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**Fourth International**

# **A changed situation**

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**In February the Fourth International's world congress will meet in Europe, bringing together hundreds of revolutionary socialists from five continents to assess the tasks of Marxists in the coming years. The congress meets in a world situation which has changed dramatically since the conference was planned just a few years ago, a change which has sharply impacted on the role and profile of the Fourth International itself. Briefly, the following factors sum up this change:**

[[https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/07\\_trotsky.jpg](https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/07_trotsky.jpg)]

– The collapse of the 1990s 'dot.com' economic bubble in the US and other advanced countries, and the slide of the world economy towards the worst recession since 1974-5. This turnaround was anticipated by the economic collapse in Asia in 1997, and the financial blow-out in Russia in 1998. Â· Linked to these processes, developing economic crisis and even financial collapse in a series of third world countries, particularly in Latin America, where the economic and social catastrophe in Argentina has been followed by one in Uruguay, and may soon be repeated in Brazil.

– The response to this by the ruling class internationally in trying to deepen 'neo-liberalisation' - attacks on workers conditions and welfare rights - something impacting particularly strongly in Europe (for example in Italy and the UK), but also in the United States.

– Bitter counter-offensives launched by the working class and the oppressed against these attacks, noticeable particularly in the present wave of workers' struggles in many European countries, and again in the huge mobilizations against the destruction of living standards in Argentina.

– The growth of the mass movement against neo-liberal globalization, starting with Seattle at the end of 1999, and culminating with the 90,000-strong World Social Forum and the 60,000-strong European Social Forum, both in 2002. In several countries this mass movement has fed into a powerful anti-war movement. Without doubt this movement has been decisive in changing the situation of the left internationally.

– The effects of September 2001 on world politics, particularly in the launching of the US 'war on terrorism', an attempt to reorganize world politics to the right under US leadership.

– The accession to government of a number of left-inclined or populist governments in Latin America (Venezuela, Brazil), representing a massive rejection of neo-liberalism continent-wide.

These developments have substantially changed the place of the Fourth International. In the last three years militants from its sections have found themselves centrally involved in decisive mobilizations, often in leadership positions.

Particularly noteworthy has been the role of the Italian comrades of the Bandiera Rossa current in the Party of Communist Refoundation, many of whom played a vital role in the mobilisations for the Genoa demonstrations and the Florence-based European Social Forum; the role of the Brazilian comrades in developing the influence of the Brazilian Workers' Party, including their decisive enabling role in the World Social Forum, thanks to their strong position in Porto Alegre; and the role of the Ligue Communiste Revolutionnaire in France in leading the mobilizations against the far right candidate Le Pen, resulting in the strong electoral showing of the LCR presidential candidate Olivier Besancenot.

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These three examples are just part of a significant turnaround for the FI, which has in many countries begun to recruit new members, sometimes in large numbers, and often among young people. This political and organizational renewal has helped bring to an end a period of political and organizational difficulty.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s the FI went through a series of sharp internal debates, which resulted in some organizational attrition. Such debates were inevitable in view of the huge change in world politics, and especially the giant defeats of the workers movement internationally, symbolized by the collapse of the Soviet Union, the launching of the first Gulf war by the US, and the electoral rout of the Sandinistas.

In the situation of widespread demoralization and pessimism in the workers' movement and the Left - something already dramatically receding - it was difficult for any political trend rooted in the real world to maintain its bearings, against the twin dangers of demoralized collapse on the one hand and the wishful thinking of rote sectarianism on the other.

If the FI has been able to steer through that period, it was above all by maintaining its openness to the mass movement, its insistence on the efficacy of the united front, and its championing of the mass movements of the oppressed. This was at a time when the usefulness of this approach was not always obvious, and when closed-in sectarian propagandism of the Lutte Ouvrière type sometimes seemed more effective. Once the mass anti-globalization movement developed, the relationship of forces in the revolutionary left began to change.

## Key axes of debate

Despite the changes referred to above, the key documents for the world congress reject any short-term euphoria and locate the present period in the light of the giant historical changes which have taken place, notably the rise to power of neo-liberalism, the historic defeats of the workers' movement, the collapse of Stalinism and the abject ideological and political collapse of social democracy. The document on 'The role and tasks of the Fourth International' insists that the rebuilding of the workers and popular movements, and of the political Left, is only beginning and that we face a prolonged battle.

"The historical mutation of the workers and social movements has only reached an initial phase. We face a long period of rebuilding. The turn in the world situation has broken a prevailing sense of political powerlessness and fatalism in activist circles. Failing a historical, emblematic event resulting in a spectacular upheaval in the international situation, the reorganization of the anti-capitalist/anti-imperialist social movement will take the form of a series of social and political experiences, which can reunify the exploited and oppressed layers, today fragmented and divided, around social choices and choices of demands; reconstitute the militant teams and militant cadre in the social movements; and develop a 'transitional' anti-capitalist programme with global implications on the basis of capitalism's current contradictions and the activity of the exploited and oppressed classes."

