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Fourth International

The archives of the Fourth International at La Contemporaine in Nanterre

- Features -

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La Contemporaine, a French archive centre, library and museum, has recently inaugurated its new building, part of the University of Paris-Nanterre. It offers a wide range of thematic collections on the history of social movements and international revolutionary dynamics. Trotskyist collections are already well represented, with the archives of the Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire and those of Pierre Frank and Michel Pablo available for consultation.

The long-awaited inventory of the archives of the United Secretariat of the Fourth International (USFI) deposited at La Contemporaine has now been completed. It will soon be available online on Calames, the digital catalogue of higher education archives. The archives were donated by the United Secretariat when the Fourth International moved premises in 1993. In the absence of the necessary resources, the processing of these archives had since remained incomplete and consultation of the collection was limited. Work was resumed in 2023, and a total of more than 400 boxes of written archives were carefully classified and described. The collection contains documents dating from the late 1960s to the mid-1990s, and bears witness to the intensity and diversity of political activity over these decades. The comprehensive inventory, with numerous thematic indications, is intended to facilitate activist and academic research on a variety of revolutionary spaces and struggles.

Unpublished sources on the history of the Fourth International

These archives provide information on the activities of the "United Secretariat of the Fourth International", formed in 1963 from the merger of the International Secretariat and a number of organisations that had split ten years earlier, notably the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) of the United States.

The collection contains archives from the main bodies of the Fourth International, i.e. the World Congress, the International Executive Committee (IEC), the United Secretariat and its Bureau. These archives contain a wide variety of documents, enabling us to analyse in depth the activities and debates that took place within the revolutionary organisation. In addition to numerous circulars and minutes of meetings, the collection contains a large amount of correspondence, particularly with various political, trade union and community organisations. They provide useful insights into relations with other revolutionary movements. The archives also contain a remarkable collection of leaflets, brochures and periodicals showing the variety of perspectives and mobilisations undertaken by the member parties of the Fourth International. There are also numerous boxes of documentation and reports, evidence of the painstaking work carried out to gather information and produce political guidelines on various subjects. All this makes it possible to follow the inner workings of the Fourth International, from the internal debates to the drafting of resolutions, right through to the voting and implementation of directives in the sections.

The most original aspect of the collection, however, is the section devoted to relations with the sections. Comprising almost 300 archive boxes, it contains all the documents relating to exchanges with the various organisations in every continent that claimed to be members of the USFI. These boxes, which are organised by country and contain a wealth of thematic and geographical information, tell us about the political life, mobilisations and controversies that animated each of these organisations, as well as their links with the International. The archives also allow us to observe the recomposition of militant forces by country, as certain sections experienced tensions or split up. The distribution of boxes gives an idea of the political weight, intensity of relations and numerical strength of each section. Europe and Latin America are particularly well represented, as are parts of Asia such as India, Japan and Sri Lanka.

On the other hand, other geographical areas remain more marginal, most notably the African continent.

This part of the collection contains a large number of rare documents, in limited print runs, covering many of the political struggles and events of the second half of the 20th century, on all scales. The documentation ranges from rallies against nuclear weapons in India to organisations of the unemployed in Belgium, from the issue of political prisoners in Chile to mobilisations against neo-colonialism in Mauritius, right through to the strikes in Sri Lanka in July 1980. The Fourth International was involved on most of the major political fronts of the period: workers' strikes, anti-colonial struggles, resistance to dictatorships, mobilisations against unemployment and the crisis, campaigns to abolish the debt, struggles against the far right and the environmental movement.

What kind of internationalism?

Diving into the archives of the Fourth International also means understanding how the internationalism defended by the revolutionary organisation was structured in practice. [\[1\]](#)

One of the key elements in the practice of internationalism is the militant press, a tool for circulating information, theories and experiences. It acts as a transmission belt between the different countries involved in the International, enabling resolutions and strategies to be drawn up and different areas of struggle to be compared. In particular, the internal bulletins are an essential resource for understanding in detail the political life of militant groups. At the level of each section, these bulletins provide a wealth of details on current militant events and the internal debates that run through the Fourth International and the organisations that claim to be part of it. They also make it possible to observe the emergence - or disappearance - of certain political issues, as well as the "hot spots" in the debate at any given time. For example, we can trace the debates that presided over the drafting of the 1979 "Women's Resolution", which brought into conflict several perspectives on the relationship between the women's movement and the labour movement.

The proliferation of press titles and pamphlets testifies to the importance of circulating and pooling exchanges as part of internationalist practice. Far from being limited to national borders, this internationalism was also reflected in more specific publications, such as *La Internacional*, aimed at Spanish immigrants in France, and the bulletin of the Arab revolutionary Marxists. This press was sometimes marked by the experience of exile and political clandestinity, particularly in Latin America, as evidenced by the false covers used to conceal the bulletins.

