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23rd ICC Congress

The responsibilities of revolutionaries in the current period

The different facets of fraction-like work

Resolution on the international situation

Imperialist conflicts, life of the bourgeoisie, economic crisis

Report on the impact of decomposition on the political life of the bourgeoisie

Report on decomposition today (2017)

Resolution on the balance of forces between the classes

Report on the class struggle

Formation, loss and re-conquest of proletarian class identity

Report on the question of the historic course

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The responsibilities of revolutionaries in the current period

The different facets of fraction-like work

Last spring, the ICC held its 23rd International Congress. This article proposes to give an account of its work.

Point 4 of the “Report on the structure and functioning of the revolutionary organisation” defines the International Congress as *“The highest moment in the unity of the organisation... It is at the International Congress that the programme of the ICC is defined, enriched, or rectified; that its ways of organising and functioning are established, made more precise or modified; that its overall orientations and analyses are adopted; that a balance sheet of its past activities is made and perspectives for future work drawn up”*.¹

This Congress was centred round our continuity with the Communist International, whose centenary was last year. Historical continuity and transmission are a fundamental concern for the revolutionary organisation. It was with this approach that the activities resolution adopted by the Congress recalled that *“the Communist International was founded a hundred years ago in March 1919 with the intention to be the ‘party of the revolutionary insurrection of the world proletariat’*. Today, in different circumstances but in conditions still defined by the historic epoch of the decadence of capitalism, the objective posed by the Communist International, the creation of the world political party of the revolutionary working class, remains the ultimate aim of the fraction-like work of the ICC”.

The resolution insists on the fact that *“the Communist International was not created out of the blue, its foundation was dependent on the preceding decades of the fraction work of the marxist left in the 2nd International, particularly by the Bolshevik Party...”*. Which means for today’s revolutionaries that *“just as the Comintern could not have been created without the preparatory work of the marxist left, so the future international will not come to be without an international centralised fraction-like activity of the organisational inheritors of the Communist Left”*.

Recalling that *“the Communist International was founded in the most difficult circumstances imaginable: it followed four years of mass carnage and immiseration of the world proletariat; the revolution-*

ary bastion in Russia was subject to a total blockade and military intervention by the imperialist powers; the Spartacist Revolt in Germany had been drowned in blood and two of the key figures of the new International, Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht, murdered”, the resolution underlines that, despite the differences with the period of revolutionary response to the First World War and the ensuing counter-revolution, *“The ICC faces increasingly difficult conditions as decadent capitalism sinks further into another barbaric spiral of economic crisis and imperialist conflict in its phase of decomposition. To accomplish its historic tasks ICC must draw strength and its fighting spirit from the crises it will face, as did the marxist left of 1919”*.

Fraction-like work

To place ourselves in a line of continuity with the efforts of the Communist International, the Congress saw its aim as developing and concretising our work as being similar to that of a fraction. The notion of the fraction has always been crucial in the history of the workers’ movement. Like the working class as a whole, its political organisations are subjected to the pressure of alien ideologies, both bourgeois and petty bourgeois. This engenders, in particular, the disease of opportunism. To fight against this disease, the proletariat gives rise to left fractions within its organisations:

“It has always been the left that has ensured the continuity between the proletariat’s three main international political organisations. It was the left, through the marxist current, which ensured the continuity between the 1st and 2nd International,

against the Proudhonist, Bakuninist, Blanquist, and corporatist currents. It was the left, which fought first of all the reformist tendencies, and then the ‘social-patriots’, which ensured the continuity between the 2nd and 3rd International during the war; then by forming the Communist International. And it was the left, once again, and in particular the Italian and German lefts, which took up and developed the revolutionary gains of the 3rd International, trodden underfoot by the social-democratic and Stalinist counter-revolution”.

If its struggle is to be victorious, the proletariat requires a continuity in its class consciousness. Otherwise it is doomed to be the plaything of the schemes of its enemy. The left fractions have always been the most committed and determined in the defence of this continuity in class consciousness, in its development and enrichment.

Groups like the Internationalist Communist Tendency (ICT) make the following objection: fraction of what? For a long time there have been no communist parties within the proletariat. And it’s true that, in the 1930s, the Communist Parties were definitively won over by the bourgeoisie. We are not fractions, but that doesn’t mean that we don’t have to carry out a work similar to that of a fraction. A work which unites into a coherent whole:

- the fight against opportunism;
- the defence and development of the critical historical continuity of the proletariat, forming a bridge between the past of the workers’ movement and its future;
- the response to new situations arising in society and the proletarian class struggle.

The Congress deepened our understanding of fraction-like work at the level of our press, our intervention, theoretical method, the elaboration of marxist method and the defence of the organization. There is a whole work involved in constructing the bridge towards the future party which will have to be based on very firm theoretical, programmatic, analytical and

1. *International Review*, n° 33.

organisational foundations. This is what the proletariat needs if it is find a path through the terrible convulsions of capitalism and develop a revolutionary offensive aimed at overthrowing this system.

In this framework of fraction-like work a “Report on Transmission” was presented to the Congress, although due to lack of time we weren’t able to discuss it. However, given the importance of the question, we will take charge of discussing it in the coming period. Transmission is vital for the proletariat. Much more than all the other revolutionary classes in history, it needs the lessons of the battles of its preceding generations in order to assimilate their acquisitions and take its struggle forward towards its revolutionary goals. Transmission is particularly important for the continuity of revolutionary organisations because there is a whole series of approaches, practices, traditions and experiences which belong to the proletariat and are the fertile soil in which the proletarian political organisation elaborates its way of functioning and maintains its vitality. As it says in the activities resolution adopted by the Congress: “*the ICC must be able to transmit to new comrades the necessity to study thoroughly the history of the revolutionary movement and develop a growing knowledge of the different elements of the experience of the communist left in the period of counter revolution*”.

The report on transmission devotes a central chapter to understanding the conditions of militancy and the historical acquisitions which have to guide it. Forming conscious, determined militants, capable of standing up to the hardest tests, is a very difficult task but its indispensable for the formation of the future party of the proletarian revolution.

Decomposition, an unprecedented epoch in human history

During the 1980s, the ICC began to understand that global society was heading towards a historic impasse. On the one hand, given the resistance of the proletariat of the central countries to a military mobilisation, capitalism didn’t have a free hand to move towards its organic outcome to its historic crisis – generalised imperialist war. On the other hand, the proletariat, despite the advance in its struggles between 1983 and 1987, was not able to open up its own perspective towards the proletarian revolution. In the absence of either of the major classes being able to put forward a perspective, we were seeing society rotting on its feet, a growing chaos, the proliferation of centrifugal tendencies, of every man for himself. A spectacular manifestation of

this dynamic was the collapse of the bloc around the former USSR.

The ICC had to face up to a challenge for marxist theory. On the one hand, in September 1989, we produced “Theses on the economic and political crisis in the eastern countries” where, two months before the fall of the Berlin Wall, we announced the brutal downfall of the USSR itself. On the other hand, we were obliged to understand in depth the new situation, by elaborating in 1990 the “Theses on Decomposition”, the basic idea of which was this: “*the generalised decomposition which is infecting the system today, and which can only get worse... Here again, quite apart from the strictly quantitative aspect, the phenomenon of social decomposition has today reached such a breadth and depth that it has taken on a new and unique quality, revealing decadent capitalism’s entry into a new and final phase of its history: the phase where decomposition becomes a decisive, if not the decisive factor in social evolution*”.

The 23rd Congress carefully looked at the considerable aggravation of the process of decomposition, notably affecting the central countries. We have seen spectacular illustrations of this – among others – in Brexit in the UK, the victory of Trump or the Salvini government in Italy.

All these points were broadly taken up in the reports and resolutions of the congress which we have already published and we invite our readers to study these documents attentively and critically. With these documents, we are trying to respond to the main tendencies in the present situation.

Decomposition, as we see it spreading on the world scale and more and more dominating all spheres of social life, is an unprecedented phenomenon in human history. The *Communist Manifesto* of 1848 considered such a possibility “*Freeman and slave, patrician and plebeian, lord and serf, guild-master and journeyman, in a word, oppressor and oppressed, stood in constant opposition to one another, carried on an uninterrupted, now hidden, now open fight, a fight that each time ended, either in a revolutionary reconstitution of society at large, or in the common ruin of the contending classes*”. However, historical cases involving the collapse of an entire civilisation and the “mutual ruin of the contending classes” have been very localised and could be easily overcome by the later imposition of new conquerers. To the extent that the decadence of modes of production prior to capitalism (slavery, feudalism) saw the very powerful economic emergence of the new ruling class, and that this was an exploiting class, the new relations of production could limit the

decomposition of the old order and even profit from it for their own interests. By contrast, this is impossible in capitalism since “*communist society, which alone can follow capitalism, cannot develop at all within it; the regeneration of society is thus completely impossible without the violent overthrow of the bourgeois class and the eradication of capitalist relations of production*”²

The proletariat has to face up to the conditions and implications imposed by this new historic epoch, drawing all the lessons that flow from it for its own struggle, in particular the need to defend, even more energetically than in the past, its political, class autonomy, since decomposition puts this in grave danger. Decomposition favours “partial” struggles (feminism, ecology, anti-racism, pacifism etc), struggles which don’t go to the roots of problems but only address their effects and, worse, focus on particular aspects of capitalism while preserving the system as a whole. These mobilisations dilute the proletariat into an inter-classist mass, dispersing and fragmenting it in a whole series of false “communities” based on race, religion, affinity etc. The only solution is the proletariat’s struggle against exploitation because “*the struggle against the economic foundations of the system contains within it the struggle against all the super-structural aspects of capitalist society, but this is not true the other way around*.”³

Situation of the class struggle

The revolutionary organisation is based on a militant engagement within the class. This is concretised in the adoption of resolutions in which the present situation is analysed by placing it in a historic framework, to make it possible to draw out perspectives that can give an orientation to the proletarian struggle. The Congress thus adopted a specific resolution on the class struggle and a more general one on the world situation.

Decomposition has had a powerful impact on the struggle of the proletariat. Combined with the disorienting effects of the fall of “socialism” in 1989 and the enormous anti-communist campaign launched by the bourgeoisie, the working class has suffered a deep retreat in its consciousness and its combativity whose effects still persist – and have even got worse over the last 30 years.

The Congress went deeper into the historic framework for understanding the class struggle, closely examining the evolution of the balance of class forces since 1968.

2. “Theses on decomposition”.

3. ICC platform point 12.

The resolution underlines that:

- the gains of the struggles between 1968 and 89 have not been lost, even if they have been forgotten by many workers (and revolutionaries): the fight for the self-organisation and extension of struggles; the beginnings of an understanding of the anti-working class role of the unions and parties of the capitalist left; resistance to being dragooned into war; distrust towards the electoral and parliamentary game, etc. Future struggles will have to be based on the critical assimilation of these gains, taking them further and certainly not denying or forgetting them;
- the great danger for the proletariat of democracy, democratism, and the instruments of the democratic state, notably the unions, the left parties and the extreme left, but also its ideological campaigns and political manoeuvres;
- the current weakness of the proletariat, despite the efforts we saw in the struggles between 2006 and 2011, where, as well as the reappearance of assemblies, many questions about the future of society began to be posed;
- the positive effect which certain elements of the present situation can eventually bring: a greater concentration of workers in huge cities, associated labour on a world scale, growing links between young workers on an international level, the incorporation of new battalions of the proletariat in countries like China, Bangladesh, South Africa, Mexico...;
- the indispensable role of the workers' struggle on their class terrain against the increasingly violent blows of the historic crisis of capitalism.

At the congress, there were disagreements on the appreciation of the situation of the class struggle and its dynamic. Has the proletariat suffered ideological defeats which are seriously weakening its capacities? Is there a subterranean maturation of consciousness, or, on the contrary, are we seeing a deepening of the reflux in class identity and consciousness?

These questions are part of an ongoing debate, with amendments presented to the Congress resolution.

Other burning questions of the world situation

In line with its responsibilities, the Congress examined other aspects determining the evolution of world society, in particular:

- the tendency towards a loss of control by

the political apparatus of the bourgeoisie of its electoral game and the formation of governments, a phenomenon eloquently attested by Brexit;⁴

- the considerable aggravation of imperialist tensions, notably between the US and China and in the Persian Gulf, as well as the intensification of the arms race; the trade war, which is the consequence of the worsening of the crisis, and which is used by the US as a means to put imperialist pressure on its rivals;
- the perspective, which is becoming closer and closer, of new convulsions in the world economy: falling growth rates, slow-down in world trade, exorbitant debt, the incredible phenomenon of negative interest rates, etc.

Marxism is a living theory. This means that it must be capable of recognising that certain instruments for analysing the historic situation are no longer valid. This is the case with the notion of the historic course, which was fully applicable to the period 1914-89 but which has lost its validity as a way of understanding the dynamic of the balance of forces between the classes in the current historic period. This led the Congress to adopt a report on this question.

The defence of the organisation

The revolutionary organisation is a foreign body in bourgeois society. The proletariat is “*a class of civil society which is not a class of civil society, an order which is the dissolution of all orders*” (Marx). The workers can never really find their place in this society because economically, as the exploited class deprived of any means of production, they are always in a precarious situation, at the mercy of unemployment; and because, politically, they are “Pariahs” who can only find their salvation and their emancipation outside of capitalism, in a communist society which can’t emerge before the bourgeois state is overturned all over the world. The bourgeoisie, its politicians, its ideologues, may disdainfully accept the “working citizen”, workers as a sum of alienated individuals, but they abhor and furiously reject the proletariat as a class.

In the image of their class, revolutionary organisations, while being part of the capitalist world, are at the same time a foreign body within it because their very reason for existence and their programme is based on the need for a total break from the operation, reasoning, and values of present-day society.

4. See the “Report on the impact of decomposition on the political life of the bourgeoisie” (2019).

In this sense, the revolutionary organisation is an entity which bourgeois society rejects with all its fibres. Not only because of the historic threat it represents as the vanguard of the proletariat, but because its very existence is a constant reminder to the bourgeoisie that it has been condemned by history, an affirmation of the urgent necessity for humanity to replace the deadly competition of each against all by the association of free and equal individuals. It’s this new form of radicality which the bourgeoisie cannot understand and fills it with anxiety, so that it has to permanently mobilise itself against the organisations and militants of the proletariat. As the *Communist Manifesto* underlines:

“The Communist revolution is the most radical rupture with traditional property relations; no wonder that its development involved the most radical rupture with traditional ideas”.

Being a foreign body means that the revolutionary organisation is permanently under threat, not only through repression and the attempts to infiltrate it and destroy from within by specialised state bodies, or by the actions of parasitic groups (as we shall see later on), but also by the permanent danger of being turned away from its tasks and its function by the penetration of ideologies which are alien to the proletariat.

The organisation can’t exist without permanent combat. The spirit of combat is an essential feature of the revolutionary organisation and its militants. Combats, crises, difficulties are part of all revolutionary organisations.

“Crises are not necessarily a guarantee of impending collapse and failure. On the contrary, the existence of crises can be an expression of a healthy resistance to an underlying tendency towards failure that had hitherto been developing peacefully. And therefore crises can be the sign of reacting to danger and struggling against signs of collapse. A crisis is also an opportunity: to understand the root causes of serious difficulties that will enable the organisation to ultimately strengthen itself and temper its militants for future battles.

“In the Second International (1889-1914) the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party was well known for undergoing a series of crises and splits, and for this reason was held in contempt by the leaders of the larger parties of the International like the German Social Democracy (SPD) who presented an appearance of going from success to success, steadily increasing their membership and electoral votes. However the crises of the Russian Party, and the struggle to overcome and learn

from them by the Bolshevik wing, steeled the revolutionary minority in preparation for standing against the imperialist war in 1914 and for leading the October Revolution of 1917. By contrast the facade of unity of the SPD (challenged only by 'trouble-makers' like Rosa Luxemburg) completely and irrevocably collapsed in 1914 with the complete betrayal of its internationalist principles in face of the First World War".⁵

The defence of the organisation is a permanent element in the activity of the organisation and was thus an important point in the balance sheet and perspectives for our activities at this Congress. This fight is carried out on all fronts. The most important and specific is the struggle against attempts to destroy it (through slander, denigration, suspicion and distrust). But, at the same time, "*the ICC is not immune from the opportunist pressures on the programmatic positions, allied to sclerosis, that, on a different scale, have already debilitated the other groups of the communist left*"⁶. This is why there is a unity and a coherence between this vital aspect of the struggle against the threat of destruction and the no less vital need to fight against any expression of opportunism that may arise in our ranks: "*Without this permanent struggle on the long-term historic level against and vigilance toward political opportunism, the defence of the organisation, its centralisation and principles of functioning as such will be for nothing. If it is true that without proletarian political organisation the best programme is an idea without social force, it is equally true that without full fidelity to the historical programme of the proletariat the organisation becomes an empty shell. There is unity and no opposition or separation between the principles of political organisation and the programmatic principles of the proletariat. While the struggle for the defence of theory and the struggle for the defence of organisation are inseparable and equally indispensable, the abandonment of the former is a threat, certainly fatal, but in the medium term, while the abandonment of the latter is a short-term threat. As long as it exists, the organisation can recover, including theoretically, but if it no longer exists, no theory will revive it.*"⁷

The struggle against parasitism

The history of the workers' movement has provided evidence of a danger which, today, has taken on a considerable importance – parasitism. The First International

already had to defend itself against this danger identified by Marx and Engels. "*It is high time to put an end, once and for all, to the internal conflicts provoked daily in our Association by the presence of this parasitic body. These quarrels only serve to waste energies which should be used to fight against the bourgeois regime. By paralysing the activity of the International against the enemies of the working class, the Alliance admirably serves the bourgeoisies and the governments*".⁸ The International had to fight against plots by Bakunin, an adventurer who used a façade of radicalism as a way of hiding a work of intrigue and slander against militants like Marx and Engels, of attacks against the central organ of the International (the General Council), of destabilisation and disorganisation of the sections, of creating secret structures to conspire against the activity and functioning of the proletarian organisation

Obviously, the historic conditions in which today's proletarian struggle develops are very different from those that existed at the time of the First International. This was a mass organisation regrouping all the living forces of the proletariat, a "power" which genuinely worried bourgeois governments. Today the proletarian milieu is extremely weak, reduced to a number of small groups who don't represent an immediate danger for the bourgeoisie. This said, the difficulties and dangers which this milieu faces do have similarities with those confronted by the First International. In particular, the existence of "parasitic bodies" whose reason for existence is in no way to contribute to the struggle of the working class against the bourgeoisie but on the contrary to sabotage the activity of organisations engaged in this struggle. At the time of the First International, the Alliance led by Bakunin carried out its work of sabotage (before being expelled at the Hague Congress in September 1872) inside the International itself. Today, largely because of the dispersion of the proletarian milieu into a number of small groups, the "parasitic bodies" don't operate inside one group in particular but on the margins of these groups, trying either to recruit elements who are sincere but who lack experience or are influenced by petty bourgeois ideas (as the Alliance did in Spain, Italy, Switzerland and Belgium), or by doing all they can to discredit the authentically proletarian groups and sabotage their activity (as the Alliance did when it realised that it would not be able to take

control of the International).

