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17th World Congress discussion

# Towards a text on Role and Tasks of the Fourth International

- Fourth International resolutions - World Congresses - 17th World Congress - 2018 - 17th World Congress discussion -

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## Introduction

Our understanding of the role and tasks of the Fourth International at a national level is that we want to build parties that are useful in the class struggle. That is to **say parties that can assemble the forces and decide on actions that have an effect and advance the class struggle** on the basis of a **class struggle approach and programme**, the ultimate goal of such a party being obviously to get rid of the existing (capitalist) system, in whatever general terms this may be expressed. This perspective commits the forces of the FI to being an integral and loyal part of building and leading these new parties, not simply aiming to recruit or wait to denounce eventual betrayals.

Our orientation follows as a conclusion from the analysis of the world situation discussed in the other two reports developed in the perspective of the World Congress, which note on the one hand the geopolitical chaos, and on the other the uneven and contradictory processes of radicalization, against a background of a crisis of class-consciousness.

The key idea is that we cannot generalize a model for what FI has to do, although it is obvious that some apparently more successful experiences will tend to be imitated; but we have to get used to a situation in which the concrete experiences are different and maybe sometimes apparently going in a different direction. One of the problems that we have had is the involuntary tendency sometimes to consider only what is going on in some key countries (France

a few years ago, etc), and not internationalize enough our thinking; the discussion on different experiences in the last ICs [1] has been good to pluralize more our perspective; and this is the focus of this role and tasks resolution.

# A reorientation in the 1990s

In 1995 we decided that the perspective of building small mass vanguard parties based on the full programme of the FI had met its limits, although many valuable lessons about building activist parties had been learnt. In the new situation created by the fall of the Berlin wall and the collapse of the Soviet bloc – reconfiguring the delimitations between organizations – it was possible to build radical class-struggle parties involving more forces that could have a positive and weightier effect on the class struggle. [2]

The resolution “Building the International today” thus laid out an approach to party building focused on building and strengthening the International's organizations at national level through assembling forces more broadly than those that would be won to the historic programme of the FI.

It described the context in this way: *“The project of a socialist society offering an alternative both to capitalism and to the disastrous experiences of bureaucratic “socialism”, lacks credibility: it is severely hampered by the balance sheet of Stalinism, of social democracy, and of populist nationalism in the “third world”, as well as by the weakness of those who put it forward today.*

*“In a large number of dominated countries, broad vanguard forces are now sceptical about the chances of a success of a revolutionary break with imperialism; and sceptical about the possibilities of taking power and keeping it in the new world balance of power”... “revolutionary internationalism appears as a utopia”. (Chapter 1)*

We should note that the reports in preparation for the upcoming World Congress do not indicate any qualitative improvement in the relationship of forces and level of political class consciousness. This is not to say that the situation has not changed at all since 1995, there have been important movements that have left their mark on political consciousness (among others the Zapatistas, the Global Justice movement, Bolivarian revolution, the Occupy movement, the Arab revolutionary process as well as some massive workplace strikes and feminist mobilizations) but they have not been sufficient to roll back the unremitting attacks and thus have not changed the overall balance of forces. No strong political current has emerged on the left that has restructured the game, thus the building of new parties remains a viable perspective.

The two terrains for such party-building were indicated as follows):

*“the collapse of the Stalinist system has had the positive effect of serious shaking sectarian prejudices against us in the ranks of the working class, trade-union and political vanguards. The triumphalism of capital has also had the effect of encouraging the unification of all anti-capitalists who are now conscious of their weakness. We are better able today to build up relationships of active solidarity and unity in struggle with forces that until recently balked at the very idea of talking to us.”(Chapter 2)... “We hope to welcome into our ranks revolutionary Marxist organizations which do not necessarily claim to be “Trotskyist” nor identify with our history, but which join with us on the basis of a real programmatic coming together.”(Chapter 3)*

*“We should also take up the new topics of political thought that interest the young generations, which will develop, from now on, in a “post-Stalinist” context, where new ideological concerns and experiences must be combined with the century old lessons once more confirmed by capitalism in crisis. Taking up new topics is not simply a question of “pedagogy” towards the struggling youth, but much more fundamental question of our capacity to elaborate theory, update our programme and assimilate the new political experiences, original forms and themes of struggle,*

*socio-economic changes, etc.”*

The document went on to outline different methods of moving towards this aim of strengthening our organizations:

A) *United front in concrete struggles and mass movements.*

B) *Unity with other revolutionary organizations*

C) *Broader regroupment with other left organizations*

Already in 1991 the resolution on Latin America had stated: **“It is obviously impossible to offer a single orientation for all our sections.** There is no one single model for party building nor a single line for party building valid for all times and all places. It is now clear that the Nicaraguan revolution and the constitution of the Brazilian PT gave rise to attempts to repeat these two experiences. We are for building big mass revolutionary parties, but there are countless different variants possible for getting there.” (emphasis added).

