of the Piqueteros movement in Argentina in 2002-4 had been very important, later on, in 2011, the ICC was not able to take into account the criticisms made of it by the Internationalist Voice group.

Did we make opportunist errors in the analysis of the Arab movements?

We can conclude from the preceding

16. The section on “Struggles against the war economy in the Middle East” from the report to the 23rd Congress has not been discussed in depth. The report talks about the existence of proletarian movements in several countries, and it is necessary to re-evaluate these movements on a more solid and in-depth basis, seeking to situate the analysis of these movements in the framework of the critique of the weak link, as well as the context of decomposition (which the report doesn’t seem to do explicitly, adopting the approach applied to the movements of 2011) in order to look at the nature of these movements and their strengths and weaknesses.

17. “Israel protests: “Mubarak, Assad, Netanyahu!”, ICC online, cited in the article from *International Review* n° 147.

elements that although ICC analysed the movements in the Arab countries in 2011, with their massive character, their simultaneity with other movements in the western countries, the forms taken by these movements (assemblies etc), the presence of the working class (different from the chaotic nature of a number of the interclassist riots or mobilisations dominated by leftist groups like the Piqueteros for example), we did not take a step back and come to a lucid view of what they really represented, in a context where the most experienced parts of the world proletariat was not able to provide a perspective and a direction. This approach was caught up in immediatism.

In the overall context that favoured the impatience and precipitation which existed in the organisation, imagining that the world proletariat was already overcoming the post-89 retreat on a massive scale, this immediatism was certainly the antechamber to opportunism, the point of departure for a slide towards opportunism and the abandoning of class positions, as can be attested by the different ways this immediatism manifested itself:

- the rather contradictory nature of our statements of position on the revolts in the Middle East;
- the absence of coherence and articulation based on the cardinal positions of the organisation underlying our political analyses, or even forgetting or abandoning them (for example, replacing the concept of interclassist struggles by the term “social revolts”, and without really explaining what we meant by “social revolts”.
- the rather empirical and superficial approach which tended to stay at the surface of things and which tended to substitute itself for our political framework;
- the major role played by our view of indignation as a unilaterally positive factor for the development of proletarian consciousness (or even as an indication of a movement’s positive nature, applied to all kinds of movements);
- the tendency to see positive elements where the situation was dominated by the greatest dangers for the class, leading to a weakening of the denunciation of bourgeois ideology by the organisation.

While all these elements combined bring together the conditions for openly opportunist positions – if there is no barrier to these deleterious tendencies posed by proletarian clarity and the defence of class positions by the ICC – it should be

underlined that the ICC didn’t take up positions that directly contradicted its platform and class positions. We have to situate these difficulties at the level of what they really represented (which doesn’t mean relativising their importance and dangers). The analysis and intervention of the ICC was weakened by immediatism (with all that this implies at the level of ambiguity, superficiality, lack of rigour, forgetting the defence of our framework and political positions, and a dynamic opening the door to opportunism), but we can’t conclude that it took up directly opportunist positions (which was the case regarding the youth movement around ecology).

Relationship between partial struggles and interclassism

The deviation on the youth movement against ecological destruction showed a forgetting of point 12 of our platform: *“The ecological question, like all social questions (whether education, family and sexual relations or whatever) are destined to play an enormous role in any future coming to consciousness and any communist struggle. The proletariat, and it alone, has the capacity to integrate these questions into its own revolutionary consciousness. In so doing it will broaden and deepen this consciousness. It will thus be able to lead all ‘partial struggles’ and give them a perspective. The proletarian revolution will have to confront all of these problems very concretely in the struggle for communism. But they cannot be the point of departure of the development of a revolutionary class perspective. In the absence of the proletariat, they are at worst the point of departure for new rounds of barbarism. The leaflet and the article of the ICC in Belgium are glaring examples of opportunism. This time, it is not opportunism on organisational matters, but opportunism in relation to the class positions as expounded in our platform”* (comrade S, contribution to an internal bulletin in 2019)

We can say that the report on the class struggle to the 23rd Congress was not without ambiguities at this level. It took an ambiguous position on the nature of these movements and left the door open to the idea that they could play a positive role in the development of consciousness.¹⁸

We have found it hard to see what distinguishes these two types of movement, with a tendency to amalgamate them, to put them at the same level. So what is it that distinguishes interclassist struggles and

18. *“The fact that these are not specifically proletarian movements certainly makes them vulnerable to mystifications around identity politics and reformism, and to direct manipulation by left and democratic bourgeois factions”.*

partial struggles? In interclassist movements, workers' demands are diluted and mixed up with petty bourgeois demands (cf the Yellow Vests). This is not the case with partial or "single issue" struggles which manifest themselves essentially at the level of the superstructures, their demands focusing on themes which leave out the foundations of capitalist society, even if they can point to capitalism as being responsible, as with the climate question, or with the oppression of women which is blamed on the capitalist patriarchy. They are also factors of division within the working class, divisions with workers employed in the energy sector in the first case, or by reinforcing divisions between the sexes. Workers may be drawn into partial struggles but this doesn't make them interclassist. It's a question of clarifying the difference between partial struggles and interclassist struggles, and what they may have in common.

On indignation

In the 2010s, the ICC recognised indignation as an important component of the class struggle of the proletariat and a factor in its coming to consciousness. However, the ICC has had a tendency to define its importance "in itself", in a somewhat metaphysical way. One of the roots of our difficulties lies in the inappropriate and unilateral use of the concept of indignation as something necessarily positive, an indication of reflection and even of the development of class consciousness, without taking into account the class nature of its origin, or the class terrain on which it is being expressed. With the further plunge into decomposition there will be many movements driven by indignation, disgust, anger among large layers of society against the phenomena of this period.

The report on the class struggle to the 23rd ICC Congress develops on the spread of social indignation against the destructive nature of capitalist society (eg in reaction against the murder of black people, the climate question or the harassment of women). But by affirming that the anger expressed by these movements can be recuperated by the proletariat when the latter has regained its class identity and is struggling on its terrain, an ambiguity is introduced about whether the proletariat can "take over" the leadership of such movements in their present form. In reality, such movements would have to "dissolve" before the elements participating in them could join the proletarian struggle. This is in contradiction to what is said in point 12 of the platform: "*The struggle against the economic foundations of the system contains within it the struggle against all the super-structural aspects of capital-*

ist society, but this is not true the other way around". Furthermore, such partial struggles tend to hinder the combat of the working class, its autonomy, and this is why the bourgeoisie knows very well how to recuperate them to preserve the capitalist order. In this sense indignation in itself is not a factor in the development of class consciousness: everything depends on the terrain on which it is expressed. This emotional reaction which may come from different classes does not automatically lead to a reflection that can contribute to the development of class consciousness.

The organisation needs to clarify what would be the conditions, on the historical scale, for an autonomous proletarian

movement to give an entirely new focus and direction to all the different grievances and oppressions imposed by capitalist society, and which today, in the absence of proletarian leadership, find their only outlet on the terrain of interclassist or bourgeois mobilisations.

The impact of the capitalist crisis on the whole of society poses another question to be clarified: what is the relationship of the struggle of the proletariat to other classes, intermediate or non-exploiting layers, still existing in capitalism and capable of developing their own mobilisations against the policy of the state (such as peasant movements)?

What has changed since the 23rd Congress?

Almost a decade has passed since the Indignados movement. Important though it was, it by no means marked a reversal of the retreat that began in 1989. We also know that the bourgeoisie – above all in France where the danger of contagion was most evident – took counter-measures to prevent a similar, or more advanced, movement erupting in the traditional "home" of revolutions.

In many ways, the retreat of the class deepened after the subsidence of the movements around 2011. The illusions that predominated in the Arab Spring, given the inability of the working class to provide leadership to the various revolts, have been drowned in barbarism, war, terrorism, and ferocious repression. In Europe and the US, the populist tide, in part fed by the barbaric developments in Africa and the Middle East which precipitated the refugee crisis and the blow-back of Islamic terrorism, has undoubtedly had an impact on a part of the working class. In the "Third World", mounting economic misery tended to provoke popular revolts in which the working class was again unable to manifest itself on its own terrain; even more significantly, the tendency of social discontent to take on an interclassist nature was clearly expressed in a central country like France, with the Yellow Vest demonstrations that persisted for a whole year. From 2016, with the accession to power of Trump and the vote for Brexit in the UK, the rise of populism reached spectacular levels, dragging a part of the working class into its campaigns against the "elites". And in 2020, this whole process of decomposition accelerated even more dramatically with the pandemic. The climate of fear generated by the pandemic, and the resulting lock-down, have further increased the atomisation of the working

class and created profound difficulties for a class response to the devastating economic consequences of the Covid-19 crisis.

And yet, not long before the pandemic hit, we were seeing a new development of class movements: the teachers' and GM autoworkers strikes in the US; the widespread strikes in Iran in 2018, which posed the question of self-organisation even if, contrary to the exaggerations of parts of the milieu, they were still a long way from the formation of soviets. In particular, the latter strikes raised the question of class solidarity in the face of state repression.

Above all, we saw the struggles in France at the end of 2019, where key battalions of the working class were in the streets around class demands, pushing aside the Yellow Vest movement which was reduced to a symbolic presence at the back of the marches

There were parallels in other countries, for example Finland. But then the pandemic struck the heart of Europe, to a large extent paralysing the possibility that the struggles in France could take on an international dimension, despite the fact that in the first phase of the lock-down there were many strikes by workers in defence of their working conditions faced with the totally inadequate health measures taken by the state and the employers.¹⁹ These movements were unable to develop further given the restrictive conditions of the lock-down, although the central role of the working class in keeping life in this society going was highlighted by those sectors who had no choice but to carry on working during the lock-down: health, transport, food supply, etc. The ruling class made strong

19. "Covid-19: despite all the obstacles, the class struggle forges its future", *World Revolution* n° 386.

efforts to present these workers as heroes serving the nation, but the hypocrisy of governments – and thus the class basis of the “sacrifices” of these workers – was evident to many. In Britain, for example, there were angry protests by health workers when it became clear that their “heroism” wasn’t worth a wage rise.²⁰

On top of the pandemic, the working class was quickly faced by further obstacles to the development of class consciousness, above all in the US where the Black Lives Matter protests focused attention on the “single issue” of race, followed swiftly by the huge election campaign which gave a new boost to democratic illusions. Both these campaigns had a major international impact. In the US in particular, the danger of the working class being pulled, via identity politics of right and left, into violent confrontations behind competing bourgeois factions remains very real: the dramatic assault on the Capitol by Trump supporters demonstrates that even if Trump has been removed from government, Trumpism remains as a powerful force on the level of the streets. Finally, workers are now facing a second wave of the pandemic and a new series of lock downs, which not only renew the state-enforced atomisation of the class but have also led to explosions of frustration against the lock-downs which have drawn some parts of the class into

reactionary protests fuelled by conspiracy theories and the ideology of the “sovereign individual”.

For the moment, the combination of all these issues, but above all the conditions imposed by the pandemic, have acted as an important brake on the fragile revival of the class struggle between 2018 and 2020. It is difficult to predict how long this situation will persist and therefore we cannot provide any concrete perspectives for the development of the struggle over the coming period. What we can say, however, is that the working class will be faced by brutal attacks on its living conditions. This has already begun in a number of sectors where employers have drastically reduced their workforces. The governments of the central countries of capitalism are still showing a certain caution in dealing with the class, subsidising firms to enable them to hold on to employees, “furloughing” locked-down workers who can’t work from home in order to prevent an immediate plunge into impoverishment, taking measures to avoid evictions of tenants unable to pay their rents, and so on. This is costing governments vast sums, greatly increasing an already swollen burden of debt. We know that, sooner or later, the workers will be asked to pay for this.

the framework of bourgeois democracy. Despite its enormous potential for combativity (which has not been exhausted by the irruption of the pandemic), the proletariat in France does not yet pose the question of proletarian revolution. Even if the word ‘revolution’ has come back on some banners, what content is there? I don’t think it’s a question of ‘proletarian’ revolution. The working class in France has not yet recovered its class identity (which was still very embryonic in the movement against pension reform). There is still within it a rejection or at least a very deep mistrust of the word ‘communism’.