Unfortunately, this lesson from history has been forgotten by the majority of the groups of the communist left. Given that the priority of the parasites is to take aim at the main organisation of the communist left, the ICC, these groups consider that this is an "ICC problem", even going so far as to maintain, at certain moments, cordial relations with parasitic groups. However, the behavior of the latter (from the Communist Bulletin Group nearly 40 years ago to the more recent International Group of the Communist Left) passing through a number of small groups, blogs or individuals, speaks for itself:

- odious denigration of our organisation and its militants, in particular the accusation that we use Stalinist methods or are even state agents;
- theft of our material means;
- threats to use bourgeois justice or the police against our militants;
- publication of police-like material providing information that could identify our militants or sow suspicion between militants inside the same organisation.

The General Council of the International considered that the Alliance "*admirably serves the bourgeoisies and the governments*". In the same way, the activities resolution of the 23rd ICC congress considers that "*in the current historic epoch, parasitism is objectively working on behalf of the bourgeoisie to destroy the ICC*" and that "*as the last 30 years' experience shows, political parasitism is one of the most serious dangers that we will have to face... In the past decades political parasitism has not only persisted but developed its anti-ICC arsenal and widened its repertoire*".

Thus, recently, we have witnessed a more sophisticated but also more dangerous kind of activity: the falsification of the tradition of the communist left through the promotion of a fake communist left based on Trotskyism. Without even considering the intention behind this, such an enterprise can only complete a front of slander and snitching aimed at "*creating a cordon sanitaire that isolates the ICC from the other groups of the proletarian political milieu...and from the searching elements*".

This is why the Congress committed the whole organisation to engage in a determined and unrelenting struggle against parasitism, considering that "*an essential, long term axis of the ICC's intervention*

5. International Review n° 153, "News of our death is greatly exaggerated".

6. Activities resolution of the Congress.

7. Ibid.

8. Engels, "The General Council to all the members of the International Working Men's Association", August 1872, warning against Bakunin's Alliance. Published (with slight variations in translation) in Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Collected Works*, vol.23, Lawrence and Wishart.

Imperialist conflicts, life of the bourgeoisie, economic crisis

Historical framework: the phase of capitalist decomposition

1) Thirty years ago, the ICC highlighted the fact that the capitalist system had entered the final phase of its period of decadence, that of decomposition. This analysis was based on a number of empirical facts, but at the same time it provided a framework for understanding these facts: *"In this situation, where society's two decisive – and antagonistic – classes confront each other without either being able to impose its own definitive response, history nonetheless does not just come to a stop. Still less for capitalism than for preceding social forms, is a 'freeze' or a 'stagnation' of social life possible. As crisis-ridden capitalism's contradictions can only get deeper, the bourgeoisie's inability to offer the slightest perspective for society as a whole, and the proletariat's inability, for the moment, openly to set forward its own historic perspective, can only lead to a situation of generalised decomposition. Capitalism is rotting on its feet."*¹

Our analysis took care to clarify the two meanings of the term "decomposition"; on the one hand, it applies to a phenomenon that affects society, particularly in the period of decadence of capitalism and, on the other hand, it designates a particular historical phase of the latter, its ultimate phase:

*"... it is vital to highlight the fundamental distinction between the elements of decomposition which have infected capitalism since the beginning of the century [the 20th century] and the generalised decomposition which is infecting the system today, and which can only get worse. Here again, quite apart from the strictly quantitative aspect, the phenomenon of social decomposition has today reached such a breadth and depth that it has taken on a new and unique quality, revealing decadent capitalism's entry into a new and final phase of its history: the phase where decomposition becomes a decisive, if not the decisive factor in social evolution."*²

It is mainly this last point, the fact that decomposition tends to become the de-

cisive factor in the evolution of society, and therefore of all the components of the world situation – an idea that is by no means shared by the other groups of the communist left – that constitutes the major thrust of this resolution.

2) The May 1990 theses on decomposition highlight a whole series of characteristics in the evolution of society resulting from the entry of capitalism into this ultimate phase of its existence. The report adopted by the 22nd Congress noted the worsening of all these characteristics, such as:

- "the proliferation of famines in the 'Third World' countries ...;
- the transformation of the 'Third World' into a vast slum, where hundreds of millions of human beings survive like rats in the sewers;
- the development of the same phenomenon in the heart of the major cities in the 'advanced' countries, ... ;
- the recent proliferation of 'accidental' catastrophes (...) the increasingly devastating effects, on the human, social, and economic levels, of 'natural' disasters ...;
- the degradation of the environment, which is reaching staggering dimensions."³

The "Report on decomposition" to the 22nd Congress of the ICC also highlighted the confirmation and aggravation of the political and ideological manifestations of decomposition as identified in 1990:

- "the incredible corruption, which grows and prospers, of the political apparatus (...);
- the development of terrorism, or the seizure of hostages, as methods of warfare between states, to the detriment of the 'laws' that capitalism established in the past to 'regulate' the conflicts between different ruling class factions;
- the constant increase in criminality, insecurity, and urban violence, (...);
- the development of nihilism, despair, and suicide amongst young people... and of the hatred and xenophobia (...);

- the tidal waves of drug addiction, which have now become a mass phenomenon and a powerful element in the corruption of states and financial organisms (...);
- the profusion of sects, the renewal of the religious spirit including in the advanced countries, the rejection of rational, coherent thought (...);
- the invasion of the same media by the spectacle of violence, horror, blood, massacres, (...);
- the vacuity and venality of all 'artistic' production: literature, music, painting, architecture (...);
- 'every man for himself', marginalisation, the atomisation of the individual, the destruction of family relationships, the exclusion of old people from social life"⁴

The report of the 22nd Congress focused in particular on the development of a phenomenon already noted in 1990 (and which had played a major role in the ICC's awareness of the entry of decadent capitalism into the phase of decomposition): the use of terrorism in imperialist conflicts. The report noted that: *"The quantitative and qualitative growth of the place of terrorism has taken a decisive step (...) with the attack on the Twin Towers (...) It was subsequently confirmed with the attacks in Madrid in 2004 and London in 2005 (...), the establishment of Daesh in 2013-14 (...), the attacks in France in 2015-16, Belgium and Germany in 2016"*. The report also noted, in connection with these attacks and as a characteristic expression of the decomposition of society, the spread of radical Islamism, which, while initially inspired by Shia (with the establishment in 1979 of the mullahs' regime in Iran), became essentially the result of the Sunni movement from 1996 onwards, with the capture of Kabul by the Taliban and, even more so, after the overthrow of Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq by American troops.

3) In addition to confirming the trends already identified in the 1990 theses, the report adopted by the 22nd Congress noted the emergence of two new phenomena resulting from the continuation of decom-

1. "Decomposition, the final phase of the decadence of capitalism", pt.4, *International Review* n° 62.

2. Ibid, pt. 2.

3. Ibid, pt. 7.

4. Ibid, pt. 8.

position and destined to play a major role in the political life of many countries:

- a dramatic increase in migration flows from 2012 onwards, culminating in 2015, and coming mainly from the war-torn Middle East, particularly following the "Arab spring" of 2011;
- the continued rise of populism in most European countries and also in the world's leading power with the election of Donald Trump in November 2016.

Massive population displacements are not a phenomenon specific to the phase of decomposition. However, they are now acquiring a dimension that makes them a singular element of this decomposition, both in terms of their current causes (notably the chaos of war that reigns in the countries of origin) and their political consequences in the countries of destination. In particular, the massive arrival of refugees in European countries has been a prime basis for the populist wave developing in Europe, although this wave began to rise long before (especially in a country like France with the rise of the National Front).

4) In fact, over the past twenty years, populist parties have seen the number of votes polled in favour of them triple in Europe (from 7% to 25%), with strong increases following the 2008 financial crisis and the 2015 migration crisis. In about ten countries, these parties participate in the government or parliamentary majority: Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Bulgaria, Austria, Denmark, Norway, Switzerland and Italy. Moreover, even when populist groups are not involved in government, they have a significant influence on the political life of the bourgeoisie. Three examples can be given:

- in Germany, it was the electoral rise of the AfD that considerably weakened Angela Merkel, forcing her to give up the leadership of her party;
- in France, "Man of Destiny" Macron, an apostle of a "New World", although he managed to win a large victory over Marine Le Pen in the 2017 elections, has in no way succeeded in reducing the influence of the latter's party, which in the polls is hot on the heels of his own party, La République en Marche, which claims to be both of the "right and left" with political personnel on both sides (for example, a Prime Minister from the Right and a Minister of the Interior from the Socialist Party);
- in Great Britain, the traditionally most skilful bourgeoisie in the world has been giving us for more than a year the spectacle of deep distress resulting from its

inability to manage the "Brexit" imposed on it by the populist currents.

Whether the populist currents are in government or simply disrupting the classic political game, they do not correspond to a rational option for the management of national capital nor therefore to a deliberate card played by the dominant sectors of the bourgeois class which, particularly through its media, is constantly denouncing these currents. What the rise of populism actually expresses is the aggravation of a phenomenon already announced in the 1990 theses: *"Amongst the major characteristics of capitalist society's decomposition, we should emphasise the bourgeoisie's growing difficulty in controlling the evolution of the political situation"*.⁵ A phenomenon clearly noted in the report of the 22nd Congress: *"What must be stressed in the current situation is the full confirmation of this aspect that we identified 25 years ago: the trend towards a growing loss of control by the ruling class over its political apparatus."*

The rise of populism is an expression, in the current circumstances, of the bourgeoisie's increasing loss of control over the workings of society, resulting fundamentally from what lies at the heart of its decomposition, the inability of the two fundamental classes of society to provide a response to the insoluble crisis into which the capitalist economy is sinking. In other words, decomposition is fundamentally the result of impotence on the part of the ruling class, an impotence that is rooted in its inability to overcome this crisis in its mode of production and that increasingly tends to affect its political apparatus.

Among the current causes of the populist wave are the main manifestations of social decomposition: the rise of despair, nihilism, violence, xenophobia, associated with a growing rejection of the "elites" (the "rich", politicians, technocrats) and in a situation where the working class is unable to present, even in an embryonic way, an alternative. It is obviously possible, either because it will itself have demonstrated its own powerlessness and corruption, or because a renewal of workers' struggles will cut the ground under its feet, that populism will lose its influence in the future. On the other hand, it cannot in any way call into question the historical tendency of society to sink into decomposition, nor the various manifestations of it, including the increasing loss of control by the bourgeoisie of its political game. And this has consequences not only for the domestic policy of each state but also for all relations between states and imperialist configurations.

The historic course – a paradigm change

5) In 1989-90, in the face of the dislocation of the Eastern bloc, we analysed this unprecedented historical phenomenon – the collapse of an entire imperialist bloc in the absence of a generalised military confrontation – as the first major manifestation of the period of decomposition. At the same time, we examined the new configuration of the world that resulted from this historic event:

"The disappearance of the Russian imperialist gendarme, and that to come of the American gendarme as far as its one-time 'partners' are concerned, opens the door to the unleashing of a whole series of more local rivalries. For the moment, these rivalries and confrontations cannot degenerate into a world war (even supposing that the proletariat were no longer capable of putting up a resistance). (...) Up to now, during the period of decadence, such a situation where the various imperialist antagonisms are dispersed, where the world (or at least its decisive zones) is not divided up between two blocs, has never lasted long. The disappearance of the two major imperialist constellations which emerged from World War II brings with it the tendency towards the recomposition of two new blocs. Such a situation, however, is not yet on the agenda (...) This is all the more true in that the tendency towards a new share-out of the planet between two military blocs is countered, and may even be definitively compromised, by the increasingly profound and widespread decomposition of capitalist society, which we have already pointed out (...)"

*"Given the world bourgeoisie's loss of control over the situation, it is not certain that its dominant sectors will today be capable of enforcing the discipline and coordination necessary for the reconstitution of military blocs."*⁶

Thus, 1989 marks a fundamental change in the general dynamics of capitalist society:

- Before that date, the balance of power between the classes was the determining factor in this dynamic: it was on this balance of forces that the outcome of the exacerbation of the contradictions of capitalism depended: either the unleashing of the world war, or the development of class struggle with the overthrow of capitalism as the perspective.
- After that date, this dynamic is no longer determined by the balance of forces

6. "After the collapse of the Eastern bloc, destabilisation and chaos", *International Review* n° 61.

5. Ibid, pt. 9.

between classes. Whatever the balance of forces, world war is no longer on the agenda, but capitalism will continue to sink into decay.

6) In the paradigm that dominated most of the 20th century, the notion of a “historical course” defined the outcome of a historical trend: either world war or class confrontations; and once the proletariat had suffered a decisive defeat (as on the eve of 1914 or as a result of the revolutionary wave of 1917-23), world war became ineluctable. In the paradigm that defines the current situation (until two new imperialist blocs are reconstituted, which may never happen), it is quite possible that the proletariat will suffer a defeat so deep that it will definitively prevent it from recovering, but it is also possible that it will suffer a deep defeat without this having a decisive consequence for the general evolution of society. This is why the notion of “historical course” is no longer able to define the situation of the current world and the balance of forces between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat.

In a way, the current historical situation is similar to that of the 19th century. At that time:

- an increase in workers' struggles did not mean the prospect of a revolutionary period since proletarian revolution was not yet on the agenda, nor could it prevent a major war from breaking out (for example, the war between France and Prussia in 1870 when the power of the proletariat was rising with the development of the International Workmen's Association);
- a major defeat of the proletariat (such as the crushing of the Paris Commune) did not result in a new war.

That said, it is important to stress that the notion of “historical course” as used by the Italian Fraction in the 1930s and by the ICC between 1968 and 1989 was perfectly valid and constituted the fundamental framework for understanding the world situation. In no way can the fact that our organisation has had to take into account the new and unprecedented facts on this situation since 1989 be interpreted as a challenge to our analytical framework until that date.

Imperialist tensions

7) As early as 1990, at the same time as we were seeing the disappearance of the imperialist blocs that had dominated the “Cold War”, we insisted on the continuation, and even the aggravation, of military clashes:

“In the period of capitalist decadence,

all states are imperialist, and take the necessary measures to satisfy their appetites: war economy, arms production, etc. We must state clearly that the deepening convulsions of the world economy can only sharpen the opposition between different states, including and increasingly on the military level. ... For the moment, these rivalries and confrontations cannot degenerate into a world war. ... However, with the disappearance of the discipline imposed by the two blocs, these conflicts are liable to become more frequent and more violent, especially of course in those areas where the proletariat is weakest.”⁷

“The present disappearance of imperialist blocs does not imply the slightest calling into question of imperialism's grip on social life. The fundamental difference lies in the fact that (...) the end of the blocs only opens the door to a still more barbaric, aberrant, and chaotic form of imperialism.”⁸

Since then, the global situation has only confirmed this trend towards worsening chaos, as we observed a year ago:

“...The development of decomposition has led to a bloody and chaotic unchaining of imperialism and militarism;

– the explosion of the tendency of each for himself has led to the rise of the imperialist ambitions of second and third level powers, as well as to the growing weakening of the USA's dominant position in the world;

– The current situation is characterised by imperialist tensions all over the place and by a chaos that is less and less controllable; but above all, by its highly irrational and unpredictable character, linked to the impact of populist pressures, in particular to the fact that the world's strongest power is led today by a populist president with temperamental reactions.”⁹

8) The Middle East, where the weakening of American leadership is most evident and where the Americans' inability to engage too directly on the military level in Syria has left the field open to other imperialisms, offers a concentration of these historical trends:

– Russia has imposed itself as an essential power in the Syrian theatre thanks to its military force, in particular to preserve its naval bases in Tartus.

– Iran, through its military victory to save its ally, the Assad regime, and by forging an Iraqi-Syrian land corridor directly

linking Iran to the Mediterranean and the Lebanese Hezbollah, is the main beneficiary and has fulfilled its objective of taking the lead in this region, in particular by deploying troops outside its territory.

- Turkey, obsessed by the fear of the establishment of autonomous Kurdish zones that can only destabilise it, operates militarily in Syria.
- The military “victories” in Iraq and Syria against the Islamic State and the retention of Assad in power offer no prospect of stabilisation. In Iraq, the military defeat of the Islamic State did not eliminate the resentment of the former Sunni faction around Saddam Hussein that gave rise to it: the exercise of power for the first time by Shiites only further fuels it. In Syria, the regime's military victory does not mean the stabilisation or pacification of the shared Syrian space, which is subjected to the intervention of different imperialisms with competing interests.
- Russia and Iran are deeply divided over the future of the Syrian state and the presence of their military on its territory.

Neither Israel, hostile to the strengthening of Hezbollah in Lebanon and Syria, nor Saudi Arabia, can tolerate this Iranian advance; while Turkey cannot accept the excessive regional ambitions of its two rivals.

Nor can the United States and the West give up their ambitions in this strategic area of the world.

