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Centenary of the foundation of the Communist International - What lessons can we draw for future combats?

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A century ago a wind of hope blew for humanity: in Russia first of all the working class had just taken power. In Germany, Hungary and then in Italy it fought courageously to follow the Russian example with a single agenda: the abolition of the capitalist mode of production whose contradictions had plunged civilisation into four years of war. Four years of unprecedented barbarity that confirmed the entry of capitalism into its phase of decadence.

In these conditions, acknowledging the bankruptcy of the Second International and basing itself on all the work of the reconstruction of international unity started at Zimmerwald in September 1915, then Kienthal in 1916, the Third, Communist International (CI) was founded on March 4 1919 in Moscow. In his April Thesis of 1917, Lenin had already called for the foundation of a new world party. For Lenin a decisive step was taken during the terrible days of January 1919 in Germany, during the course of which the German Communist Party (KPD) was founded. In a *"Letter to the workers of Europe and America"* dated January 26, Lenin wrote: *"When the Spartacus League became the German Communist Party, then the founding of the 3rd International became a fact. Formally this foundation hadn't yet been decided upon, but in reality the 3rd International exists from now"*. Leaving aside the excessive enthusiasm of such a judgment, as we will see later, revolutionaries at the time understood that it was now indispensable to forge the party for the victory of the revolution at the world level. After several weeks of preparation, 51 delegates met up from March 2 to March 6 1919, in order to lay out the organisational and programmatic markers which would allow the world proletariat to continue to advance the struggle against all the forces of the bourgeoisie.

The ICC lays claim to the contributions of the Communist International. This centenary is thus an occasion to salute and underline the inestimable work of the CI in the history of the revolutionary movement, but equally to draw the lessons of this experience and draw out its weaknesses in order to arm the proletariat of today for its future battles.

Defending the struggle of the working class in the heat of revolution

As Trotsky's "Letter of invitation to the congress" confirmed: *"The undersigned parties and*

organisations consider that the convening of the first congress of the new revolutionary International is urgently necessary (...) The very rapid rise of the world revolution, which constantly poses new problems, the danger of strangulation of this revolution under the hypocritical banner of the 'League of Nations', the attempts of the social-traitor parties to join together and further help their governments and their bourgeoisies in order to betray the working class after granting each other a mutual 'amnesty', and finally, the extremely rich revolutionary experience already acquired and the world-wide character of the whole revolutionary movement – all these circumstances compel us to place on the agenda of the discussion the question of the convening of an international congress of proletarian-revolutionary parties".

In the image of the first appeal launched by the Bolsheviks, the foundation of the CI expressed the will for the regroupment of revolutionary forces throughout the world. But it equally expressed the defence of proletarian internationalism which had been trampled underfoot by the great majority of the social democratic parties who made up the 2nd International. After four years of atrocious war which had divided and decimated millions of proletarians on the field of battle, the emergence of a new world party was witness to the will to deepen the work begun by the organisations who remained faithful to internationalism. In this the CI was the expression of the political strength of the proletariat, which again manifested itself after the profound defeat caused by the war, and also of the responsibility of revolutionaries to continue to defend the interests of the working class and the world revolution.

During the course of the congress it was said many times that the CI was the party of revolutionary action. As it affirms in its Manifesto, the CI saw the light of day at the moment that capitalism had clearly demonstrated its obsolescence. From here on humanity entered *"the era of wars and revolutions"*. In other words, the abolition of capitalism became an extreme necessity for the future of civilisation. It was with this new understanding of the historic evolution of capitalism that the CI tirelessly defended the workers' councils and the dictatorship of the proletariat: *"The new apparatus of power must represent the dictatorship of the working class (...) it must, that is to say, be the instrument for the systematic overthrow of the exploiting class and its expropriation (...) The power of the workers' councils or the workers' organisations is its concrete form"* (Letter of invitation to the congress). These orientations were defended throughout the congress. Moreover, the *"Theses on Bourgeois Democracy"*, written by Lenin and adopted by the congress, focussed on denouncing the mystification of democracy, on warning the proletariat about the danger that it posed in its struggle against bourgeois society. From the outset the CI placed itself resolutely in the proletarian camp by defending the principles and methods of working class struggle, while energetically denouncing the call from the centrist current for an impossible unity between the social-aitors and the communists: *"the unity of communist workers with the assassins of the leading communists Liebknecht and Luxemburg"*, according the terms of the "Resolution of the first congress of the CI on the position towards the socialist currents and the Berne Conference". This resolution was

