
The First International Is Still Relevant Today

BY

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The International Working Men's Association was launched in London on this day in 1864. As the "First International," it cemented class solidarity across countries as a shared ideal and inspired large numbers to organize against capitalist exploitation.

After its first meeting, on September 28, 1864, the International Workingmen's Association (better known as the "First International") quickly aroused passions all over Europe. It made class solidarity a shared ideal and inspired large numbers of women and men to struggle against exploitation. Thanks to its activity, workers were able to gain a clearer understanding of the mechanisms of the capitalist mode of production, to become more aware of their own strength, and to develop new, more advanced forms of struggle for their rights.

In the beginning, the International was an organization containing various political traditions, the majority of which were reformist rather than revolutionary. Originally, the central driving force was British trade unionism, the leaders of which were mainly interested in economic questions. They fought to improve the workers' conditions, but without calling capitalism into question. Hence, they conceived of the International primarily as an instrument to prevent the import of workers from abroad in the event of strikes.

The second most important group were the mutualists, long dominant in France. In keeping with the theories of Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, they opposed any working-class involvement in politics and the strike as a weapon of struggle.

Then there were the Communists who opposed the very system of capitalist production and argued for the necessity of overthrowing it. At its founding, the ranks of the International also included a number of workers inspired by utopian theories and exiles having vaguely democratic ideas and cross-class conception who considered the International as an instrument for the issuing of general appeals for the liberation of oppressed peoples.

It was Karl Marx who gave a clear purpose to the International and who achieved a non-exclusionary,

yet firmly working-class-based political program that won it mass support. Rejecting sectarianism, he worked to bring the International's various strands together. Marx was the political soul of its General Council (the body that worked out a unifying synthesis of the various tendencies and issued guidelines for the organization as a whole). He drafted all its main resolutions and prepared almost all its congress reports.

But the International was, of course, much more than Marx, brilliant a leader as he was. It was not, as has often been written, the "creation of Marx." Rather it was a vast social and political movement for the emancipation of the working classes. The International was made possible first of all by the labor movement's struggles in the 1860s. One of its basic rules — and the fundamental distinction from previous labor organizations — was that "the emancipation of the working classes must be conquered by the working classes themselves."

Marx was essential to the International, but the International had a very positive impact on Marx, too. His direct involvement in workers' struggles meant that he was prompted to develop and sometimes revise his own ideas, subjecting old certainties to discussion and asking himself new questions, all the while sharpening his critique of capitalism by drawing the broad outlines of a communist society.

Theory and Struggle

The late 1860s and early 1870s were a period rife with social conflicts in Europe. Many workers who took part in protest actions decided to make contact with the International, whose reputation quickly spread widely. From 1866 on, strikes intensified in many countries and formed the core of a new and important wave of mobilizations. The International was essential in struggles that were won by workers in France, Belgium, and Switzerland. The scenario was the same in many of these conflicts: workers in other countries raised funds in support of the strikers and agreed not to accept work that would have turned them into industrial mercenaries. As a result, the bosses were forced to compromise on many of the strikers' demands. These advances were supported by the diffusion of newspapers that either sympathized with the ideas of the International or were veritable organs of the General Council. Both contributed to the development of class consciousness and to the rapid circulation of news concerning the activity of the International.

Across Europe, the association developed an efficient organizational structure and increased the number of its members (150,000 at the peak moment). For all the difficulties bound up with a diversity of nationalities, languages, and political cultures, the International managed to achieve unity and coordination across a wide range of organizations and spontaneous struggles. Its greatest merit was to demonstrate the crucial importance of class solidarity and international cooperation.

The International was the locus of some of the most famous debates of the labor movement, such as that between communism and anarchy. The congresses of the International were also where, for the first time, a major transnational organization came to decisions about crucial issues, which had been discussed before its foundation, that subsequently became strategic points in the political programs of socialist movements across the world. Among these were the indispensable function of trade unions, the socialization of land and means of production, the importance of participating in elections and doing this through independent parties of the working class, women's emancipation, and the conception of war as an inevitable product of the capitalist system.