The centrifugal action of the various powers, small and large, whose divergent imperialist appetites constantly collide, only fuels the persistence of current conflicts, as in Yemen, as well as the prospect of future conflicts and the spread of chaos.

9) While, following the collapse of the USSR in 1989, Russia seemed doomed to play only a secondary power role, it is making a strong comeback to the imperialist level. A power in decline and lacking the economic capacity to sustain military competition with other major powers in the long term, it has demonstrated, through the restoration of its military capabilities since 2008, its very high military aggressiveness and its capacity to be a nuisance internationally:

– It has thus thwarted US “containment” (with the integration into NATO of its former Warsaw Pact allies) on the European continent with the annexation of Crimea in 2014, with the separatist amputation of Donbass breaking any possibility of making Ukraine a central

7. Ibid.

8. “Militarism and Decomposition”, *International Review* n°64.

9. “Analysis of Recent Developments in Imperialist Tensions”, *International Review* n° 161.

part of the anti-Russian apparatus.

- It has taken advantage of America's difficulties to push towards the Mediterranean: its military intervention in Syria has enabled it to strengthen its naval military presence in that country and in the eastern Mediterranean basin. Russia has also managed for the time being to make a rapprochement with Turkey, a NATO member, which is moving away from the American orbit.

Russia's current rapprochement with China on the basis of the rejection of American alliances in the Asian region has only a weak prospect of creating a long-term alliance given the divergent interests of the two states. However the instability of relations between the powers confers on Russia as a Eurasian state a new strategic importance in view of the place it can occupy in the containment of China.

10) Above all, the current situation is marked by China's rapid rise to power. The latter has the aim (by investing massively in new technological sectors, in artificial intelligence, etc) of establishing itself as the leading economic power by 2030-50 and acquiring by 2050 a "*world-class army capable of winning victory in any modern war*". The most visible manifestation of its ambitions is the launch since 2013 of the "new Silk Road" (creation of transport corridors at sea and on land, access to the European market and security of its trade routes) designed as a means of strengthening its economic presence but also as an instrument for developing its imperialist power in the world and in the long term, directly threatening American pre-eminence.

This rise of China is causing a general destabilisation of relations between powers, a serious strategic situation in which the dominant power, the United States, is trying to contain and block the threatening rise of China. The American response – started by Obama taken on and amplified by Trump by other means – represents a turning point in American politics. The defence of its interests as a national state now means embracing the tendency towards every man for himself that dominates imperialist relations: the United States is moving from being the gendarme of the world order to being the main agent of every man for himself, of chaos, of questioning the world order established since 1945 under its auspices.

This "*strategic battle for the new world order between the United States and China*", which is being fought in all areas at once, further increases the uncertainty and unpredictability already embedded in the particularly complex, unstable and shift-

ing situation of decomposition: this major conflict is forcing all states to reconsider their evolving imperialist options.

11) The stages of China's rise are inseparable from the history of the imperialist blocs and their disappearance in 1989: the position of the communist left affirming the "*impossibility of any emergence of new industrialised nations*" in the period of decadence and the condemnation of states "*which failed to succeed in their 'industrial take-off' before the First World War to stagnate in underdevelopment, or to preserve a chronic backwardness compared to the countries that hold the upper hand*" was valid in the period from 1914 to 1989. It was the straitjacket of the organisation of the world into two opposing imperialist blocs (permanent between 1945 and 1989) in preparation for the world war that prevented any major disruption of the hierarchy between powers. China's rise began with American aid rewarding its imperialist shift to the United States in 1972. It continued decisively after the disappearance of the blocs in 1989. China appears to be the main beneficiary of "globalisation" following its accession to the WTO in 2001 when it became the world's workshop and the recipient of Western relocations and investments, finally becoming the world's second largest economic power. It took the unprecedented circumstances of the historical period of decomposition to allow China to rise, without which it would not have happened.

China's power bears all the stigma of terminal capitalism: it is based on the over-exploitation of the proletarian labour force, the unbridled development of the war economy through the national programme of "military-civil fusion" and is accompanied by the catastrophic destruction of the environment, while national cohesion is based on the police control of the masses subjected to the political education of the One Party and the fierce repression of the populations of Uighur Muslims and Tibet. In fact, China is only a giant metastasis of the generalised militaristic cancer of the entire capitalist system: its military production is developing at a frenetic pace, its defence budget has increased six-fold in 20 years and has been ranked second in the world since 2010.

12) The establishment of the "New Silk Road" and China's gradual, persistent and long-term progress (the establishment of economic agreements or inter-state partnerships all over the world; with Italy, with its access to the port of Athens in the Mediterranean; in Latin America; with the creation of a military base in Djibouti – the gateway to its growing influence on the African continent) affects all states and

upsets the existing balances.

In Asia, China has already changed the balance of imperialist forces to the detriment of the United States. However, it is not possible for it to automatically fill the "void" left by the decline of American leadership because of the domination of each for themselves in the imperialist sphere and the distrust that its power provokes. Significant imperialist tensions have crystallised in particular with:

- India, which denounces the creation of the Silk Road in its immediate vicinity (Pakistan, Burma, Sri Lanka) as a strategy of encirclement and an attack on its sovereignty, is undertaking a major programme to modernise its army and has almost doubled its budget since 2008;
- and Japan, which has the same desire to block it. Tokyo has begun to question its post World War II status limiting its legal and material capacity to use military force, and it directly supports regional states, diplomatically but also militarily, in order to confront China.

The hostility of these two states towards China is driving towards their convergence as well as their rapprochement with the United States. The latter have launched a four-party Japan-United States-Australia-India alliance that provides a framework for diplomatic, but also military, rapprochement between the various states opposed to China's rise.

In this phase of "catching up" with US power by China, it is trying to hide its hegemonic ambitions in order to avoid direct confrontation with its rival, which is harmful to its long-term plans, while the United States is taking the initiative now to block it and refocus most of its imperialist attention on the Indo-Pacific area.

13) Despite Trump's populism, despite disagreements within the American bourgeoisie on how to defend their leadership and divisions, particularly regarding Russia, the Trump administration adopts an imperialist policy in continuity and consistency with the fundamental imperialist interests of the American state. It is generally agreed among the majority sectors of the American bourgeoisie that it is vital to defend the USA's rank as undisputed leading world power.

Faced with the Chinese challenge, the United States is undergoing a major transformation of its imperialist world strategy. This shift is based on the observation that the framework of "globalisation" has not guaranteed the United States' position but has if anything weakened it. The Trump administration's formalisation of the

principle of defending only their interests as a national state and the imposition of profitable power relations as the main basis for relations with other states, confirms and draws implications from the failure of the policy of the last 25 years of fighting against the “every man for himself” tendency as a world policeman in defence of the world order inherited from 1945.

This turnaround by the United States is reflected in:

- its withdrawal from (or questioning of) international agreements and institutions that have become obstacles to its supremacy or contradictory to the current needs of American imperialism: withdrawal of the Paris Agreement on Climate Change, reduction of contributions to the UN and withdrawal from UNESCO, the United Nations Human Rights Council, the Global Compact on Migrants and Refugees;
- the willingness to adapt NATO, the military alliance inherited from the blocs, which has lost much of its relevance in the current configuration of imperialist tensions, by imposing on the allies a greater financial responsibility for their protection and by revising the automatic character of the deployment of the American umbrella;
- the tendency to abandon multilateralism in favour of bilateral agreements (based on its military and economic strength) using the levers of economic blackmail, terror and the threat of the use of military brute force (such as atomic strikes against North Korea) to impose themselves;
- the trade war with China, largely with a view to denying China any possibility of gaining economic stature and developing strategic sectors that would allow it to directly challenge US hegemony;
- the questioning of multilateral arms control agreements (NIF and START) in order to maintain their technological lead and relaunch the arms race to exhaust America’s rivals (according to the proven strategy that led to the collapse of the USSR). The United States adopted in 2018 one of the highest military budgets in its history; it is relaunching its nuclear capabilities and is considering the creation of a sixth component of the US Army to “dominate space” to counter China’s threats in the satellite field.

The vandalising behaviour of a Trump, who can denounce American international commitments overnight in defiance of established rules, represents a new and powerful factor of uncertainty, providing further impetus towards “each against all”.

It is a further indication of the new stage in which capitalism is sinking further into barbarism and the abyss of untrammelled militarism.

14) The change in American strategy is noticeable in some of the main imperialist theatres:

- in the Middle East, the United States’ stated objective towards Iran (and sanctions against it) is to destabilise and overthrow the regime by playing on its internal divisions. While seeking to continue its progressive military disengagement from the quagmire of Afghanistan and Syria, the United States now unilaterally relies on its allies in Israel and especially Saudi Arabia (by far the largest regional military power) as the backbone of its policy to contain Iran. In this perspective, they provide each of these two states and their respective leaders with the guarantees of unwavering support on all fronts to tighten their alliance (provision of state-of-the-art military equipment, Trump’s support in the scandal of the assassination of the Saudis’ opponent Khashoggi, recognition of East Jerusalem as the capital of Israel and of Israeli sovereignty on the Syrian Golan Heights). The priority of containing Iran is accompanied by the prospect of abandoning the Oslo agreements, with its “two-state” solution (Israeli and Palestinian) to the Palestinian question. The cessation of US aid to the Palestinians and the PLO and the proposal for a “big deal” (the abandonment of any claim to the creation of a Palestinian state in exchange for considerable US economic aid) are aimed at trying to resolve the Palestinian bone of contention, which has been instrumentalised by all regional imperialisms against the United States, in order to facilitate de facto rapprochement between its Arab and Israeli allies;
- in Latin America, the United States is engaging in a counter-offensive to ensure better imperialist control in its traditional area of influence. Bolsonaro’s rise to power in Brazil is not as such the result of a simple push of populism but results from a vast operation of American pressure on the Brazilian bourgeoisie, a strategy woven by the American state with the objective, now fulfilled, of bringing this state back into its imperialist fold. As a prelude to a comprehensive plan to overthrow the anti-American regimes of the “Troika of Tyranny” (Cuba, Venezuela and Nicaragua) we have seen the so-far abortive attempt to remove the Chavist/Maduro regime in Venezuela.

Washington, however, is clearly inflict-

ing a setback on China, which had made Venezuela a political ally of choice for expanding its influence and has proved powerless to oppose American pressure. It is not impossible that this American offensive of imperialist reconquest of its Latin American backyard may inaugurate a more systematic offensive against China on other continents. For the time being, it raises the prospect of Venezuela’s plunge into the chaos of a deadlocked clash between bourgeois factions, as well as an increased destabilisation of the entire South American zone.

15) The current general strengthening of imperialist tensions is reflected in the re-launch of the arms race and military technological supremacy not only where tensions are most apparent (in Asia and the Middle East) but for all states, all leading major powers. Everything indicates that a new stage is looming in inter-imperialist clashes and that the system sinking into military barbarism.

In this context, the EU (European Union) in relation to the international imperialist situation will continue to confront the tendency towards fragmentation as put forward in the “Report on Imperialist tensions” from June 2018.¹⁰

The economic crisis

16) On the economic level, since the beginning of 2018, the situation of capitalism has been marked by a sharp slowdown in world growth (from 4% in 2017 to 3.3% in 2019), which the bourgeoisie predicts will be worsening in 2019-20. This slowdown proved to be greater than expected in 2018, as the IMF had to reduce its forecasts for the next two years and is affecting virtually all parts of capitalism simultaneously: China, the United States and the Euro Zone. In 2019, 70% of the world economy has been slowing down, particularly in the “advanced” countries (Germany, United Kingdom). Some of the emerging countries are already in recession (Brazil, Argentina, Turkey) while China, which has been slowing down since 2017 and is expected to grow by 6.2% in 2019, is experiencing its lowest growth figures in 30 years.

The value of most currencies in the emerging countries has weakened, sometimes considerably, as in Argentina and Turkey

At the end of 2018, world trade recorded zero growth, while Wall Street experienced in 2018 the largest stock market “corrections” in the last 30 years. Most indicators are flashing and point to the prospect of a

10. See: *International Review* n° 161.

new dive in the capitalist economy.

17) The capitalist class has no future to offer, its system has been condemned by history. Since the 1929 crisis, the first major crisis of the era of the decadence of capitalism, the bourgeoisie has not ceased to develop the intervention of the state to exercise general control over the economy. Increasingly faced with a narrowing of extra-capitalist markets, more and more threatened by generalised overproduction *“capitalism has thus kept itself alive thanks to the conscious intervention of the bourgeoisie, which can no longer afford to rely on the invisible hand of the market. It is true that solutions also become part of the problem:*

- *the use of debt clearly accumulates huge problems for the future;*
- *the swelling of the state and the arms sector is generating appalling inflationary pressures.*

*Since the 1970s, these problems have led to different economic policies, alternating between ‘Keynesianism’ and ‘neoliberalism’, but since no policy can address the real causes of the crisis, no approach can achieve final victory. What is remarkable is the determination of the bourgeoisie to keep its economy moving at all costs and its ability to curb the tendency to collapse through gigantic debt.”*¹¹

Produced by the contradictions of the decadence and historical impasse of the capitalist system, state capitalism implemented at the level of each national capital does not, however, obey a strict economic determinism; on the contrary, its action, essentially of a political nature, simultaneously integrates and combines the economic dimension with the social (how to face its class enemy according to the balance of forces between the classes) and imperialist dimensions (the need to maintain a huge armaments sector at the centre of any economic activity). Thus, state capitalism has experienced different phases and organisational modalities in the history of decadence.

18) In the 1980s, under the impetus of the major economic powers, such a new phase was inaugurated: that of “globalisation”. In a first stage, it first took the form of Reaganomics, quickly followed by a second, which took advantage of the unprecedented historical situation of the fall of the Eastern bloc to extend and deepen a vast reorganisation of capitalist production on a global scale between 1990 and 2008.

Maintaining cooperation between states,

using in particular the old structures of the Western bloc, and preserving a certain order in trade exchanges, were means of coping with the worsening crisis (the recessions of 1987 and 1991-93) but also with the first effects of decomposition, which, in the economic field, could thus be largely mitigated.

Following the EU’s reference model of eliminating customs barriers between member states, the integration of many branches of world production has been strengthened by developing veritable chains of production on a global scale. By combining logistics, information technology and telecommunications, allowing economies of scale, the increased exploitation of the proletariat’s labour power (through increased productivity, international competition, free movement of labour to impose lower wages), the submission of production to the financial logic of maximum profitability, world trade has continued to increase, even if less so, stimulating the world economy, providing a “second wind” that has extended the existence of the capitalist system.

19) The 2007-09 crash marked a step in the sinking of the capitalist system into its irreversible crisis: after four decades of recourse to credit and debt in order to counter the growing trend of overproduction, punctuated by ever deeper recessions and ever more limited recoveries, the 2009 recession was the most significant since the Great Depression. It was the massive intervention of the states and their central banks that saved the banking system from complete bankruptcy, racking up a huge public debt by buying back debts that could no longer be repaid.

Chinese capital, which has also been seriously affected by the crisis, has played an important role in the stabilisation of the world economy by applying plans to relaunch the economy in 2009, 2015 and 2019, based on massive state debts.

Not only have the causes of the 2007-2011 crisis not been resolved or overcome, but the severity and contradictions of the crisis have moved to a higher level: it is now the states themselves which are faced with the crushing burden of their debt (the “sovereign debt”), which further affects their ability to intervene to revive their respective national economies. *“Debt has been used as way of supplementing the insufficiency of solvent markets but it can’t grow indefinitely as could be seen from the financial crisis which began in 2007. However, all the measures which can be taken to limit debt once again confront capitalism with its crisis of overproduction, and this in an international context which is in constant deterioration and*

*which more and more limits its margin of manoeuvre.”*¹²

20) The current development of the crisis through the increasing disruptions it causes in the organisation of production into a vast multilateral construction at the international level, unified by common rules, shows the limits of “globalisation”. The ever-increasing need for unity (which has never meant anything other than the imposition of the law of the strongest on the weakest) due to the “transnational” intertwining of highly segmented production country by country (in units fundamentally divided by competition where any product is designed here, assembled there with the help of elements produced elsewhere) comes up against the national nature of each capital, against the very limits of capitalism, which is irremediably divided into competing and rival nations. This is the maximum degree of unity that it is impossible for the bourgeois world to overcome. The deepening crisis (as well as the demands of imperialist rivalry) is putting multilateral institutions and mechanisms to a severe test.

This fact is illustrated by the current attitude of the two main powers competing for world hegemony:

- China has ensured its economic rise both by using the levers of WTO multilateralism while developing its own economic partnership policy (such as through the “New Silk Road” project aimed at counteracting the slowdown in its growth) without regard to environmental or “democratic” standards (a specific aspect of globalisation policy aimed at imposing Western standards and global competition between the beneficiaries and losers of globalisation). Ideologically, it challenges the Western liberal order that it considers to be in decline and since 2012 has been trying, through the creation of institutions (the Shanghai Organisation, the Asian Development Bank...) to lay the foundations of an alternative competing international order, which the Western bourgeoisie describes as “illiberal”.
- The American state under the Trump administration (supported by a majority of the American bourgeoisie), considers itself the loser of “globalisation” (which it had originally initiated), its position as world leader having been eroded progressively by its rivals (mainly China, but also western powers like Germany). The policy of “America First” tends to bypass regulatory institutions (WTO, G7 and G20) which are increasingly unable to preserve America’s position (which

11. 16th international congress, “Resolution on the international situation”.

12. International Situation Resolution, 20th ICC Congress.

had been their primary vocation) and to favour bilateral agreements that better defend its interests and the stability essential for conducting business.

21) The influence of decomposition is an additional destabilising factor. In particular, the development of populism further aggravates the deteriorating economic situation by introducing a factor of uncertainty and unpredictability in the face of the turmoil of the crisis. The coming to power of populist governments with unrealistic programmes for national capital, which weakens the functioning of the world economy and trade, is creating a mess, and raises the risk of weakening the means imposed by capitalism since 1945 to avoid any autarkic retreat into the national framework, encouraged by the uncontrolled contagion of the economic crisis. The mess of Brexit and the difficult exit of Britain from the EU provide another illustration: the inability of British ruling class parties to decide on the conditions for separation and the nature of future relations with the European Union, the uncertainties surrounding the “restoration” of borders, in particular between Northern Ireland and Eire, the uncertain future of a pro-European Scotland threatening to separate from the United Kingdom affect the English economy (by reducing the value of the pound) as well as that of its former EU partners, deprived of the long-term stability they need to regulate the economy.

