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Fourth International

September 1938 - the founding of the Fourth International

- Features -

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Introduction

From the early 1930s, revolutionary Marxists faced a challenge: the tool created in the aftermath of October 1917, the Communist International, had been transformed into a branch of Stalinist diplomacy, having "purged" the national parties, betrayed the revolutionary upsurges in China and led to a non-combat defeat in Germany against Nazism.

Rebuilding an international

From August 1914, it had already been necessary to resist the submission of the leaders of the Socialist International to the imperialist governments. So, after less than 20 years, in the midst of the war, then the revolutionary upsurges and the triumph of fascism, it was necessary to rebuild the international organization of revolutionary militants.

Far from limiting himself to the Bolshevik-Leninist network, Trotsky and his comrades first tried, unsuccessfully, to rally with the "centrists" of the London Bureau who had resisted the takeover of Stalinism and spoken out in favour of creating a Fourth International. The aim was to rebuild a mass International. It was essential to continue the path opened by the Communist International in 1919 and to organize firmly in the face of the impending war and the revolutionary upheavals to come. The Fourth International was finally created in 1938 with the hope that the small number of activists gathered could grow as it had, between 1915 and 1919, around internationalists.

A project that is still relevant today

The Fourth International did not transform itself into a revolutionary mass organization after the war, but the need to build such an international is still pressing today. The world has been shaken up in 80 years: the extension and then the collapse of the Stalinist block, Russia has returned to the international capitalist system, revolutions in China and Cuba, wars of independence in colonial empires leading to their collapse. All these events have set in motion tens of millions of men and women seeking the paths to a democratic society free of capitalist exploitation and oppression, satisfying social needs. The hundreds of thousands of women and men driven out of their homes by wars and climate change, global warming, the rise of new reactionary movements in many parts of the world are in addition to the daily harm of capitalist austerity policies.

The tasks outlined by the revolutionaries of 1938 are still on the agenda, and it is up to today's activists to respond to them, in struggles and social movements, and by building, in the face of narrow chauvinist excesses, a revolutionary anti-capitalist and internationalist political revolutionary force, leading the feminist, ecological, anti-racist, anti-discrimination and anti-racist struggle head-on and extending the ambition of the Communist Manifesto that inspired the First International.

Léon Crémieux

From the Left Opposition to the founding of the Fourth International

The foundation of the Fourth International was not only the advent of a new structure: it was also the result of a process of political struggle lasting more than fifteen years, led by Trotsky and the Left Opposition, in the Communist Parties and the Third International (IC) (from which they were expelled), for the reform of the International founded following the October Revolution. This political struggle embraced the entire policy of Stalin and his henchmen, from party independence to the agrarian policy of the Soviet Union.

In 1933, when Hitler came to power and Trotsky sought to bring together all the anti-Stalinist revolutionaries, a draft programme for the Left Opposition appeared, "Eleven Points" which would become the backbone of the Transitional Programme published five years later. Eleven points summarized Trotsky's central concerns about the Stalinists. One of the most important points is undoubtedly that on "the independence of the proletarian party, always and under all conditions". In China, Stalin had forced the Chinese communists to dissolve into the Guomindang, the nationalist party led by Chiang Kai-Shek, by deforming the united front policy set out at the Fourth Congress of the Communist International. From this alliance, the only thing that emerged was the disarmament of the communists in the face of nationalist repression during the Shanghai insurrection in April 1927: despite the launch of a general strike and the seizure of power from China's main economic lung, the communists were massacred by Chiang Kai-Shek's troops, whom they had brought into the city.

Against "socialism in one country"

One of the other central points of the struggle against Stalinism was the struggle for "the recognition of the international and thus permanent character of proletarian revolution, the rejection of the theory of socialism in a single country". Indeed, while, as soon as the Winter Palace was taken, the entire Bolshevik party was aware of the need to extend the revolution to Europe and the whole world, Stalinism, in its attempt to liquidate the revolution, revised all Marxist principles by stating the idea that it was possible to establish "socialism in a single country". Obviously, this myth was accompanied by the idea that Russia had already entered socialism, a myth developed by an economic policy that Trotsky described as "opportunist" from 1923 to 1928, when Stalin supported the rich peasants (kulaks) against the development of industry, then "adventurist" between 1928 and 1932, when the USSR turned against the kulaks to march towards forced industrialization.