The International also spread outside Europe. On the other side of the Atlantic, immigrants who had arrived in recent years began to establish the first sections of the International in the United States, but the organization suffered from two handicaps at birth that it would never overcome. Despite repeated exhortations from the General Council in London, it was unable either to cut across the nationalist

character of its various affiliated groups or to draw in workers born in the “New World.” When the German, French, and Czech sections founded the Central Committee of the International for North America, in December 1870, it was unique in the history of the International in having only “foreign-born” members. The most striking aspect of this anomaly was that the International in the United States never produced an English-language press organ. At the beginning of the 1870s, the International reached a total of fifty sections with a combined membership of four thousand, but this was still only a tiny proportion of the American industrial workforce of more than two million.

Peak and Crisis

The most significant moment of the International coincided with the Paris Commune. In March 1871, after the end of the Franco-Prussian War, the workers of Paris rose against the new government of Adolphe Thiers and took power in the city. Henceforth, the International was at the center of the storm and gained enormous notoriety.

For capitalists and the middle classes, it represented a great threat to the established order, whereas for workers it fueled hopes for a world without exploitation and injustice. The labor movement had enormous vitality, and that was apparent everywhere. Newspapers linked to the International increased in both number and overall sales. The insurrection of Paris fortified the workers’ movement, impelling it to adopt more radical positions and to intensify its militancy, and not for the first time, France showed that revolution was possible, this time with the goal of building new forms of political association for workers.

The next step to take then, as stated by Marx, was understanding that “the economic movement of the working class and its political action are indissolubly united.” That led the International, at the London Conference of 1871, to push for the foundation of a key instrument of the modern workers’ movement: the political party — although it should be stressed that the understanding of this was much broader than that adopted by communist organizations after the October Revolution.

When the International dissolved itself after the Hague Congress of 1872, it was a very different organization from what it had been at the time of its foundation: reformists no longer constituted its bulk, and anticapitalism had become the political position of the whole association (including new tendencies like the anarchists led by Mikhail Bakunin). The wider picture, too, was radically different. The unification of Germany in 1871 confirmed the onset of a new age, with the nation-state the central form of political, legal, and territorial identity.

The initial configuration of the International thus became outmoded, just as its original mission came to an end. The task was no longer preparing for and organizing Europe-wide support for strikes, nor calling congresses proclaiming the usefulness of trade unions or the need to socialize the land and the means of production. Such themes were now part of the International’s collective heritage. After the Paris Commune, the real challenge for the workers’ movement became how to organize to end the capitalist mode of production and overthrow the institutions of the bourgeois world.

Our Internationalism

The 156th anniversary of the First International takes place in a very different context. An abyss

separates the hopes of those times from the mistrust so characteristic of our own, the anti-systemic spirit and solidarity of the age of the International from the ideological subordination and individualism of a world reshaped by neoliberal competition and privatization.

The world of labor has suffered an epochal defeat, and the Left is still in the midst of deep crisis. After decades of neoliberal policies, we've returned to an exploitative system, similar to that of the nineteenth century. Labor market "reforms" — a term now shed of its original progressive meaning — have introduced more and more "flexibility" with each passing year, creating deeper inequalities. Other major political and economic shifts have succeeded one another, after the collapse of the Soviet bloc. Among them, there have been the social changes generated by globalization, the ecological disasters produced by the present mode of production, the growing gulf between the wealthy exploitative few and the huge impoverished majority, one of the biggest economic crises of capitalism (the one erupted in 2008) in history, the blustery winds of war, racism and chauvinism, and, most recently, the COVID-19 pandemic.

In a context such as this, class solidarity is all the more indispensable. It was Marx himself who emphasized that the confrontation between workers — including between local and migrant workers (who are moreover discriminated) — is an essential element of the domination of the ruling classes. New ways of organizing social conflict, political parties, and trade unions must certainly be invented, as we cannot reproduce schemes used 150 years ago. But the old lesson of the International that workers are defeated if they do not organize a common front of the exploited is still valid. Without that, our only horizon is a war between the poor and unbridled competition between individuals.

The barbarism of today's world order imposes upon the contemporary workers' movement the urgent need to reorganize itself on the basis of two key characteristics of the International: the multiplicity of its structure and radicalism in objectives. The aims of the organization founded in London in 1864 are today more timely than ever. To rise to the challenges of the present, however, the new International cannot evade the twin requirements of pluralism and anticapitalism.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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