Moreover: "We find ourselves in a new, very particular situation. The working class is still in a position of weakness, on the defensive, but the radical left is recovering and regaining the political initiative on a grand scale. Its goal is to affirm a bold, anti-capitalist, social and political left that aims at influencing and orienting struggles and mobilisations."

The document makes a further series of key judgements:

– That it is vital to fuse together the different elements of the opposition to neo-liberal globalization, most notably the global justice movement and the trade union struggles against austerity and neo-liberal 'modernization'.

As the document puts it: "The movement against capitalist globalization is a strong lever in the renewal of the workers' and social movements, and the development of a new emancipatory perspective. From the start of the new cycle, militant, radical forces (political, social, trade-union, civic and intellectual) outside the control of the traditional workers' movement bureaucracies have been playing an integral role and even taken the initiative...A fusion has become possible between a new, young generation, bearing a re-politicization and a new radicalism, and activists who are still active from the experienced generations of the 1968 and 1985-95 cycles.

– That the centre of the renewal of the left is the fight to build broad anti-capitalist parties:

"Our goal is to form proletarian parties that are anti-capitalist, internationalist, ecologist and feminist; are broad, pluralistic and representative are deeply attached to the social question and steadfastly put forth the immediate demands and social aspirations of the world of labour; express workers' militancy, women's desire for emancipation, the youth revolt and international solidarity, and take up the fight against all forms of injustice; base their strategy on the extra parliamentary struggle and the proletariat's self-activity and self-organization; and take a clear stand for expropriation of capital and (democratic, self-managed) socialism."

– That a decisive pivot between the global justice movement and the new left formations which have emerged - like Communist Refoundation and the Scottish Socialist party - is the fight for militant, class struggle trade unionism. It is the terrain of the direct working class struggle against neo-liberalism that the essential background for a resurgence of the social movements and the emergence of militant left parties and alliances is created. The document declares, "The Fourth International will pay increased attention to the world of labour."

## Programmatic renewal

The Congress will mark an important stage in a long process of programmatic renewal which the Fourth International has been undertaking since the mid-1980s. The starting point of this process of reflection has been that the foundation programme of the movement - the 1938 'transitional programme' - could not possibly answer all the questions posed all the questions posed by 60 years of historical development, the emergence of new social movements and other innovative political movements not foreseen in the 1930s, and indeed the results of decades of research from within the Marxist and other progressive movements. Indeed this process had already started with the adoption in 1979 of a major programmatic resolution on 'Socialist revolution and women's liberation' which stated the FI's commitment to the necessity of building an autonomous women's movement before, during and after the revolutionary process, and the adoption in 1985 of a resolution on 'Socialist democracy and the dictatorship of the proletariat' affirming the necessity and desirability of pluralist expression of the oppressed and exploited. The programmatic resolutions proposed at this congress are 'Ecology and socialism' which attempts to lay out a revolutionary Marxist analysis of the causes of ecological disaster and a long-term programme for defence of the environment. A resolution 'On lesbian and gay liberation' building on the gains of the 1979 resolution affirms the indissolubility of free expression of sexuality and human emancipation. In all these cases the FI's commitment is not simply a programmatic one but a commitment to actively build the movements.

Congress documents also reflect a discussion that has been going on for about 15 years on the role of the Fourth International itself. On the one hand there is widespread agreement that the ambitions and claims of the International at the time of its foundation - that it was, or would soon become, the 'world party of socialist revolution' and indeed it was the only authentically revolutionary current - cannot be sustained today. Congress documents set the task of the FI as helping to bring into existence a 'mass revolutionary international', which could only be composed of much more diverse political forces than the FI itself. On the other hand it is clear that the usefulness of the FI as a grouping of active organizations, grouped around central programmatic reference points and with a wealth of experiences in the mass movements internationally, has been vindicated in the last few years, especially in the development of the

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global justice movement, but also in playing a role, sometimes a vital role, in the creation of broad left formations which can help to overcome the crisis of political representation of the working class and the oppressed - thus demonstrating a continuing need to strengthen this grouping that is in no way counterposed to the battle to create broader formations.