While these political battles were first fought in the Soviet Union CP (CPSU) and the IC, Trotsky was quickly excluded: as early as 1927, the "Old Man" was excluded from the CPSU with the Left Opposition. But this did not prevent the opposition members from continuing to consider themselves as a fraction of the CPSU and the IC, with the aim of reforming the party and the International, to put the latter once again at the service of the revolution. Contrary to what one might think, it was neither purges nor assassinations that pushed the Left Opposition towards a new international for revolution. Any foundation of a new international assumed that the previous one had been overcome by a historical test such that its bankruptcy became indisputable. And when it comes to the total bankruptcy of power, it means the need for its insurrectional overthrow.

Bankruptcy of the Third International

The bankruptcy of the Third International occurred in 1933, with Hitler's arrival in power: as fascism took hold in Germany, the KDP (German Communist Party) simply capitulated without a fight. It was a defeat without a fight, and the German communists, social democrats and trade unionists were brought to the slaughterhouse under the guilty eyes of Stalin, whose so-called "third period" policy, which called the social democratic parties "social-fascist", prevented any development of a united front against fascism.

Therefore, a new party of revolution was needed, including in the USSR. In capitalist countries, this implied the need to found new parties whose task would be to fight Stalinism, a new form of counter-revolutionary reformism. In the USSR, however, in the workers state of the 1930s alone, while the task was also the revolution, it was different in content, being essentially political, since the October Revolution had already destroyed the private ownership of the means of production.

Arthur Nicola

The Fourth International as a response to the impending war

Hitler's seizure of power in January 1933 led Trotsky to put on the agenda the creation of a new international, not only because the policy pursued in Germany by the Third International had demonstrated the failure of the Stalinist bureaucracy, but also because the Nazi victory led him to believe that war was now inevitable.

For Trotsky, the rise of fascism could only lead to war, which he believed would be even more atrocious than that of 1914, but he also thought that it would open revolutionary possibilities, if the proletariat had a leadership capable of guiding it correctly. Therefore, Trotsky's first theoretical text for the international short story was a pamphlet on "War and the Fourth International", which he published in June 1934 in several languages to explain that the war would raise new questions of direction.

Against "national defencism"

Of course, Trotsky was part of the rejection of "national defencism", which had led the sections of the Second International to show solidarity with their bourgeoisie in 1914, by joining the governments of the "Sacred Union". Trotsky saw this same logic renewed in the policy of alliance of "democracies" against fascism that the governments of the popular front put in place with the blessing of the Second and Third Internationals. For Trotsky, this position could only lead the workers' movement to align itself, under the guise of antifascist struggle, with the policies of the British and especially French imperialist states.

While firmly rejecting "national defence" policies, Trotsky considered that "revolutionary defeatism", which had been at the heart of Bolshevik politics during the First World War, was no longer an appropriate slogan for the situation. The rise in the countries on the periphery of resistance to colonialism and imperialism showed that not all nationalisms could be put on an equal footing, which led Trotsky to call for support for the Ethiopian state invaded in 1935 by Italy, or the Chinese Republic attacked in 1937 by Japan. This same reasoning also led him to oppose those who put the Spanish republican government and the Francoists on the same footing: although he considered that the proletariat should maintain its class independence, by refusing to show solidarity with the bourgeoisie and thus enter the republican government, it should nevertheless support the anti-Franco struggle.

Above all, the question of the USSR made the situation much more complex. For Trotsky, it was essential to provide "unconditional support" to the Soviet Union, so that the proletariat would not lose the benefit of the October Revolution. However, the bankruptcy of its German policy had led Stalin to seek the Franco-British alliance, which led the Third International to align itself with one of the main imperialist blocs. These elements imposed a somewhat complex orientation, as Trotsky showed when he replied to the Dewey Commission, which asked him what he would do if the USSR entered the war against Germany in alliance with France: that it was necessary to develop a policy of sabotage of the war effort in Germany, while in France being satisfied with propaganda for proletarian revolution.