Furthermore, M argues that this overestimation of the tendency towards politicisation can open the door to a councilist vision: *“The politicisation of struggles can only be verified when the revolutionary vanguard begins to have a certain influence in workers’ struggles (especially in the general assemblies). This is not the case today. The RI Congress Report therefore opens the door to a councilist vision by affirming that there already exist ‘the indications of a politicisation of the struggle’.”*

The danger of a councilist vision is also raised in the divergences expressed by comrade S during and after the 23rd Congress, though not from the same point of departure. These divergences have since deepened and given rise to a public debate which has in turn had a certain impact on some of our contacts. Insofar as they relate to the problem of the balance of class forces, these divergences touch on three key questions:

- the potential and limits of the economic struggles;
- the question of subterranean maturation;
- the question of “political defeats”. Here, the publication of the first round of the debate on the divergences has led some of our contacts to pose questions about what happened in the 1980s.

Economic struggles and subterranean maturation

In his reply to our reply, in an internal bulletin in 2021, comrade S affirms where he agrees with the ICC on the necessity for the economic struggle: because workers have to defend their physical existence against capitalist exploitation; because workers need to fight to “have a life” beyond the working day so that they can have access to culture, to political debates, and so on; and because, as Marx put it, a class which cannot fight for its interests at this level certainly cannot put itself forward as a force capable of transforming society. But at the

Debates about the balance of class forces

The dramatic developments in the world situation since the last ICC congress has inevitably given rise to debates both within the organisation and among our milieu of contacts and sympathisers. These debates have focused on the significance of the pandemic and the acceleration of decomposition, but they have also posed new questions about the balance of class forces. At the RI Congress in the summer of 2020, criticisms were made of the report on the class struggle, notably its assessment of the movement against pension reforms in France in early 2019. In a text in our internal bulletin in 2021, Comrade M in particular argued – we think correctly – that the report claimed that the movement had attained a certain level of politicisation, without providing sufficient evidence for such an advance; at the same time, there was a lack of clarity in the report regarding the distinction between the politicisation of struggles, and the politicisation of minorities – a distinction which the present report has aimed to elucidate. In this text, comrade

M warns against an overestimation of the present level of the class struggle (a mistake we have often made in the past – cf the report to the 21st Congress):

“The tendency to politicise the struggles was by no means revealed in the movement against pension reform in France. There was no space for proletarian debate, no general assembly. The politicisation of the working class on its own class terrain will be inseparable from its emergence from the profound retreat it has undergone since 1989. The proletariat in France, as in all countries, has not yet found the way back to its revolutionary perspective, a path blocked by the collapse of the Eastern bloc. With the aggravation of the crisis and the attacks on its living conditions, it is obvious that the working class is today becoming more and more aware that capitalism has no future to offer it. It is looking for a perspective, but it does not yet know that it is in its hands and in its struggles that this perspective is hidden and buried. This awareness of the monstrous reality of today’s world does not mean a politicisation on its own class terrain, i.e. outside

20. “Protests in the health sector: putting ‘national unity’ into question”, *World Revolution* n° 387.

same time, he argues, in the conditions of decomposition, not least as a result of the undermining of a perspective for social revolution by the impact of the collapse of the eastern bloc, the historic links between the economic and the political dimensions of the struggle have been broken to the point where this unity cannot be restored by a development of the economic struggles alone. And here he quotes Rosa Luxemburg in *Reform or Revolution* to warn the ICC against any relapse into a councilist vision in which the “workers themselves”, without the indispensable role of the revolutionary organisation, can recover their revolutionary perspective: “Socialism is not at all a tendency inherent to the daily struggles of the working class. It is inherent only to the sharpening objective contradictions of the capitalist economy on the one side, to the subjective understanding of the indispensability of overcoming it through a socialist transformation on the other”.

From this, comrade S concludes that the main danger facing the ICC is a councilist deviation in which the organisation leaves it to the revival of economic struggles to “spontaneously” politicise themselves, and thus ignores what should be its primary task: carrying out the necessary theoretical deepening which would enable the class to regain confidence in marxism and the possibility of a communist society.

We have seen that the danger of councilism cannot be dismissed when it comes to understanding the process of politicisation: we have learned to our cost that the danger of becoming over-enthusiastic about the possibilities and depth of the immediate struggles is ever-present. We also agree with Luxemburg – and with Lenin – that socialist consciousness is not the mechanical product of the day-to-day struggle but is a product of the historic movement of the class, which certainly includes the theoretical elaboration and intervention of the revolutionary organisation. But what is missing from comrade S’s argument is any explanation of the actual process through which revolutionary theory can once again “grip the masses”. In our view, this is linked to a disagreement on the question of subterranean maturation.

In his text, he says: “*the Reply asks if I consider the situation today to be worse than it was in the 1930s (when groups like Bilan contributed to a political and theoretical ‘subterranean maturation’ of consciousness despite the defeat of the class), whereas I deny the existence of such a maturation at present. Yes, at the level of subterranean maturation the situation is indeed worse than in the 1930s, since today the tendency among revolutionaries is more towards political and theoretical*

regression”.

In order to respond to this, it is necessary to go back to our original debate on the question of subterranean maturation – to the struggle against the councilist view that class consciousness only develops in phases of open struggle.

Thus, MC’s²¹ argument in his text on “On subterranean maturation”, in October 1983, was that the rejection of subterranean maturation profoundly underestimated the role of the revolutionary organisation in the elaboration of class consciousness: “*The class struggle of the proletariat goes through ups and downs, but this isn’t the case with class consciousness: the idea of the regression of consciousness with the retreat of the class struggle is contradicted by the whole history of the workers’ movement, a history in which the elaboration and deepening of theory continues in a period of retreat. It’s true that the field, the extent of its action narrows, but not its elaboration in depth*”.

Comrade S does not of course deny the role of the revolutionary organisation in the development of theory. So when he speaks about “subterranean regression” he means that the communist political vanguard (and thus the ICC) is failing to carry out the theoretical work needed to restore the confidence of the working class in its revolutionary perspective – that it is regressing theoretically and politically.

But we should recall that MC’s text does not restrict subterranean maturation to the work of the revolutionary organisation:

“*The work of reflection goes on in the heads of the workers and will manifest itself in the upsurge of new struggles. There exists a collective memory of the class, and this memory also contributes to the development of the coming to consciousness and its extension in the class*”. Or again: “*This process of developing consciousness is not uniquely reserved to communists for the simple reason that the communist organisation is not the only seat of consciousness. This process is also the product of other elements of the class who remain firmly on a class terrain or tend in that direction*”.

This is important because comrade S seems precisely to restrict subterranean maturation to the revolutionary organisation alone. If we understand him correctly, since the ICC is tending towards theoretical and political regression, this is evidence for

the “subterranean regression” he speaks about. Of course, we don’t agree with this assessment of the current situation of the ICC, but that is another discussion. The point to focus on here is that the communist organisation and the proletarian political milieu are merely the tip of the iceberg in a deeper process going on in the class:

In a polemic with the CWO in *International Review* n° 43 on the problem of subterranean maturation, we defined this process as follows:

- “*at the least conscious level, and also in the broadest layers of the class, it [subterranean maturation] takes the form of a growing contradiction between the historic being, the real needs of the class, and the workers’ superficial adherence to bourgeois ideas. This clash may for a long time remain largely unadmitted, buried or repressed, or it may begin to surface in the negative form of disillusionment with, and disengagement from, the principal themes of bourgeois ideology;*- “*in a more restricted sector of the class, among workers who fundamentally remain on a proletarian terrain, it takes the form of a reflection on past struggles, more or less formal discussions on the struggles to come, the emergence of combative nuclei in the factories and among the unemployed. In recent times, the most dramatic demonstration of this aspect of the phenomenon of subterranean maturation was provided by the mass strikes in Poland 1980, in which the methods of struggle used by the workers showed that there had been a real assimilation of many of the lessons of the struggles of 1956, 1970 and 1976....*- “*in a fraction of the class that is even more limited in size, but destined to grow as the struggle advances, it takes the form of an explicit defence of the communist programme, and thus of regroupment into the organised marxist vanguard. The emergence of communist organisations, far from being a refutation of the notion of subterranean maturation, is both a product of and an active factor within it.*”²²

What’s missing from this model is another layer – elements, often not direct products of class movements, who are searching for communist positions, thus the swamp (or part of it – the part that is a product of a political advance, even if confused, rather than those degenerating elements who express a regression from a higher level of clarity), and those more

21. Marc Chirik, former member of *Bilan* and the Gauche Communiste de France and founding member of the ICC. See “Marc, Part 1: From the Revolution of October 1917 to World War II” *International Review* n° 65 and “Marc, Part 2: From World War II to the present day”, *International Review* n° 66.

22. “Reply to the CWO: On the subterranean maturation of consciousness”, *International Review* n° 43.

explicitly moving towards the revolutionary organisations.

The emergence of such a layer is not the only indication of subterranean maturation, but it is certainly the most obvious. Comrade S has argued that the appearance of this layer can be explained merely by referring to the revolutionary nature of the working class, but since we understand the class not as a static, but as a dynamic force, it is more accurate to see this layer as a product of a movement towards the development of consciousness within the class. And it is certainly necessary to study the movement within the movement: to understand whether there is a process of maturation taking place in this layer—in other words, does the milieu of searching elements itself show signs of development? And if we compare the two “surges” of the politicised minorities that have appeared since around 2003, there are indeed indications that such a development has taken place.

The first surge took place in the mid-2000s and coincided with what we termed a new generation of the working class, manifesting itself in the anti-CPE movement and the Indignados. A small part of this milieu gravitated towards the communist left and even joined the ICC, giving rise to hopes that we were encountering a new generation of revolutionaries (cf the “Orientation Text on the Culture of Debate”²³). What we were actually experiencing was a movement (the French term “mouvance” would be more accurate) largely within the swamp and one which proved to be highly permeable to the influence of anarchism, modernism, and parasitism. One of the distinguishing features of this mouvance was, alongside a distrust of political organisation, a profound resistance to the concept of decadence and thus to the groups of the communist left, seen as sectarian and apocalyptic, above all the ICC. Some of the elements in this surge had been involved in the ultra-activism of the anti-capitalist movement in the 90s, and although they had made a first step in seeing the central role of the working class in the overthrow of capitalism, they retained their activist leanings, pushing some of them (e.g. the majority of the collective that organises libcom) towards a revived anarcho-syndicalism, towards ideas of “organising” at the workplace, which thrived on the possibility of winning small victories and turned away from any notion that the objective and historic unfolding of the crisis would itself be a factor in the development of the class struggle.

The second surge of searching elements, which we have become aware of in the last few years, although perhaps smaller in scale

than the previous surge, is certainly situated on a more profound level: it tends to regard decadence and even decomposition as self-evident; it often bypasses anarchism, which they see as lacking the theoretical tools for understanding the present period, and have less fear of directly contacting the groups of the communist left. Often very young and lacking any direct experience of the class struggle, their primary concern is to deepen, to make sense of the chaotic world that confronts them by assimilating the marxist method. Here, in our view, is a clear concretisation of communist consciousness resulting, in Luxemburg’s words, from *“the sharpening objective contradictions of the capitalist economy on the one side, (and) the subjective understanding of the indispensability of overcoming it through a socialist transformation on the other”*.

In relation to this emerging layer of politicised elements, the ICC has a dual responsibility as a “fraction-like” organisation. On the one hand, of course, the vital theoretical elaboration required to provide a clear analysis of an ever-shifting world situation and to enrich the communist perspective.²⁴ But it also involves a patient work of constructing the organisation: the work of “formation of cadres” as the GCF put it after World War Two, the development of new militants who will last the course; of defending the organisation against the incursions of bourgeois ideology, the slanders of parasitism and so on. This work of organisational construction does not appear at all in S’s reply, and yet it is certainly one of the principal elements in the real struggle against councilism.

