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Fourth International

70 years ago: the founding of the Fourth International

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The Fourth International was founded when it was “midnight in the century”. Fascism was on the rampage, the counter-revolution had triumphed in the USSR and Stalinism was suffocating the revolutionary workers’ movement all over the world. In contrast with the preceding Internationals, it was not carried forward by waves of workers’ struggles and a growth of the working-class movement.

https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/800px-Quatrieme_internationale.jpg

Earlier issues of Quatri me Internationale, a predecessor of International Viewpoint

Image: Sirdon

The First International arose after the revolutionary explosions of 1848 in Europe. The Second International was the incarnation of the growth and the organization of the workers’ movement at the end of the 19th century and at the beginning of the 20th. The Third International was launched after the Russian Revolution. But the Fourth International stood against the stream, at a time of major historical defeats for the workers’ movement. Also, contrary to certain forecasts, in particular those of Trotsky who, taking the example of the Third International after the First World War and the Russian Revolution, foresaw the development of a mass Fourth International after the Second World War, it would remain a minority organization.

But the foundation of the Fourth International was not justified by forecasts or by responses to the conjuncture of the period; it was justified by the need, faced with the betrayals of social democracy and Stalinism, to affirm a historical alternative, a new political current which would ensure continuity and the programmatic, theoretical and political vitality of the revolutionary workers’ movement. So it was not a question of proclaiming a “Trotskyist International”. It was necessary, at the moment when with the war “everything was going to pieces”, to preserve the heritage of Marxism, not in order to put it “in cold storage” while waiting for better days, but in order to aid the political struggle and the building of revolutionary parties.

Against the stream

The origin lay in the Left Opposition to Stalinism. But the Fourth International was much more than that. It maintained a certain vision of the world, marked by internationalism - which already flowed from a certain capitalist globalisation and was opposed to the “socialism in one country” of Stalin. Its whole struggle was conditioned by the class struggle, by the elements of a programme of transition towards socialism, by the united front of the workers and their organizations, by the independence of the workers’ movement faced with the governments of class collaboration in the developed capitalist countries – the different formulas of the Union of the Left or the plural Left -, but also with respect to the national bourgeoisies in the countries dominated by imperialism, which would go down in history as the theory of permanent revolution. Where many commentators reduced their analysis of the world of the last century to camps or states - the USA and the ex-USSR -, the Fourth International put forward the struggle of the peoples and the workers against their own imperialism and against the Soviet bureaucracy.

The Fourth International was not confined to defending Marxist ideas in a general or dogmatic way. Ernest Mandel, for example, analyzed the dynamics of the development of capitalism, from the 1950s to the end of the 1970s. Programmatic documents were discussed and adopted by international congresses, on the questions of socialist democracy, feminism and ecology. Faced with Stalinism, Trotsky and his movement had distinguished themselves, from the 1930s onwards, by tenaciously defending democratic socialism. These references have allowed many generations, especially today, at a time when school textbooks confuse communism and Stalinism, to distinguish

between the Russian Revolution and the Stalinist counter-revolution, to maintain the objective of the revolution... and to be able, in spite of the defeats, "to start again".

Because our movement has also another singularity, even with respect to other Trotskyist movements: that of recognizing revolutionary, anti-imperialist and socialist processes, even despite their leaderships, of expressing unflinching solidarity with them against imperialism. We clearly defended the Chinese, Yugoslav, Vietnamese, Algerian, Cuban and Nicaraguan revolutions. In particular, our relationship with the experience of Che Guevara expresses this will to link ourselves to these revolutionary processes.

New period...

Now of course, that was not done without any political mistakes or faults. While combating Stalinism and expressing our solidarity with the peoples of Eastern Europe against the bureaucracy, our movement globally underestimated the extent of the destruction caused by Stalinism, which, when the Soviet bloc collapsed, left the road open, not to an anti-bureaucratic political revolution or to mass movements for democratic socialism, but to the restoration of capitalism. In our solidarity with the colonial revolutions, in this enthusiasm for living revolutions, we underestimated the problems which were linked to them. We did not sufficiently exercise the duty of criticism. But the organizations of the Fourth International demonstrated other weaknesses, often linked to their small size: a propagandist character, some sectarian faults, a style of political "advisers" towards other and bigger forces, generally reformist parties ... "Do what we cannot do!", we said to them...

Trotskyism also suffered from factionalism. There is a well-known proverb: "one Trotskyist, a party; two Trotskyists, two factions; three Trotskyists, a split..." Whereas, over the last 70 years, a number of revolutionary organizations and currents have disappeared, the Fourth International has maintained itself. It did not fulfil its historical objectives, it experienced ups and downs, there were major crises in certain countries - as in Brazil, recently -, but there have also been breakthroughs, as in France, and positive experiences, as in Portugal, Italy, Pakistan and the Philippines. That is a considerable achievement.

At the moment when the LCR wants to write a new page of the history of the workers' movement, we have to know where we come from, in order to "enrich with a revolutionary content" the processes of reorganization of the workers' movement that are underway. Because this is indeed an historical turning point. The Fourth International is the product of a period marked by the driving force of the Russian Revolution, but its programme and the reality of the activity of its members go beyond this history. However, nothing is guaranteed. "New period, new programme, new party", that also means a new International. It cannot just be proclaimed, and the road will be long. But the comrades of the Fourth International will do their utmost to bring it into existence.