After the German-Soviet Pact

These questions of orientation became even more difficult when, only four weeks after the foundation of the Fourth International on 3 September 1938, the "democracies" broke with Stalin to conclude with Hitler the Munich Agreements that delivered the Sudetenland to him. Trotsky then understood that the Stalinist bureaucracy would seek the German alliance, and was not surprised by the conclusion in August 1939 of the German-Soviet pact that destabilized the leaders of the workers' movement. Trotsky also understood that the collapse of the Allied troops in June 1940 was a redistribution of the cards, stressing that the Nazi occupation of continental Europe created a situation of oppression that would necessarily allow the development of legitimate proletarian resistance, both social and national.

The complexity of the contradictions expressed in the war thus posed obvious problems of orientation for the new international as well as for the entire labour movement. Decapitated by Trotsky's assassination in August 1940, the Fourth International was in an even more difficult situation because the war made it impossible for sections to continue to correspond. While it was "midnight in the century", it was thus not in a position to give the proletariat the revolutionary leadership that would have been necessary to transform the imperialist war into a class war, in line to the goal that Trotsky had originally proposed for the Fourth International.

Laurent Ripart

Foundation of the Fourth International: The Transitional Programme

In preparation for the founding congress of the Fourth International in 1938, Leon Trotsky wrote an essential document: "The Death Agony of Capitalism and the Tasks of the Fourth International", known as the "Transitional Programme".

The transitional method

Like any political text, it has limitations that correspond to a specific historical moment. The most obvious is the one that appears in the very title of the document: the conviction that capitalism is "dying", that productive forces have stopped growing, that the bourgeoisie is disoriented, and that the economic crisis has no way out. However, Trotsky does not fall into the trap of "optimistic fatalism": he is fully aware that capitalism will never die a natural death. The future is not decided, nor is it determined by "objective conditions": if socialism does not triumph, humanity will experience a new and terrible war, and a catastrophe that threatens human civilization itself. Prophetic words... Trotsky's Marxism attributes a decisive role to the "subjective factor", to the consciousness and action of the historical subject: "Everything depends on the proletariat".

What is important, even brilliant, about the document is a certain method of political intervention, what could be called the transitional method. This method, which is inspired by the experience of the October Revolution and the social struggles of the 1920s and 1930s, has as its starting point the philosophy of Marx's praxis, that is, the understanding that the social consciousness of the exploited, their self-transformation, their ability to become historical subjects, result above all from their own practice, their own experience of the struggle and social conflict.

A rational wager

Breaking with the old social-democratic tradition of separating a reformist "minimum program" from an abstractly socialist "maximum program", Trotsky proposed "transitional" demands which, starting from the workers' real level of consciousness, their concrete and immediate demands, led to a confrontation with the logic of capitalism, to a conflict with the interests of the great bourgeoisie. For example: the abolition of "trade secrecy" – or "banking secrecy" – and workers' control of factories; or the sliding scale of wages and working hours, as a response to unemployment; or the expropriation of large banks and the nationalization of credit. Once again, more than any one claim, what is decisive in this document is the dialectical approach, the "transition" from the immediate to the challenge of the system.

What inspires the 1938 "Transitional Programme" is, despite the terrible defeats and crises of the workers movement of the 1930s, a rational wager on the possibility of a revolutionary solution to the deadlock of capitalism, on the ability of workers to become aware, through their practical experience of struggle, of their fundamental interests; in short, a wager on the vocation of the exploited and oppressed classes to save humanity from catastrophe and barbarism. This challenge has not lost any of its relevance at the beginning of the 21st century.

Michael Löwy

The founding congress

The plenary session of the founding congress took place on a single day, on 3 September 1938, in the farmhouse belonging to Alfred Rosmer, in Périgny in the Paris suburbs - although for security reasons it was said for some time that it had been held in Lausanne.

Agreement on the need for a new international had been almost unanimous in the ranks of the International Opposition since 1933. An "Open Letter for the Fourth International" was published, at Trotsky's insistence, in 1935. But the failure of attempts to regroup with organizations such as the POUM or the London Bureau, and the difficulties of the Bolshevik-Leninist organizations themselves, were obstacles to its proclamation at the Conference for the Fourth International in July 1936, with also the argument that this new international lacked a mass party, and that the decision would be misunderstood. It was not until the 1938 conference that this step was taken.