The disagreements about economic policy in Britain, the US and elsewhere show that there are growing divisions not only between rival nations but also at home – divisions between “multilateralists” and “unilateralists”, but even within these two approaches (eg between “hard” and “soft” Brexiteers in the UK). Not only is there no longer any minimal consensus about economic policy even between the countries of the former western bloc but this question is also increasingly causing conflicts within the national bourgeoisies themselves.

22) The current accumulation of all these contradictions in the context of the advancing economic crisis, as well as the fragility of the monetary and financial system and the massive international indebtedness of states following 2008, open up a period of serious convulsions to come and once again place the capitalist system in front of the prospect of a new downward dive. However, it should not be forgotten that capitalism has certainly not definitively exhausted all the means it has to slow down its sinking into the crisis and to avoid uncontrolled situations, particularly in the central countries. The over-indebtedness of states, where an increased share of the

national wealth produced must be allocated to servicing the debt, heavily affects national budgets and severely reduces their room for manoeuvre in the face of the crisis. Nevertheless, it is certain that this situation will not:

- end the policy of indebtedness, as the main palliative to the contradictions of the crisis of overproduction and a means of postponing the inevitable, at the cost of ever more serious future convulsions;
- put any brake on the mad arms race to which each state is irrevocably condemned. This is taking on a more manifestly irrational form with the growing weight of the war economy and the production of arms, the growing share of their GDP that will continue to be devoted to it (and which today is reaching its highest level since 1988, at the time of the confrontation between imperialist blocs).

23) Concerning the proletariat, these new convulsions can only result in even more serious attacks against its living and working conditions at all levels and in the whole world, in particular:

- by strengthening the exploitation of labour power by continuing to reduce wages and increase rates of exploitation and productivity in all sectors;
- by continuing to dismantle what remains of the welfare state (additional restrictions on the various benefit systems for the unemployed, social assistance and pension systems); and more generally by “softly” abandoning the financing of all forms of assistance or social support from the voluntary or semi-public sector;
- the reduction by states of the costs represented by education and health in the production and maintenance of the proletariat’s labour power (and thus significant attacks against the proletarians in these public sectors);
- the aggravation and further development of precariousness as a means of imposing and enforcing the development of mass unemployment in all parts of the class;
- attacks camouflaged behind financial operations, such as negative interest rates which erode small saving accounts and pension schemes. And although the official rates of inflation for consumer goods are low in many countries, speculative bubbles have contributed to a veritable explosion of the cost of housing;
- the increase in the cost of living notably

of taxes and the price of goods of prime necessity.

Nevertheless, although the bourgeoisie in all countries is more and more compelled to strengthen its attacks against the working class, its margin of manoeuvre on the political level is by no means exhausted. We can be sure it will make use of every means to prevent the proletariat from replying on its own class terrain against the growing deterioration of its living conditions imposed by the convulsions of the world economy.

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*must be an open and continuous political and organisational combat against parasitism in order to eliminate it from the proletarian milieu”.*⁹

The struggle for the future party

Working like a fraction thus has a number of facets which form a unity: defence of the organisation, combat against parasitism, development of marxism, capacity for analysis and intervention confronted with the evolution of the world situation. This unity was at the heart of this Congress and will have to guide the activity of the ICC. As we said at the beginning of this article, the 23rd ICC Congress was centred round a militant reminder of the experience of the Third International and the effort to draw all the lessons from this experience. This is why the activities resolution ends with this commitment:

*“To accomplish its historic tasks the ICC must draw strength and its fighting spirit from the crises it will face, as did the Marxist left of 1919. If it is capable of assuming fraction-like work, then it will have the means to regroup the Communist Left current and new revolutionary energies on clear programmatic bases, and thus fully play its role in the foundation of the future party”.*¹⁰

ICC December 2019

9. Activities Resolution of 23rd Congress.

10. Ibid.

Report on the impact of decomposition on the political life of the bourgeoisie

In the context of the impact of decomposition on the life of the bourgeoisie, this report focuses more particularly on the difficulties faced by the bourgeoisie with the rise of populist currents and on the way in which it tries to react to this. It will therefore not deal directly and centrally with the history of populism or with more general issues such as the relationship between populism and violence.

Decomposition and populism

The ICC has not discussed a report on the life of the bourgeoisie since its 17th congress in 2007.

However, the "Report on decomposition" from the 22nd ICC congress, which updates and completes the main axes of the theses on the decomposition and places the phenomenon of populism in this context, provides the framework of reference for analysing and interpreting the upheavals characterising the political life of the bourgeoisie today. The main ideas are as follows:

- Decadent capitalism has entered "*into a specific phase - the final phase - of its history, the one in which decomposition becomes a factor, if not the decisive factor, in the evolution of society.*" Along with the refugee crisis and the development of terrorism, populism is one of its most striking expressions. This process of decomposition of society is irreversible.
- The rise of populism "*is not the desired political choice of the dominant sectors of the bourgeoisie*". On the contrary, it is a confirmation of the tendency towards "*an increasing loss of control by the ruling class over its political apparatus*".
- Its real cause is "*the inability of the proletariat to put forward its own response, its own alternative to the crisis of capitalism. Into this vacuum comes the loss of trust in the official institutions of society, that are no longer able to protect it, and it grows stronger and stronger, giving rise to a loss of confidence in the future and the tendency to look to the past and to look for scapegoats to blame for the catastrophe*".
- There is "*a common element present in most advanced countries: the profound loss of confidence in the 'elites' (...) due to their inability to restore health to the economy and to stem the steady rise in unemployment and poverty*".

This revolt against the political leaders "*(...) can in no way lead to an alternative perspective to capitalism*".¹

- "*The populist reaction is to want to replace the existing hypocritical pseudo-equality with an 'honest' and open system of legal discrimination. (...) The logic of this argumentation is that, in the absence of a longer-term perspective of growth for the national economy, the living conditions of the natives can only be more or less stabilised by discriminating against everybody else.*"²

The increasing loss of control by the bourgeoisie of its political apparatus

Since 2017 and the 22nd International Congress, following the vote in support of Brexit in the UK and the election of Trump as President of the United States, the impact of populism on all aspects of the international situation has become increasingly clear: it has been shown clearly with regard both to the imperialist tensions and the struggle of the proletariat. It is also becoming more and more prominent in the economy. It is finally revealing itself in a spectacular way on the level of the bourgeoisie's political apparatus: the events of the last two years therefore confirm in a spectacular way "*this aspect that we identified 25 years ago: the tendency towards a growing loss of control by the ruling class of its political apparatus.*"³

There has been a spectacular expansion of this loss of control in recent years, accentuating a real populist groundswell. According to a study by *The Guardian* newspaper, covering the last twenty years, the populist parties have seen the number of votes for them in Europe triple (from 7% to 25%). In about ten countries, these parties participate in the government or the parliamentary majority: Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Slovakia,

1. All quotes from "Report on Decomposition", 22nd ICC Congress.

2. "Resolution on the International Class Struggle", 22nd ICC Congress.

3. Report on Decomposition..

Bulgaria, Austria, Denmark, Norway, Switzerland and Italy. The study points to two moments that affected these growth figures: the 2008 financial crisis and the refugee wave in 2015. The exacerbation of other phenomena characteristic of decomposition, such as terrorism, every man for himself, has fuelled the flames and stimulated the populist encroachment into all aspects of capitalist society. Finally, the rise to power within the leading imperialist power of a populist president has further intensified the power of the tidal wave, as recent data illustrate: the formation of a government composed solely of populist groups in Italy, a political apparatus that is sinking into confusion in Great Britain, strong pressure from populist forces on Merkel's politics in Germany, the victory of Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil, the "Yellow Vests" movement in France, the emergence of a nationalist populist party ("Vox") in Spain, and so on...

The expressions of populism are causing more and more uncontrollable convulsions within the political apparatus of the various bourgeoisies. The following sections of the report will show that they are a major factor in all industrialised countries and that they also have a significant impact in similar forms in a number of "emerging" countries.

Trump's presidency and the exacerbation of opposition within the US bourgeoisie

The US bourgeoisie's crisis did not come about as a result of Trump's election. In 2007, a report to the 17th Congress already noted the crisis of the American bourgeoisie by explaining: "*It is first and foremost this objective situation - a situation that excludes any long-term strategy on the part of the remaining dominant power - that made it possible to elect and re-elect such a corrupt regime, with a pious and stupid President at its head [Bush junior]. (...), the Bush Administration is nothing more than a reflection of the dead-end situation of US imperialism*".⁴ However, the victory of a populist president (Trump) known for making unpredictable decisions not only brought to light the crisis of the US bourgeoisie, but also highlighted the growing instability of the political apparatus of the

4. "The Impact of Decomposition on the Life of the Bourgeoisie".

US bourgeoisie and the exacerbation of internal tensions.

Incapable of preventing his election, the most responsible fractions did everything in their power to try to limit the damage (a) by manoeuvring to remove him, but the “impeachment” procedures seem to be very long term; (b) by placing trusted men on the presidential staff (From McMaster to Kelly and Tillerson along the way) but they have gradually been removed (the last one, Mad Dog’ Mattis has just quit); (c) by trying to impose political control through its Republican deputies although, in the end, it was Trump who played vampire to the Republican Party; (d) by aiming to develop an alternative to Trump within the Democratic Party - but this has been a failure so far. In the end, Trump’s re-election for a second term seems increasingly probable.

Moreover, Trump’s confusing and capricious policy highlights the perplexity and divisions within the US bourgeoisie about the economic and imperialist policies needed to maintain its global supremacy. Beyond Trump’s versatile and commercial approach, the shift from multilateralism to bilateralism reveals a real tension within the bourgeoisie: the domination of US imperialism has always presented itself behind a moral screen: the defence of democracy and the free world, the defence of human rights (Clinton, Obama), the fight against evil (Bush), and this at the head of a broad coalition of states. Faced with the difficulties of maintaining this role as a global policeman, Trump openly broke with the hypocrisy of multilateralism to impose the cynical reality of the bilateral power struggle, even with his friends (Britain) and allies (Germany). In its logic, the US can only maintain its global supremacy if it improves its economic situation and this can be done by blackmailing its competitors through its overwhelming military supremacy. His former national security adviser, General McMaster, explained it well in the *Wall Street Journal*: he has “*the farsighted vision that the world is not a ‘global community’, but an arena where nations, non-governmental and economic actors are engaged in competition. (...). Rather than denying this elementary nature of international relations, we embrace it*”.⁵ In this sense, Trump’s irrationality does not reflect a lack of orientation of his policy but resides in the orientation itself, which positions the leader of world capitalism at the forefront of “every man for himself” and chaos.

Trump’s unpredictability towards Russia reveals how much these tensions crystallise around the attitude towards the former

leader of the opposing bloc; for large parts of the US bourgeoisie, it is the enemy of the “free world”, but nevertheless a potential ally against China (and against Germany). While the majority of bourgeois factions seem to remain opposed to a rapprochement with Putin, Trump constantly blows hot and cold on this subject: there were friendly talks with Putin in Helsinki last July, with Trump, openly breaking NATO’s blockade against Russia following the aggression against Ukraine, declaring his desire they do “great things in the world” together; then we have Trump’s decision in October to abandon the agreement on the non-proliferation of nuclear weapons, claiming that Russia does not stand by it.

Results and consequences of the various strategies of the European bourgeoisies

The “Contribution on Populism”⁶ envisaged as a hypothesis three types of strategies that the bourgeoisie could adopt in the face of the populist wave: first, direct opposition, playing the anti-populism card; second, having the traditional parties take over aspects of the populist politics and thirdly, re-invigorating, or even reviving the opposition of right vs left. To what degree have we seen these strategies implemented and what have been the consequences?

Confrontation with an anti-populist policy: the French and German examples

In France, the bourgeoisie’s anti-populist policy initially succeeded in countering Marine Le Pen by pulling the “new” Macron and his “La France en Marche” movement out of the hat – a movement which, according to the media campaign, was not linked to the traditional parties. However, Macron was quickly confronted with the problem of having to implement a policy oriented towards globalisation, at a time when Trump’s protectionism was changing the rules, and especially when, at this time, he was forced to launch massive attacks against the working class.

The consequences were quick to appear: Macron was now confronted with a dizzying drop in popularity and the slingshots from the “Yellow Vests”, which would undoubtedly benefit the populist currents most, especially since Macron still doesn’t really have the support of a solid and reliable political structure (a strong party machine) and this after the bourgeoisie had scuttled its traditional parties - weakened and plagued by internal disputes - in the 2017 elections. Nevertheless, despite its fragility, it remains the only political force in France capable of limiting the weight of

the populist Rassemblement National.

In Germany, Merkel immediately established herself as the champion of anti-populism (“We can do this”), but this boosted the populist wave so that the German bourgeoisie was now confronted with AfD, which has become the country’s second largest political party. As a result, the Grand Coalition had to be reconstituted after the last elections, having been largely forsaken in the general elections, and the election results in the regions of Bavaria and Saxony confirmed the electoral defeat for the CDU/CSU and the collapse of the SPD. The situation is complex and Merkel’s relinquishing of the presidency of her party, CDU, (and therefore in the future the position of Chancellor) heralds a phase of uncertainty and instability for the dominant bourgeoisie in Europe.

The political apparatus of the German bourgeoisie is therefore in turmoil just as Germany is under pressure within the EU, on the one hand from the Central European countries that reject its policy towards refugees but also the role as subordinate subcontracting economies which they feel Germany imposes on them; and on the other hand from the countries of Southern Europe (Greece, Italy) which reject its economic policy; and all this while also finding itself in the sights of the Trump administration, which wants to impose import taxes on its cars and machines.

The adoption of populist ideas by traditional parties: the British example

The British bourgeoisie tried to channel the disastrous consequences of the referendum to exit the EU by having one of its major traditional parties, the Conservative Party, take on the responsibility for implementing the Brexit plan. Far from stabilising the situation, conflicts within the British political system have intensified, giving rise to further instability and unpredictability as to what will be the final outcome:

- the May government’s continued hesitation and delay (a) in putting forward a coherent policy to implement Brexit and (b) in reaching a clear agreement with the EU, is pushing the EU to take measures to safeguard its own interests against what the European officials are already calling “a failed state”;
- negotiations within the British government, far from tending towards resolving conflicts, have exacerbated them (giving rise to a series of resignations of ministers opposed to what was the current policy at the time) and this especially within the Conservative Party itself, which is in danger of splitting apart, so that even May’s vague and general agreement reached with the

5. *Wall Street Journal*, 30.05.2017.

6. *International Review* n° 157, 2016.

EU is unlikely to get approval from the British Parliament. The divisions are just as real within the Labour Party with the Brexiteers, including party leader Corbyn, opposed by a large number of MPs who are “pro” the EU;

- in the words of one European diplomat, there is deep instability and British politicians are more and more looking like a “political Taliban”. In recent months, the most radical populist views have won renewed prominence, the dream of “Albion reborn”, and not just those outside the traditional parties (like Farage) but hard-line Conservative Party politicians too (Boris Johnson, Jacob Rees-Mog and Steve Baker).

The constitution of a populist government: the Italian example

One scenario not envisaged by the text on populism is the constitution of a government composed solely of populist parties. For several years, populist parties have been part of government coalitions in various countries and, in several countries of the former Eastern bloc such as Hungary or Poland, populist parties have even taken over at the head of the state. Today, however, it is the EU’s fourth largest economy, Italy, which, against the backdrop of a very difficult economic and social situation (Gross Domestic Product falling by 10% at constant prices between 2008 and 2017), has seen the emergence of a government made up exclusively of populist parties (the League and the Five Star Movement). This government combines a nationalist and xenophobic policy with a social welfare policy for Italians, namely: (a) a citizenship income, costing €9 billion; (b) pension reform reducing the retirement age from 67 to 62 years (additional budget costs of €7 billion); (c) the adoption of the “dignity decree” which reduces the renewal period for fixed-term contracts from 3 to 2 years; (d) the reduction in taxes for self-employed workers and SMEs; and (e) an obligation for companies that have received public aid to repay it if, within five years of obtaining it, they transfer their activities to another country.

The impact of this Italian populist policy on the stability of the EU is incalculable in the long term: in terms of its refugee policy, its hard line (attacking NGOs in particular) clashes with other European countries, especially France and Spain. On the budgetary side, the Italian government refuses the constraints imposed by the European Commission (budget deficit of 2.4% of GDP instead of the 0.8% planned for by the previous government, in total contradiction with European budgetary rules); instead it wants a social welfare policy for the “Italian people”, which rejects the budgetary

rigour advocated by Germany. However, any new monetary crisis involving Italy would call into question the existence of monetary union and the eurozone. Italy knows this, which allows it to use it as a form of blackmail. Also, the budget deficit will increase Italian debt, which would downgrade its rating with the international rating agencies and would lead institutional investors to abandon Italian funds.

We should closely follow the social policy impact of the populist coalition. The social measures announced so far remain far below what the populists promised, in particular by Five Star (9 billion announced for citizenship income instead of the 17 planned) and moreover, the Italian government has agreed, under pressure from the EU, to postpone a series of these measures to limit their budgetary impact. Moreover, the populist government did not repeal the Job Act, concocted by the Renzi government to liberalise the Italian labour market and make it largely precarious. As a result, many of the measures announced will have an effect contrary to that announced. Thus, the “dignity decree” theoretically reduces the possibilities of using limited-term contracts in the event of renewal but, under the Job Act, the trend will be towards non-renewal of contracts and thus an increase in precariousness. In addition, citizenship income will also increase pressure on the unemployed (it will be withdrawn if they refuse three job offers) and spending will be controlled (payments will be credited to a controlled-use card). Finally, retirement at age 62 will only be available to those who have contributed to the system for 38 years.