Furthermore: if this process of subterranean maturation is a real one, if it is the tip of the iceberg of developments taking place within far wider layers of the class, the ICC is correct in envisaging the possibility of a future re-connection between the defensive struggles and the growing recognition that capitalism has no future to offer humanity. In other words, it announces the intact potential for the politicisation of the struggles and their convergence with the emergence of new revolutionary minorities and the increasing impact of the communist organisation.

On “political defeats”

The publication of a first round of debate on the balance of class forces has brought out various divergences among our milieu

of close sympathisers. On the ICC forum, particularly in the thread “Internal debate in the ICC on the international situation”, in an exchange of contributions with MH, “Debate on the balance of class forces”, in our contact meetings, and on his own blog,²⁵ comrade MH in particular has become increasingly critical of our view that it was essentially the collapse of the eastern bloc in 89 which precipitated the long retreat of the class from which we have yet to emerge. For MH, it was largely a political/economic offensive of the ruling class after 1980, spearheaded by the British bourgeoisie in particular which brought the third wave of struggles to an end (rather: strangled it at birth). In this view, it was the defeat of the miners’ strike in 1985 in the UK which marked the defeat of the struggles in the 1980s. This conclusion is currently leading MH to reassess our view of the struggles after 1968 and even to question the notion of decomposition, although his differences sometimes seem to imply that “decomposition has won out”, and that we need to face the reality of a grave historical defeat for the working class. Comrade Baboon largely agrees with MH about the key importance of the defeat of the miners’ strike but has not followed him to the point of questioning decomposition or concluding that the retreat of the working class has perhaps taken a qualitative step into a kind of historical defeat.²⁶

Comrade S, however, now seems to be increasingly explicit about this being the case. As he put it in a recent letter to the international central organ:

“Is there or is there not a fundamental divergence on the balance of class forces?”

“The position of the organisation is that the working class is undefeated. The opposite position also exists within our ranks, that the working class, in the past five years, has suffered from a political defeat, the main symptom of which is the explosion of identitarianism of all kinds, which results first and foremost from the failure of the class to recover its own class identity. The position of the organisation is that the situation of the class is better than it was in the 1990s under the shock of the ‘death of communism’, whereas the

As we pointed out at the beginning of

25. “Notes on the bourgeois counter-offensive in the 1980s” (wixsite.com).

26. We won’t go further into these discussions here, except to say that they seem to be based on an underestimation both of the significant struggles that took place after 1985, where the questioning of the unions in countries like France and Italy compelled the ruling class to radicalise its trade union apparatus, and above all an underestimation of the impact of the collapse of the eastern bloc on class combativity and consciousness.

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23. “The culture of debate: A weapon of the class struggle”, *International Review* n° 131.

24. As was pointed out in the discussion at the meeting of the ICC’s international central organ in February, the ICC cannot be accused of neglecting the effort to deepen our understanding of the communist programme. The existence of a thirty-year series on communism does provide some evidence that we are not starting from scratch here....

Report on the economic crisis

This report follows on from the report adopted by the 24th Congress of RI.¹ Several aspects are adequately dealt with in that report, including the measures taken in the economic field in the face of the pandemic; the violent incursion of decomposition onto the economic terrain, and the attack on workers' living conditions becoming a real nightmare. We will not develop these elements but will concentrate on the perspective: where is the world economy heading after the great cataclysm that erupted with the Covid pandemic?

A widely predicted crisis

The Report on the economic crisis adopted by the 23rd ICC Congress announced that: *"we must consider the possibility of significant shocks in the global economy in 2019-2020. Negative factors are accumulating: increasingly uncontrollable debt; the trade war that is raging; sharp devaluations of overvalued financial assets; a -0.1% contraction of the German economy in the third quarter of 2018, with the Chinese economy falling to its lowest rate in the last decade."*

For 2020, the World Bank recorded a global fall in output of 5.2%, which is 7% for the world's top 23 economies and 2.5% in the "developing economies". According to the World Bank, the fall in output is the worst since 1945 and *"the first time since 1870 that so many economies have experienced a simultaneous fall in output"*.² A very important phenomenon is the fall in world trade. One indicator is the drop in world seaborne trade, which fell by 10% in 2020. But, paradoxically, *"container prices have on average quadrupled in the last two months. From around \$1,500 to almost \$5,000. And in some cases, it has been as high as \$12,000. This is because countries like China use their ships and containers for their own use, taking them away from global traffic."*³

For 2021 a rebound of the world economy is forecast; however, this would be on condition that the pandemic has been overcome by June 2021, otherwise the forecasts are

much more pessimistic. There will be feverish increases in growth, but beyond that, we should consider that the most serious forecasts point to a stabilisation of the world economy from 2023 onwards. The experience of the post-2008 recovery is that it took a long time to take hold (from 2013 onwards), was rather anaemic and in 2018 showed signs of exhaustion. As we will see throughout this report, the current conditions of the global economy are much worse than in 2008, and, rather than making predictions, the important thing is to understand this significant deterioration.

On one hand, the "experts" give a misleading picture of the effects of the pandemic crisis on the economy. They start from the axiom that such a crisis will not have irreversible effects on the economic apparatus and that the economy will recover at a higher level than in the previous period. Such an assumption underestimates the significant deterioration of the long-standing productive, financial and commercial tissue, which the pandemic crisis is likely to profoundly weaken. It is estimated that 30% of companies may disappear permanently in OECD countries. Behind us we have more than 100 years of capitalist decadence, with the economy deformed by the war economy and the effects of environmental destruction, profoundly altered in its reproductive mechanisms by indebtedness and state manipulations, eroded by pandemics, and increasingly affected by the effects of decomposition. In such conditions it is illusory to think that the economy will recover without the slightest hitch.

On the other hand, the profound weakness of the proclaimed "recovery" of 2013-2018 already heralded the current situation. Outside the United States, China, and to a lesser extent Germany, production in all the major countries of the world has stagnated or fallen (according to World Bank estimates) - something that has not happened since the Second World War.

The irruption of decomposition on the economic terrain

Already at the 22nd Congress we noticed the growing impact of the effects of decomposition on the economic terrain and particularly on the state capitalist management of the crisis. We were aware of this tendency in the economic crisis report adopted by the 23rd Congress that noted this irruption of decomposition as one of

the main factors in the evolution of the economic situation and, finally, the report on the crisis adopted by the 24th Congress of RI deepened this analysis and focused on the pandemic in a double sense: as a result of decomposition and of the aggravation of the economic crisis, but at the same time a powerful factor in the acceleration of the latter.

It's important to underline our approach to the question: one of the features of decadence is that the capitalist system tries to stretch all the possibilities contained in its relations of production to their extreme limits, even at the risk of violating its own economic laws. So, *"one of the major contradictions of capitalism is that arising from the conflict between the increasingly global nature of production and the necessarily national structure of capital. By pushing to its limits, the economic, financial and productive possibilities of the 'associations' of nations, capitalism has obtained a significant 'breath of fresh air' in its fight against the crisis, but at the same time it has put itself in a risky situation"*⁴

This "risky situation" has been demonstrating its serious consequences linked to the impact of decomposition on the economic terrain, especially in the last five years of the 2010s. The pandemic is the expression of the acceleration of decomposition and, at the same time, aggravates it further. The report on the economic crisis is focussed on this fundamental reality. The Resolution on the Situation in France of the 24th RI Congress shows this central axis quite clearly:

"In 2008, during the 'subprime crisis', the bourgeoisie was able to react in a coordinated manner on an international scale. The famous G7, G8, ... G20 (which were in the headlines) symbolised this capacity of states to agree at the very least to try to respond to the 'debt crisis'. 12 years later, division, the 'war of masks' and then the 'war of vaccines', the cacophony of decisions to close borders against the spread of the COVID 19, the lack of consultation at the international level (except for Europe, which is struggling to protect itself against its competitors) to limit the economic collapse, are signs of the advance of 'every man for himself' and the plunge of the highest political circles of capitalism into an increasingly irrational management of the system."

This tendency is becoming even stronger, particularly in the US where a

1. "The irruption of decomposition on the economic terrain: Report on the economic crisis", *International Review* n° 165, 2020.

2. World Bank press release, June 2020 "Covid-19 to plunge global economy into worst recession since World War II"

3. La Vanguardia, 7/12/21 "Los precios del comercio marítimo mundial se cuaduplican tras la Covid".

4. 23rd Congress Report.

long trend of economic decline is combined with an unprecedented aggravation of decomposition in its political apparatus and its social tissue.

However, it would be a mistake to think that this tendency is limited to the United States. In Europe, Germany seems to have reacted, but tensions within the EU are increasingly evident, and the shock of Brexit will have consequences that have not yet surfaced. China's "stability" is more apparent than real.

Consequently, we can say that the effects of the breakdown in the economic sphere and in state management of the economy are here to stay and will have an increasingly strong influence on economic developments. It is true that the bourgeoisie is going to set in motion counter-tendencies (for example, the EU agreements on partial mutualisation of the debt or Biden's annulment of certain measures adopted by Trump). However, beyond the brakes or the reversal measures, the weight of decomposition on the economy and on the state management of the latter is going to become stronger, with consequences that are for the moment difficult to predict. Rather than making predictions, we need to monitor developments closely and draw conclusions within the overall framework we set up.

Bailing out the economy cannot be done under the same conditions as in 2008.

With the response that capital in most countries has been forced to give to the pandemic (the lockdown that has not yet ended), one of the worst recessions in history has occurred.

To prevent a generalised collapse, the bourgeoisie has been forced to inject billions. This has allowed it to "muddle through", to "weather the storm".⁵ It will be necessary to "rescue the world economy". And how will this complicated operation be carried out?

We can say that it will be done in much worse conditions than in 2008, that it will entail a violent dose of austerity and that the world economy will be left in a much more deteriorated condition, with less capacity for recovery, and will experience greater chaos and significant convulsions.

Five factors explain these worse conditions:

- The growing weight of decomposition

5. The figures and analysis of this gigantic deployment of monetary injections are provided in the report on the economic crisis adopted by the 24th RI Congress: see "The irruption of decomposition on the economic terrain", *International Review* n° 165, 2021.

on the economy and state capitalism

- China will no longer be able to play the role of a locomotive providing a lifeline as it did in response to 2008.
- Environmental disaster.
- The weight of the war economy.
- The crushing weight of debt.

The gradual dislocation of the economic edifice of globalisation

With the pandemic we have witnessed a chaotic and irrational response by states, starting with the largest and most powerful ones. The WHO has been ignored by all states, thus preventing the required international strategy based as much as possible on scientific criteria. Each state has tried to close its economy as late as possible in order not to lose competitive and imperialist advantages over its rivals. By the same token, economies have been reopened with the aim of gaining advantages over rivals, and the closures provoked by the worsening of the pandemic have been trapped in the contradiction between the need to maintain and increase production in the face of rivals and the need to prevent the productive apparatus and social cohesion from being undermined by new waves of contagion.

The mask war has been a degrading spectacle: states considered "serious" such as France or Germany were blatantly stealing shipments of masks destined for other national capitals. The same has happened with equipment such as breathing apparatus, oxygen, personal protective equipment, etc.

In the current war over vaccines: their manufacture, their distribution, and the vaccinations themselves, are all revealing the growing disorder which the world economy is sliding into.

In vaccine research and manufacture, we have seen a chaotic race between states in fierce competition. Britain, China, Russia, the United States ... have been in a race against the clock to be the first to have the vaccine. International coordination has been absent. Vaccines have been tested in record time with no real guarantee of efficacy.

Distribution is equally chaotic. The EU's conflict with the British company AstraZeneca is testimony to this. The richer countries have left the poorer ones unprotected. Israel has vaccinated its nationals while sidelining the Palestinians. Russia uses misleading propaganda to present its vaccine as the best. It is evidence that the vaccine is used as an instrument of imperi-

alist influence. Russia and China make no secret of this and openly proclaim that they will offer lower prices to those countries that bow to their economic, political and military demands.

