

The history of the federalist IWMA

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The “first” International Workingmen’s Association was founded in 1864 through the initiative of workers themselves but also with some participation of “politicians”. Organizationally, it was built as an association of workers’ unions. According to the Statutes, there was no centralism. The workers of the same profession or area formed a section, all sections of any country formed a federation, and every country federation sent delegates to the General Council.

This Council was purely a coordinating body — it could not issue any decrees, instructions, etc. It was to analyze disputes and misunderstandings between the sections. All sections and federations maintained their autonomy. The supreme body of the IWMA was the annual congress of delegates of the sections and federations, and only it could discuss all matters relating to the association and the international labor movement. It could elect the Council, alter or amend the charter etc.

The IWMA was divided between partisans of the primacy of political action for achieving political power (supporters of Marx, the Social Democrats, Blanquists etc.) and their opponents (including Anarchists). The contradictions between them grew and eventually resulted in open conflict. In the early 1870s, supporters of Marx tried to capture the International. Having the General Council under their control, they called a conference of the IWMA in London and manipulated the representation of sections. The constructed majority renounced previous federalist norms and adopted centralist organizational changes with executive power of the General Council. Simultaneously, a resolution was made that the political struggle for power and the founding of “workers” political parties were necessary.

The split of the “first” IWMA

These decisions were rejected by the majority of the Swiss, Spanish, Italian, Belgian and French sections. The Jura federation adopted an anti-authoritarian constitution and challenged the decision about the new prerogatives of the General Council as “hierarchical and authoritarian”. The Swiss, Italian and Spanish sections insisted on holding the next Congress in Switzerland, where it was easier for most of the delegates to come. But Marx and his supporters from General Council insisted on the organization of the Congress in The Hague in 1872.

Italian sections protested and called for a global anti-authoritarian Congress in Neuchatel. But Marx had done everything to ensure the profitable composition of Congress. So, he tried to come to terms with Blanquists, promising them seats in the General Council. Blanqui represented the majority of the organized French refugees, members of the IWMA. The anti-authoritarian wing of the French section was defeated along with the Paris Commune, in which they played a crucial role. In addition, Marx invited all his friends to the Congress as mandated by loyal sections. The manipulated and artificial majority in The Hague confirmed the decisions of London and declared Bakunin expelled from the International.

The decisions of the Hague Congress provoked outrage not only among the sections and supporters of Bakunin in Switzerland, but also among the French, Italian, Belgian and Spanish sections. The Jura Federation became a center of discontent, and around it, a libertarian ideology was formed, calling for a socio-economic system of administration liberated from any authority, centralization, and the state.

The Congress of Saint Imier and founding of Federalist IWMA

The Jura Federation organized an extraordinary congress of the IWMA at St. Imier in September of 1872. The delegates from the Italian and the Spanish federations, from some the French and two American sections attended. The Congress recognized the activities of the Hague Congress as illegal and accused the General Council of abuse of authority. The Treaty of friendship and solidarity between the federations and anti-authoritarian groups was adopted. It said that unity must be based not on an artificial organization of the central authorities, but on the identity of the interests of the proletarians of different countries and on the voluntary union of federations. The participating federations pledged to aid each other without direct links to any central authority and to support each other in the fight against any encroachments on their rights.

The Congress rejected the struggle for political power because “any political organization cannot be anything other than the organization of power in favor of a particular class and to the detriment of the masses of the proletariat, and therefore the proletariat, if it wants to seize political power, inevitably would have to become a dominant and exploiting class”. The Congress declared the goal of the International the “destruction of all political power through a general strike” because the “destruction of all political power is the first duty of the proletariat”, and any “revolutionary” government is no less dangerous to it than the present.

In autumn 1872, in Spain, Belgium and Great Britain, the conferences of sections were held. Most delegates also spoke out against the manipulations of the General Council and for an alliance with the Jura Federation. In response, the General Council decided on May 30, 1873 to exclude all federations, sections and individuals who rejected the Hague decision, that is, first of all, members of St. Imier, as well as the Belgian and Dutch federations.

It was a split of the IWMA into 2 different organizations. The centralist organization, which went for Marx, consisted at first mainly of German, Austrian, Danish, Dutch, part of the American and a minority of the British sections. The International of Marx exiled in the USA and then ceased to exist. The national social democratic parties soon emerged in its place. However, the Federalist IWMA flourished initially. It included the Swiss, Belgian, Spanish, Italian, some American, British and Dutch sections.

