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15th World Congress

A Congress of Optimism and Renewal

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The 15th World Congress of the Fourth International which met in early 2003 recorded a much-changed situation - in world politics and the International itself - compared with the previous Congress in 1995.

In the early-mid 1990s the world situation was still marked by the successive defeats of the international workers movement by neoliberalism, the collapse of the Soviet Union and the so-called 'end of Communism', and the drastic effects which this combination of factors had on the organisation and consciousness of the workers' and popular movements. This inevitably had serious negative effects on the organisations of the far left, despite the opportunities provided by the semi-collapse of Stalinism and the discrediting of social democracy, thanks to its complete prostration before neo-liberalism.

Even more, in the mid-1990s triumphant capitalism seemed in the middle of a substantial boom, reinforcing the ideological confidence of its ideologues and demoralising the Left even more.

By 2003 the whole situation had changed, and it was these profound changes - creating a novel and unstable situation - which were the centrepiece of the deliberations of the Congress. Key documents discussed noted:

– The 'dot.com' boom has gone into reverse, starting in 1997-8 with the financial meltdowns in Asia and Russia and leading to the stock market crashes of 2001, and what is now a worldwide recession from which there seems little prospect of escape. In turn, this has helped undermine the credibility of neoliberalism, which faced with disasters like Enron and WorldCom in the United States, has suffered deep ideological defeats.

– Announcing itself with the anti-World Trade Organisation demonstrations in Seattle at the end of 1999, the Global Justice movement has sent shockwaves around the world, winning legions of young people to draw anti-capitalist or anti-big business conclusions - a new radicalisation in which the forces of revolutionary marxism have played a significant role. In retrospect it can be seen that the preconditions for this were established by preceding events of resistance, above all the emergence of the Zapatista resistance movement in the Mexican state of Chiapas in 1994. A major area of concern for the Congress was the question, 'how do we utilise this new movement for global justice to renovate, rebuild and dynamise the workers movement into a new spirit of resistance?'

– If the imperialist world system faces prolonged economic difficulties and redoubled resistance, it in turn has become more violent and dangerous than ever. The Congress met in the run-up to war in Iraq, when the Bush-Blair axis faced a totally unprecedented anti-war movement, which on just one day - April 15 - resulted in more than 10 million anti-war protestors on the streets.

– While this new radicalisation is a major positive outcome, enabling radical forces worldwide to break out of the cycle of defeat and demoralisation, it takes place within an overall world situation where neoliberalism remains the 'religion of the bourgeoisie' and is in the ascendant, constantly attempting to impose new defeats on the historic gains of the workers movement. In 2003 a major area of struggle against the neoliberal agenda emerged in several European states on the question of pension rights.

– Very importantly for the International, due to the deep unpopularity of the neoliberal right in Latin America, a new wave of popular struggles comes together with the election of left and populist governments - notably those of Lucio Guttierrez in Ecuador, Hugo Chavez in Venezuela and, most important of all, the Workers Party-dominated

government of Luis Ignacio da Silva ('Lula') in Brazil.

– Thanks to the prolonged degeneration and crisis of social democracy and Stalinism, for around a decade now a series of broad leftist or anti-capitalist parties, fronts, alliances and movements have emerged, which constitute a formidable factor in the historic process of ideological and organisational renovation of the left. In a number of countries (Italy, Portugal, France, Brazil, Scotland and others) Fourth Internationalists participate in these regroupments and in some places are part of the leaderships.

The very difficult situation of the late 1980s and early 1990s provoked some sharp internal debates, which were a factor in a certain organisational attrition in the parties of the International - most of them stagnated, or even declined. These debates often came down to issues related to the role, the usefulness and the self-identity of a world regroupment of marxist activists like the Fourth International. At the 2003 world congress these debates seem to have been largely overcome, reflected in the strong consensus on major issues.

Not surprisingly, a significant factor in this has been a number of very positive political experiences, for example the electoral success of the LCR's presidential candidate Olivier Besancenot in the 2002 presidentials, and the vital role played by Brazilian and Italian revolutionary marxists in the World Social Forums in Sao Paolo, and the European Social Forum in Florence respectively.

The ability of the Fourth International to survive the years of defeats, and to come through relatively unscathed, was related to the implantation of its sections in the social movements, their policy of systematic united front and their ability to understand that the high tide of neoliberalism would eventually wane. Nonetheless these attributes had a price in the relative weakening of some sections against nationally-based, sectarian and dogmatic organisations, which were immune to, and often seemed to prosper from, defeats of the workers movement. Once the political situation changed, the relationship of forces in the far changed with it, in the main to the benefit of the FI sections.

One of the most important features of this change has been a limited, but significant, renewal of the organisation's leadership and cadre teams by a younger generation, who came into politics in the 1990s. There is still much to do on this front.

The Fifteenth Congress documents basically define the International as an indispensable tool for the renewal of the world workers movement and popular forces towards the emergence of a new mass revolutionary internal. As the document on the tasks of the International puts it, the International is "a living tool, but a very unstable one given the weakness of its parts and the difficulty of rebuilding a coordination and leadership structure corresponding to its activist reality. 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."

The mutation over time in the self-definition of the International is paralleled by a prolonged effort at programmatic renewal. This Congress adopted, for the first time, documents on the ecological crisis and lesbian and gay liberation. Of course, activism on these issues has been a feature of Fourth International organisations for more than two decades, but this is the first attempt at a systematic programmatic codification of these issues. Programmatic renewal is a process which is ongoing. Its sources are twofold.

First, since the programmatic foundations of the International was laid down in the late 1930s, immense advances in human knowledge have taken place which enable us to better understand, for example, the origins of women's oppression and its interaction with modern capitalism.

Second, vast social and economic changes worldwide, and a plethora of new social movements, have changed the

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constellation of struggle and resistance to capitalism, out of all recognition compared with the pre-war period.

It is without question that sections of the revolutionary marxist movement, during long periods of isolation and marginal political existence, fetishised their programmatic inheritance into a reified object to be defended against all comers. While loyalty to basic values of anti-capitalist, revolutionary intransigence has been essential, progress now demands programmatic renewal. Without it marxist organisations will fall into self-imposed marginalisation and irrelevance.

If the 15th Congress met under the sign of organisational and political renewal, there was no complacency about the scale of the tasks to be achieved. Given the scope of the defeats inflicted by imperialism from the late 1970s onwards, the task of rebuilding the workers and popular movements, and turning the still defensive struggles into substantial long-term victories, remains immense. This task goes hand-in-hand with politically renewing the left of the workers movement, a task still in its infancy - despite the significant breakthrough represented by organisations like Rifondazione Comunista and the Scottish Socialist party. The Congress set the goal of attempting the highest possible degree of fusion between the vanguard of the workers movement and the new activists of movements against neoliberal globalisation, as a key instrument for deepening this process.

Finally, the Congress debated the need - as a precondition for advancing the above two goals - to renew and strengthen the organisations of the International itself. It is only by revolutionary marxist organisations combining all three tasks that significant progress can be made.