It enumerated the different options chosen by our organizations at the time:

**The emergence of a mass workers’ party** like the PT made possible the growth of a **revolutionary Marxist current within it** that works in the most loyal possible way to build it. ...

The Mexican PRT has basically developed as an **independent revolutionary party with mass influence.** Before the emergence of neo-Cardenism, we were close to obtaining the convergence of the bulk of the revolutionary left around the PRT. ...

**Entering revolutionary organizations already existing or in formation.** This is the path followed by our Colombian section. Our comrades went into A Luchar on the basis of political agreement, basically around the situation in Colombia. ...

**Participation in a revolutionary political front while maintaining an independent existence.** At this level, the experience of our Uruguayan comrades in forming the MPP through the convergence of several currents - the MLN-Tupamaros, the PVP, the MRO and good section of independent individuals - is very important. ...

**In 2003 we reaffirmed:**

*(2) The struggle for such Parties will go through a series of stages, tactics and organizational forms, specific to each country. Such an anticapitalist recomposition must pursue a key objective from the outset: creating an effective, visible polarization between it and all the forces loyal to social neoliberalism (social democracy, post-Stalinism, ecologists, populists) in order to accelerate their crisis and give it a positive outcome.*

*This requires:*

*– the presence of significant political forces, in which revolutionary marxist currents collaborate with important or emblematic currents or representatives who are breaking with reformist parties without necessarily arriving at revolutionary marxist positions;*

- a respectful but close relationship with the social movement, where the recomposed organisation puts forward the movement's demands and actions;
- a formation recognized as representing something real in society, breaking the monopoly of parties loyal to social-neoliberalism, thanks to the presence of elected representatives in assemblies on the local, regional national and (possibly) international (European) level elected by universal suffrage;
- a pluralist functioning that goes beyond simple internal democracy in a way that fosters both convergence and discussion, allowing for the functioning of a revolutionary Marxist current as an accepted part of a broader whole.

In the case of Latin America, our objective is to build broad, pluralistic anti-capitalist parties and/or regroupments with a real presence in the proletariat and the social movements, that express a resistance to neoliberalism in the framework of the struggle against capitalist globalisation. As a revolutionary Marxist current, we are in favour of building a "hard core" of the left. This perspective cannot be successful if it takes the place of strategic thinking, radical action, and bold initiatives, through a sectarian attitude of "self-affirmation" striving to maintain "our own identity".

**In 2010 our emphasis had largely shifted from stressing the possible relations with already existing left organisations of different types to rebuilding the left:**

***4. We want to get involved in this reorganisation to create a new left that is capable of meeting the challenge of this century and rebuilding the workers' movement, its structures, its class consciousness, its independence from the bourgeoisies at the political and cultural level.*** (our emphasis)

â€¢ An anti-capitalist, internationalist, ecologist and feminist left;

â€¢ A left that is clearly alternative to social democracy and its governments

â€¢ A left which fights for a socialism of the 21st century, self-managed and democratic and which has a coherent programme for getting there;

â€¢ A left that is conscious that for this goal it has to break with capitalism and its logic and thus that it cannot govern with the political representation with which it wants to break;

â€¢ A pluralistic left rooted in the social movements and the workplaces which integrates the combativity of the workers, the struggles for women's and LGBT liberation and emancipation and ecologist struggles;

â€¢ A non-institutional left which bases its strategy on the self-organisation of the proletariat and the oppressed on the principle that emancipations of the workers is the task of the workers themselves;

â€¢ A left that promotes all forms of self-organisation by workers and by the popular classes that encourages thinking, deciding, and doing things for itself and on the basis of its own decisions;

â€¢ A left which integrates new social sectors, new themes such as those expressed by the World Social Forum in Belem, and above all the new generations because you cannot make new things with old material;

â€¢ An internationalist and anti-imperialist left which fights against domination and war and the self-determination of the people and which lays out the framework for a mass democratic international;

â€¢ A left able to link the precious heritage of critical and revolutionary Marxism with developments of feminism, ecosocialism and the indigenous movements of Latin America.

â€¢ An independent and class-struggle left which fights for the broadest united action against the crisis and for the rights, the gains and the aspirations of the workers and all the oppressed.