evidence of the intransigent defence of proletarian principles and was voted on unanimously by the congress. It was adopted in reaction to the recent meeting held by the majority of the social democratic parties of the 2nd International [1] which had taken up a certain number of orientations openly aimed against the revolutionary wave. The resolution ended with these words: *"The congress invites the workers of every country to begin the most energetic struggle against the yellow international and to warn the widest numbers of the proletariat about this International of lies and betrayal"*.

The foundation of the CI turned out to be a vital stage for advancing the historical struggle of the proletariat. It took up the best contributions of the 2nd International while discarding those positions and analyses which no longer corresponded to the historic period which had just opened up[2]. Whereas the former world party had betrayed proletarian internationalism in the name of the Sacred Union on the eve of the First World War, the foundation of the new party strengthened the unity of the working class, arming it for the bitter struggle that it had to undertake across the planet for the abolition of the capitalist mode of production. Thus, despite the unfavourable circumstances and the errors committed - as we will see - we salute and support such an enterprise. Revolutionaries of that time took up their responsibilities; it had to be done and they did it!

A foundation in unfavourable circumstances

Revolutionaries faced with a massive surge from the world proletariat

The year 1919 was the culminating point of the revolutionary wave. After the victory of the revolution in Russia in October 1917, the abdication of Wilhelm II and the precipitous signing of the armistice faced with mutinies and revolts of masses of workers in Germany, workers' insurrections broke out in numerous places, most notably with the setting up of republics of councils in Bavaria and Hungary. There were also mutinies in the fleets and among French troops, as well as in British military units, refusing to intervene against soviet Russia. In 1919 a wave of strikes hit Britain (Sheffield, the Clyde, South Wales and Kent). But in March 1919, at the moment the CI appeared in Moscow, the great majority of uprisings had been suppressed or were on course to be.

There is no doubt that revolutionaries of that time found themselves in a situation of urgency and they were obliged to act in the fire of revolutionary battle. As the French Fraction of the Communist Left (FFCL) underlined in 1948: *"revolutionaries tried to fill the gap between the maturity of the objective situation and the immaturity of the subjective factor (the absence of the party) by a gathering in numbers of politically heterogeneous groups and currents and called this coming together the new Party"*. [3]

It's not a question here of discussing the validity or not of the foundation of the new party, of the International. It was an absolute necessity. On the other hand we want to point to a certain number of errors in the way in which it was realised.

An overestimation of the situation in which the party was founded

Even though the majority of reports submitted by the different delegates on the situation of the class struggle in each country took into account the reaction of the bourgeoisie faced with the advance of the revolution (a resolution the White Terror was voted on at the end of the congress), it's striking to see to what point this aspect was largely underestimated during these five days of work. Already, some days after the news of the foundation of the KPD, which followed the founding of the communist parties of Austria (November 1918) and Poland (December 1918), Lenin considered that the die was already cast: *"When the German Spartacus League, led by its illustrious leaders known the world over, these loyal partisans of the class struggle such as Liebknecht, Rosa Luxemburg, Clara Zetkin, Franz Mehring, definitively broke all links with socialists such as Scheidemann (...) when the Spartacus League became the German Communist Party, then the foundation of the 3rd International, the Communist International, truly proletarian, truly international, truly revolutionary, became a fact. This foundation wasn't formally sanctified, but, in reality, the 3rd International now exists"* [4]. To add a significant anecdote here: this text was finished and drafted on January 21 1919, the date on which Lenin was told about the assassination of Karl Liebknecht. And yet an unwavering certainty ran through the congress and Lenin announced it with: *"The bourgeoisie can unleash its terror, it may assassinate millions of workers, but victory is ours, the victory of the world communist revolution is assured"*. Consequently all the reporters of the situation overflowed with the same optimism; like comrade Albert, a young member of the KPD who on March 2 expressed himself to the congress in these words: *"I'm not expressing an exaggerated optimism by affirming that the German and Russian communist parties continue the struggle, firmly hoping that the German proletariat will also lead the revolution to the final victory and the dictatorship of the proletariat will equally be established in Germany, despite all the national assemblies, despite all the Scheidemanns and despite the national bourgeoisie (...) It is this which motivated me to accept your invitation with joy, convinced that after a short delay we will struggle side by side with the proletariat of other countries, particularly France and Britain, for the world revolution in order to realise the objectives of the revolution in Germany"*. A few days later, between March 6 and 9, a terrible repression struck Berlin, killing 3000 workers including 28 sailors imprisoned and then executed by firing squad in the tradition of Versailles! On March 10, Leo Jogisches was assassinated and Heinrich Dorrenbach[5] met the same fate on May 19.