The development of the Federalist IWMA

In September 1873, the 6th Congress of the IWMA was convened in Geneva at the initiative of the Jura Federation. Attended by delegates from 7 national federations (England, Belgium, Holland, Switzerland, Spain, Italy and France), this Congress revised the statutes of the International, announced the full autonomy of sections, eliminated the General Council and replaced it with a Bureau without any executive power and with only technical coordination functions. The function of the Bureau was transferred to one of the federations. The Congress called for a general strike, which “is nothing other than the social revolution”, and urged the workers to unite in international trade unions, able to organize a strike in their profession.

The 7th Congress of the IWMA was held in September 1874 in Brussels. At this time, the Italian federation, following the recommendations of Bakunin, began organizing popular revolts. In contrast, the Belgians under Cesar de Paepe began to gradually evolve toward rapprochement with social democracy, which subsequently led to the collapse of the IWMA.

The delegates at the Brussels Congress were sent by the Spanish, Swiss, Belgian, Italian and some German and French sections. The most important of the topics discussed was the question about “the organization of public services of the future society”. Two different projects were presented: from the Belgian federation (De Paepe) and from the Geneva section. Both proposals were identical in the basic ideas: the center of social life in the future society should be the free commune rather than a centralized state. De Paepe, however, offered to preserve the unity of the state as a body in charge of collective works of major and general significance, although most of the decisions should be taken at the base and decentralized.

The Congress called for the elimination of the state, but the resolution was controversial: each federation or party in each country can decide which political action may be necessary or helpful for the social revolution. It was an obvious compromise with the Belgian federation which became more reformist. In contrast, the Italian federation was in favor of direct action. The next Congress of 1875 in Barcelona did not take place because of the repression in the Spain.

The Federalist IWMA developed unevenly. The Spanish section flourished, but the attempts to extend the International in other countries failed. The escalation of repressions forced people to search for new tactical ways. The differences between the Anarchists and the Belgian collectivists intensified. British trade unionists and some other sections separated from IWMA.

The 8th Congress of the International was held in Bern in October of 1876. The delegates from Belgium, Spain, Holland, Italy and Switzerland arrived, the French involved indirectly. The meetings were accompanied by differences between the supporters of mass action and of “propaganda by deed”. De Paepe said the IWMA no longer existed. He proposed to organize a world congress for socialist unification of all the former sections of IWMA, irrespective of their programs, tactics, and views. This proposal was unfortunately accepted.

The desire for compromise with the reformists killed the IWMA

The 9th Congress of the IWA in Verviers in 1877 brought together 11 delegations from Belgium, France, Italy, Russia, Switzerland, and indirectly from Greece, Egypt and Uruguay. Some resolutions on the socialization of property, the elimination of wage labor and a pact of solidarity were adopted. The representatives of the Federations of Italy, France, Germany, Switzerland, Egypt and Greece were only able to agree on the condemnation of a tendency to agree with supporters of political parties because “all parties form a reactive mass; it is necessary to fight them all”.

Thus, there could be no agreement with the 35 delegates from the Marxist and authoritarian socialists who gathered in Ghent at the “World Socialist Congress”. The delegates from the Congress of Verviers came but they were in the minority. Most who came were socialists, Statists, and they forced a resolution of the political struggle and the formation of political parties of the proletariat. The Belgian and the Dutch federation left the IWMA and joined the Social-Democracy. From now on the path of the authoritarian socialists (Social Democrats) and the anarchists finally dispersed.

All new attempts to revive the IWMA failed until 1922. Some were ruined by the focus of the Anarchists on the “propaganda by deed”, a form of insurrectionism of a minority which isolated Anarchists from working masses (the Congress of London, 1881). Other endeavors failed because of new attempts to reconcile with the Reformists. In 1896, the Anarchists were expelled from the Congress of the 2nd International. Only a clear and visible crisis of reformism of social democracy and the birth of a new labor movement of revolutionary syndicalism based on

extra-parliamentary direct action could revive the idea of an international association of anti-authoritarian workers.

In 1907, the International Anarchist Congress, and in 1913, the international conference of revolutionary syndicalists were held. The continuation of this process was interrupted by the war, but then it resumed. For a time it seemed that the Russian Bolsheviks had broken with the statism of social democracy and the prospect of an imaginary reunification of anarchists, syndicalists and revolutionary Marxists loomed on the horizon.

A number of anarchists and syndicalists even joined the Comintern and then discussed the possibility to join the Red Trade Union International. But very quickly it became clear that the Bolsheviks were the same Statists as the Social Democrats, if not worse, that they oppressed the independent workers' and peasants' movement and sought to subject the workers' organizations throughout the world to its parties. After this, a break with them was inevitable. In December 1922, the Congress of anarcho-syndicalist labor unions in Berlin decided to recreate the First International, the actual IWA. Since then, it continues to exist and underwent many severe trials.

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