Finally, the way in which the population is being vaccinated is mind-bogglingly disorganised and undisciplined. In France, Germany, Spain, Italy, to give just a few examples, there is a constant lack of supply, causing delays in vaccination even in the groups identified as priority (health workers, the over-65s). Vaccination plans have been delayed several times. Often the first dose is administered and the second is delayed sine die, thus nullifying the effectiveness of the vaccine. Rulers, politicians, businessmen, the military etc. have bypassed the list of priority groups and have been vaccinated first.

What this degrading spectacle around vaccines shows us is a growing tendency for capitalism to undermine the capacity for "international cooperation" that had managed to mitigate the economic crisis in the period 1990-2008. Capitalism is founded on **competition to the death** – and this constituent feature of capitalism did not disappear in the heyday of "globalisation" – but what we see now is an exacerbated competition, taking as its field something as sensitive as health and epidemics. If in the ascendant period of capitalism competition between capitals and nations was a factor of expansion and development of the system, in decadence it is, on the contrary, a factor of destruction and chaos: destruction with the barbarism of imperialist war; **chaos** (that also includes destruction and wars) especially with the irruption of the effects of decomposition on the economic terrain and its state management. This chaos will increasingly affect global production and supply chains, the planning of production, the ability to combat "unexpected" phenomena such as pandemics or other catastrophes.

The repatriation of production to the home country by multinationals has been underway since 2017 but seems to have accelerated with the pandemic:

*"A study released this week by Bank of America, on 3,000 companies with a total market capitalisation of \$22 trillion and located in 12 major global sectors, states that 80% of these companies have relocation plans to repatriate part of their production from abroad. 'This is the first turning point in a decades-long trend,' the authors proclaim. In the last three years, some 153 companies have returned to the US while 208 have done so in the EU."*⁶

6. Published on the website of Asociación de Cargadores de España (Association of Spanish Shippers).

Are these measures irreversible? Are we witnessing the end of the phase of “globalisation”, i.e. global production, strongly interconnected with an international division of labour, with production, transport and logistics chains organised on a global scale?

The first consideration is that the pandemic is taking longer than expected. On 28th September 2020, the figure of one million deaths was reached; on 15th January, less than three months later, this reached two million. Although vaccines are being applied, the WHO's scientific director, Soumya Swaminathan, predicts that we will have to wait until 2022 to reach reasonable immunisation of the population in Europe. It is likely that the disruption and interruptions in production will continue throughout 2021.

Secondly, if we look at historical experience, we can see that the measures of state capitalism that were taken in response to the First World War did not disappear completely after the end of the war; and 10 years later, with the crisis of 1929, they made a gigantic leap, confirming the correct prediction of the First Congress of the Communist International:

*“All the fundamental questions of the world's economic life are no longer regulated by free competition, not even by combinations of national and international trusts or consortiums. They have fallen under the yoke of military tyranny to serve as its safeguard from now on. If the absolute subjection of political power to finance capital has led mankind to imperialist butchery, this butchery has allowed finance capital not only to militarise the state to the end, but to militarise itself, so that it can only fulfil its essential economic functions with iron and blood.”*⁷

By the same token, it's likely that the measures taken in response to the pandemic on the economic terrain will remain in place, even if there will be partial setbacks.

This is confirmed by the fact that, since 2015, as we made clear in the report of the 23rd Congress, China, Germany and the United States have been moving in this direction. The measures taken during the pandemic only deepen an orientation that was already present in the 2010s.

That the big powers have not, for the moment, coordinated their financial and economic responses to the danger of bankruptcy is evidence of this. While, in the 2008 crisis, meetings of the G8, G20 etc proliferated, this kind of meeting is

now obviously absent.⁸

However, the globalised structure of world production offers major advantages to the most powerful economies, and they will take actions to correct the major disruptions outlined above. A really clear example: the plan to mutualise debts in the EU particularly benefits Germany which will consolidate its exports to Spain, Italy, etc. These countries, presented as “the great beneficiaries”, will in the end be the big losers, as their industrial tissue will be weakened by the overwhelming competition from German exports. In fact, debt mutualisation will help Germany to counter the Chinese presence in southern European countries, which has strengthened since 2013. We are not witnessing a dismantling of globalisation, but rather its increasing dislocation (for example, through the tendency towards fragmentation into regional areas), the much greater weight of protectionist tendencies, the relocation of production areas, the multiplication of measures that each country takes on its own, in breach of international agreements. In short, a growing chaos in the functioning of the world economy.

Chinese policy

In the period 2009-2015, China played an essential role with its purchases and investments in the weak revival of the world economy after the severe upheaval of 2008. In the face of the present situation, can China play the same role as the locomotive of the world economy? We think that this is very unlikely for at least 4 reasons:

1. China's current situation is much weaker than it was then: growth in output continues to decline slowly but surely; according to the IMF, China will have the worst growth in 35 years: only 1.2%. This is how the International Communist Party (Bordigist) expressed it: “*in China, the official unemployment rate was 6% at the end of April; but a study by a Chinese organisation estimated real unemployment at the same date at 20.5% (or 70 million unemployed); the study was withdrawn and the organisation's management punished by the authorities, but Western economists put forward figures of the same order.*” (cited in an internal document, 2020). China's level of indebtedness is gigantic (300% of GDP in 2019); the situation of many of its companies is very fragile. For example, in China 30% of companies

are “zombies”,⁹ which is the highest percentage in the world (in Germany and France it is estimated at 10%). Also state owned companies still hold a large share in the economy and these companies have the highest debt burden.

2. The Silk Road project - a 60-country plan of commercial, economic and imperialist expansion - seeks to define a global economic area exclusive to China, with the result that the role it can play in stimulating world trade will diminish. China's rivals and especially the USA have responded with a trade war and in the Asia-Oceania area with the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership¹⁰ that links 11 countries in the area. And, among those countries that had to become indebted to China in their participation in the Silk Road project, some have been hardest hit by the economic consequences of the Corona pandemic, threatening their solvency.
3. These “agreements” show that the dynamic that will dominate the coming years - barring a change in trend, which is highly unlikely - is not one of “cooperation” but rather a large fragmentation of world production into reserved areas under Chinese, American or German tutelage.
4. The pile of debts, which after 2008 served to “fuel” the Chinese engine, managed to allow double digit growth in China and also to create bigger markets in China itself for many exporters from the US, East Asia and Europe. But the conditions for this to be repeated do not exist. All countries have become more protectionist. Moreover, the workforce in China, which had been receiving some of the lowest wages, have been receiving higher wages, which has led to considerable job transfers from China to other, still cheaper countries (South-East Asia, Africa).

Environmental disaster

The process of ecological destruction (devastation and pollution of environmental and natural resources) goes back a long way. Imperialist war and the war economy have contributed to this process to an important

9. Zombie companies are those that need to constantly refinance their debt to the extent that debt repayment eats up all their profits and even forces them to take on new debt.

10. This agreement emerged after the US withdrew from the proposed Trans-Pacific Partnership following the election of Trump.

7. *Manifesto of the First Congress of the Communist International.*

8. Biden proposed to set up a G10 meeting not for economic coordination but to isolate China.

extent. However, the question that arises is to what extent has this process negatively influenced the capitalist economy by hindering accumulation?

In the framework of this report, we cannot give an elaborate answer. However, it's likely that in the context of the increasing difficulties in collaboration between countries, with the nationalist manoeuvring of each state, ecological destruction will have an increasingly negative impact on the reproduction of capital and will contribute to making the moments of economic recovery in the coming period much weaker and more unstable than in the past.

Air pollution is estimated to kill 7 million people every year. Consumption of contaminated water causes approximately 485,000 deaths every year.¹¹

During the 20th century, 260 million people died from indoor air pollution in the Third World – about twice the toll in all the century's wars. This is more than four times the number who died from outdoor air pollution.¹²

Extreme weather, mass extinctions, falling agricultural yields, and toxic air and water are already damaging the global economy, with pollution alone costing 4.6 trillion USD every year.¹³

The mere protection of cities along the coasts will swallow large sums – equal to if not superior to all the rescue packages which have had to be adopted under the Corona pandemic. The economic implications of this chaos are very real and the impact of this process of self-destruction is staggering. It is calculated that if climate change increases the temperature by 4°C, global GDP will fall from 2010 levels by 30% (the fall during the depression of the 30s was 26.7%). The present fall will be permanent: 1.2 billion jobs could be lost. These figures do not consider the deepening economic crisis or the impact of Covid.

All these damages are considerably aggravated by the Covid crisis, even if will take a while to assess its impact. In fact, the Covid crisis itself is a clear expression of the consequences for the economy of ecological destruction:

“The colonisation of natural areas and human contact with animals that are reservoirs of viruses and pathogens is the first link in the chain that explains the pandemics. The destruction of forest habitats in tropical areas means that many

*pathogens that were previously confined to inaccessible places can be transmitted to humans. People meet species with which they were not previously associated, thus increasing the chances of becoming infected with animal-borne diseases. Animal markets, transport and globalisation then spread them.”*¹⁴

Institutions such as the World Bank clearly warn of the consequences of ecological destruction, for example in terms of the expansion of poverty:

*“New research estimates that climate change will drive 68 million to 135 million people into poverty by 2030. Climate change is a particularly acute threat for countries in Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia – the regions where most of the global poor are concentrated. In a number of countries, a large share of the poor live in areas that are both affected by conflict and facing high exposure to floods – for example Nepal, Cameroon, Liberia and the Central African Republic.”*¹⁵

The breakdown of international cooperation around the Covid pandemic is a foretaste of the dog-eat-dog attitude that will predominate faced with climate change. The increased economic competition resulting from Covid can only accelerate this dynamic. Capitalism's ability to limit the increase in global temperature is growing weaker.

*“Taken together, rapid action against rising temperatures and a renewed commitment to globalisation would put the world economy on track for 2050 output of \$185 trillion. Delaying moves to cut carbon emissions, and allowing cross-border ties to fray, could cap it at \$149 trillion – the equivalent of kissing goodbye to the entire GDP of the U.S. and China last year.”*¹⁶

The contradiction between the interests of the capitalist nation and the whole capitalist system with the future of humanity could not be clearer. If determined action is taken against climate change, imperialist and economic tensions will be ramped up qualitatively, with the rise of China to becoming the world's main economy. If no action is taken, the world economy will shrink by 30% with all the consequences that this will bring.

This can only exponentially develop capitalism's destruction of the environment and lay the ground for further pandemics

as the conditions for them are expanded, as several internal contributions have shown.¹⁷

The barrier of the war economy

The war economy, as *Internationalisme* reminded us, is a dead weight on the world economy. In spite of the clear position of the “Orientation text on militarism and decomposition”,¹⁸ parts of the organisation have tended to think that under decomposition, war spending would tend to be reduced and would not have the enormous impact it had in the period of the blocs and the Cold War. This view is false, as the report adopted by the 23rd Congress underlined: “Global military spending experienced – in 2019 – the largest increase in ten years. Over the course of 2019, military spending reached \$1.9 trillion (€1.8 trillion) worldwide, an increase of 3.6 percent in one year, the largest since 2010. ‘Military spending reached its highest level since the end of the Cold War,’ said Nan Tian, a researcher at SIPRI.”¹⁹

The need to address COVID has not diminished the rearmament. The Bundeswehr's budget is up by 2.85% by 2021, Spain is increasing military spending by 4.7%, France by 4.5%, while the UK is rising by an additional 18.5 billion euros.²⁰

In the United States, stirring up anti-China hysteria, the Senate has approved an astronomical increase in military spending, which by 2021 will reach 740 billion dollars. In Japan, “Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga on Monday approved the ninth consecutive increase in the military budget, setting the new all-time record at 5.34 trillion yen (about \$51.7 billion), an increase of 1.1% over the previous year's budget”.²¹

“The U.S. wars in Afghanistan, Iraq,

17. “the reckless conquest by capital of ‘wild’ territories, as we have already seen with Ebola [which] has to do with the hunger for land of this capitalist system, that is to say, with the functioning of rents. Growing urbanisation, the exploitation of every square inch of the planet (...) leads to a forced coexistence between species.”. “There is indeed a tendency to underestimate the degree to which the pandemic is a product of the ecological dimension, another fundamental characteristic of decomposition. The quote from Le Fil Rouge is interesting in the way the tendency towards pandemics is linked to the metabolic exchange with nature (Marx) - which has reached distorted proportions by the development of capitalism in decadence and decomposition. The idea that this is almost a natural disaster leads to taking its social roots out of picture.”