However, the last words of Lenin of the closing speech of the congress showed that it hadn't moved one iota on the relationship of force between the two classes. Without hesitation it affirmed: *"The victory of the proletarian revolution is assured throughout the entire world. The foundation of the International Republic of Councils is underway."*

But as Amedeo Bordiga noted a year later: *"After the slogan 'Soviet regimes' was launched onto the world by the Russian and international proletariat we first of all saw the revolutionary wave resurface after the end of the war and the proletariat of the entire*

world move into action. In every country we saw the old socialist parties filtered out and the communist parties were born, engaging in the revolutionary struggle against the bourgeoisie. Unfortunately the period which followed has been a period of check because the German, Bavarian and Hungarian revolutions have all been wiped out by the bourgeoisie."

In fact, important weaknesses of consciousness in the working class constituted a major hindrance to a revolutionary development:

- * the difficulties of these movements to overcome the struggle against war alone and go towards the higher level of proletarian revolution. This revolutionary wave was above all built up around the struggle against the war;
- * the development of the mass strike through the unification of political and economic demands remained very fragile and thus did little to push it onto a higher level of consciousness;
- * the revolutionary peak was on the point of being reached. The movement no longer had the same dynamic after the defeat of the struggles in Germany and Central Europe. Even if the wave continued it had lost the force it had from 1919-1920;
- * the Soviet Republic in Russia remained cruelly isolated. It was the sole revolutionary bastion with all that this implied in favour of a regression in consciousness both within Russia and the rest of the world.

A foundation in an urgent situation which opened the door to opportunism

The revolutionary milieu came out of the war in a weakened state

"The workers' movement on the eve of the first imperialist world war was in a state of extreme division. The imperialist war had broken the formal unity of the political organisations that claimed to be part of the proletariat. The crisis of the workers' movement, which already existed beforehand, reached its culminating point because of the fact of the world war and the positions to take up in response to it. All the marxist, anarchist and trade union parties and organizations were violently shaken by it. Splits multiplied. New groups arose. A political delimitation was produced. The revolutionary minority of the 2nd International represented by the Bolsheviks, the German left around Luxemburg and the Dutch Tribunists, who already were not very homogeneous, did not simply face a single opportunist bloc. Between them and the opportunists there was a whole rainbow of political groups and tendencies, more or less confused, more or less centrist, more or less revolutionary, representing the general shift of the masses who were breaking with the war, with the Sacred Union, with the treason of the old parties of social democracy. We see here a process of the liquidation of the old parties whose downfall gave rise to a multitude of groups. These groups expressed less the process of the constitution of

the new party than the dislocation in the liquidation, the death of the old party. These groups certainly contained elements for the constitution of the new party but in no way formed the basis for it. These currents essentially expressed the negation of the past and not the positive affirmation of the future. The basis for the new class party can only reside in the former left, in its critical and constructive work, in the theoretical positions and programmatic principles which the left had been elaborating for the 20 years of ITS FRACTIONAL EXISTENCE AND STRUGGLE inside the old party." [6]

Thus the revolutionary milieu was broken apart, composed of groups lacking clarity and displaying a good deal of immaturity. Only the left fractions of the 2nd International, the Bolsheviks, the Tribunists, the Spartacists (in part only because they were also heterogeneous or even divided) were up to it and were based on solid ground for the foundation of the new party.

Moreover a good number of militants lacked political experience. Among the 43 delegates to the founding congress whose ages were known, five were in their twenties, 24 their thirties and only one was older than fifty[7]. Out of the 42 delegates whose political trajectory could be traced, 17 had joined social democratic parties before the Russian revolution of 1905, whereas 8 only became active socialists after 1914[8].