The re-establishment of the right/left opposition

The third strategy envisaged, re-establishing the right/left opposition to cut the ground from under the feet of populism, does not seem to have been really put in place by the bourgeoisie. On the contrary, the past few years have been characterised by an irreversible trend towards the decline of the Socialist parties.

The question of the crisis of the social democratic parties refers to the question of the role of the left-wing parties, already addressed in the report on the life of the bourgeoisie of the 17th Congress (2007). After having played an essential role in halting the wave of workers’ struggles of the 1970s and 1980s (left in government, left in opposition), these parties have been available for other tasks because, as the report points out, since the early 1990s, the social question was no longer the decisive factor in the formation of governments: “... *there is another factor that is becoming increasingly important, which is becoming*

a truly decisive factor in the political life of the bourgeoisie in general and in the formation of government teams in particular: the decomposition of bourgeois society, which in recent years has made indisputable progress”.⁷ Indeed, in the second decade of the 20th century and the first decade of the 21st, Socialist or social democratic parties were deployed in the front line to counter the first effects of decomposition on the bourgeoisie’s political apparatus (cf. Blair, Schröder, Zapatero, Hollande).

As a consequence, they suffered not only from the disillusionment in the major democratic parties after the “post war boom”, such as the Christian Democracy (in Italy, Holland, Belgium and even Germany) but they are also particularly identified with the failed political system. Thus the tendency towards decline seems irreversible: the Socialist Party has disappeared in Italy, is threatened with extinction in France, Holland and Greece and is in deep crisis in Germany, Spain or Belgium. Only the Labour Party in Britain seems to be escaping this trend at the present time, although this does not seem linked right now to the bourgeoisie’s revitalisation of the right/left opposition. It is possible that the Labour Party could profit from the Conservative Party’s difficulties in managing the populist groundswell around Brexit, when, should the Tory Party implode, the bourgeoisie will have to turn to it for help.

New radical popular left-wing formations of various types have emerged in some countries: Syriza, Podemos, “La France Insoumise”, the Democratic Socialist current within the Democratic Party in the USA, with the support of a significant number of young people in the wake of Bernie Sanders’ candidature in the past primaries, etc. The various alternatives to the bankruptcy of social democracy, which the bourgeoisie is putting in place, provide clues to the impact of decomposition and populism on the working class, in relation to the scale of the defeats suffered and the level of consciousness in the various industrialised countries today. In Italy, one of the countries where the working class was in the vanguard during the struggles from 1968 to the 1980s, the “left-wing alternative” proposed is the Five Star Movement, a populist movement that declares itself, furthermore, neither right nor left, and this underlines the importance of the political difficulties experienced by the Italian proletariat. In Germany, the alternative is not really the former Stalinists of Die Linke but rather the Greens, which also reflects the state of mind of the working class and the weakening of the sense of class identity. In France and Spain, on the other hand, the

7. “The impact of decomposition on the life of the bourgeoisie”.

alternatives called for are explicitly located on the left, and develop instead a “workers” discourse and claim to be located on a proletarian terrain, even if they appear to be concerned with the proper functioning of the bourgeois political apparatus (Syriza in Greece implemented the fierce austerity imposed by the EU; Podemos in Spain provided the support necessary to ensure a shaky stability to the central government). In this sense, they cannot be considered as left-wing populist parties.

The emergence of “strong leaders” in Eastern European countries and in countries outside the capitalist heartlands

The populist wave is not limited to the industrialised countries of the West but also affects a number of countries in Eastern Europe and some “emerging” countries, where it is manifested through specific phenomena, such as the rise of “strong leaders”. The economic destabilisation under the pressure of the 2008 crisis on the one hand, and the huge corruption scandals affecting the political parties on the other hand, have caused resentment and exasperation among the population in a whole series of these countries, such as Poland, Hungary, and Turkey, which has been recuperated by populist forces through reactionary movements leading to the advent of “strong men”, charismatic leaders like Orbán, Kaczyński, Erdoğan or Bolsonaro and, for quite a while already, Putin.

While the 1990s and even the early 21st century had been characterised by “democratic opening” in many of these countries (as well as in Russia and China), these “strong” leaders displayed their contempt for the “liberal” elites, the traditional “democratic” political game and an “independent” press, clearly preferring instead a nationalist authoritarian regime, rejecting immigrants or minorities that could alter national cohesion. *“On July 26, 2014, in Romania, Mr. Orbán clearly showed his colours in a resounding speech: (...) We consider, he said, that a democracy does not necessarily have to be liberal and that it is not because a state ceases to be liberal that it ceases to be a democracy (...). Societies with a liberal democracy as their foundation are unlikely to be able to maintain their competitiveness in the coming decades. (...) He also announced an economic project, that of ‘building a competitive nation for the great global competition of the coming decades’”*⁸ This is the idea that there are different models of democracy, an idea that is also found in some ways in Putin’s Russian model or

8. *Le Monde Diplomatique*, 23.09.2018.

in China’s application of the Singaporean model.

The hunt for corrupt elites (from Polish judges to Russian oligarchs, European bureaucrats, supporters of the Turkish Gülen movement or those of the Brazilian “Workers Party”) goes hand in hand with xenophobic nationalism that focuses on the rejection of foreigners (refugees from the Middle East or Africa, Venezuelans) or minorities (Erdoğan accentuating his anti-Kurdish discourse, Orbán targeting the Roma or Putin targeting the Chechens).

China

On the surface, the country shows an apparent serenity, but political tensions do not spare China, despite its dazzling economic and military development. Since the late 1970s, it has abandoned its essentially autarkic economy to develop, on the Japanese and Singaporean models, an economy gradually integrated into regional and then global markets. This political line, advocated by Deng Xiaoping, has not been maintained without political upheavals and struggles, as illustrated by the events in Tiananmen and again around 2003, but it was accentuated between 2003 and 2013 by President Hu Jintao. This orientation required the establishment of peaceful relations with the United States: in 1992 a memorandum of understanding was signed, which granted American requests concerning customs tariffs and intellectual property rights. It was also accompanied by a wave of democratisation in the 1980s and 1990s, but with limitations after Tiananmen.

Xi Jinping’s rise to power has showed a certain reorientation of Chinese politics, which is expressed on a political level, as in other countries, by a shift towards power into the hands of a strong leader. Xi is presented as Mao’s equal. This reorientation is the result of a number of factors: (a) China’s rapid economic development, which goes hand in hand with a further affirmation of international expansion (the “New Silk Road”); (b) it also leads to more explicit manifestations of nationalism and an impressive development of its military strength, while the USA develops an increasingly aggressive attitude towards China; (c) The supersonic transformation of the Chinese economy “has led to deep spatial and social divisions and significant ecological damage. (...) The Gini coefficient, a fine measure of income dispersion and thus of the degree of inequality in societies, has fallen from 0.16 at the beginning of the post-Maoist transition to 0.4 on average since the late 1990s (0.27 in Sweden, to 0.32 in France, 0.34 in the United Kingdom and 0.4 in the United

States)”⁹ and the prospects for restructuring linked to a shift towards a more skilled economy are proving perilous.

In this context, there are two trends within the party today: an economic trend and a nationalist trend. With Xi the latter seems predominant (“No one should expect China to swallow snakes at the expense of its interests” (XIX CCP Congress, 18.10.17)) but there seems to be some discussion within the party between a faction that tends to want to make concessions to the USA (according to Deng Xiaoping’s conception of “hiding your talents and biding your time”) and a faction with a hard line of confrontation with the USA; Xi seems rather to be in favour of the latter “asserting itself on the international scene as number one in a ‘great country’ - to use his expression - treating America as an equal partner.”¹⁰

Populism, an essential factor in the political life of the bourgeoisie today

As the 22nd ICC International Congress “Report on Decomposition” recalled, decomposition, of which populism is one of the most striking expressions, is a decisive factor in the evolution of society and is an irreversible process. While populism is not the result of a deliberate political will on the part of the dominant sectors of the bourgeoisie, they have been unable to prevent its impact on their political apparatus from reaching such a level that they are confronted with a tendency towards a growing loss of control over it, and with unpredictable shocks that will more than ever characterise the political life of the bourgeoisie in the coming period.

1. This loss of control by the bourgeoisie over its political apparatus is clearly distinct from the various political crises that the bourgeoisie may have experienced in the 1960s to 1980s. Their context is radically different: before the 1990s, the bourgeoisie’s political crises were linked either to the inability to cope with the working class or to the consequences of imperialist confrontations (the Suez crisis in Britain and France, the Algerian crisis in France, the Maastricht Treaty in France and Holland, etc.) and were managed within the political apparatus. The current crisis concerns a growing tendency towards the loss of control by the bourgeoisie of its own political apparatus. This was already highlighted in the last report on the life of the bourgeoisie (17th ICC congress, 2007): *“The bourgeoisie of the most developed countries of Europe, Japan and the United*

9. *Le Monde Diplomatique*, 5 December 2017.

10. *Le Monde Diplomatique*, 4 October 2018.

States, once masters in the subtle art of electoral manipulation, is now facing increasing difficulties in obtaining the least undesirable result".¹¹ The unlikely political upheavals affecting the English, American and German bourgeoisies, the three most experienced bourgeoisies in mastering the political game in the past, perfectly illustrate the gravity of the problem.

Populist movements are formed around recurring themes such as refugees, security, the resentment of those left behind by the crisis, but they also feed on specific tensions within the national bourgeoisies: the US bourgeoisie's dismay at the decline of its world leadership, the British bourgeoisie's ambiguity towards Europe, divisions between regionalist and nationalist factions within the Spanish or Belgian bourgeoisie, etc.

2. While the increasing pressure of populism is plunging the traditional political apparatus of the bourgeoisie into chaos, these movements tend to benefit today in various countries - and not only in Eastern European countries but also in the USA and Great Britain for example - from the support of factions of the big bourgeoisie. Thus, in the USA, not only the steel or automotive sectors can support Trump's protectionist policy, but even the IT sector against the rise of Chinese companies, such as Huawei or Alibaba, which threaten their global domination. And other areas of Silicon Valley may be in favour of a rapprochement with Russia.

3. Populism is street politics. In fact, if populist parties and movements generate a kind of militant energy, unlike traditional parties, it is because these formations no longer respect taboos and therefore allow all prejudices to be expressed.

As a result, populist campaigns, marked by anger and resentment, denigrate the traditional political world and elites, and point fingers at those who are guilty for what is not working. They naturally lead to the stigmatisation of groups and individuals, to a tendency towards their demonisation, which is already happening and will happen more and more frequently and explicitly in various forms in the political news: attacks on refugee reception centres in Germany; letters with suspicious powder addressed to Trump and other members of his administration during the campaign for the mid-term elections in the USA, while booby-trapped packages were sent to Democratic parliamentarians, the media (CNN) or elite figures (Soros); the anti-Jewish attack by a white supremacist in Pittsburgh; assassination attempt against presidential candidate Bolsonaro in Brazil

and on his return the threats of the same Bolsonaro and his supporters against the WP and other left-wing movements; polarisation of the "Yellow Vests" against the figure of Macron, etc.

4. Unlike the first expressions of populism (Haider, Berlusconi,...) which defended an ultraliberal economic policy, the current populist parties advocate a policy aimed at protecting the indigenous population ("Italians first", "real Finns", "Eigen volk eerst" ("our own people first", the slogan of the Flemish populists),...) by openly discriminating against others. This may involve economic protectionism or the promotion of a form of chauvinist neo-Keynesian policy: Trump claims to protect American workers and their work against the "invasion" of Mexican and Central American immigrants as well as foreign products; Polish or Hungarian governments take protective measures for their employees and pensioners while opposing any refugee quota in the name of defending the nation's cultural integrity; the Lega/Five Star government in Italy is implementing an uncompromising and tough policy against the reception of refugees while planning a "citizenship income" for every Italian citizen and lowering the retirement age from 67 to 62 years. This kind of policy appears to be more "realistic" than that of the left, insofar as in safeguarding the benefits of the oppressed natives at the expense of other oppressed people.

Recent events in Russia and Hungary highlight the fact that the importance of such a chauvinistic "social" policy for the credibility of populist movements and "strong leaders" should not be underestimated. For example, in Russia, the draconian pension reform, which Putin and his government pushed through by taking advantage of the media hype around the Football World Cup (the retirement age rising from 55 to 63 for women, and from 60 to 65 for men), provoked strong protests and a decline in Putin's popularity rate from 80 to 63%. The latter immediately had to relax the measures and announce a big increase in the value of pensions, without however being totally convincing, insofar as his popularity is based more on the fact that by restoring state control over the oligarchs, he had succeeded in guaranteeing regular payment of wages and pensions. In Hungary, major demonstrations have taken place to protest against the Orban government's "slavery" law, which almost completely eliminates all wage compensation for overtime.

5. In response to the rise of populism, the bourgeoisie has set up anti-populist campaigns, particularly in France during the 2017 election campaign or in the USA

where the populist/anti-populist opposition (anti-Trump) has been at the centre of political life since the Trump election, as the mid-term elections have further demonstrated. Often, while opposing populism, they are largely inspired and take up populist approaches or ideas:

- In France, the campaign around Macron used the same strategies as populism: rejection of traditional parties, "new" man (Macron) and political "movement" (LREM) presented as breaking with the past.
- By focusing priorities on the need to eliminate terrorism and on the public safety of citizens (increased controls, increased number of cameras, etc.), they also instilled the idea that it is inevitable to agree to sacrifice a little freedom for greater security.
- Lafontaine in Germany and Podemos in Spain fight populism by translating its anti-immigration language to the point of view of the "left": by creating an opposition between a left advocating "open borders" and another left advocating "closed borders and local help", they integrate populist arguments into the very anti-populist discourse.

January 2019

11. "The impact of decomposition on the life of the bourgeoisie".

Report on decomposition today (May 2017)

The ICC adopted the Theses on Decomposition more than 25 years ago.¹ Since then, this analysis of the current phase of society has become a key element in our organisation's understanding of the evolution of the world. The following document provides an update of the Theses on Decomposition with regard to the evolution of the world situation during the last quarter century, and especially in the recent period.

Concretely, we must confront the essential points of the Theses with the present situation: to what degree have the various elements been confirmed, even amplified, and to what extent have they been disproved or need to be developed? In particular, the current world situation requires us to return to three issues of key importance:

- terrorism;
- refugees;
- the rise of populism as an expression of the loss of control by the bourgeoisie of the political game.

1) The general framework for the analysis of decomposition

“...it is vital to highlight the fundamental distinction between the elements of decomposition which have infected capitalism since the beginning of the century and the generalised decomposition which is infecting the system today, and which can only get worse. Here again, quite apart from the strictly quantitative aspect, the phenomenon of social decomposition has today reached such a breadth and depth that it has taken on a new and unique quality, revealing decadent capitalism's entry into a new and final phase of its history: the phase where decomposition becomes a decisive, if not the decisive factor in social evolution.” (Point 2).

“Concretely, not only do the imperialist nature of all states, the threat of world war, the absorption of civil society by the state Moloch, and the permanent crisis of the capitalist economy all continue during the phase of decomposition, they reach a synthesis and an ultimate conclusion within it.” (Point 3).

“In this situation, where society's two decisive - and antagonistic - classes confront each other without either being able to impose its own definitive response, history nonetheless does not just come to a stop. Still less for capitalism than for preceding social forms, is a 'freezing' or a 'stagnation'

of social life possible. As a crisis-ridden capitalism's contradictions can only get deeper, the bourgeoisie's inability to offer the slightest perspective for society as a whole, and the proletariat's inability, for the moment, openly to set forward its own can only lead to a situation of generalised decomposition. Capitalism is rotting on its feet.” (Point 4).

“In fact, no mode of production can live, develop, maintain itself on a viable basis and ensure social cohesion if it is unable to present a perspective for the whole of the society which it dominates. And this is especially true of capitalism, which is the most dynamic mode of production in history.” (Point 5).

“...in a historical situation where the working class is not yet capable of entering the combat for its own, and the only 'realistic' perspective - the communist revolution - but where the ruling class is not able either to put forward the slightest perspective of its own, even in the short term, the latter's previous ability during the period of decadence to limit and control the phenomenon of decomposition cannot help but collapse under the repeated blows of the crisis.” (Point 5).

To begin with, we must insist on an essential aspect of our analysis: the term “decomposition” is used in two different ways. On the one hand, it applies to a phenomenon that affects society particularly in the period of the decadence of capitalism and, on the other hand, it refers to a particular historical phase of capitalism, its ultimate phase.

“(...) the phenomenon of social decomposition has today reached such a breadth and depth that it has taken on a new and unique quality, revealing decadent capitalism's entry into a new and final phase of its history: the phase where decomposition becomes a decisive, if not the decisive factor in social evolution.” (Point 2).

On the basis of our analysis of decomposition, we can see this unprecedented situation in which neither of the two main classes of society, the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, is in a position to implement its

own response to the crisis of the capitalist economy, world war or the communist revolution. Even if there had been a shift in the balance of power between the classes, if, for example, the bourgeoisie were moving towards a new generalised war or if the proletariat had engaged in struggles opening up a revolutionary perspective, that would not mean that the period of decomposition of society would have been left behind (as the IGCL stupidly asserts). The process of decomposition of society is irreversible because it corresponds to the terminal phase of capitalist society. The only thing that could possibly have happened, in the case of such a change-round, is a slowing down of this process, certainly not a “turning back”. But, in any case, such a change-round has not occurred. Over the past quarter century, the world proletariat has been totally incapable of providing itself with any prospect at all of overthrowing the existing order. Quite the contrary, we have witnessed a regression in its combativity as well as in its ability to display the fundamental weapon of its struggle, solidarity.