A congress prepared for several months

For Trotsky himself, "the holding of this conference is a great success. An uncompromising revolutionary tendency, subjected to persecutions that no other political tendency has probably ever endured, has once again shown its strength."

Delegates representing organizations from eleven countries - the United States, France, Great Britain, Germany, the Soviet Union, Italy, Brazil, Poland, Belgium, the Netherlands and Greece - proclaimed the "World Party of Socialist Revolution". The congress report lists as affiliated the organisations of the following countries: Argentina, Australia, Austria, Belgium, Bolivia, Brazil, Canada, Chile, China, Cuba, Czechoslovakia, France, Germany, Great Britain, Greece, Indochina, Mexico, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Romania, Santo Domingo, South Africa, Spain, Switzerland, Soviet Union, United States, Uruguay.

The congress was prepared in advance for several months by preparatory commission commission, under conditions of severe repression of the movement, in particular the assassinations of Léon Sedov – Trotsky's son – in February, and of Rudolf Klement, the movement's secretary, in July. The death of the latter, it is explained in the minutes,

prevented the distribution to the International Secretariat of the report he was preparing, all his papers having disappeared at the time of his murder.

Adoption of the "Transitional Programme"

Nevertheless, in his introductory report, Vilain (the Frenchman Pierre Naville) insists on the real progress made at the political level since the 1936 conference, particularly through the political intervention of the sections. He cites the Moscow trials, the Popular Fronts in France and Spain and the invasion of Ethiopia by Italy and China by Japan as milestones. However, he stressed that at the organizational level the General Council could not function due to the geographical dispersion of its members and that the work had to be carried out by the International Secretariat.

The most important text presented at the congress is Trotsky's, the Transitional Programme (see above). The discussion on this text was divided into three points: the question of trade unions, in particular strikes with factory occupation around the amendments proposed by the Poles; the Russian question, in particular the characterisation of the bureaucracy based on an amendment by the Americans; and the questions of war and Spain.

The draft was adopted by 21 votes in favour and one against (that of Yvan Craipeau who, after having continued to be active in the underground during the war, left the International in 1948).

"World Party of Socialist Revolution"

The draft statutes which were to delimit the Fourth International after the years of the "movement for the Fourth International" and the debate on whether or not to declare it, could not be prepared due to Klement's death. However, an outline was discussed and adopted, thus proclaiming the foundation of the "Fourth International (World Party of Socialist Revolution)". The Polish delegates do not agree with this proclamation of the International but affirmed their loyalty and undertook to implement the decisions.

In addition to these two texts, the Congress discusses a "Resolution on Class Struggle and War in the Far East", a text on "The World Role of American Imperialism", and a series of resolutions on particular situations in different countries, including a fairly detailed resolution on the tasks of the French section. It also addressed a letter to Leon Trotsky, and appealed for the organization of international solidarity, particularly with the Spanish working class. [2]

The conference also made a statement on the issue of youth affirming that "only the enthusiasm and offensive spirit of youth can ensure the first successes of the struggle." It continues "it addresses all our youth organizations, all our sections to tell them: we can only win the hard-working youth to the Fourth International by speaking their language, by expressing their aspirations, by giving them an organization that is their own. Not youth political parties. Not academies for young old people! Fighting organizations, ardent combative involved with youth: in the factory, in the barracks, in the fields, also involved with their entertainment, seeking to imbue all acts of youth with a willingness to fight that is latent and only asks to express itself." [3] "A conference of youth organisations bringing together 6 countries took place on Sunday 11 September in Paris. [4]

Penelope Duggan

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[1] *l'Anticapitaliste* n° 442, 13 septembre 2018 "[Septembre 1938 : la fondation de la IVe Internationale](#)".

[2] The documents are published on the Marxist Internet Archive [here](#).

[3] This resolution "The Bolshevik-Leninists and the organisation of revolutionary youth" is not published in the Marxist International Archive along with the other documents. This is translated from Pierre Frank's series on the congresses of the Fourth International, Volume 1 "Birth of the Fourth International 1930-40".

[4] The resolution adopted is available here "[Resolution on Youth](#)".