Internationalism was also developed through the many solidarity campaigns led by the organisations of the Fourth International: for Greek exiles, against repression in Chile, and against colonisation in Palestine. These solidarity policies are particularly evident in the archives of the Commissions, whose files reveal a great deal of liaison and investigative work on the ground. They include reports and press files on the political situation in a number of countries, including South Korea, Brazil and the United States. These archives show how political orientations are developed in relation to the sections, and provide information on missions and trips to make contact with revolutionary activists in different countries. However, not all sections played the same role in developing policy. While the French and American sections, in particular, were almost constantly involved in debates and decisions, other organisations remained further removed from the governing bodies. The archives also reveal the letters that went unanswered and the practical and financial difficulties faced by some parties.

Within the perspective of openness and massification, the "Fourth" also studied itself. A number of reports are devoted to the feminisation of the organisation, providing precise information on the number of women in each section and their access - or otherwise - to militant responsibilities. Other internal reports provide interesting details on the average age of activists, their professional background and changes in membership. The archive also

contains records of militant training: courses, training and seminars. These documents bear witness to the growing importance attached to the issue of youth within the organisation, particularly since the 1982 resolution on youth movements in imperialist countries. A number of initiatives were put in place, most notably the “Summer Camps”, which brought together hundreds of young people.

Changes in revolutionary hope

In the 1970s in particular, in connection with the general ferment of revolutionary movements, new Marxist theorisations emerged within the Fourth International, around the texts of Daniel Bensaïd and Ernest Mandel. The collection contains a number of documents that provide a deeper understanding of these developments. They relate to the major issues of the period 1970-1990, from the fall of the USSR to capitalist globalisation and the creation of Europe. Beyond the European context, it is also possible to follow the evolution of revolutionary thought in Latin America, notably through the example of Peru. Hugo Blanco, a major figure in the peasant and indigenous movement, was a long-time sympathiser of the Fourth International. The archives enable us to retrace his career, from his imprisonment in 1963 to his relations with the Fourth International, right up to his distancing from the organisation at the end of the 1980s. In this way, they enable us to grasp the link between the agrarian struggle and the struggle for emancipation. Generally speaking, we can trace the major controversies that ran through the Fourth International. The question of armed struggle was particularly acute in the case of the revolutions in Central America, particularly in Nicaragua. The attitude to be adopted towards events in Poland and Iran was also at the heart of the organisation's debates in the 1980s.

Finally, the gradual integration of new militant fronts into the movement was noticeable. The succession of congresses showed that certain struggles were increasingly being taken into account. The upheaval brought about by the feminist movements of the 1970s was reflected at the 1979 World Congress, where a resolution entitled “Women's liberation and socialist revolution” was adopted. It was also from this date that the ecological question began to be addressed in the official texts of the Fourth International, in the wake of the mobilisations against the nuclear industry. To a lesser extent, material on lesbian and gay liberation struggles appeared later. At the same time, the strategy of the “turn to industry” was also central. From 1980 onwards, the aim was for activists to voluntarily join certain industrial sectors, in order to root the movement more firmly within the working class.

These archives are therefore crucial to understanding the dynamics of the revolutionary movement in the second half of the century. Deepening the work of collecting revolutionary archives is essential for the memory of these struggles. To the 400 boxes presented here must be added 600 boxes of periodicals, also part of the 1993 donation from the Fourth International. This collection, which is still being processed by La Contemporaine, is made up of publications from all the sections.

In order to offer a reflective approach to the collection, la Contemporaine has joined forces with Fanny Gallot, a lecturer at the University of Paris-Est Créteil, to organise a series of seminars devoted to the “international circulation of revolutionary hopes”. The aim of these meetings is to stimulate research into the history of the Fourth International and, more generally, revolutionary organisations. The first session, held on 24 April 2024, was devoted to a presentation of the la Contemporaine's collection, as well as the archives of the Radar website (*Rassembleur, diffuseur les archives révolutionnaires*). [2] Each session also provided an opportunity to interview two ‘great witnesses’ to the history of these movements. The first round table gave the floor to Penelope Duggan and Léon Crémieux, two long-standing activists of the Fourth International and members of its Bureau.

The history of the Fourth International can also be enriched by other resources. The French translation of Livio Maitan's memoirs, for example, offers an intimate yet critical view of the movement from 1975 to 1995. [3] An inventory of the IIRE (International Institute for Research and Education) library holdings has also recently been

completed. [4] The audio-visual archives available online on the Institute's website are also a valuable resource, consisting of a number of recordings, including several seminars given by Daniel Bensaïd.

Preserving and promoting these different materials is particularly important for a better understanding of the history of revolutionary movements, and thus for shedding light on contemporary struggles.

12 June 2024

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[1] See Ludivine Bantigny and Fanny Gallot, [After May 1968 \(France\): The Fourth International and revolutionary hope - Analyses, strategies and projects](#)".

[2] See the site: <http://association-radar.org>

[3] The English translation: Livio Maitan, "Memoirs of a critical communist - Towards a history of the Fourth International", Resistance Books-IIRE-Merlin Books, London 2019.

[4] See the resources on the site: <https://www.iire.org>