Despite their passion and enthusiasm, the indispensable experience in such circumstances was very much lacking amongst them.

Disagreements among the proletariat's avant-garde

As the FFCL already underlined in 1946, *"It is undeniable that one of the historic causes of the victory of the revolution in Russia and its defeat in Germany, Hungary and Italy resides in the existence of the revolutionary Party at a decisive moment in the former and its absence or its incompleteness in the latter."* The foundation of the 3rd International was deferred for a long time by the various divisions inside the proletarian camp during the episode of revolution. In 1918-19, and quite conscious that the absence of the party was an irredeemable weakness for the victory of the world revolution, the avant-garde of the proletariat was unanimous on the imperious necessity to set up a new party. However, there was no agreement on when to do it and above all on the approach to adopt. While the great majority of communist organisations and groups were favorable to the briefest delay, the KPD and particularly Rosa Luxemburg and Leo Jogiches opted for an adjournment, considering that the situation was premature, that the communist consciousness of the masses remained weak and that the revolutionary milieu also lacked clarity[9]. The KPD delegate to the congress, comrade Albert, was thus mandated to defend this position and not to vote for the immediate foundation of the Communist International.

"When it was said to us that the proletariat needed a political centre in its struggle, we could say that this centre already existed and that all the elements which were found at the

base of the system of councils had already broken with elements of the working class which went towards the democratic bourgeoisie: we noted that everywhere a rupture was being prepared and it is about to be realised. But a Third International must not only be a political centre, an institution in which the theoreticians discuss with one another with warm words, it must be the basis of an organisational power. If we want to make the Third International an efficient instrument of struggle, if we want to make it a means for combat, then the necessary conditions have to exist. Thus, in our opinion, the question mustn't be approached and discussed from an intellectual point of view; we have to ask if the basics of the organisation concretely exist. I've always had the feeling that the comrades who are pushing so strongly for its foundation have been greatly influenced by the evolution of the 2nd International and that they wanted, after the Berne Conference, to impose it on the current enterprise. That seems less important to us and when it's said that clarification is necessary, otherwise indecisive elements will rally to the Yellow International, I say that the founding of the 3rd International will not bring back the elements who are re-joining today's 2nd, and that if they go there despite everything, then that's their place."[10]

As we see, the German delegate warned of the danger of founding a party by compromising on principles and on programmatic and organisational clarification. Although the Bolsheviks took the concerns of the KPD very seriously, it was in no doubt that they were caught up in a race against time. From Lenin to Zinoviev, through to Trotsky and Rakovsky, all insisted on the importance of making all the parties, groups, organisations or individuals who claimed to be more or less close to communism and the soviets join the new International. As noted in a biography of Rosa Luxemburg: "Lenin saw in the International the means to help various communist parties to set themselves up and strengthen themselves"[11] through the decantation produced by the struggle against centrism and opportunism. For the KPD, it was first of all a question of forming "solid" communist parties which had the masses behind them before endorsing the creation of the new party.

A method of foundation which did not arm the new party

The composition of the congress is both the illustration of the precipitation and the difficulties that it imposed on revolutionary organisations at the time. Out of 51 delegates taking part in the work, taking account of lateness, early departures and brief absences, around forty were Bolshevik militants from the Russian party but also the Latvian, Lithuanian, Byelorussian, Armenian and eastern Russian parties. Outside of the Bolshevik Party, only the communist parties of Germany, Poland, Austria and Hungary had a real existence.

The other forces invited to the congress were a multitude of organisations, groups or elements that were not openly "communist" but products of a process of decantation within social democracy and the trade unions. The letter of invitation to the congress appealed to all the forces, near or far, which supported the Russian revolution and seemed to have the will to work for the victory of the world revolution:

"10. It is necessary to ally ourselves with these elements of the revolutionary movement which, although they did not belong to the socialist parties before, today placed themselves on the whole on the terrain of the dictatorship of the proletariat under the form of the power of the councils. In the first place we refer here to the syndicalist elements of the workers' movement.