In the same way, the bourgeoisie has not succeeded in achieving for itself a real perspective “other than day-to-day stop-gap measures to prop up the economy” (Theses, point 9). Following the collapse of the eastern bloc, the world economy seemed to experience, after a period of instability in this area, a significant recovery from its crisis. In particular, we saw the emergence of the BRICs showing impressive growth rates. However, the sense of euphoria that had gripped the world bourgeoisie, imagining that its economy could revive as in the “post war boom” years, was cruelly dampened with the convulsions of 2007-2008 which highlighted the fragility of the financial sector and threatened a depression similar to that of the 1930s. The world bourgeoisie managed to limit the damage, in particular with a massive injection of public funds into the economy which resulted in an explosion of sovereign debt and caused, most notably, the Euro crisis in 2010-2013. At the same time, the rate of growth of the world's largest economy remained at a lower level than before 2007 despite interest rates being virtually equal to zero. As for the highly praised BRICs, they have now been reduced to ICs since Brazil and Russia are facing a spectacular slowdown in their growth, or even recession. What dominates in the ruling class today is not euphoria, the belief in “brighter

1. See “Theses on decomposition, final phase of capitalist decadence”, *International Review* n° 107, 2001

tomorrows”, but moroseness and anxiety, which is certainly not relaying to the whole of society the feeling that a “better future is possible”, especially amongst the exploited whose living conditions continue to deteriorate.

Thus the historical conditions which led to this phase of decomposition have not only continued to exist, they have worsened, which has resulted in a worsening of most of the manifestations of decomposition.

In order to fully understand such worsening, it is important to recall that - as point 2 of the Theses points out - we are talking about the epoch or phase of decomposition and not merely “manifestations of decomposition”. Point 1 of the Theses insists that there is a crucial difference between the decadence of capitalism and the decadence of other modes of production that preceded it. To underline this difference is important in relation to the question that constitutes the key to decomposition: perspective. If we look at the decadence of feudalism we can see that it was limited by the “parallel” emergence of capitalist relations and the gradual and partial rise of the bourgeois class. The decomposition of a series of economic, social, ideological and political forms of feudal society was somehow attenuated in reality (not necessarily with any real consciousness) by the emerging new mode of production. Two illustrations can be given: the absolute monarchy was used in some countries for the economic development of capital, contributing to the formation of a national market; and the religious view of the “purification of the body” - supposed to be the home of the devil - had a usefulness in the primitive accumulation of capital by increasing the birthrate and by imposing discipline on future proletarians.

It is for this reason that in the decadence of feudalism there may have been more or less advanced manifestations of social decomposition, but there could not have existed a specific period of decomposition. In human history some very isolated civilisations were able to finish in a total decomposition leading to their disappearance. However, only capitalism can have in its decadence a global era of decomposition, as a historical and world phenomenon.

2) Social manifestations of decomposition

The theses of 1990 pointed to the main social manifestations of decomposition:

- *"The proliferation of famines in the countries of the 'third world' (...)*
- *The transformation of this same 'third*

world' into an immense shantytown where hundreds of millions of human beings survive like rats in the sewers (...)

- *The development of the same phenomenon in the heart of the major cities of 'advanced' countries (...)* *The 'accidental' catastrophes which have multiplied in recent times (...)*
- *The increasingly devastating effects of 'natural' disasters at the human, social and economic levels (...)*
- *The degradation of the environment which reaches astonishing proportions (...)* (Point 7).

The FAO's official figures show a fall in malnutrition since the 1990s. However, there are still close to one billion people who suffer from malnutrition today. This tragedy mainly affects Southern Asia and especially sub-Saharan Africa where, in some regions, nearly half of the population are the victims of hunger, especially the children, with dramatic consequences for their growth and development. While technology has led to phenomenal increases in productivity, including in the agricultural sector, at the same time farmers in many countries are unable to sell their produce, and hunger continues to be a scourge for hundreds of millions of people as in the worst periods of human history. And if it does not strike the rich countries, it is because the state is still able to feed its poor. For example, 50 million people in the United States receive food aid vouchers.

Today, more than one billion people live in shantytowns and the number has only increased since 1990. Thus, the “*transformation of the Third World into a huge slum*” is evident to such an extent that the Global Risks report presented to the Davos Forum in 2015 placed “*rapid and uncontrolled urbanisation*” among the major risks threatening the planet for the first time, noting in particular that “*40% of urban growth takes place in shantytowns*” globally, which means that this proportion is much higher in the under-developed countries.

And this phenomenon of the growth of shantytowns tends to spread into the richest countries, in various forms: millions of Americans losing their homes during the subprime crisis, inflating further the numbers of the existing homeless, the camps of Roma or refugees on the outskirts of many cities in Europe, and even in the centres ... And even for those who live in permanent housing, tens of millions of them live in real slums. In 2015, 17.4% of the inhabitants of the European Union lived in overcrowded conditions, 15.7% of dwellings were leaky or rotting and 10.8% of dwellings were

without heat. This was not only the case for the poor countries of Europe, as the figures were 6.7%, 13.1% and 5.3%, respectively in Germany and 8%, 15.9% and 10.9% in the United Kingdom.

We could also cite many examples of “accidental” disasters, in the past 25 years. But it is enough to mention two of the most spectacular and dramatic affecting, not Third World countries, but the two most developed economic powers: the floods of New Orleans in August 2005 (nearly 2000 dead, a city emptied of inhabitants) and the Fukushima nuclear disaster in March 2011, which is comparable with that of Chernobyl in 1986.

As regards the “*devastating scale of the degradation of the environment*”, something that is now confirmed by observations and forecasts that today are universally accepted in scientific circles and that most sectors of the bourgeoisie of every country now recognise (even if the ruling class is incapable of implementing the needed measures owing to the laws of capitalism). The list is long, not only the catastrophes awaiting humanity due to the destruction of the environment, but also those that are hitting us presently: pollution of the air in the cities and of the water of the oceans, climatic change bringing increasingly violent weather phenomena, the spreading desertification, the increasing disappearance of plant and animal species that more and more threatens the biological equilibrium of our planet (for example, the disappearance of bees is a threat to our food resources).

3) The political and ideological manifestations of decomposition

The picture we gave in 1990 was as follows:

- *“the incredible corruption that grows and prospers inside the political apparatus (...)*
- *the development of terrorism, or the taking of hostages, as methods of warfare between states, to the detriment of the 'laws' capitalism established in the past to 'regulate' conflicts between fractions of the ruling class*
- *the constant increase in crime, insecurity and urban violence (...)*
- *the development of nihilism, despair and suicide among young people, and the hatred and xenophobia (...)*
- *the tidal waves of drug addiction, which is now become a mass phenomenon and a powerful element participating in the corruption of states and financial institutions (...)*

- *the profusion of sects, the revival of the religious spirit, including in some advanced countries, the rejection of a rational, coherent and constructive thought (...)*
- *the invasion of the same media by the spectacle of violence, horror, blood and massacres (...)*
- *the vacuity and venality of all 'artistic' production: literature, music, painting, architecture (...)*
- *the attitude of 'every man for himself', marginalisation, the atomisation of individuals, the destruction of family relationships, the exclusion of the elderly from social life, the annihilation of love and affection* “ (Point 8).

All these aspects have been confirmed and have even got worse. By leaving aside momentarily the aspects related to the points which will be emphasised below (terrorism, the refugee question and the rise of populism), we can note, for example, that violence and urban crime have exploded in many countries in Latin America and also in the suburbs of some European cities - partly in connection with drug trafficking, but not only this. As regards this traffic, and the enormous weight it has in society, including at the economic level, it can be said that this is a continually growing “market” because of the increasing malaise and the despair that affects every layer of the population. Regarding corruption, and all the manipulations that constitute “white-collar crime”, many instances have been uncovered in recent years (like those of “Panama papers” which are just a tiny tip of the iceberg of the gangsterism in which the financial sector more and more has to tread). With respect to the venality of creative artists and their recuperation, we can quote the recent award of the Nobel Prize for Literature to Bob Dylan, artistic symbol of revolt in the 1960s, but there are many others we could name. Finally, the destruction of human relationships, family ties, and human empathy has only worsened as evidenced by the use of anti-depressants, the explosion of psychological pressure and stress at work and the appearance of new occupations intended to “support” such people. There are also expressions of real carnage like that of summer 2003 in France where 15,000 elderly people died during the heat wave.

4) The question of terrorism

Obviously, this is not a new question either in the history or in the analyses of the ICC (see, for example, the texts “Terror, terrorism and class violence” published in *International Review* n° 14 and n° 15.

That said, it is important to remember that it was on the basis of the Paris bombings in 1985 that our comrade MC began a reflection on decomposition. The theses analyse as particularly significant the entry of capitalism into the phase of decomposition: *“the development of terrorism, the taking of hostages, as means of warfare between states, to the detriment of the 'laws' that capitalism established in the past to 'regulate' conflicts between fractions of the ruling class* “.

It is hardly necessary to note to what extent this question has acquired a prominent place in the life of capitalism. Today, terrorism as an instrument of war between states has become central to the life of society. We have even seen the constitution of a new state, Daesh, with its army, its police, its administration, its schools, for which terrorism is the weapon of choice.

The quantitative and qualitative increase in the role of terrorism took a decisive step 15 years ago with the attack on the Twin Towers, and it was the world's leading power that deliberately opened the door to this attack in order to justify its intervention in Afghanistan and Iraq. It was subsequently confirmed by the attacks in Madrid in 2004 and London in 2005. The establishment of Daesh in 2013-14 and the attacks in France in 2015-16, Belgium and Germany in 2016 represent another step in this process. Moreover, the Theses give us some elements of explanation of the growing fascination of jihadism and suicidal acts on a part of the youth of the developed countries:

- *"the development of nihilism, despair and suicide among young people, and the hatred and xenophobia;*
- *the profusion of sects, the revival of the religious spirit, including in some advanced countries, the rejection of a rational, coherent and constructive thought (...)*
- *the invasion of the same media by the spectacle of violence, horror, blood and massacres (...)*”

All these aspects have only increased in recent decades. They affect every sector of society. In the most advanced country of the world, there was the rise of a “religious right” (the “Tea Party”) inside one of the two political parties in charge of managing the interests of the national capital, a movement involving the most favoured sectors of society. Similarly, in a country like France, the adoption of homosexual marriage (which in itself was only a manoeuvre of the Left to distract from the betrayal of its electoral promises and the attacks it had carried out against the exploited) has seen millions of people of all social sectors

mobilised, but above all the bourgeois and the petty bourgeois, who considered that such a measure was an insult to God. At the same time, obscurantism and religious fanaticism continue to increase amongst the most disadvantaged sections of the population, especially young proletarian immigrants who are Muslim, drawing along with them a significant number of “native born” young people. Never in European cities have we seen so many veils, or even “burqas” on the heads of Muslim women. And what about the attitude of those tens of thousands of young people who, after the assassination of the cartoonists of the newspaper Charlie Hebdo, considered that they had brought it on themselves by drawing the “Prophet”?

5) The question of refugees

This question is not addressed in the theses of 1990. So here we provide a supplement to deal with this problem.

The question of refugees has acquired a central place in the life of society in recent years. In 2015, more than 6 million people were forced to leave their country, bringing to more than 65 million the number of refugees in the world (more than the population of Great Britain). To this number must be added the 40 million people who are displaced within their own country. This is a phenomenon unprecedented since the Second World War.

Population displacement is a part of the history of humankind, a species that appeared in a small part of East Africa 200,000 years ago and spread throughout the world wherever there were exploitable resources for food and the other basic needs of life. One of the great moments of these displacements of population is that of the colonisation of the greater part of the planet by the European powers, a phenomenon which appeared 500 years ago and coincided with the rise of capitalism (see the pages of the *Communist Manifesto* on this subject). In general, migratory flows (while they include traders, adventurers or soldiers driven by conquest) are composed mainly of populations fleeing their country because of persecution (English Protestants of the “Mayflower”, Jews from Eastern Europe) or poverty (Irish, Sicilians). It is only with the advent of capitalism in its period of decadence that the dominant migratory flows are reversed. Increasingly, it is the inhabitants of the colonies who, driven by misery, come to find work (generally low-skilled and very poorly paid) in the metropolises. This phenomenon continued after the waves of decolonisation which have followed one another from the end of the Second World War until the 1960s.

It was at the end of the 1960s that the open crisis of the capitalist economy, with the rise in unemployment in the developed countries at the same time as the increase in poverty in the former colonies, gave rise to a significant increase in illegal immigration. Since then, the situation has only worsened despite the hypocritical speeches of the ruling class, which finds in the “undocumented” a workforce still cheaper than those that have the necessary papers.

Thus, for several decades, the migratory flows were mainly about economic emigration. But what is new in recent years is that the proportion of immigrants having fled their country for reasons of war or repression has exploded, creating a situation like that experienced following the Spanish Civil war or the end of the Second World War. Year after year, the number of refugees who, by all sorts of means, including the most dangerous, are knocking on the doors of Europe, is increasing, which is putting to the test the capacities of European countries to play host and making the issue of refugees a major political issue in these countries (see below on the question of populism). The massive displacements of populations are not phenomena peculiar to the phase of decomposition. But today they are assuming a dimension which makes them a singular element of decomposition and we can apply to this phenomenon the analysis we gave in 1990 about unemployment: *“In fact, although unemployment (which is a direct result of the economic crisis) is not in itself an expression of decomposition, its effects make it an important element of this decomposition.”* (Point 14).

6) The rise of populism

The year 2016, notably with Brexit and the election of Donald Trump at the head of the world’s top power marks a stage of great importance in the development of a phenomenon that had not yet played a significant role when it appeared in countries like France, Austria or, to a lesser extent, Italy with the rise of the populist extreme right in the elections. This phenomenon is obviously not the result of a deliberate political will of the dominant sectors of the bourgeoisie, even if these sectors clearly know how to use it against the consciousness of the proletariat.

The theses of 1990 stated:

“Among the major characteristics of the decomposition of capitalist society we should emphasise the growing difficulty of the bourgeoisie in controlling the evolution of the political situation.” (Point 9).

“This general tendency for the bourgeoisie to lose control of its own policies, was one of the prime factors in the collapse of the Eastern bloc; this collapse can only accentuate the tendency:

- *because of the resulting aggravation of the economic crisis;*
- *because of the disintegration of the western bloc which is implied by the disappearance of its rival;*
- *because of the temporary disappearance of the perspective of world war which will exacerbate the rivalries between the different bourgeois factions (between national factions especially, but also between cliques within national states).”* (Point 10)

If the worsening of the economic crisis resulting from the collapse of the Eastern bloc did happen at the beginning, it has not been sustained. However, the other aspects have remained valid. What needs to be emphasised in the current situation is the full confirmation of this aspect that we identified 25 years ago: the tendency for the dominant class to increasingly lose control of its political apparatus.

Obviously, these events are used by various sectors of the bourgeoisie (particularly those of the left) to revive the flame of antifascism (this is particularly the case in Germany) for obvious historical reasons. In France, too, during the last regional elections in December 2015, there was a “Republican Front” which saw the Socialist Party withdraw its candidates and call to vote for the right to block the road to the National Front. That said, it is clear that the main target of anti-fascist campaigns, as history has taught us, the working class, is not at present a threat or even a major concern for the bourgeoisie.

In fact, the almost unanimous view of the most responsible sectors of the bourgeoisie and their media against Brexit, against the election of Trump, against the extreme right in Germany or against the National Front in France cannot be considered as a manoeuvre: the economic and political options put forward by populism are by no means a realistic option for managing the national capital (contrary to the options of the left of capital which propose a return to Keynesian solutions faced with the “excesses” of neo-liberal globalisation). If we confine ourselves to the case of Europe, populist-led governments, if they were to implement their programmes, could only lead to a sort of vandalism which would only further aggravate the instability that threatens the institutions of this continent. And this is all the more so because while the political staff of the populist movements has acquired a serious experience in the

field of demagoguery, it is in no way prepared to take over the affairs of state.

When we developed our analysis of decomposition, we considered that this phenomenon affected the form of imperialist conflicts (see “Militarism and decomposition”, *International Review* n° 64) and also the consciousness of the proletariat. On the other hand, we considered that it had no real impact on the evolution of the crisis of capitalism. If the current rise of populism were to lead to the coming to power of this current in some of the main European countries, such an impact of decomposition will develop.

Indeed, while the rise of populism can have specific causes in a given country (after the fall of Stalinism for certain Central European countries, the effects of the financial crisis of 2007-2008 which ruined and deprived millions of Americans of their homes, etc.), it has a common element that is present in most advanced countries: the deep loss of confidence in the “elites”, that is to say, the traditional ruling parties (conservative or progressives like the social-democrats) because of their inability to restore the health of the economy, to stop a steady rise in unemployment and poverty. In this sense, the rise of populism constitutes a sort of revolt against the current political leaders, but a revolt that cannot lead to an alternative perspective to capitalism. The only class that can give such an alternative is the proletariat when it mobilises on its class terrain and gains consciousness of the necessity and the possibility of the communist revolution. It is the same with populism as with the general phenomenon of the decomposition of society which marks the present phase of the life of capitalism: their determining cause is the inability of the proletariat to put forward its own response, its own alternative to the crisis of capitalism. In this vacuum, a loss of confidence in the official institutions of society that are no longer able to protect it, a loss of confidence in the future, a tendency to look to the past, to seek out scapegoats responsible for the disaster, is getting stronger and stronger. In this sense, the rise of populism is a phenomenon totally typical of the period of decomposition. This is all the more so as it finds valuable allies in the rise of terrorism, which creates a growing sense of fear and helplessness, especially with the massive influx of refugees aggravating fears that they have come to take the jobs of the natives or will hide new terrorists in their midst.

When we had identified the entry of world capitalism into the acute phase of its economic crisis, we had pointed out that this system had succeeded initially

in pushing its most catastrophic effects towards the periphery, but that these effects would not fail to return to the centre like a boomerang. The same model applies to the three questions which have been discussed in more detail since:

- terrorism already exists on a much more dramatic scale in some peripheral countries;
- these same countries have a far greater problem with refugees than the central countries;
- these countries are also subject to convulsions of their political apparatus.

The fact that today the central countries are witnessing such a boomerang return is an indication that human society is sliding further and deeper into decomposition.

7) The general difficulty in recognising the existence of decomposition

One of the reasons for the difficulty encountered by the proletariat and, first of all, by its own vanguard, to identify and understand this era of decomposition and arm itself against it, is the very nature of decomposition as a historical phase.