18. International Review n° 64, 1991.

19. El Mundo “Gasto militar mundial tuvo su mayor armento en una década, según SIPRI” Republished on the Deutsche Welle website 27/04/20..

20. Indofensa.com website, 01/12/20, “Germany increases its defence budget by 1.3 billion euros.”

21. Aviacionline website, 23/12/20: “Japon apribea presupuesto militar record para el 2021”.

11. Article on the Britannica website on pollution.

12. Guy Hutton, “Air pollution: Global damage costs of air pollution 1900-2050”. Assessment paper published by Copenhagen Consensus on Human Challenges, 2011.

13. The economics of extinction” published Green Economy Coalition website, 17/5/18.

14. *La Vanguardia* 8/9/20 “La degradación ambiental catapultó los pandemias” reporting on the publication by the European Environment Agency “Healthy environment, healthy lives: How the environment influences health and well-being in Europe”, 2020.

15. World Bank website page on poverty, overview section.

16. Bloomberg Business week, “The \$36 trillion bill for neglecting climate and free trade”, 13/11/20.

*Syria and Pakistan have cost American taxpayers \$6.4 trillion since they began in 2001. That total is \$2 trillion more than all federal government spending during the recently completed fiscal year*²²

There is no available data for China for 2021 but military spending apparently grew less in 2020 than in 2019. However, *“the People’s Liberation Army reached two major milestones, unveiling its first 100% indigenous aircraft carrier and its first intercontinental ballistic missile capable of reaching the United States. China also built its first overseas military base in Djibouti in 2017. Beijing is also designing a new generation of destroyers and missiles to strengthen its deterrence against its Asian neighbours and the US Navy.”*²³

Russia dramatically increased military spending in the three-year period 2018-21, Australia *“has launched in the last two years an ambitious naval programme to create an ocean-going fleet with twelve new submarines to be built by the French shipyard DCNS, nine frigates (a programme for which Navantia is bidding), two logistics ships and twelve patrol vessels; it will also receive 72 US F-35 fighter planes from Lockheed Martin by 2020. The Australian authorities even plan to double its budget within a decade to 21 billion dollars a year”*. Scandinavian countries *“see Russian threats to their airspace and in the Arctic as less and less a work of fiction, and in the case of Sweden, the revival of compulsory military service and significant increases in the defence budget have been announced.”*²⁴

This tour through the bloody jungle of military spending shows that the war economy and armaments, beyond the initial boost they can give, end up being an increasingly heavy burden for it, and we can foresee that they will participate in the tendency to make the economic recovery that capitalism is seeking for the post-COVID period more fragile and convulsive.²⁵

22. CNBC website, 20/11/19: “America has spent \$6.4 trillion on wars in the Middle East and Asia since 2001, a new study says”.

23. *El Comercio*, 21/5/20: “China fijo el gasto militar en USD 178,000 millones para este 2020”. <https://www.elcomercio.com/actualidad/china-gasto-militar-economia-pandemia.html> [13]

24. ABC International website, 12/11/17: “China y Rusia doblan su gasto militar en una década”.

25. The war economy can initially stimulate the economy but this is deceptive, as can be seen if we look at the long term; there is the example of Russia and more recently Turkey which after a spectacular take-off is today increasingly weakened by the suffocating weight of the war effort. Likewise, Iran and Saudi Arabia, engaged in an extreme rivalry, are increasingly weakened in their economies.

The crushing weight of debt

In 1948 the Marshall Plan involved a total amount of loans of 8 billion dollars; the Brady Plan to save South American economies in 1985 involved 50 billion dollars; expenditure to get out of the quagmire of 2008 reached the astronomical figure of 750 billion dollars.

The current figures turn these injections into the economy into small change. The EU has deployed a 750-billion-euro package. In Germany *“The government is deploying the largest assistance package in the history of the Federal Republic. To finance this package, the Federation will take out new loans totalling roughly €156 billion.”*²⁶ Biden has proposed a \$1.9 trillion economic stimulus and support programme to Congress. The total stimulus poured into the US economy in 2020 is estimated at \$4 trillion.

World debt in the third quarter of 2020 was €229 trillion, 365% of world GDP (a new historical record). This debt is 382% in industrialised countries. According to the International Institute of Finance this escalation has been accelerating since 2016 with an increase in the last 4 years of 44 trillion euros. It is within this framework that we must address the consequences of the current escalation of global indebtedness.²⁷

The accumulation of capital (the expanded reproduction defined by Marx) has as its basis of development the extra-capitalist markets and the areas insufficiently integrated into capitalism. If both become smaller, the only way out for capital, organised by the state, is indebtedness, which consists of throwing ever larger sums of money into the economy on account of the expected production of the coming years.

If there are no inflationary shocks in the major economies, it is for three reasons:

1. The deflationary tendency that has affected the world economy since 2008.
2. The overvaluation of the assets of companies and even states has become chronic and degraded the economic figures that have ceased to be reliable for decades.
3. Zero-interest rates or even negative interest rates.

One of the factors that allowed global capital to cushion the effects of debt was

26. Quoted in an internal communiqué on Germany.

27. *Repubblica* website, 18/11/20: “La década mundial esclara en 2020 a un record de 233 billones”.

the international coordination of monetary policies, a certain degree of coordination and organisation of financial transactions on a global scale. If this factor is beginning to fail and “everyone for themselves” has prevailed, what consequences are to be expected?

Capitalism has deployed the equivalent of three and a half years of world production. Is this an unimportant figure that could be stretched to infinity? Absolutely not. This gigantic gangrene is the breeding ground not only for crazy speculative rallies that have ended up being institutionalised in the indecipherable labyrinth of financial transactions, but also for monetary crises, gigantic bankruptcies of companies and banks and even of significant states. Logically, this process implies that the internal market for capital cannot grow infinitely, even if there is no fixed limit in the matter. It is in this context that the crisis of overproduction at the current stage of its development poses a problem of profitability for capitalism. The bourgeoisie estimates that around 20% of the world’s productive forces are unused. The overproduction of means of production is particularly visible and affects Europe, the United States, India, Japan, etc.²⁸

Since 1985, when the USA abandoned its position as creditor to become one of the biggest debtors, the world economy has been suffering from the aberrant situation that practically all countries are in debt; the biggest creditors are in turn the biggest debtors, and everyone knows that. Today after decades of gigantic debts these recent rescue packages have surpassed all previous interventions. However now the big players are all so much in debt, the risk of “detonations”/avalanches of debts is increasing. Now the “zero-interest” situation is still facilitating the policy of increasing debt burdens, but – leaving all other factors aside – should interest rates go up, something will tumble...

A weakened and unstable world economy

The brutal closure of production has consequences. First, China and Germany, as well as other major producing countries, will find themselves with a huge production overcapacity that cannot be immediately compensated. In general, the machinery sector, electronics, IT, raw material supply, transport etc. will find themselves with huge stocks and a slow revival of demand.

28. See the Report on the economic crisis adopted by the 24th Congress of RI (“The irruption of decomposition on the economic terrain”, *International Review* n° 165).

Although there will undoubtedly be moments of recovery in production (which will be enthusiastically cheered in capitalist propaganda), and although there will be counter-tendencies that the most intelligent sectors of capital will set in motion,²⁹ what is indisputable is that the world economy will be shaken and weakened in the coming decade.

Over the last half century capitalism has shown a capacity to “carry on” in the face of the many upheavals it has undergone (1975, 1987, 1998, 2008). However, the global conditions we have just analysed allow us to suggest that this capacity has been considerably weakened. There will not be – as councilists and Bordigists hope – a Great Final Collapse, but because it is the heart of the world economy that is being destabilised – particularly the USA and in an increasing manner also parts of Europe – it will make it more difficult to coordinate a response to the crisis on an international level. Along with the crushing weight of debt, this provides a clear confirmation of the perspective outlined by the 23rd Congress report on the crisis:

“The destabilising weight of unbridled indebtedness; the growing saturation of markets; the growing difficulties of ‘globalising management’ of the world economy caused by the irruption of populism, but also the sharpening of competition and the weight of the enormous investments demanded by the arms race; lastly, a factor that should not be neglected, the increasingly negative effects of the galloping destruction of the environment and the uncontrolled upheaval of the ‘natural’ balances of the planet.”

One of the policies that states are going to launch to give a boost to the economy are the so-called green economy’ plans. These are driven by the need to replace old heavy industry and fossil fuels with electronics, computerisation, AI, lightweight materials and new energy sources that allow for higher productivity, cost reduction and labour savings. For a while, the large investments that such a revival of the economy will require – which will also include arms production – may give a boost to the economies of the countries that are best positioned in the process, but the spectre of overproduction will once again return to haunt the world economy.

Workers’ resistance - a key factor in the evolution of the situation

The deterioration of workers’ living conditions was very gradual in the period 1967-80.

It first began to accelerate in the 1980s when welfare benefits began to be limited, mass lay-offs took place, and the precariousness of work began to be established.

In the period 1990-2008 the deterioration continued: the systematic reduction in the number of workers employed became “normal”. A housing crisis also began. Mass migration put downward pressure on wages and working conditions in the central countries. However, the fall in living conditions in the central countries was still gradual and limited. There was something perverse that masked the fall: the development of massive credit in proletarian households.

In the Report adopted by the 23rd Congress we showed the huge worsening of the living standards of the proletariat in the central countries, significant cuts in pensions, health, education, social services, social benefits etc., the rise in unemployment and especially the spectacular development of job insecurity. The 2010s have seen a major escalation of the degradation of working class living conditions in the central countries. The gradual attacks that we saw between 1970-2008 began to accelerate in the decade 2010-2020.

The pandemic crisis has intensified the attacks on workers’ living conditions.

First, in all countries, workers have been sent to the slaughterhouse because they have been forced to go to work in overcrowded public transport and have found themselves without protective equipment in the workplace (in fact there were a lot of protests in factories, warehouses etc. at the beginning of lockdown because of this). However, it should be noted that health care workers and workers in old people’s homes have suffered a high number of infections and deaths. Workers in the food industry have also been hard hit,³⁰ as have agricultural workers, most of whom are migrants.³¹

Attacks against the working class in all countries, but particularly in the central countries, are clearly on the agenda. The ILO’s report *COVID-19 and the World of Work* is blunt: “the COVID 19 pandemic

30. “The situation in the meat packaging industry revealed a similar picture as in the slaughter houses of Chicago more than a century ago. Suddenly high infection rates amongst staff in the slaughterhouses became known. It became known that these are the modern sweat shops in Germany, with very cheap labour from Eastern Europe, living in barracks, or very run down, crowded apartments – rented by subcontractors of the slaughterhouses. Hundreds of them got infected, due to cramped working and housing conditions” (Communiqué by our section in Germany).

31. In Spain, in April 2020, strawberry pickers, mostly workers from Morocco and Africa, tried to strike against their appalling overcrowding in barracks and the left-wing coalition government immediately sent in the Guardia Civil.

has caused the world of labour the most serious crisis since the Great Depression of the 1930s.”

