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Fourth International

The Fourth International is 80 years old!

- Features -

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On the 26 October the International Institute for Research and Education in Amsterdam and the Fourth International organised a [public meeting](#) in the IIRE in Amsterdam commemorating the eightieth anniversary of the founding of the Fourth International.

Michael Löwy was the speaker. We reproduce here an edited version of his contribution. The audio recoding is available [here](#).

Birth of the international left-wing opposition

The Russian left-wing opposition had supporters in different countries, but it was from 1929, when Trotsky from his exile in Turkey sent a letter to the members of the Opposition, that it organized itself into an international network. A first international conference of Bolshevik Leninists (the term chosen to designate this movement) was held in Paris in April 1930, and established a small international secretariat (Kurt Landau - murdered by the Stalinists in Spain in 1937, Alfred Rosmer, Léon Sedov). Another conference was held in Copenhagen in 1932, with the presence of Trotsky, and a another in February 1933, which approved an 11-point resolution, building on the legacy of the first four Communist International (CI) congresses. Until then, the opposition's orientation had been that of a regeneration of the CI. It was after Hitler's victory, without resistance on the part of the German CP, which had refused, during these decisive years, any policy of antifascist united front, that the decision was taken, in an international Plenum in the summer of 1933, to take the road to rupture, by building a new International. At that time, August 1933, an international conference of opposition to Stalinism met in Paris, which issued a document known as the "Declaration of the Four": the Internationalist Communist League (Trotsky's supporters), the SAP (German Socialist Workers' Party) and two Dutch organizations, which would soon unite under the name RSAP (Revolutionary Socialist Workers Party), led by Henk Sneevliet (shot by the Nazis during the war). Unfortunately, this initiative had no follow-up, and when the first conference for the Fourth International met in Geneva in July 1936, only Trotskyists participated. However, this conference considered that the conditions were not yet in place to proclaim the new International.

Foundation of the Fourth International

It was therefore in September 1938, in Alfred Rosmer's house in Périgny in the Paris suburbs, that the Fourth International was founded. In tragic circumstances: Rudolf Klement and Leon Sedov, who were in charge of preparing the Congress, had just been assassinated by the GPU. And among the participants in the clandestine meeting, a Russian, Mark Zborowski, called "Etiennne", an undercover agent of the GPU....

It must be said that Trotsky had not abandoned the idea of a broader International. In a letter of that time to Marceau Pivert, he wrote: "The Bolshevik-Leninists consider themselves as a fraction of the International that is being built. They are ready to work hand in hand with the other truly revolutionary factions." [1] The PSOP and the POUM wanted to send observers, but for reasons of clandestinity, this was not done.

Congress participants come from eleven countries, but there were affiliated organizations in 28 countries. Among those present at this Congress were several French (Pierre Naville, Yvan Craipeau), North Americans (Max Schachtmann, James P. Cannon), Belgians (Leon Lesoil), Brazilians (Mario Pedrosa), Greeks (Michel Raptis, called "Pablo")...

The Founding Congress adopted an essential document, which still remains a reference for revolutionary Marxism today: the Transitional Programme.

The Transitional Programme

In preparation for the founding congress, Leon Trotsky wrote an essential document: "The Death Agony of Capitalism and the Tasks of the Fourth International", known as the "Transitional Programme". Like any political text, it has limitations that correspond to a specific historical moment. The most obvious is the one that appears in the very title of the document: the conviction that capitalism is "dying", that productive forces have stopped growing, that the bourgeoisie is disoriented, and that there no way out of the economic crisis. However, Trotsky does not fall into the trap of "optimistic fatalism": he is fully aware that capitalism will never die a natural death. The future is not decided, nor determined by the "objective conditions": if socialism does not triumph, humanity will experience a new and terrible war, a catastrophe that threatens human civilization itself - prophetic words... Trotsky's Marxism attributes a decisive role to the "subjective factor", to the conscience and action of the historical subject: "everything depends on the proletariat".

What is important, even brilliant about the document is a certain method of political intervention, what could be called the transitional method. This method, which is inspired by the experience of the October Revolution and the social struggles of the 1920s and 1930s, has as its starting point the philosophy of Marx's praxis, that is, the understanding that the social consciousness of the exploited, their self-transformation, their ability to become historical subjects, results above all from their own practice, their own experience of the struggle and social conflict.

Breaking with the old social-democratic tradition of separating a reformist "minimum programme" from an abstractly socialist "maximum programme", Trotsky proposed "transitional" demands which, starting from the workers' real level of consciousness, their concrete and immediate demands, would lead to a confrontation with the logic of capitalism, to a conflict with the interests of the big bourgeoisie. For example: the abolition of "trade secrecy" - or "banking secrecy" - and workers' control of factories, or the sliding scale of wages and working hours, as a response to unemployment, as well as the expropriation of large banks and the nationalization of credit. Once again, more than any one claim, the decisive factor in this document was the dialectical approach, the "transition" from the immediate to the challenge of the system.

What inspired the 1938 "Transitional Programme" was, despite the terrible defeats and crises of the workers movement of the 1930s, a rational wager on the possibility of a revolutionary way out of the impasses of capitalism, the ability of workers to become aware, through their practical experience of struggle, of their fundamental interests; in short, a wager on the vocation of the exploited and oppressed classes to save humanity from catastrophe and barbarity. This challenge has not lost any of its relevance at the beginning of the 21st century.