** 11. Finally, it's necessary to win over all the proletarian groups and organisations that, without openly rallying to the revolutionary current, show a tendency in this direction."*^[12]

This approach led to several anomalies which exposed a lack of representation of a part of the congress. For example, the American Boris Reinstein didn't have a mandate from his Socialist Labour Party. S. J. Rutgers from Holland represented a league for socialist propaganda. Christian Rakovsky ^[13] was supposed to represent the Balkan Federation, the Bulgarian "Narrows" and the Romanian CP. But he'd had no contact with these three organisations since 1915-16^[14]. Consequently, despite appearances, this founding congress was at root perfectly representative of the lack of consciousness within the world working class.

All these elements show that a large part of the revolutionary avant-garde's objective was quantity to the detriment of a prior clarification on organisational principles. This approach turned on its head the conception which the Bolsheviks had developed over the last fifteen years. And this is what the FFCL had already noted in 1946: *"As much as the "strict" method of selection on the most precise principled bases, without taking into account immediate numerical success, allowed the Bolsheviks to build a Party which, at a decisive moment, was able to integrate and assimilate into itself all the energies and revolutionary militants of other currents and finally lead the proletariat to victory, so the "loose" method, immediately concerned above all with bringing together the largest numbers at the expense of programmatic precision and principles, had to lead to the constitution of the mass party, a real colossus with feet of clay which fell to its defeat under the domination of opportunism. The formation of the class party turns out to be infinitely more difficult in the advanced capitalist countries - where the bourgeoisie possesses numerous means to corrupt the consciousness of the proletariat - than was the case in Russia."*

Blinded by the certitude of the imminent victory of the proletariat, the revolutionary avant-garde enormously underestimated the objective difficulties which stood in front of them.

This euphoria led them to compromise the "strict" method for the construction of the organisation that the Bolsheviks in Russia and in part the Spartacists in Germany had defended before everything. They considered that the priority of work had to be given to a great revolutionary coming-together, countering on the way the Yellow International which a few weeks before had re-formed in Berne. This "loose" method relegated the clarification of organisational principles to the status of an annex. Little importance was given to the confusions that could be brought in by groups integrated into the new party; the struggle would take place within it. For now, the priority was given to the regroupment of the

greatest numbers.

This "loose" method turned out to be heavy with consequences since it weakened the CI in the organisational struggles to come. In fact the programmatic clarity of the first congress was circumvented by the opportunist push in the context of the weakening and the degeneration of the revolutionary wave. Within the CI fractions of the left emerged which criticised the insufficiencies of the rupture with the 2nd International. As we will see in a following piece, the positions defended and elaborated by these groups responded to the problems raised in the CI by the new period of the decadence of capitalism.

(to be continued)

Narek, March 4, 2019.

[1] The Berne Conference of 1919 was "an attempt to resuscitate the corpse of the Second International", to which the "Centre" had sent representatives.

[2] For a greater development see our article <https://en.internationalism.org/content/3066/1919-foundation-communist-i...> International Review, no. 57, spring 1989.

[3] Internationalisme. "A propos du Premiere Congres du Parti Communiste Internationaliste d'Italie", no. 7, Jan-Feb 1946.

[4] Lenin, Works, t.XXVIII, p. 451.

[5] Dorrenbach was the commander of the People's Naval Division in Berlin, 1918. After the January defeat, he took refuge in Brunswick and then Eisenach. He was arrested and executed in May 1919.

[6] Internationalisme, "A propos du Premier Congres du Parti Communiste d'Italie", no. 7, Jan-Feb, 1946.

[7] Founding of the Communist International: The Communist International in Lenin's Time. Proceedings and Documents of the First Congress: March 1919, Edited by John Riddell, New York, 1987. Introduction, page 19.

[8] Ibidem.

[9] It's this mandate that the KPD gave (in the first weeks of January) to their delegate to the founding congress. This is no way meant that Rosa Luxemburg for example was

opposed to the foundation of an International - far from it.

[10] Intervention of the German delegate March 4, 1919, in Premier Congres de l'Internationale Communiste, integral texts published under the direction of Pierre Broué, Etudes et Documentation Internationales, 1974.

[11] Gilbert Badia, Rosa Luxemburg, Journalist, Polemicist, Revolutionary, Editions Sociales, 1975.

[12] "Letter of invitation to the Congress", Op. Cit. First Congress of the International.

[13] One of the most influential and determined delegates in favour of the immediate foundation of the CI.

[14] Pierre Broué, History of the Communist International (1919-1943), Fayard, 1997, p. 79 (in French).

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