Unemployment. The over-capacities in industry, and the slow and weak recovery of demand, will act as a strong stimulus for massive lay-offs. During the period of strict lockdown, the huge state subsidies to the part-time unemployed masked the gravity of the situation of many workers suffering from a drastic reduction in their incomes. However, a gradual “normalisation” of economic functioning will bring about a further worsening of workers’ living conditions, making it in many cases irreversible. According to the ILO, a global loss of 36 million jobs is the best-case scenario and 130 million is the worst-case scenario estimated for 2021.³²

We can illustrate this in an analysis of the dismal perspective for the car industry:

“An expert of the German car industry gave the following overview/forecast: According to the forecast, all major automobile markets will shrink by double-digit percentages. France and Italy will be hardest hit, with a decline of 25 percent each, Spain with 22 percent, and Germany, the USA and Mexico with 20 percent each. For the world’s largest auto mobile market, China, Dudenhöffer expects a decline in sales of around 15 percent. In the German plants, there is suddenly surplus capacity of 1.3 to 1.7 million vehicles. Short-time work only can bridge short periods. No company could keep unused production capacity for years. That is why 100,000 of the 830,000 jobs at car manufacturers and suppliers in Germany today are at risk – ‘under optimistic assumptions’, Dudenhöffer wrote.”³³

Precariousness. The ILO calls precariousness “under-utilised employment” and estimates that there are 473 million workers in the world in this condition (2020). Equally important is informal work: “more than 2 billion workers are engaged in economic activities which are not sufficiently covered, or not covered at all, by formal systems in law or in practice.” According to the ILO, “630 million workers worldwide do not earn enough from their work to lift themselves and their families out of poverty.”³⁴

Wages. On wages, the ILO has assessed the global decline in wages worldwide

32. “ILO Monitor: Covid-19 and the world of work, seventh edition”, 25/01/21.

33. Quoted by the communiqué on the German situation,

34. “World employment and social outlook: Trends 2020”.

Continued on page 13

29. Ibid.

Report on imperialist tensions

Report adopted in November 2021 at the meeting of the central organ of the ICC

This report is written within the framework of the resolution on the international situation adopted by the 24th ICC Congress and more particularly on the following points (emphasised in bold):

“8. While the advance of capitalist decomposition, alongside the chaotic sharpening of imperialist rivalries, primarily takes the form of political fragmentation and a loss of control by the ruling class, this does not mean that the bourgeoisie can no longer resort to state totalitarianism in its efforts to hold society together. (...) The election of Biden, supported by a huge mobilisation of the media, parts of the political apparatus and even the military and the security services, express this real counter-tendency to the danger of social and political disintegration most clearly embodied by Trumpism. In the short term, such ‘success’ can function as a brake on mounting social chaos.

9. The evident nature of the political and ideological decomposition in the world’s leading power does not mean that the other centres of world capitalism are able to constitute alternative fortresses of stability (...)

12. Within this chaotic picture, there is no doubt that the growing confrontation between the US and China tends to take centre stage. The new administration has thus demonstrated its commitment to the “tilt to the east” (...).”

This framework aims to understand the events of the last months in order to contribute reflection around the three following questions:

1. Where are we regarding the decline of American hegemony?
2. Has China been able to draw an advantage from this period?
3. What is the dominant tendency today on the level of imperialist confrontations?

1. The decline of American hegemony and the polarisation of US/Chinese tensions

“Confirmed as the only remaining superpower, the USA would do everything in its power to ensure that no new superpower – in reality, no new imperialist bloc – could

*arise to challenge its ‘New World Order’”.*¹ The history of the last 30 years has been characterised by a systematic decline of American leadership despite its persistent policy of trying to maintain its hegemonic position in the world.

1.1 A brief look at the decline of American hegemony

Different stages have characterised the efforts of the United States to maintain its leadership faced with evolving threats. It is also marked by internal dissension within the American bourgeoisie on which policies to undertake, and this will also accentuate the dissension.

a) The “New World Order” under the direction of the United States (Bush Senior and Clinton: 1990-2001)

President Bush Senior utilised the invasion of Kuwait by Iraqi forces in order to mobilise a large military coalition around the United States to “punish” Saddam Hussein. The first Gulf War aimed to make an “example”: faced with a world being swamped by chaos and “each for themselves” it was a matter of imposing a minimum of order and discipline, and, in the first place, on the most important countries of the ex-Western Bloc. The sole remaining superpower tried to impose on the “international community” a “new world order” under its aegis not only because it was the only one that had the means but also because it is the country which has most to lose from a world in disorder.

However, it could only take up this role by more tightly constraining the whole of the world in the steely grip of militarism and barbaric warfare, as in the bloody civil war in ex-Yugoslavia where it had to counter the imperialist appetites of the European countries (Germany, Britain, France, etc.) by imposing a “Pax Americana” in the region (Dayton Accords, December 1995).

b) The United States as the “World Cop” (Bush Junior: 2001-2008)

The attacks by al-Qaida on September 11 2001 led President Bush Junior to unleash a “War against Terror” in Afghanistan and above all Iraq in 2003. Despite all the pressure and the use of “fake news” aiming to

mobilise the “international community” behind it against the “Axis of Evil”, the United States failed to mobilise the other imperialisms against the “Gangster State” of Saddam and invaded almost alone apart from Tony Blair’s Britain, its only significant ally.

The setback of these interventions, underlined by the retreat from Iraq (2011) and Afghanistan (2021), demonstrates the incapacity of the United States to play the role of World Cop, imposing its law on the world. On the contrary, the “War against Terror” opened wide the Pandora’s Box of decomposition in these regions, exacerbating the expansion of every man for himself, which has been particularly shown by a multiplication of imperialist ambitions all over the place: countries such as China and Russia, Iran of course, but also Turkey, Saudi Arabia, even the Gulf Emirates and Qatar. The growing impasse of the policy of the United States and the aberrant flight into military barbarity has demonstrated the net weakening of its world leadership.

The Obama administration attempted to reduce the political catastrophe created by Bush (Bin Laden’s execution in 2011 underlined the absolute technological and military superiority of the United States) and to focus more and more clearly on the rise of China as the principal danger for American hegemony. This “pivot” has unleashed intense debates within its bourgeoisie and its state apparatus.

c) The policy of “America First” (Trump, essentially followed by Biden: 2017-)

The policy of “America First” on the imperialist level, opened up by Trump from 2017, meant in reality the official recognition of the retreat of American imperialist policy over the last 25 years: *“The American response started by Obama taken on and amplified by Trump by other means represents a turning point in American politics. The defence of its interests as a national state now means embracing the tendency towards every man for himself that dominates imperialist relations: the United States is moving from being the gendarme of the world order to being the main agent of every man for himself, of chaos, of questioning the world order established since 1945 under its auspices.”*²

While this demonstrates the limits of

1. “Resolution on the International Situation”, point 4, 15th ICC Congress, 2003, *International Review* n° 113.

2. “Resolution on the International Situation”, 23rd Congress of the ICC, *International Review* n° 164.

operations based on “boots on the ground”, given the problems of mobilising masses of workers into large-scale engagements and consequent casualties that a major military deployment implies (Bush already had this difficulty in mobilising for the war in Iraq), above all it goes in tandem with a growing polarisation and sharpened aggression towards China which tends to be identified more and more as the principal danger. If this position was discussed within the Obama administration and if still more tensions appeared on the question within the Trump administration, between those who wanted to take on the “gangster states” such as Iran (Pompeo, Kushner) and those concentrating on the “major Chinese danger” (secret services and military), the focus on this last option is incontestably the central axis of Biden’s foreign policy. Concentrating its forces on military and technological competition with China is a strategic choice for the United States with a view to maintaining or even increasing its supremacy and defending its position as the “Godfather” faced with the gangsters (China and, subordinately, Russia) which most directly threaten its hegemony. Already as a world gendarme, the United States exacerbated warfare, chaos and each for themselves; its present policy is no less destructive, quite the contrary.

1.2. Polarisation of tensions around the South China Sea

The pivot of America towards China and the consequent redeployment of forces initiated by the Trump administration have been fully taken up by Biden’s administration. The latter has not only maintained the aggressive economic measures against China set in motion up by Trump, but it has ramped up the pressure through an aggressive policy:

- on the policy level: defence of Uyghur rights and Hong Kong; diplomatic and commercial rapprochement with Taiwan; accusations of information technology piracy against China;
- at the military level in the South China Sea through explicit and spectacular military actions over the last months: a multiplication of military exercises involving the American fleet and those of its allies; alarmist reports on the imminent threat of Chinese intervention in Taiwan; the presence in Taiwan of special US forces in order to strengthen the unity of the Taiwanese elite; conclusion of the new AUKUS accord between the United States, Australia and Britain which sets up a military coordination explicitly oriented against China; Biden’s pledge to support Taiwan in the event of Chinese aggression.

Taiwan has always played an important role in the strategy of the United States towards China. During the Cold War it constituted an important element of the containment of the Soviet Bloc; in the 1990’s, and in the beginning of the 2000s, it constituted a workshop for globalised capitalism, into which China was also integrated. But with the growth in power of the latter the outlook changed and Taiwan played a new geo-strategic role in blocking access to the west Pacific for Chinese vessels. Moreover, on a strategic level, “*in effect the foundries on the island produce the major part of semi-conductors of the latest generation, indispensable components of the world’s digital economy (smartphones connections, artificial intelligence, etc.)*”³

For its part China has reacted furiously to these political and military pressures, particularly those around Taiwan: organisation of massive and threatening naval and aerial manoeuvres around the island; the publication of alarmist studies indicating that “the risk of war has never been so high”, or the release of plans for a surprise attack against the island which would lead to a total defeat of the Taiwanese forces.

Warnings, threats and intimidation have come one after the other in the last months around the South China Sea. They underline the growing pressure exerted on China by the United States. In this context the US has done everything possible to take in tow other Asian countries concerned by the expansionist aims of Beijing, trying for example to create a type of Asian NATO, the QUAD, bringing together the United States, Japan, Australia and India, and associating South Korea to it. On the other hand, and in the same sense, Biden wanted to revive NATO with the aim of drawing European countries into its policy of pressurising China. Paradoxically, the make-up of AUKUS indicates the limits of rallying other nations behind the United States. AUKUS first of all represents a slap in the face for France and negated Biden’s fine words about a “partnership” within NATO. Moreover, this agreement confirms the sensitivity of countries like India, which has its own imperialist ambitions, and above all of South Korea and Japan, squeezed between fear of China’s military strengthening and their industrial and commercial links with the country.

2. The significance of the return to power of the Taliban in Afghanistan

After the chaos and bloody barbarism of Iraq and Syria, events of September 2021 in Afghanistan fully confirm the main

tendencies of the period: the decline of US leadership, the growth of chaos and each for themselves.

2.1. The US debacle in Afghanistan

The total collapse of the regime and the Afghan army, the clear advance of the Taliban despite 20 years of American military intervention and hundreds of billions of dollars devoured by “nation building”, as well as the panicked evacuation of US nationals and collaborators, strikingly confirms that the United States is no longer up to fulfilling the role of World Cop. More specifically, the dramatic and chaotic retreat of American troops from Afghanistan has led to domestic and foreign stresses on the Biden administration.

a) On the external level, the debacle has undermined the reliability of the United States in the eyes of its “allies”

When even the Secretary General of NATO, Jens Stoltenberg, has had to recognise that the United States could no longer guarantee the defence of its European allies against their enemies, the whole charm offensive of Biden towards NATO and the allies collapsed. The total absence of working in concert within NATO and the uncompromising “Lone Ranger” attitude of the United States provoked indignant reactions in London, Paris and Berlin. As for the collaborators of the Americans in Afghanistan (like the Kurds in Syria betrayed by Trump), they rightly fear for their lives: here is the strongest world power incapable of guaranteeing the lives of its collaborators and the support of its allies. It doesn’t give much confidence (as Xi Jinping sarcastically observed!).

b) On the internal level it has eroded the credibility of the Biden administration

The resolution on the international situation of the 24th congress underlined that “*The election of Biden, supported by a huge mobilisation of the media, parts of the political apparatus and even the military and the security services, express this real counter-tendency to the danger of social and political disintegration most clearly embodied by Trumpism. In the short term, such ‘successes’ can function as a brake on mounting social chaos.*”⁴ However, the Afghan debacle demonstrates not only the United States’ unreliability towards its allies but it also accentuates tensions within the American bourgeoisie and opens up an avenue to all the adverse forces (Republican and populist) who condemn this hasty and humiliating retreat that “dishonours the United States on an international level”. And this at a time when the policy of industrial recovery and public works ad-

3. *Le Monde diplomatique*, October 2021.

4. Point 8.

vocated by the Biden administration, and aimed at containing the ravages caused by populism, comes up against the ferocious opposition from Republicans in the Capitol and from Trump. On top of which, faced with a stagnating anti-Covid vaccination policy, it has been obliged to take measures of constraint against the population.