A moral and political imperative

In many respects it can be said that this deed of foundation in 1938 was unreasonable: while the Third International was founded in 1919, after a victorious revolution, in the midst of the rise of the revolutionary wave in Europe, with the participation of organizations gathering tens or hundreds of thousands of members, the Fourth International was proclaimed in the midst of the workers movement's rout, when Europe was close to the moment that Victor Serge would characterize as "midnight in the century"; with delegates representing only very small organizations (except in the United States and perhaps Greece); a small clandestine meeting, in the absence of its main leader, exiled in Mexico; without the support of the main parties close to the left opposition, such as the POUM, the French PSOP, the

German SAP or the Dutch RSAP. In short, a handful of isolated irreducible people who claim to found the “World Party of Socialist Revolution”. Daniel Bensaïd recalls the arguments of the Polish delegates (Hersch Mendel) at the Founding Congress: Marx, Engels and Lenin refrained from founding the First, Second or Third International in periods of reflux. [2]

And yet: the break with the Stalinized Komintern was an unavoidable political and moral imperative; it saved the legacy of the Russian revolution and communism from Stalinism! The foundation of the Fourth International made it possible, through an active international network, for 80 years to create an independent revolutionary left, while the large non-Stalinist organizations - the German SAP, the Dutch RASP, the Spanish POUM, the French PSOP, the English ILP, etc. – who did not want to join the new International, have long since disappeared. It has also made it possible, thanks to the contribution of comrades such as Ernest Mandel or Daniel Bensaïd – but also world congresses, which have worked on feminism, ecology, the LGBTI cause – to renew the theory, strategy and programme of revolutionary Marxism.

Certainly, we remain a very small movement, far from the ambitions of the founders; but a movement that today has, in several countries – alone or in unity with other anti-capitalist movements such as Portugal and Spain – more influence than the heirs of the Third Stalinist International.

If our International remains alive, we owe it not only to the great thinkers who have enriched our thinking and inspired our practice, but also and above all to anonymous activists. In a moving tribute to Roberto Mackenzie, a black activist of our organization in Colombia murdered by paramilitaries, Daniel Bensaïd insisted on this fact: revolutionary history is made by these unknown, anonymous fighters, who dedicate their lives to the cause of emancipation of the exploited and oppressed.

Post-Scriptum

André Breton and Leon Trotsky at the foot of the Popocatepetl volcano

In 2018, there is another 80th anniversary concerning Trotsky: the foundation of FIARI, the International Federation of Independent Revolutionary Art. This event illustrates the importance that the founder of the Red Army gave to art and culture.

In the summer of 1938, André Breton and Leon Trotsky met in Mexico, at the foot of the Popocatepetl and Iztaccíhuatl volcanoes. A surprising encounter, between personalities apparently located at the opposite ends of the earth: one, revolutionary heir to the Enlightenment, the other, installed on the tail of the romantic comet, one founder of the Red Army, the other, initiator of the surrealist adventure. Their relationship was rather unequal: Breton had an enormous admiration for the October revolutionary, while Trotsky, while respecting the poet's courage and lucidity, had some difficulty in understanding surrealism... Not to mention his literary tastes, which carried him rather towards the great realistic classics of the 19th century. And yet, the current passed, the Russian and the French found a common language: internationalism, revolution. From this encounter, from the friction of these two volcanic stones, came a spark that still shines: the Manifesto for an Independent Revolutionary Art. A libertarian communist document, antifascist and allergic to Stalinism, that proclaims the revolutionary vocation of art and its necessary independence from states and political systems.

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The idea for the document came from Leon Trotsky, and was immediately accepted by André Breton. It was written for four hands – one of the few documents written by Trotsky with another person – after long conversations, discussions, exchanges, and probably some disagreements, and was signed by André Breton and Diego Rivera, the great Mexican muralist painter, at the time a strong supporter of Trotsky (they would get fall out soon afterwards). This harmless little lie was due to the old Bolshevik's conviction that a Manifesto on art should only be signed by artists. The text had a strong libertarian tone, particularly in the formula proposed by Trotsky, proclaiming that, in a revolutionary society, the artists' regime should be "anarchist", that is, based on unlimited freedom.

The Manifesto concluded with a call to create a broad movement, including all those who recognized themselves in the general spirit of the document. In such a movement, write Breton and Trotsky, Marxists can walk hand in hand with anarchists. This call for unity between Marxists and anarchists is one of the most interesting aspects of the document and one of the most current, 80 years later.

Soon after, FIARI was founded, the International Federation for Independent Revolutionary Art, which succeeded in bringing together not only Trotsky's supporters and Breton's friends, but also anarchists and independent writers or artists. The Federation had a publication, the journal *Clé*, whose editor was Maurice Nadeau, at the time a young Trotskyist militant with a great interest in surrealism (he became the author, in 1946, of the first *Histoire du Surréalisme*). The manager was Leo Malet and the National Committee was composed of Yves Allégret, André Breton, Michel Collinet, Jean Giono, Maurice Heine, Pierre Mabile, Marcel Martinet, André Masson, Henry Poulaille, Gérard Rosenthal, Maurice Wullens. *Clé* magazine had only 2 issues in 2 issues from issue no. 1 (January 1939) to issue no. 2 (February 1939). FIARI was a beautiful "libertarian Marxist" experience, but of short duration: in September 1939, the beginning of the Second World War put a de facto end to the Federation.

PS:

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[1] Daniel Bensaïd, "Who are the Trotskyists?" in *Strategies of Resistance*, Resistance Books, London, 2009.

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