

The Workers' New International

An old Internationalist

5 November 1902

The grandiose workers' movement that is emerging across the whole of the civilized world and the ever-more apparent need for solidarity between workers in every land so that they may stand up to the progressive internationalization of capitalism inevitably had to plant and have planted in the heads of many the idea of establishing a new International Working Men's Association.¹¹³ And the international Federations established between the workers from certain trades, such as the fossil coal miners and transport workers are themselves a step in the direction of a general union of all workers conscious of their class interests.

It might not be without its uses at this point to remind ourselves of the lessons of past experience, scrutinizing what the mission of the old International was and the reasons that led to its demise.

The life of the renowned International Working Men's Association was brief but glorious. Born into a time similar to the present, a time of labor awakening, it died quickly and genuinely succeeded in shaking the world. It weaned the workers away from following bourgeois parties and endowed them with a class consciousness, a program of their own and a policy of their own; it broached and debated all the most essential social issues and devised the whole of modern socialism, which some writers then claimed was the product of their own heads; it set the mighty quaking, roused the ardent hopes of the oppressed, inspired sacrifices and heroism... and just as it most looked fated to lay capitalist society to rest, it disintegrated and perished.

How come?

The break-up of the International is conventionally ascribed either to persecution or to the personal frictions that emerged within its ranks, or to the manner of its organization, or to all of the above.

I am of a different mind.

Persecution would have been powerless to break up the Association and often fostered its popularity and growth.

The personal frictions were actually only a secondary concern and, as long as the movement was vibrant, were inclined rather to spur the various factions and most prominent personalities into action.

The manner of its organization, having grown centralistic and authoritarian thanks to the handiwork of the General Council in London and especially of Karl Marx who was the driving

force behind it, actually resulted in the International's splitting into two branches: but the federalist, anarchist branch that included the federations from Spain, Italy, francophone Switzerland, Belgium, southern France, and individual sections from other countries did not long outlive the authoritarian branch. It will be argued that even within the anarchist branch the authoritarian blight endured and that, there too, a few individuals were able to do and undo in the name of the masses who passively followed them. And that is the truth. But it is worth noting that in this instance, the authoritarianism was unintended and did not derive from the organizational format nor from the principles informing it, but was the natural and logical consequence of the phenomenon to which I chiefly ascribe the break-up of the Association and which I am about to spell out.

Within the International, founded as a federation of resistance societies in order to provide a broader base for the economic struggle against capitalism, two schools of thought very quickly surfaced, one authoritarian and the other libertarian; these split the Internationalists into two hostile factions, which, at least in their extreme wings, were associated with the names of Marx and Bakunin.

One group was out to turn the Association into a disciplined body under the command of a Central Committee, whereas the others wanted a free federation of autonomous groups; one group was out to bring the masses in line in order to do it good by force, according to the hoary authoritarian superstition, whereas the others were out to raise them up and get them to set themselves free. But the inspirations behind both factions had one distinguishing feature in common, and that is that each side passed on their thoughts to the body of the membership, reckoning that they had converted them when they had actually only secured their pretty much unthinking support.

Thus we saw the International quickly turning mutualist, collectivist, communist, revolutionary, and anarchist at a rate of development documented in the proceedings of its congresses and in the periodical press, but which simply could not have been reflective of any actual and simultaneous evolution in the vast majority of members.

Since there were no separate agencies for the economic struggle and the political and ideological struggle, and every Internationalist did all his thinking and fighting activity within the International, the inevitable outcome was either that the most advanced individuals would have had to stoop to and stay at the level of the slow-moving, backward mass or, as happened, stride ahead and proceed on their way with the illusion that the masses understood and was following them.

These more advanced elements pondered, debated, discovered the needs of the people; they framed the vague intuitions of the masses into concrete programs; they affirmed socialism; they affirmed anarchy; they divined and prepared for the future—but they killed the Association: the sword had worn out the sheath.

Not that I am saying that this was a bad thing. Had the International remained a straightforward federation for resistance and not been buffeted by the storm of ideas and partisan passions, it might have survived as the English Trade Unions have, as things useless and perhaps even harmful to the cause of human emancipation. It was better that it should have perished and tossed its fertile seeds to the winds.

But I hold that today the old-school International cannot and should not be remade. Today there are thriving socialist and anarchist movements; the illusion and error that sustained the old International are no longer possible today.

The factors that ultimately killed off the old International—namely, the frictions between authoritarians and libertarians on the one hand and the gulf between the thinkers and the semi-conscious masses driven only by interests, on the other—are likely today to thwart the birth and growth of a new International, should it be, as the first one was, simultaneously a society for economic resistance, a workshop of ideas, and a revolutionary association.

The new International can only serve as an association designed to marshal all workers (which is to say, as many as it can), without regard to social, political, or religious outlook, in the fight against capitalism. Thus it should be neither individualist, nor collectivist, nor communist; it must be neither monarchist nor republican, nor anarchist; and should be neither religious nor anti-religious. It should have a single shared thought upon which entry into it is conditional: a willingness to fight the bosses.

Hatred of the bosses is the beginning of salvation.

If later on, enlightened by propaganda, educated by the struggle in tracing the causes of woes and searching for radical remedies, and encouraged by the example of the revolutionary parties, the bulk of the membership were to burst into socialist, anarchist, and anti-religious assertions so much the better; since the progress would then be real rather than illusory.

Of course, it is not that I would not like to see the new International Working Men's Association be socialist and anarchist; I would just like it to be genuinely so.

And for that to be a possibility, it needs to happen freely and gradually, as consciences expand and understanding spreads.

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