2.2 An unpredictable situation for the other imperialisms

The absence of centralisation in the Taliban power, the myriad currents and groups with the most diverse aspirations which make up the movement, and the agreements made with local warlords in order to quickly define the parameters of the country mean that chaos and unpredictability characterise the situation, as the recent attacks aimed at the Hazara minority demonstrate. This can only intensify the interventions of different imperialisms, but it also increases the unpredictability of the situation and thus the ambient chaos.

- Iran is linked to the Hazara minority along its frontiers and firmly intends to maintain its influence in this region. Pakistan is concerned that the victory of the Taliban (which it finances through its ISI secret services) leads to a Pashtun independence movement within its own frontiers. India, which largely financed the collapsed regime, is now confronted with an intensification of Muslim guerrilla activity in Indian Kashmir. Russia has strengthened its troop deployment in the ex-Soviet republics of Asia in order to counter any attempts to support any local jihadist movements.
- And does China in particular draw any advantage from the American retreat? The opposite is true. Chaos in Afghanistan even renders coherent and long-term policies in the country hazardous. Moreover, the presence of the Taliban on the borders with China constitute a potentially serious danger for Islamic infiltration (via the Uyghurs); above all the Pakistani “brothers” of the Taliban, the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), cousins of the Islamic State of Khorasan (ISK), are engaged in attacks against the workplaces and dockyards of the “New Silk Road”, which have already led to the deaths of dozens of Chinese “aid workers”.

China is trying to counter the danger coming from Afghanistan by implanting itself in the old Soviet republics of Central Asia (Turkistan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan). But these republics are traditionally part of the Russian zone of influence. This increases the danger of a confrontation with its “strategic ally”,

with whom it has fundamentally opposing long-term interests over the “New Silk Road” (cf. Point 4.2. which deals with the Russian-Chinese alliance).

3. China's position on the imperialist chessboard

In the last decades China has undergone a dazzling rise on the economic and imperialist levels which has made it the most important challenger to the United States. However, as events of September 2021 in Afghanistan have already illustrated, it hasn't been able to profit either from the decline of the US or from the crisis of Covid-19 and its consequences in order to strengthen its position on the level of imperialist relations; again quite the contrary. We'll examine the difficulties which faced Chinese bourgeoisie in handling the pandemic, and in the management of the economy, imperialist relations and tensions within the ruling class.

3.1. Difficulties in the management of the Covid crisis

China put “zero tolerance” before opening up the country, but the strict lockdowns applied to towns and entire regions each time infections were detected heavily disrupted economic and commercial activities: thus, the closure of the port of Yantian, the third largest container port in the world, led last May to the blockage of thousands of containers and hundreds of ships, totally disorganising world maritime traffic.

Moreover, this quest for herd immunity pushed some Chinese towns and provinces to put financial sanctions on latecomers and those reluctant to get vaccinated. Faced with numerous criticisms on Chinese social networks, the central government blocked these types of measures, which were tending “to put national cohesion into danger”.

Finally, the most serious problems came without doubt over the converging information on the limited efficacy of the Chinese vaccine communicated by the various countries using them “*All in all, the Chilean vaccination campaign – quite effective with 62% of the population currently vaccinated – does not seem to have any noticeable impact on the proportion of deaths.*”⁵ Even the Chinese authorities are looking to make agreements to import Pfizer or Moderna versions in order to alleviate the inefficiencies of their own vaccine.

Beyond the undeniable responsibility of China in the outbreak of the pandemic,

5. H. Testard, “Covid-19: la vaccination décolle en Asie mais les doutes augmentent sur les vaccins chinois”, *Asialyst*, 21.07.21.

the inefficient management of the Covid crisis by Beijing puts pressure on Chinese state capitalism.

3.2. The accumulation of problems for the Chinese economy

The strong growth of China for 40 years now – even if the figures have fallen back the last decade – seems to be coming to an end. Experts expect growth of Chinese GDP lower than 6% in 2021 against 7% on average over the last decade and more than 10% from the preceding decade. Various other factors are accentuating the present difficulties of the Chinese economy:

- a) The danger of the bursting of the Chinese property bubble: Evergrande, China's second biggest real estate company today finds itself burdened with some 300 billion euros of debt, around 2% of GDP, that it can't pay back. Others similar companies are contaminated such as Fantasia Holdings or Sinic Holdings and are on the edge of default faced with their creditors. Generally, the housing sector which represents 25% of the Chinese economy has generated a colossal public and private debt of billions and billions of dollars. Evergrande's bankruptcy is really only the first sequence in the global collapse of this sector. Today empty buildings are so numerous that they could house 90 million people! It's true that the immediate collapse of the sector will be avoided as the Chinese authorities have no choice other than to limit the damage which otherwise risks having a very severe impact on the financial sector: “*(...) there will not be a snowball effect like in 2008 [in the US], because the Chinese government can stop the machine*”, says Andy Xie, an independent economist and former Morgan Stanley employee in China, quoted by Le Monde. “*I think that with Anbang [insurance group, editor's note] and HNA [Hainan Airlines], we have good examples of what can happen: there will be a committee bringing together around a table the company, the creditors and the authorities, which will decide which assets to sell, which to restructure and, in the end, how much money is left and who can lose funds*”.⁶

However, if the Chinese housing market bases its economic model on astronomical debt, numerous other sectors are in the red: at the end of 2020, the global debt of Chinese businesses represents 160% of the GDP of the country, against about 80% for American companies; and the “toxic” investments of local governments, according to the analyses of Goldman Sachs, represents 53,000 billion yuan, a sum which amounts to 52% of Chinese GDP. Thus the bursting of the housing bubble risks not

6. P.A. Donnet, “Chute d'Evergrande en Chine: la fin de l'argent facile”, *Asialyst*, 25.09.21.

only contaminating other sectors of the economy but also endangering social stability (close to 3 million direct and indirect jobs are linked to Evergrande), a great fear of the Chinese Communist Party.

b) Energy cuts: they are the consequence of a lack of provision of coal caused, among other things, by the record floods in the Shaanxi Province which alone produces 30% of the country's combustibles, and also the hardening of anti-pollution rules decided by Xi. The shortage is already affecting industrial activity in several regions: the steel sector and the aluminium and cement sectors are already suffering from limitations on available electricity. Aluminium production capacity has already been reduced by 7%, cement production by 29% (Morgan Stanley's figures); paper and glass will be the next sectors hit by power shortages. From now these cuts will slow down economic growth in the whole of the country. But the situation is even more serious than appears at first sight: *"The power shortage is now spilling over into the residential market in parts of the Northeast. Liaoning province has extended power cuts from the industrial sector to residential networks."*⁷

c) Breaks in the production and supply chain. These are linked to the energy crisis but also to the lock-down due to Covid infections (see the preceding points). They have affected production in industries across many regions and increased the risk of breaking national and global supply chains that have already been hit hard, much more so as some manufacturers are faced with an acute shortage of semi-conductors.

3.3. The planned "New Silk Road" is running out of steam

The "New Silk Road" is becoming more and more difficult to achieve, due to financial problems linked to the Covid crisis and to the difficulties of the Chinese economy but also to the reticence of its partners:

- on one hand, the level of debt in the "partner" countries has risen because of the Covid crisis and they find themselves unable to pay the interest on Chinese loans. Some countries like Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Kirghizstan, Pakistan, Montenegro and various African countries have asked China to restructure, delay or even annul their debt payments which are due this year;
- on the other hand, there is a growing distrust among numerous countries regarding the actions of China (European Union, Cambodia, Philippines,

Indonesia) connected to the anti-Chinese pressure exercised by the United States (as in Latin America), and there are also the consequences of the chaos produced by decomposition, destabilising certain key countries "along the route", as in the example of Ethiopia.

In short, we shouldn't be surprised that in 2020 there was a collapse in the value of investments injected into the "New Silk Road" project (-64%), while China has loaned more than \$461 billion since 2013.

3.4. Accentuation of tensions within the Chinese bourgeoisie

During the regime of Deng Xiao Ping's Stalinist-type Chinese state capitalism, under the cover of a policy of "creating wealth in order to share wealth", a number of "free" zones were established (Hong Kong, Macao, etc.) so as to develop a type of "free market" capitalism allowing international capital to come in while also favouring the private capitalist sector. This sector, with the collapse of the Eastern bloc and the "globalisation" of the economy in the '90s, developed in an exponential manner, even if the public sector under the direct control of the state still represented 30% of the economy. How then did the rigid and repressive "One Party" Stalinist state manage this "opening" to private capital? From the 1990's, the Party was transformed by massively integrating entrepreneurs and private business bosses: *"In the early 2000s, the then president Jiang Zemin lifted the ban on recruiting private sector entrepreneurs, who had previously been seen as class enemies (...). The businessmen and women thus selected became members of the political elite, which ensures that their companies are, at least partially, protected from predatory managers."*⁸ Today, professionals and graduate managers constitute 50% of Chinese Communist Party members.

The oppositions between the different factions will thus be expressed not only within state structures but even within the CCP itself. For several years⁹ the growing tensions between different factions within the Chinese bourgeoisie, particularly between those linked to the private capitalist sectors depending on international investments and exchanges, and those linked to the state structures of financial control at the regional and national level are those that advocate opening up to world trade and those that advance a more nationalist policy. In particular, the "turn to the left" taken by the faction behind President Xi,

which means less economic pragmatism and more nationalist ideology, has intensified tensions and political instability these last years: thus *"the continuing tensions between Premier Li Keqiang and President Xi Jinping over economic recovery, as well as China's 'new position' on the international stage"*.¹⁰ There is the "policy of war" undertaken by Chinese diplomacy regarding Taiwan and, at the same time, the spectacular declaration by Xi that China wants to reach carbon neutrality for its economy by 2060, and explicit criticisms of Xi are regularly appearing (latterly the "viral alert" essay published by a reputable professor of constitutional rights at Beijing's Tsinghua University, predicting the end of Xi). There are tensions between Xi and the general command of the People's Liberation Army, the interventions of the state apparatus against "too flamboyant" entrepreneurs and criticisms of state control (Jack Ma and Ant Financial, Alibaba). Some bankruptcies (HNA, Evergrande) could also be linked to fighting between cliques within the Party, for example in the cynical framework of "protecting citizens from the excesses of the capitalist class".

In short, far from taking advantage of the present situation, the Chinese bourgeoisie, as others, is confronted with the weight of the crisis, the chaos of decomposition and internal tensions that it is trying by all means to contain within the capitalist structures of a worm-eaten state.

4. The extension of chaos, instability and barbaric warfare

The analysis given in the preceding points certainly shows that the tensions between the United States and China tend to occupy a predominant place in the situation of imperialism, but without stimulating a tendency to the formation of imperialist blocs. In fact, beyond certain limited alliances such as AUKUS, the principal power on the planet, the United States, has not only failed to mobilise other powers behind its policies (as against Iraq or Iran before or China today) but it is incapable of defending its own allies and taking on the role of "bloc leader". This decline of US leadership leads to an accumulation of chaos which more and more impacts on the policies of the all the dominant imperialisms including China which itself cannot durably impose its leadership over other countries.

4.1. Chaos and war

The fact that the Taliban have "beaten" the Americans will embolden all the smaller

7. P.A. Donnet, "Chine: comment la grave pénurie d'électricité menace l'économie", *Asialyst*, 30.09.21.

8. "Que reste-t-il du communisme en Chine?", *Le Monde Diplomatique* n°68, July, 2021.

9. See: "Report on Imperialist Tensions", 20th ICC Congress, International Review n° 152.

10. A. Payette, "Chine : à Beidaihe, 'l'université d'été' du Parti, les tensions internes à fleur de peau", *Asialyst*, 06.09.20.

sharks, who will not hesitate to advance their agendas in the absence of anyone able to impose the “rules”. We are going into a period of an acceleration of lawlessness and the greatest chaos in history. Each for themselves becomes the central factor in imperialist relations and the most barbaric warfare threatens entire zones of the planet.

a) Central Asia, the Middle East and Africa

In addition to the barbaric civil wars in Iraq, Libya and Yemen, the descent of Afghanistan into horror, the strong tensions between Armenia and Azerbaijan, stimulated by Turkey provoking Russia, civil war has broken out in Ethiopia (supported by Eritrea) against the “rebel province” of Tigray (supported by Sudan and Egypt); and finally there are growing tensions between Algeria and Morocco.