[[https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/09\\_ukdemo.jpg](https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/09_ukdemo.jpg)]

Moreover, it is important to remember that the current stage of the dramatic emergence of the global justice movement and the re-building of the workers movement and the left, does not come out of nothing and did not simply start with Seattle. As the document on the World Situation explains:

"This turning point did not come out of thin air. It was the result of an accumulation of discontents, rising consciousness, a new spirit of solidarity, and major struggles, albeit ones that all ended in impasses, setbacks or defeats: in the US, the long pilots' and UPS strikes; in Europe, national or sectoral general strikes in Britain (the miners, 1984-85), Denmark (1986 general strike), Belgium (in 1986, then in public services in 1987, a general strike in 1993, a protracted teachers' strike spread over two years), Spanish state (general strikes in the early 1990s) and Italy (1992 and 1994). In Latin America Ecuador, Brazil and Bolivia, and in Asia, South Korea and Indonesia, experienced mass movements and major workers' struggles.

The strike movement against the Juppe government in France (winter 1995) was the first sign of this change. With the European March of the unemployed, casualized and excluded to Amsterdam (June 1997), there began to be a change in the state of mind of activist layers in France and the rest of Europe. Other direct initiatives, already underway, such as the campaign for cancelling the third world debt, certain very radical peasant movements (Brazil, India...) added to this. The confrontation in Seattle in November 1999, opened the road to the 'movement against globalization' which came together in Porto Alegre in the first World Social Forum, moved by a radical, internationalist and potentially anti-capitalist spirit, carried by a new generation. This spirit of radical internationalism on a feminist basis was also clearly expressed by the 2000 World March for Women, the preparation of which predated Seattle.

In Genoa, for the first time, this movement was able to combine with radical sectors of the mass trade-union movement in a direct confrontation with the government and its neo-liberal policies. Then it once again was broadened and strengthened. After the 11th September it was able, in specific forms depending on the country, to transform itself rapidly into an anti-war movement with hundreds of thousands of demonstrators throughout the world against the imperialist war in Afghanistan. It was also one of the sources of political and organizational support for the Palestinian people, crushed by the Israeli state."

The direct 'parent' of the post-Seattle global justice movement was the decade-long campaign against third world debt, with successive mobilisations at G7, IMF and World Bank conference. Throughout this it was the sections of the Fourth International which were often the backbone of these mobilizations, at a time when other far left forces were simply not interested.

The FI is a significant factor in the evolution in a host of movements, alliances and movements worldwide, and the very existence of important structures, for example the regular conferences of the European anti-capitalist left, is due to the conscious activity of the Fourth International.

As the document on the role and tasks of the FI puts it: "the situation of the FI, as an organisation, can be defined as:

– an international organisation of revolutionaries based on the method of the Transitional Programme and the strategy and tactics flowing from it;

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- an unrivalled body of programmatic references, collective and individual political experiences with a capacity for elaboration and reflection particularly on issues such women's oppression, gay and lesbian oppression, issues which have been little developed by other revolutionary currents, with sections in several countries based on the needs of the working class of the region;
- an organisation which respects the autonomy of the mass movements and their democracy and which practices pluralism of tendencies within it;
- and thus a living tool... The fact that we have preserved this structure and that it is undoubtedly the only international grouping of its kind is a precious asset in the new political period as new activist generations emerge."

## New challenges

While saluting the new wave of struggles and noting the vital role of the global justice movement, the conference documents are extremely sober in their assessment of the world situation. Not only is neo-liberalism still the dominant ideology and practice in the main capitalist states, but to this decades-long assaults on the conditions of working people has now been added the threat of permanent imperialist war.

Militants of the movement face a whole host of responsibilities in the post-conference situation, notably:

- Building the broadest possible anti-war movement against the war drive of imperialism.
- Continuing the fight to create new anti-capitalist parties and to build those which already exist.
- Helping to rebuild the workers' movement and to fight for class struggle trade unionism, putting revolutionary marxists at the centre of the massive round of workers struggles developing.
- Arming the mass movement to confront social catastrophe in Latin America, and especially preparing the giant political struggles which are certain in Brazil after the election of Lula as president.
- Continuing the development of the global justice movement, and helping to build the strongest possible solidarity between movements in the 'North' and 'South' through the World Social Forum and the associated continent-based forums.
- Aiding the rebuilding of the mass movements of the oppressed - of women, lesbians and gay men, indigenous peoples and others - which will re-emerge with renewed force in the next period.

This is a massive agenda, and a massive set of responsibilities. Conference documents note that to do that - with all the international, as well as national, tasks it implies it is necessary to strengthen the organisation and co-ordination of the FI in the next period. And on a national level "our main problem is not in general sectarianism, but a kind of political and organisational behaviour that undervalues or dilutes revolutionary Marxist organization." To carry out its giant agenda the Fourth International aims to strengthen its international organization, strengthen the profile of its sections and ensure that (something already happening in numerous countries) the radicalization of young people results in a renewal of its leadership and cadre.