The process of decomposition which imprints its mark on the present historical period constitutes a phenomenon which advances in a very insidious way. Insofar as it affects the foundations of social life most profoundly and is manifested in the breakdown of the most ingrained social relations, it does not necessarily have a single and indisputable expression as, for example, the outbreak of world war or the revolutionary situations. Rather, it is expressed by a proliferation of phenomena that have no apparent relation to one another. Each of the phenomena, by itself, could be taken to show that decomposition is not new, each one is associated with earlier stages of capitalist decadence. For example, there is a continuation of imperialist wars. However, within this continuity, one finds the element of every man for himself and in particular “the development of terrorism, or the seizure of hostages, as methods of warfare between states, to the detriment of the ‘laws’ that capitalism established in the past to ‘regulate’ the conflicts between different ruling class factions.” (Point 8). These elements appear “indistinct” amidst the classical and general traits of imperialist war, which makes it difficult to identify them. A superficial examination will not uncover them. The same is true of the political apparatus of the bourgeoisie (thus, the emergence of populism can be erroneously linked to the phenomenon of fascism between the two wars).

The fact that the two basic classes of society (the proletariat and the bourgeoisie) are incapable of providing a perspective favours the lack of global vision and leads to a passive accommodation to existing reality. This favours narrow-minded, blind, petit bourgeois visions with no orientation towards future. It can be said that decomposition constitutes in itself a powerful factor in annihilating a consciousness of its reality. This is very dangerous for the proletariat. But it also produces a blindness of the bourgeoisie, so that decomposition, because of the difficulty to recognise it, produces a cumulative phenomenon, spiralling in its effects.

Finally, two tendencies peculiar to capitalism further aggravate this difficulty in recognising decomposition and its consequences:

- Capitalism is the most dynamic mode of production in history (Point 5) and “the bourgeoisie cannot exist without constantly revolutionising the instruments of production, which means the relations of production, that is to say the whole of social relations” (*Communist Manifesto*). This gives the impression of a permanent “modernity”, of a society which, despite everything, “progresses” and develops. One consequence of this is that decomposition does not occur uniformly in all countries. It is more attenuated in China and other Asian countries. On the other hand, it takes a much more extreme form in other parts of the world, for example in Africa or in some countries of Latin America. All this tends to “hide” decomposition. One might say that the nauseating odour it produces is diminished by the seductive perfume of “modernity”.
- In the most advanced countries, the bourgeoisie with the development of state capitalism is still capable of producing certain counter-tendencies to limit the effects of decomposition. We can see this with Brexit where the British bourgeoisie rapidly re-organised itself to reduce the damage.

8) The impact of decomposition on the working class

In point 13, the Theses deal with this question in the following terms: “The different elements which constitute the strength of the working class directly confront the various facets of this ideological decomposition:

- solidarity and collective action are faced with the atomisation of ‘look out for number one’;
- the need for organisation confronts social decomposition, the disintegration

of the relationships which form the basis for all social life;

- the proletariat’s confidence in the future and in its own strength is constantly sapped by the all-pervasive despair and nihilism within society;
- consciousness, lucidity, coherent and unified thought, the taste for theory, have a hard time making headway in the midst of the flight into illusions, drugs, sects, mysticism, the rejection or destruction of thought which are characteristic of our epoch.” (Point 13).

The experiences of struggles over the last 25 years have largely confirmed these analyses. It is particularly the case if we look at the two most advanced movements of this period: the anti-CPE movement in France in 2006 and the movement of the Indignados in Spain in 2011. It is true that solidarity was at the heart of both movements, as it had been at the heart of more limited experiences – like the mobilisation against pension reform in France 2003 or the Metro strike in New York in 2005. However, these demonstrations remained isolated and, other than gaining a quite passive sympathy, did not arouse a general mobilisation of the class.

Solidarity and collective action is one of the fundamental features of the proletarian struggle, but it has been much more difficult to express it than in the past, despite the severity of attacks on the working class, at the level of redundancies, for example. It is true that the intimidating experience of the crisis has produced a temporary retreat in combativity; however, the fact that such a retreat has become almost permanent means that we have to understand that while this factor does play a role, it is not the only factor involved, and we should consider the importance of what point 13 says about “everyman for himself”, atomisation and individual withdrawal.

The question of organisation is at the heart of the struggle of the proletariat. Leaving aside the enormous difficulties that revolutionary minorities have in seriously taking up the organisational question (which would merit a further text), the problems of the class in organising itself have worsened, despite the spectacular spread of general assemblies in the movement of the Indignados or in the anti-CPE movement. Over and above these more advanced examples, which remain a step towards the future, many other similar struggles have had great difficulty in organising themselves. This is especially the case with the “Occupy” movement in 2011 or the movements in Brazil and

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Resolution on the balance of forces between the classes

1) By the late 1960s, with the exhaustion of the post-war economic boom and in the face of deteriorating living conditions, the working class had re-emerged on the social scene. The workers' struggles that exploded on an international scale put an end to the longest period of counter-revolution in history, opening a new historical course towards class confrontations, thus preventing the ruling class from putting in place its own response to the acute crisis of capitalism: a Third World War. This new historical course had been marked by the emergence of massive struggles, particularly in the central countries of Western Europe with the May 1968 movement in France, followed by the "hot autumn" in Italy in 1969 and many others such as Argentina in spring 1969 and Poland in winter 1970-71. In these massive movements, large sectors of the new generation who had not experienced war once again raised the perspective of communism as a real possibility.

In connection with this general movement of the working class in the late 1960s and early 1970s, we must also highlight the international revival, on a very small but no less significant scale, of the organized communist left, the tradition that remained faithful to the flag of world proletarian revolution during the long night of counter-revolution. In this process, the constitution of the ICC represented an important impetus for the communist left as a whole.

Faced with a dynamic towards the politicisation of workers' struggles, the bourgeoisie (which had been surprised by the May 1968 movement) immediately developed a large-scale and long-term counter-offensive in order to prevent the working class from providing its own response to the historical crisis of the capitalist economy: the proletarian revolution.

2) Because of the break in political continuity with the workers' movement of the past, the tendency towards the politicisation of the 1960s was manifested in the emergence of what Lenin called a "political swamp": a milieu of confused groups and elements, and at the same time a zone of transmission, situated between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. At the moment of its greatest extension, this area of politicisation comprised mainly young and inexperienced people, many of them students. Already in the first half of the 1970s, the result of the

decantation within this zone was that:

- the left of capital succeeded in winning over a large part of these young elements involved in the process of politicisation;
- frustration and disappointment led many of them, strongly marked by the impatience and "radicalism" of the petty bourgeoisie, towards partial struggles or the violent, minority actions of terrorism (the Baader-Meinhof Gang in Germany, Red Brigades in Italy, then Action Directe in France);
- the layers of the swamp striving towards proletarian positions tended to gravitate in the direction of autonomism and workerism, or towards defending the myth of 'self-management'.

Moreover, the "critical" adherence of the main leftist groups (Trotskyist and Maoist) to the counter-revolution and their organisational practice and intervention as crypto-Stalinist sects, but also the mindless activism of the autonomist milieu and the cult of violence of the terrorist micro-groups destroyed a large part of this new generation in the process of being politicised. This destructive work helped to deform and discredit the real revolutionary movement of the proletariat. Parallel to this extremely negative role played by the pseudo-radical component of the swamp and the groups of the extreme left, the bourgeoisie developed a wide-scale and long-term political counter-offensive against the historic revival of the class struggle. This political counter-offensive of the bourgeoisie initially consisted, at the beginning of the 1970s, in setting up the "alternative" of bringing the left to government in the main Western countries. The aim was to herd the working class back to the electoral fold by sowing the illusion that the programme of the left parties would make it possible to improve the living conditions of the exploited masses. This first wave of struggles, which had developed since the late 1960s, was therefore exhausted during these "years of illusions".

3) But with the worsening of the economic crisis in the second half of the 1970s, a new wave of workers' struggles had emerged, also involving the proletariat in some Eastern European countries (notably in Poland in the summer of 1980).

Faced with this resumption of class

combat after a short period of reflux, the bourgeoisie had to modify its strategy aimed at hindering any politicisation of the proletariat through its economic struggles. Thanks to a judicious division of labour between the various bourgeois factions, right-wing parties in government were appointed to carry out economic attacks against the living conditions of the proletariat, while the left-wing parties in the opposition (supported by the unions and leftists) had the responsibility of sabotaging workers' struggles from the inside and diverting them onto the terrain of electoral mystifications.

The mass strike in Poland in August 1980 revealed that the proletariat, despite the leaden weight of the Stalinist regimes, was able to raise its head and spontaneously recover its methods of struggle, including sovereign general assemblies, the election of strike committees responsible to these assemblies, the necessary geographical extension of the struggles and their unification beyond corporatist divisions.

This gigantic struggle of the working class in Poland revealed that it is in the massive struggle against economic attacks that the proletariat can become conscious of its own strength, affirm its class identity which is antagonistic to capital, and develop its self-confidence.

But the defeat of the Polish workers, with the founding of the "free" trade union *Solidarność* (which benefited from the support of the trade unions of Western countries) also revealed the very strong weight of democratic illusions in a country where the proletariat had no experience of bourgeois democracy. The defeat and repression of Polish workers opened a new period of retreat for international class struggle in the early 1980s.

4) Nevertheless, despite its depth, this retreat was short-lived. In the first half of the 1980s, faced with the worsening economic crisis, the explosion of unemployment and the new attacks on the living conditions of the proletariat in the central countries, a third wave of struggles emerged. Despite the defeat of the long miners' strike in Great Britain in 1985, this wave of struggles was marked by the erosion of the left in the opposition, a growing discrediting of trade unions (as witnessed in several countries, including Scandinavia, by the sporadic spontaneous strikes that broke out outside

and against repeated union manoeuvres). This third wave of workers' struggles was accompanied by an increase in abstention rates in the elections.

In order to avoid being surprised as in May 68, and to paralyse the whole dynamic of confrontations with trade unionism, the bourgeoisie developed a third strategy: that of strengthening its apparatus for controlling the working class through the deployment of base unionism, led by the groups of the extreme left of capital. Faced with the rise of militancy, notably in the public sector, the bourgeoisie strengthened its union and para-union forces. The aim of this policy was to prevent any extension of struggles beyond corporations or sectors, to sabotage the class identity of the proletariat through setting up divisions between "white collar" and "blue collar" workers, and to block any tendency towards the self-organisation of the working class.

5) It was the British bourgeoisie (the most intelligent in the world), with the policies of the "Iron Lady" Margaret Thatcher, which sounded the key-note for the strategy of the ruling class in other central countries, aimed at stopping the dynamic of the class struggle.

Thanks to the sabotaging role of the miners' union, the ruling class had imprisoned the workers in a long, exhausting sectional strike, totally separated from other sectors of production. The crushing defeat of the miners' strike dealt a savage blow to the whole working class in this country. This success of the ruling class in Britain served as a model for the bourgeoisie in other countries, notably in France, the country in Europe where the proletariat had traditionally been very combative. The French bourgeoisie, inspired by the example of the Iron Lady in blocking the dynamic of the class struggle, set out to lock up the workers in corporatism, taking full advantage of the tendency towards "each for themselves" (which was one of the first phenomena of the decomposition of capitalism).

In 1986, since the most traditionally combative and experienced sectors of the French proletariat had since May 68 confronted union sabotage on a number of occasions (in the mines, steel, transport, car industry...) the bourgeoisie could only use such a strategy by setting up "coordinations" aimed at taking on the baton from the discredited main union confederations.

In Italy, where the proletariat had fought very important and massive struggles (in particular the "Hot Autumn" of 1969), the bourgeoisie also used the same policy of corporatist containment, by recuperating the education workers' coordinations after 1987.

In France, despite the defeat of the railway workers' strike in 1986 (thanks to the sabotaging work of the "coordinations" in the SNCF), two years later, in 1988, the workers' militancy exploded once again in another part of the public sector, the hospitals. Faced with a deep and general discontent towards the unions, and the potential danger of this massive struggle spreading to the whole public sector, the ruling class again reinforced its strategy for boxing up and dividing the working class. The French bourgeoisie was able to make use of a hospital sector which was still inexperienced and politically more "backward", the nurses, in order to keep any push towards unification stuck in the hospitals, sabotaging any possibility of the movement spreading to other parts of the public sector.

In order to break the movement in the hospital sector, the manoeuvre of the bourgeoisie consisted in offering the nurses on their own a kind of bribe (a wage increase of 350 francs a month, unblocking a billion francs already held in reserve for this purpose), whereas other categories in the hospitals who had mobilised for the movement got nothing! This defeat of the working class, given the historic tendency towards "each for themselves" could only be inflicted on the proletariat thanks to the dirty work of the self-proclaimed "nurses' coordination" which had been set up straight away with the help of the CFDT. This semi-union organ succeeded in derailing the anger of the nurses onto the rotten ground of defending their "status" of "Bac plus 3" in order to justify the re-evaluation of their wages, when their movement had originally broken out against the lack of personnel and the degradation of conditions affecting everyone in the hospitals, "white collar" as well as "blue collar" (see our pamphlet, *Bilan de la lutte des infirmières: les coordinations, la nouvelle arme de la bourgeoisie*). In the other countries of Europe, including in Germany (notably in the car industry), this manoeuvre by the bourgeoisie consisted of granting wage increases to one category of workers in the same enterprise, with the aim of dividing the workers, aggravating competition between them, sapping class solidarity and setting them against each other.

But worse still with this strategy of dividing the workers and encouraging "each for themselves", the bourgeoisie and its tame unions were able to present defeats of the working class as victories.

Revolutionaries must not underestimate the Machiavellianism of the bourgeoisie in the evolution of the balance of class forces. This Machiavellianism can only continue with the aggravation of attacks on

the exploited class. The stagnation of the class struggle, then its retreat at the end of the 80s, resulted from the capacity of the ruling class to turn certain manifestations of the decomposition of bourgeoisie society, especially the tendency towards "each for themselves", against the working class.

6) Since the retreat of the first wave of struggles, it has been essentially democratic illusions (fuelled by the bourgeoisie's counter-offensive and trade union sabotage) that have been the main obstacle to the politicisation of the working class struggles.

As highlighted in the article in *International Review* n°23, "The struggle of the proletariat in the period of decadence", the working class is confronted with several factors which make the politicisation of its struggles difficult:

- the true nature of the proletariat both as an exploited class, dispossessed of all property, and as a revolutionary class, has always meant that class consciousness cannot advance from victory to victory but can only develop unevenly towards victory through a series of defeats, as Rosa Luxemburg argued.

In the period of decadence:

- the working class can no longer maintain permanent mass organizations, political parties and workers' unions, to defend its interests;
- there is no longer a "minimum" political programme as in the ascendant period, but only a "maximum" programme. Bourgeois democracy and its national framework is no longer an arena for the political action of the proletariat;
- the bourgeois state has learned to intelligently use the former workers' political parties, which betrayed the proletariat, against the politicisation of the working class.

In addition, in the current period:

- the bourgeois state has learned to slow the pace of the economic crisis and to plan its attacks in concert with the trade unions by deploying all possible means to avoid a unified response by the working class and a re-appropriation of the final political goals of its struggle against capitalism;
- all the forces of capitalism have worked to block the politicisation of the working class by preventing it from making the link between its economic struggles against exploitation and the refusal of workers in central countries to allow themselves to be mobilised behind the bourgeoisie's war policy. A particularly

significant manoeuvre in the early 1980s was the pacifist campaign against Reagan's "Star Wars" programme. As the third wave of struggles began to wear out in the late 1980s, a major event in the international situation, the spectacular collapse of the Eastern bloc and the Stalinist regimes in 1989, dealt a brutal blow to the dynamics of class struggle, thus changing the balance of forces between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie to the benefit of the latter in a major way. This event loudly announced the entry of capitalism into the final phase of its decadence: that of decomposition. When Stalinism collapsed, it did one last service to the bourgeoisie. It allowed the ruling class to put an end to the dynamic of class struggle which, with advances and setbacks, had developed over two decades.

Indeed, insofar as it was not the struggle of the proletariat but the rotting of capitalist society on its feet that put an end to Stalinism, the bourgeoisie was able to exploit this event to unleash a gigantic ideological campaign aimed at perpetuating the greatest lie in history: the identification of communism with Stalinism. In doing so, the ruling class dealt an extremely violent blow to the consciousness of the proletariat. The bourgeoisie's deafening campaigns on the so-called "bankruptcy of communism" have led to a regression of the proletariat in its march towards its historical perspective of overthrowing capitalism. They were a major blow against its class identity.

This profound retreat in consciousness and class struggle has manifested itself in a decline in the workers' fighting spirit in all countries, a strengthening of democratic illusions, a very strong revival of the trade union grip and a very great difficulty for the proletariat to return to the path of massive struggles, despite the worsening of the economic crisis, the rise in unemployment, precariousness, and the general deterioration of its living conditions in all sectors and all countries.

Moreover, with the entry of capitalism into the ultimate phase of its decadence, the proletariat now had to face the miasma of the decomposition of bourgeois society that affects its ability to find the way back towards its revolutionary perspective. On the ideological level, *"The different elements which constitute the strength of the working class directly confront the various facets of this ideological decomposition:*

- *solidarity and collective action are faced with the atomisation of 'look out for number one';*
- *the need for organisation confronts social decomposition, the disintegration*

of the relationships which form the basis for all social life;

- *the proletariat's confidence in the future and in its own strength is constantly sapped by the all-pervasive despair and nihilism within society;*
- *consciousness, lucidity, coherent and unified thought, the taste for theory, have a hard time making headway in the midst of the flight into illusions, drugs, sects, mysticism, the rejection or destruction of thought which are characteristic of our epoch".¹*

With the retreat of its revolutionary perspective and class identity, the proletariat has also largely lost confidence in itself and in its ability to effectively confront capitalism in the defence of its living conditions.