These are the criteria and the general content of our orientation for building new useful anti-capitalist instruments for fighting the current system.

## Different paths to the same objective, breaks and bifurcations

As we reiterated in these different resolutions, the decision about which political instrument fits the **definition in any particular country at any particular time has to be based on a concrete understanding of the situation** - the dynamics, the existing forces. No recipe from outside with whatever label can replace that understanding of the actual situation.

Because the usefulness of a political instrument can only be determined by this understanding it follows that **the type of political instrument necessary changes as the situation changes**. The best scenario is that the instrument we are involved in building changes in tune with the changing needs - therefore we fight to develop the political basis/programme of the parties of which we are part so that they do so.

But it may be the case that it does not, indeed that it betrays what is necessary. In that case we have to be prepared to break and form a new instrument when we judge that we have lost the political battle.

However this does not mean that the previous choice was wrong (we also know that parties that proclaimed themselves to be based on the full programme of the Bolshevik revolution betrayed/ became reformist etc). We have to assess whether at the point in time that they were formed and in their first (more or less long) period they had a positive effect on the national situation.

Therefore while we may judge the evolution of the Brazilian PT, or Rifondazione in Italy as in the end leading nowhere this not mean that we were wrong to participate in them or that at some point (for a shorter or longer period) they were not a positive expression of the aspirations of those desiring systemic change or were not able to achieve concrete gains.

It may also be the case that very rapidly it becomes obvious that the political instrument is a transitional one and its goal must be to wage the battle to create a new political party.

Because we say that the nature of the political instrument necessary evolves with the situation we know that when the revolution is on the horizon we will need a party capable of understanding and seizing that opportunity. However we know that proclaiming the revolutionary party today does not necessarily/in most cases lead to fulfilling the criteria we give for being useful to the class struggle.

This is not to say that we cannot point to experiences in which parties that openly characterised themselves as revolutionary had a real impact: the US SWP in the anti-war movement, the French LCR, or from outside our

movement the British SWP with its launching of the Anti-Nazi League in the 1970s. However their impact was the product of a particular political situation and can only be understood in that context. Moreover, their impact was still moderate and these parties did not achieve a critical weight in the political life of their countries – with the exception of the LCR through the two Besancenot campaigns in 2002 and 2007, during the last decade of its existence.

# The balance sheets of our experiences since the beginning of the 1990s

Almost all the national organisations of the Fourth International have tried in the ways they thought corresponded to their national situation to build and be part of broader political formations.

The first experiences were in the 1980s, and they have taken many different forms. The comrades in Brazil participated in the creation and building of the Workers' Party from 1980 onwards. We can note the formation of Solidarity in the US by the regroupment of three organisations from the revolutionary left in 1986, and of the Red Green Alliance in Denmark in 1989 by an agreement between the Communist Party, the Left Socialist Party [\[3\]](#) and our own section. Ten years later, in 1999, the Left Bloc in Portugal was also created by the FI section, a current from the CP and a Maoist organisation.

In Asia substantial organisations coming from other currents (the Philippine comrades breaking with Maoism, the Pakistani comrades formerly in the Militant Tendency, the Sri Lankan comrades with their origins in the former Sri Lankan section of pre-1964 and also having been for a while in the CWI, Bangladesh, originally Maoist but become Gramscian)) have joined us through the 1990s and 2000s.

These organizations in particular have had to confront situations of extreme violence although in different ways, in the Philippines through the self-organization of the threatened communities and clandestine armed organization supporting negotiation with government, and in Pakistan an open political campaigning activity denouncing the violence of the state and the Talibans.

Some of our national organisations, particularly but not only in Europe, have participated in several attempts to build lasting broader organisations during these decades, for example in Italy or Britain, but also South Africa and Puerto Rico. The Brazilian comrades also, following the betrayal of the PT, participate in the building of the PSOL.

Some attempts at fusion of revolutionary currents have failed more or less rapidly (in the Spanish state with the Maoist MC/MKE (dates), in Germany with the post-Stalinists in the VSP), while others such as Solidarity US or Socialist Resistance in Britain continue after 15 or more years. A central point in the balance sheets has been that these initiatives survive when there is agreement on tasks in the national situation.

Other experiences have also failed to reach their hoped-for potential, one of the most notable being the creation of the New Anti-Capitalist Party (NPA) by the French section in 2009, as well Left Unity in Britain in 2014. In both these cases one factor was the unexpected emergence of a left current from within social-democracy (the Parti de Gauche in France, the Corbyn phenomenon in Britain) which undercut the dynamic of these new projects. However, in neither case have these developments yet been proved to be a longterm credible new radical political instrument they show that although in its decline social democracy is not yet dead. (This is not to say the crisis of the NPA was caused by this single factor.)