The “Somalisation” of States, zones of instability and “no-go”¹¹ have not stopped spreading; at present chaos reigns from Kabul to Addis Ababa, Sanna to Yerevan, Damascus to Tripoli and Baghdad to Bamako.

b) Central and South America

Covid has hit the sub-continent hard (one eighth of the world population, one third of world deaths in 2020) and it has plunged into the worst recession for 120 years: GDP contracted by 7.7% in 2020.¹² Chaos is growing in Haiti which is sinking into a desperate situation under the reign of bloody gangs and the situation is equally catastrophic in Central America; hundreds of millions of desperate people fleeing misery and chaos and threatening the frontier of the United States. The region suffers more and more convulsions linked to decomposition: social revolts in Columbia and Chile, populist confusion in Brazil. Mexico is trying to play its own cards (proposing a new OAS, etc) but is too dependent on the United States to affirm its own aspirations. The United States has not been able to remove Maduro in Venezuela where China, Russia and even Iran continue with their “humanitarian” support, as well as Cuba. Above all China has infiltrated itself into the economy of the region since 2008 and has become an important financier of numerous Latin American states, but American counter-pressure is presently strong on certain states (Panama, Ecuador and Chile) to keep their distance from “the predatory economic activity” of Beijing.

c) Europe

The tensions between NATO and Russia have intensified these last months: after the incident where the Ryanair flight was diverted and intercepted by Belarus in order to arrest a dissident taking refuge in Lithuania; there were June NATO manoeuvres in the Black Sea off the coast of Ukraine where an engagement took place between a British frigate and the Russian navy; and in September there were joint manoeuvres between the Russian and Belarusian armies on the frontiers of Poland and the Baltic States faced with NATO exercises on Ukrainian territory, a real provocation in the eyes of Putin.

4.2. Growing instability

The growing chaos also increases tensions within the bourgeoisie and strengthens the unpredictability of their imperialist positioning; this is the case with Brazil where the catastrophic health situation and the irresponsible management of the Bolsonaro government has led to a more and more intense political crisis, and there are similar situations in other countries of Latin America (political instability in Ecuador, Peru, Colombia and Argentina). In the Near and Middle East tensions between the clans and tribes who run Saudi Arabia could destabilise the country, while Israel is marked by an opposition from a large part of its political factions from the right to the left against Netanyahu and against the religious parties, but also by pogroms inside the country against “Israeli” Arabs. Finally, there is Turkey looking for a solution to its political and economic difficulties in a suicidal dash into imperialist adventures (Libya, Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, etc).

In Europe the Afghan debacle and the US submarine deal as well as the post-Brexit situation accentuates the destabilisation of organisations which came from the period of blocs such as NATO or the EU. Within NATO some countries increasingly doubt the reliability of the United States. Thus, Germany has not given ground to American pressure regarding the Baltic Sea pipeline with Russia, and France didn’t react well to the insult from the United States in the submarine deal with Australia; meanwhile other European countries continue to see the United States as their main protector. The question of relations with Britain over the implementation of the Brexit agreement (Northern Ireland, fish quotas, etc.) divides the countries of the EU and tensions remain strong between France and Britain. Within the EU itself the influx of refugees continues to come up against states while those like Hungary and Poland are more and more openly calling into question the “supra-national powers” defined by the European Treaty and the hydra of populism threatens France at the time of the Spring

elections in 2022.

Chaos and each for themselves also tends to hinder the continuity of action of the major imperialisms: the United States is obliged to maintain pressure through regular air bombardments on the Shi’ite militias that are harassing their remaining forces in Iraq; Russia has to play the fire-fighter in the armed confrontation between Armenia and Azerbaijan, stirred up by Turkish imperialism; the extension of chaos in the Horn of Africa through the civil war in Ethiopia with Sudan and Egypt supporting the Tigray region and Eritrea the central Ethiopian government. These developments are undermining Chinese plans to make Ethiopia, vaunted as a pole of stability and the “world’s new workshop”, a pivotal point for its “Belt and Road” plan in north-east Africa – this was also the reason China set up a military base in Djibouti. The continuing impact, measures and uncertainties linked to the pandemic are equally a factor in the imperialist policies of various states: stagnation of vaccinations in the United States after opening up with a fanfare (over 800,000 thousand deaths up to December 24 2021, New York Times); new, massive lock-downs of entire regions and a patent lack of Chinese vaccine efficiency; distrust of the population in Russia towards vaccines (just over 30% vaccination rate).

This instability also characterises alliances such as the one between China and Russia. If these countries have developed a “strategic co-operation” (see the Sino-Russian communiqué of 28.6.21) against the United States and in relation to the Middle East, Iran or North Korea, and even organised common manoeuvres between their armies and navies, their political ambitions are radically different: above all Russian imperialism aims for the destabilisation of regions and can aim for little more than “frozen conflicts” (Syria, Libya, Ukraine, Georgia...) whereas China deploys a long-term economic and imperialist policy: the New Silk Road. Moreover, Russia is perfectly conscious that the route of the “Silk Road” by land and through the zone of the Arctic opposes its interests inasmuch as it directly threatens Russian zones of influence in Central Asia and in Siberia. It also understands that on the level of industrial strength, it does not have the weight of the second world economy - its GDP corresponds to that of Italy.

4.3. Development of the war economy

“The war economy (...) is not a political economy which can resolve the contradictions of capitalism or create the foundations of a new stage of capitalist development (...) The only function of the war economy is ... WAR! Its raison d’être is the effective and

11. See: “Report on Imperialist Tensions”, 20th ICC Congress, International Review n° 152.

12. *Le Monde Diplomatique*, October 2021.

systematic destruction of the means of production and of the forces of production and the production of the means of destruction – the real logic of capitalist barbarism.”¹³ The fact that the perspective is not towards the constitution of large stable alliances, imperialist “blocs” engaged in a global confrontation and thus a world war, takes nothing away from the present accentuation of the war economy. Submitting the economy to military necessities is a drain on the economy but this irrationality is not a choice: it is the product of the impasse of capitalism that social decomposition accelerates.

The arms race devours phenomenal sums, in the case of the United States, which still has an important advantage at this level, but also in China which has significantly increased its military expenses during the last two decades. *“The increase of 2.6% of global military expenses over the year where Gross Domestic Product at the global level has shrunk by 4.4% (projection of the International Monetary Fund, October 2020), principally because of the economic aspect of Covid-19. Consequently, military expenditure in percentage of GDP – the so-called military burden – has reached a world average of 2.4% in 2020 against 2.2% in 2019. This is the strongest annual increase since the economic and financial crisis of 2009”*.¹⁴ The arms race concerns not only conventional and nuclear weapons, but the greater militarisation of space and the extension of zones that have been spared up to now, such as the Arctic region.

Given the terrifying expansion of this imperialist each for themselves, the arms race is not limited to the major imperialisms but affects all states, particularly on the Asian continent which has seen a significant rise in military expenses: thus the inversion of the respective rates between Asia and Europe between 2000 and 2018 is spectacular: in 2000, Europe and Asia respectively represented 27% and 18% of defence expenses world-wide. In 2018, these figures were overturned as Asia now represented 28% and Europe 20%.¹⁵

This militarisation is also expressed today by an awesome development of cyber-warfare by states (attacks by hackers often linked directly or indirectly to states such as the cyber-attack by Israel against Iranian nuclear sites) as well as Artificial Intelligence and military robotics (robots, drones) which are playing a more and more important role in intelligence or in military operations.

However, *“the real key of the constitution of the war economy (...) [is] the physical and/or ideological submission of the proletariat to the state, [the] degree of control that the state has over the working class.”*¹⁶ But this aspect is far from being achieved. That explains why the acceleration of the arms race goes along with a strong reluctance of the major imperialist powers (United States, China, Russia, Britain and France) for the massive engagement of soldiers in the field of conflicts (“boots on the ground”), for fear of the impact of large numbers of body bags coming back home on the population and particularly on the working class. Also revealing is the use of private military companies (Wagner troops for the Russians, Blackwater/Academi for the United States) or the engagement of local militias in order to undertake actions: for example, the use of Syrian Sunni militias by Turkey in Libya and Azerbaijan, Kurdish militias by the United States in Syria and Iraq, Hezbollah or the Iraqi Shi’ite militias by Iran in Syria, Sudanese militias by Saudi Arabia in Yemen, a regional force (Chad, Mauritania, Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso) “coached” by France in the Liptako region of Burkina Faso...

5. Impact on the proletariat and its struggle

The perspective is thus a multiplication of barbaric and bloody conflicts:

“11. At the same time, ‘massacres from innumerable small wars’ are also proliferating as capitalism in its final phase plunges into an increasingly irrational imperialist free for all...

*“13. This does not mean that we are living in an era of greater safety than in the period of the Cold War, haunted as it was by the threat of a nuclear Armageddon. On the contrary, if the phase of decomposition is marked by a growing loss of control by the bourgeoisie, this also applies to the vast means of destruction – nuclear, conventional, biological and chemical – that has been accumulated by the ruling class, and is now more widely distributed across a far greater number of nation states than in the previous period.”*¹⁷

Inasmuch as we are aware that the bourgeoisie is capable of turning the worst effects of decomposition against the proletariat, we must be conscious that the context of murderous barbarity does not at all facilitate the workers’ struggle:

– The acceleration of decomposition will bring with it endless wars throughout the

world, a multiplication of massacres and misery, millions of refugees aimlessly wandering around, an indescribable social chaos and destruction of the environment, and all this accentuating the feeling of fear and demoralisation in the ranks of the proletariat.

- The different armed conflicts will be used to unleash intense campaigns about the defence of democracy, human rights, the rights of women, as is the case with Afghanistan, Ethiopia, Syria and Iraq.
- Consequently, our intervention must denounce the progression of barbarism and the insidious nature of the situation, it must constantly warn the proletariat against underestimating the dangers posed by the chaotic multiplicity of conflicts, in a context where each for themselves is the dominant dynamic: *“Left to its own devices, it (decomposition) will lead humanity to the same fate as world war. In the end, it is all the same whether we are wiped out in a rain of thermonuclear bombs, or by pollution, radioactivity from nuclear power stations, famine, epidemics, and the massacres of innumerable small wars (where nuclear weapons might also be used). The only difference between these two forms of annihilation lies in that one is quick, while the other would be slower, and would consequently provoke still more suffering.”*¹⁸

ICC, November 2021

13. “From the crisis to the war economy”, *International Review* n° 11, 1977.

14. SIPRI - Stockholm International Peace Research Institute - press communiqué, April 2021.

15. Figures from SIPRI.

16. “From the crisis to the war economy”, *International Review* n° 11, 1977.

17. “Resolution on the International Situation” of the 24th Congress in this issue.

18. Theses on Decomposition, point 11.

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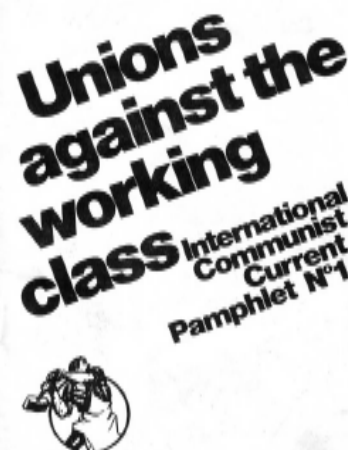
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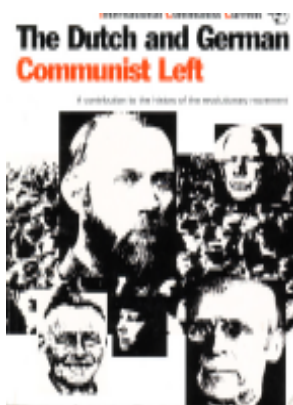
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ICC Publication



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



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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