On the other hand both the RGA of Denmark and BE in Portugal continue to have a certain role and influence as left

parties in their respective countries – as does Podemos whose impetus and base is much more linked to the development of the spontaneous resistance movements and radicalization that characterised the Indignad@s movement.

Podemos is at this point the only political force that can be characterised as being a product of that type of movement, although the support for Sanders in the US or Corbyn in Britain has some common elements. However these latter phenomena seem to be in contradiction to one of the characteristics of the new radicalizations: rejection of political parties in general, most often as a result of disillusion with the established parties, although in the cases of more radicalised elements also because of the elitist and or sectarian behaviour of far left groups in the social movements.

However in the last period in Europe and US it is possible to note that although there is still suspicion towards parties and so on, a strategic shift towards political-electoral arena has taken place, because of several factors: the depth of the economic/social/political crisis; the example of the Arab revolutions that were projected towards bringing down governments and regimes; the difficulties in obtaining victories only through the social struggle; and because of the deepening of the discredit of the political elite itself that offers a image of weakness.

Tragically the Arab revolutionary process did not give rise to strong organized political forces capable of giving leadership to the mass movement, with the partial exception of the Front Populaire in Tunisia.

Our experiences in building useful parties for class struggle have in general been participation in parties that achieved a certain influence in their countries, although they were minority parties (a percentage of vote usually under 10%, membership of few thousands, etc), in political situations in which there was a certain relative stability and in which it was not possible to foresee a collapse of traditional parties and where the “question of power” was not posed, or was only posed in terms of what links with social-democracy. But there are a few cases in which we have been involved in another type of situation that has other potentialities and poses other problems: situations of political crisis, where it was foreseeable that non-ruling class parties become a political majority, form a government and so on. The case of PT is one, Podemos another, and the case of a group with which we have comradely relations, DEA in Syriza is another; there is also Marea Socialista that was in the PSUV for some years, although in this case in a long process of a left government in power.

It would be time consuming to list all the different experiences of the different countries and a number of contributions on balance sheets have been made and published notably in *International Viewpoint* [“Building new parties of the left”](#). However as a general conclusion we can say that while no one model has led to important breakthroughs, the failure to seize opportunities that arise when a qualitative or quantitative advance in assembling useful class-struggle forces could be made will have a long-lasting negative effect.

## Lessons from the balance sheets

The lessons that we have drawn out collectively from these different experiences have been codified in the resolutions of World Congresses, and in the contributions since the 2010 World Congress in the series of balance sheet discussions that have been held in the IC meetings.

They have turned around the need to wage political battles within the political forces we are building on:

• participation in the social movements and struggles of the oppressed and exploited, not as a political elite



intervening from the outside but as an organic part of those movements and struggles in developing political analyses and demands, continuing the fight for those demands to the end. In this process we also learn from these movement to deepen and enrich our own programme—as we have on feminism, ecology, LGBTIQ questions;

â€¢ building active, radical and class-struggle trade-unions, either through activity in existing unions or where necessary and appropriate building new workers' unions;

â€¢ the attitude to the state, institutions; to elections **as a support** to the activity in the mass movement, which must remain the centre of gravity of our activity; the role and relationship to the party of elected representatives who are often the most visible representatives of the party, whose actions (through votes) may be seen to have the most effect, and who are often the most under pressure to be “useful” in the short term. It is the party's responsibility to determine the political framework for their action;

â€¢ the importance of an international and internationalist understanding of the world political situation leading to activity in international campaigns and active and practical solidarity, as well as participation in the FI (see below);

â€¢ the necessity for democratic and transparent functioning with broad democracy including tendency rights, against verticalist functioning, based on the rank and file membership's participation in the activity and decision-making of the party, with the necessary organizational structures to ensure this; understanding the oppression that continues to exist even within parties that are against all forms of women's and other specific oppression and developing structures, functioning and procedures appropriately;

â€¢ the importance of addressing the “new” questions thrown up in the struggles and fightbacks of the oppressed and exploited (notably feminism, ecology, LGBTQI, and others);

â€¢ An unremitting fight against all forms of racism - including against indigenous populations, anti-Semitism, islamophobia and for free movement of migrants, on the basis of solidarity and unity;

â€¢ the importance of renewal of organisations through an open and dynamic attitude to recruiting radicalising youth and integrating them into the party.

## The importance of the Fourth International

A crucial element that has come out in the balance sheets, starting from that of the DS current in the PT, is the absolute necessity of maintaining at national and international level the framework of the Fourth International as a place to exchange, contrast and debate not only our understanding of the worldwide political situation but also of the actual experiences of building political organizations. This means being organized as Fourth Internationalists - retaining the possibility to discuss among comrades sharing a political framework, and renewing this political framework on the basis of the ongoing experiences.

We actively seek to build organisations with forces and individuals who do not share our whole historical programme, although within the perspective of creating a political force based on the essential elements of it. Nevertheless we consider that our shared political framework, shaped by the whole scope of historical and political events, notably since the first contributions of Marxist thought and analysis but right up to the experiences and contributions up to the present day, creates an irreplaceable framework for fruitful discussion, where the weight of national experience can be counterbalanced by others, where the sharing of experience and opinions can help to chart perspectives for our

comrades in their different national contexts. Thus the annual face to face discussion in the IC meetings between leading comrades from the maximum number possible of our organisations, and those with whom we have comradely relations such that we invite them to participate, are indispensable.

At national level the exact forms of these discussions and the corresponding forms of organization will vary as do the broader forms of political organization. There will be a tension between on the one hand going beyond the contours of the political currents that originally participated in building new parties, implying the dissolution of existing organizations, and on the other our conviction that maintaining a framework of the Fourth International is indispensable, for the reasons already given. Resolving this tension in the appropriate way in each specific context is one of the challenges facing us.

At an international level our press, in both printed and online versions, are also an important element of this exchange. This presence should be strengthened by (at last) the launch of a Fourth International website that is both up to date publication but also an archive resource for our resolutions and other important texts in at least the three working languages of the International, and the other languages in which they are available.

Our schools and seminars are invaluable opportunities to educate our comrades and also to invite comrades from political forces with whom we are developing relations. Participation in the schools played a crucial role for example in the strengthening of our relations with the Philippine comrades before they joined. The development of the IIRE in the regular Manila sessions and Islamabad seminars is a crucial aspect in developing our real presence as an International in this region of the world.

The youth camp is, essentially of course for the European organizations, a unique opportunity to bring young comrades, sympathisers and friendly organisations to a political initiative where, around the core elements of the FI programme, it is possible to engage them in discussion around the real activities they are engaged in as young people. This is a very important part of training new cadre with an internationalist understanding of the complexities of our different experiences. While the camp has to remain a European initiative for practical reasons (cost, making self-organization in practice a reality through preparing and evaluating the camp together) the participation of young comrades from elsewhere, notably if this can be combined with attendance at the youth school or a seminar, is also an important investment in our future.

## Towards a new International?

The difficulties of building new organisations at a national level would only be greater at an international level. Nevertheless international contact between radical left political organizations is a priority for us. This can be through the development of our one to one relations with different organizations either from traditional far left organizations or newly emerging currents. At the same time we participate in forums of such organizations organized by others or indeed take the initiative in promoting such forums. With the decline of the Social Forum movement the possibilities are less frequent than in the 2000s decade but we should remain alert to all such initiatives.

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[1] A motion at the 2010 World Congress decided to hold a seminar on the balance sheet of the orientation of building "broad parties". The IC in 2011, on the proposal of the Danish comrades, decided to make this part of the regular IC meeting. And in 2013 decided to continue with this discussion as part of the IC meetings. In all the IC discussed balance sheets of the following experiences: 2012: PT in Brazil, Red Green Alliance Denmark, Left Bloc Portugal, Rifondazione/Sinistra Critica Italy; 2013: LPP/AWP Pakistan, LCR to Anticapitalistas Spanish State, LCR to NPA France; 2014: RPM-M Philippine, Respect to Left Unity Britain, Antarsya/Syriza Greece; 2015: Podemos Spanish state; 2016: Podemos Spanish

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state, Left Bloc Portugal. A general "discussion on some interim conclusions in 2013 led to the decision to continue the "seminar" discussions.

[2] In 1968, basing ourselves on the analysis of a worldwide youth radicalization, the 9th World Congress resolution concentrated solely on building revolutionary youth organizations linked to the party. In 1974 we posited "winning hegemony" in a "new vanguard of mass proportions" and thus building "qualitatively stronger revolutionary organizations". In 1979 the orientation was to building working-class based revolutionary parties through the turn to industry. This orientation was developed in 1985 as a turn to the people, women and youth.

[3] "From the beginning the Left Socialist Party was a mixture of all elements of the New Left: hippies, anarchists, Maoists, Trotskyists, other self-declared Leninists, anti-imperialists and many other shades of anti-establishment opposition." Michael Voss, SAP.