7) One of the objective factors that aggravated the loss of class identity of the proletariat was the policy of relocation and restructuring of the productive apparatus in the main countries of Western Europe and the United States. Many large concentrations of workers were dismantled with the closure of mines, steel mills, automobile plants, etc, sectors where the working class had traditionally led massive and very combative struggles. This industrial desertification was accompanied by the strengthening of the ideological campaigns about the end of the class struggle, and therefore of any revolutionary perspective. These bourgeois campaigns have been able to develop thanks to the Stalinist or social democratic parties which, for decades, have identified the working class only with the "blue collar" workers, thus masking the fact that it is wage labour and the exploitation of labour power that defines the working class. Moreover, with the development of new technologies, the "white collar" proletariat is much more dispersed in small production units, making it more difficult for massive struggles to emerge.

In such a situation of retreat of the class consciousness of the proletariat and the move away from any revolutionary perspective, the tendency towards every man for himself and the competition to survive in the midst of the growing economic slump tend to dominate.

The increase in unemployment and precariousness has also highlighted the phenomenon of the "Uberisation" of work. By using an internet platform to find a job, Uberisation disguises the sale of labour power to a boss as a form of "individual enterprise", while reinforcing the impoverishment and precariousness of these "entrepreneurs". The "Uberisa-

1. "Theses on decomposition", *International Review* n° 62.

tion" of individual work is a key factor in enforcing atomisation, and increasing the difficulty of going on strike, because the self-exploitation of these workers considerably hinders their ability to fight collectively and develop solidarity against capitalist exploitation.

8) With the bankruptcy of the Lehman Brothers bank and the financial crisis of 2008, the bourgeoisie was able to push one more wedge into the consciousness of the proletariat by developing a new ideological campaign on a global scale, aimed at instilling the idea (put forward by the left-wing parties) that it is the "crooked bankers" who are responsible for this crisis, while making it appear that capitalism is personified by traders and the power of money.

The ruling class was thus able to hide the roots of the failure of its system. On the one hand, it sought to pull the working class into defending the "protective" state, since bank rescue measures were supposed to protect small savers. On the other hand, this bank rescue policy has also been used, particularly by the left, to point the finger at governments seeking to defend bankers and the financial world.

But beyond these mystifications, the impact of this campaign on the working class has been to reinforce its powerlessness in the face of an impersonal economic system whose general laws appear to be natural laws that cannot be controlled or modified.

9) The unleashing of imperialist conflicts in the Middle East, as well as the absolute misery of the impoverished masses of the countries of the African continent, have resulted in an increasing flow of refugees into the countries of Western Europe. On the other side of the Atlantic, the sinking of capitalism into decay has also been illustrated by the exodus of waves of migrants from Latin American countries to the United States.

Faced with these manifestations of the decomposition of capitalist society, a new danger has emerged for the proletariat: populist ideology based on a rigorous "identitarian" policy of de-solidarisation, advocating, in face of the worsening crisis, when "resources" and "opportunities" are shrinking, that "native" populations can only avoid the worst at the expense of other parts of the non-exploiting population. This policy manifests itself in protectionism, the stigmatisation of immigrants as "profiteers on the welfare state" and the closing of borders to waves of migrants.

The increasingly open rejection of traditional bourgeois parties and "elites" has not led to a politicisation of the proletariat on its class terrain but a tendency to seek "new"

men in the electoral fields of bourgeois democracy. These “new men” are largely populist demagogues and adventurers (like Donald Trump). The rise of far-right parties in several European countries, as well as the rise to power of Trump in the United States, elected with many votes from workers in the “rust belt”, reveals that some fringes of the proletariat (particularly those affected by unemployment) can be poisoned by populism, xenophobia, nationalism and all the reactionary and obscurantist ideologies that emanate from the foul putrefaction of capitalism.

The tendency towards the individual “looking after number one” and the dislocation of society has also manifested itself in the danger of certain sectors of the proletariat being recruited behind national or regional flags (as was the case during the independence crisis in Catalonia in 2018).

10) Because of the current great difficulty of the working class in developing its struggles, its inability for the moment to regain its class identity and to open up a perspective for the whole of society, the social terrain tends to be occupied by inter-classist struggles particularly marked by the petty bourgeoisie. This social layer, without a historic future, can only be a vehicle for illusions in the possibility of reforming capitalism by claiming that capitalism can have a more “human face”, can be more democratic, more just, cleaner, more concerned about the poor and the preservation of the planet.

These inter-classist movements are the product of the absence of any perspective which affects society as a whole, including an important part of the ruling class itself.

The popular revolt of the “Yellow Vests” in France against the “high cost of living” as well as the international movement of the “Youth for Climate” are an illustration of the danger of inter-classism for the proletariat. The citizen revolt of the “Yellow Vests” (supported and encouraged from the beginning by all parties of the right and the extreme right) revealed the ability of the bourgeoisie to use inter-classist social movements against the consciousness of the proletariat.

By releasing a package of 10 billion euros to deal with the chaos accompanying the Yellow Vests demonstrations, the French bourgeoisie and its media were able to insidiously instil the idea that only inter-classist citizens’ movements and petty bourgeois methods of struggle can push the government back.

Faced with the acceleration of economic attacks against the exploited class, and the

danger of the resurgence of workers’ struggles, the bourgeoisie is now seeking to erase class antagonisms. By trying to drown and dilute the proletariat in the “population of citizens”, the ruling class aims to prevent it from regaining its class identity. The international media coverage of the Yellow Vest movement reveals that it is a concern of the bourgeoisie of all countries.

The youth movement for the climate, although expressing a global concern about the threat of the destruction of humanity, has been totally diverted onto the terrain of partial struggles that can easily be recuperated by the bourgeoisie and are very strongly marked by the petty bourgeoisie. *“Only the proletariat bears within it a perspective for humanity. In this sense, the greatest capacity for resistance to this decomposition lies within its ranks. However, this does not mean that the proletariat is immune, particularly since it lives alongside the petty bourgeoisie which is one of the major carriers of the infection.... During this period, it must aim to resist the noxious effects of decomposition in its own ranks, counting only on its own strength and on its ability to struggle collectively and in solidarity to defend its interests as an exploited class.”*²

The struggle for the class autonomy of the proletariat is crucial in this situation imposed by the aggravation of the decomposition of capitalism:

- against inter-classist struggles;
- against partial struggles put forward by all kinds of social categories giving a false illusion of a “protective community”;
- against the mobilisations on the rotten ground of nationalism, pacifism, “ecological” reform, etc.

In the balance of forces between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, it is always the ruling class that is on the offensive, except in a revolutionary situation. Despite its internal difficulties and the growing tendency to lose control of its political apparatus, the bourgeoisie has been able to turn the manifestations of the decomposition of its system against the consciousness and class identity of the proletariat. The working class has therefore not yet overcome the deep setback it has suffered since the collapse of the Eastern bloc and the Stalinist regimes. This is all the more so since democratic and anti-communist campaigns, maintained over the long term, have been regularly updated (for example on the occasion of the centenary of the October Revolution in 1917).

11) Nevertheless, despite three decades of retreat of the class struggle, the bourgeoisie has so far failed to inflict a decisive defeat on the working class, as it did in the 1920s and 1930s. Despite the seriousness of the issues at stake in the current historical period, the situation is not identical to that of the counter-revolutionary period. The proletariat of the central countries has not suffered physical defeat (as was the case during the bloody crushing of the revolution in Germany during the first revolutionary wave of 1917-23). It has not been massively recruited behind national flags. The vast majority of proletarians are not ready to sacrifice their lives on the altar of defending the national capital. In the major industrialised countries, in the United States as well as in Europe, the proletarian masses did not join the imperialist (and so-called “humanitarian”) crusades of “their” national bourgeoisie.

The proletarian class struggle is made up of advances and setbacks during which the working class strives to overcome its defeats, to learn from them and to return to the combat again. As Marx stated in the 18th Brumaire, *“The bourgeois revolutions, like those of the 18th century, quickly rush from success to success, (...) Proletarian revolutions, on the other hand, like those of the 19th century, constantly criticize themselves, interrupt at every moment their own course, go back to what already seems to be accomplished to start it over again, mercilessly mock the hesitations, the weaknesses and miseries of their first attempts, seem to bring down their opponent only to allow him to draw new strengths from the earth and to recover again, formidable, in front of them, constantly retreat again before the infinite immensity of their own goals, until the situation is finally created making it impossible to turn back, and the circumstances themselves cry: Hic Rhodus, hic salta!”*

These “circumstances” which will create a “situation that makes it impossible to turn back” will be determined, in the first place, by the exhaustion of the palliatives which have so far enabled the bourgeoisie to slow down the collapse of the world economy. Indeed, in order for the conditions for the emergence of a period of revolutionary struggle to be created, it is necessary *“that exploiters cannot live and govern as in the past. Only when ‘those below’ no longer want to and ‘those above’ cannot continue to live in the old way, only then can the revolution triumph.”*³

The inexorable worsening of poverty, precariousness, unemployment, the attacks on the dignity of the exploited in the years

2. Theses on decomposition.

3. Lenin, *Left-wing Communism: an Infantile Disorder*.

to come, constitute the material basis which can push the new generations of proletarians to find their way back to the path of the struggles that were led by previous generations, in defence of all aspects of their living conditions. Despite all the dangers threatening the proletariat, the period of decomposition of capitalism has not put an end to the objective “circumstances” that have been the impetus for the revolutionary struggles of the proletariat since the beginning of the workers’ movement.

12) The worsening economic crisis has already revealed a new generation on the social scene, even if it is still very limited and embryonic: in 2006, the student movement in France against the CPE, followed five years later by the “Indignados” movement in Spain. These two massive movements of proletarian youth spontaneously rediscovered the methods of struggle of the working class, including the culture of debate in massive general assemblies open to all.

These movements were also characterized by solidarity between generations (whereas the student movement of the late 1960s, very strongly marked by the weight of the petty bourgeoisie, had often seen themselves as being in opposition to the generations which had been mobilised for war). If, in the movement against the CPE, the vast majority of students fighting against the prospect of unemployment and precariousness, had recognised themselves as part of the working class, the Indignados in Spain (although their movement had spread internationally through social networks) did not have a clear awareness of belonging to the exploited class.

While the massive movement against the CPE was a proletarian response to an economic attack (which forced the bourgeoisie to retreat by withdrawing the CPE), the Indignados movement was essentially marked by a global reflection on the bankruptcy of capitalism and the need for another society.

Within this new generation, the class identity of the proletariat has not yet been recovered due to the lack of experience of this young generation, its vulnerability to the mystifications of “anti-globalisation” ideology and its difficulty in reclaiming the history and experience of the workers’ movement.

Nevertheless, these movements had begun to lay the groundwork for a slow maturation of consciousness within the working class (and especially among its young highly skilled generations) about the challenges of the current historical situation

13) An essential characteristic of the

development of the class consciousness of the proletariat has always been its capacity for subterranean maturation, that is, the ability to develop outside periods of open struggle and even in periods of major defeat. Class consciousness can develop in depth, in small minorities, without it spreading widely throughout the proletariat. The development of class consciousness should therefore not only be measured by its immediate extension in the class at a given time, but also through its historical continuity. As we stated in the article in *International Review* n° 42 “Internal debate: Centrist slidings towards councilism”: “*It is necessary to distinguish what is part of a continuity in the historical movement of the proletariat - the progressive elaboration of its political positions and its programme - from what is related to circumstantial factors - the extent of their assimilation and their impact in the whole class.*”

The existence and determined maintenance of the organisations of the communist left, under the difficult conditions of the decomposition of capitalism, expresses this underground capacity of class consciousness to develop its historical movement in a period of profound disorientation of the proletariat such as the one we are living today.

This subterranean maturation of the class consciousness of the proletariat is also manifested today through the emergence of small minorities and young elements in search of a class perspective and the positions of the communist left.

The organisations of the communist left must not ignore these small minorities, even if they appear to be insignificant. The process of decantation in the period of capitalist decomposition is much slower and more uneven than it was at the end of the 1960s and beginning of the 1970s.

Despite the deleterious effects of decomposition and the dangers facing the proletariat, “*Today, the historical perspective remains completely open. Despite the blow that the Eastern bloc’s collapse has dealt to proletarian consciousness, the class has not suffered any major defeats on the terrain of its struggle (...). Moreover, and this is the element which in the final analysis will determine the outcome of the world situation, the inexorable aggravation of the capitalist crisis constitutes the essential stimulant for the class’ struggle and development of consciousness, the precondition for its ability to resist the poison distilled by the social rot. For while there is no basis for the unification of the class in the partial struggles against the effects of decomposition, nonetheless its struggle against the direct effects of the crisis*

constitutes the basis for the development of its class strength and unity.”⁴

14) In the economic and defensive struggles of the proletariat “*Now and then the workers are victorious, but only for a time. The real fruit of their battles lies, not in the immediate result, but in the ever expanding union of the workers. This union is helped on by the improved means of communication that are created by modern industry, and that place the workers of different localities in contact with one another. It was just this contact that was needed to centralise the numerous local struggles, all of the same character, into one national struggle between classes. But every class struggle is a political struggle. And that union, to attain which the burghers of the Middle Ages, with their miserable highways, required centuries, the modern proletarian, thanks to railways, achieve in a few years.*

“*This organisation of the proletarians into a class, and, consequently into a political party, is continually being upset again by the competition between the workers themselves. But it ever rises up again, stronger, firmer, mightier.*”⁵

The “increase in the means of communication” allowing workers to “make contact” to “centralise local struggles” are no longer the railways, as in Marx’s time, but the new digital telecommunications technologies.

In fact, if the effects of “globalisation”, relocations, the disappearance of entire sectors of industry, the dispersion into a multitude of small productive units, the multiplication of small service jobs, precariousness and Uberisation of work have added to the blows to the class identity of the proletariat of the old industrial metropolises, the new economic, technological and social conditions in which the proletariat finds itself today contain elements favourable to the re-conquest of this class identity on a much larger scale than in the past. “Globalisation” and especially the development of the Internet, the creation of a kind of “global network” of knowledge, skills, collaborations in work at the same time as mass travel, create the objective bases for the development of a class identity on a global scale, especially for the new proletarian generations.

15) One of the main reasons why the proletariat has not been able to develop its struggles and consciousness to the level required by the gravity of the historical situation is the rupture of political continuity with the workers’ movement of the past

4. Theses on Decomposition.

5. *Communist Manifesto*.

Formation, loss and re-conquest of proletarian class identity

Capitalist society, in the final phase of decline, is giving birth to a whole variety of “identity crises”. The atomisation inherent in the system of generalised commodity production is reaching new levels, and this applies both to social life as a whole and to the reactions against the increasing misery and oppression spawned by the system. On the one hand, groups and individuals suffering from particular oppressions are encouraged to mobilise as particular groups to fight their oppressions – as women, as gays, as transgender people, as ethnic minorities and so on – and not infrequently compete with each other directly, as with the current confrontation between transgender activists and certain branches of feminism. These manifestations of “identity politics” are at the same time co-opted by the left wing of the bourgeoisie, all the way up to its most distinguished academics and most powerful political echelons (as with the Democratic Party in the USA).

Meanwhile, the right wing of the bourgeoisie, while superficially decrying the rise of identity politics, rises up in defence of its own form of identity-seeking: the search for the Real Men threatened by the spectre of feminism, the nostalgia for the glories of the White Race facing displacement by foreign hordes.

The quest for these partial, and sometimes entirely fictitious identities and communities, is a measure of mankind’s self-estrangement in a historic epoch in which a universal human community is both possible and necessary for the survival of the species. And above all, like other manifestations of social decomposition, it is the product of the loss of the one identity whose affirmation can lead to the creation of such a community, also known as communism: the class identity of the proletariat. The recent “Yellow Vest” movement in France provides us with a graphic illustration of the dangers that arise from this loss of class identity: that large numbers of workers, rightly angered by the constant attacks on their living standards, are mobilised not for their own interests but behind the demands and actions of other social classes – in this case, the petty bourgeoisie and a part of the bourgeoisie itself.¹

1. See the article on our website: *The “Yellow Vest” movement: the proletariat must respond to the attacks of capital on its own class terrain!*

The proletariat’s identity is by nature revolutionary

The exploitation of the working class is the foundation stone of the entire edifice of capitalism. It is not, as the proponents of identity politics argue openly or underhandedly, just one form of oppression amongst many. Because, despite all the changes it has been through over the last two centuries, capitalism continues to rule the Earth, what Karl Marx famously wrote in 1844 about the revolutionary nature of the proletariat remains as true as ever. This is a class whose struggle against capitalism contains the solution to all the “particular wrongs” inflicted by this society:

*“a class with **radical chains**, a class of civil society which is not a class of civil society, an estate which is the dissolution of all estates, a sphere which has a universal character by its universal suffering and claims no **particular right** because no **particular wrong**, but **wrong generally**, is perpetuated against it; which can invoke no **historical**, but only **human**, title; which does not stand in any one-sided antithesis to the consequences but in all-round antithesis to the premises of German statehood; a sphere, finally, which cannot emancipate itself without emancipating itself from all other spheres of society and thereby emancipating all other spheres of society, which, in a word, is the **complete loss of man** and hence can win itself only through the **complete re-winning of man**. This dissolution of society as a particular estate is the **proletariat**”.*²

In *The Holy Family*, written during the same period, Marx explains that the working class is by nature a revolutionary class, even when it is not aware of this:

*“When socialist writers ascribe this world-historic role to the proletariat, it is not at all, as Critical Criticism pretends to believe, because they regard the proletarians as gods. Rather the contrary. Since in the fully-formed proletariat the abstraction of all humanity, even of the **semblance of humanity**, is practically complete; since the conditions of life of the proletariat sum up all the conditions of life of society today in their most inhuman form; since man has*

2. Introduction to the *Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right*.

*lost himself in the proletariat, yet at the same time has not only gained theoretical consciousness of that loss, but through urgent, no longer removable, no longer disisable, absolutely imperative need — the practical expression of **necessity** — is driven directly to revolt against this inhumanity, it follows that the proletariat can and must emancipate itself. But it cannot emancipate itself without abolishing the conditions of its own life. It cannot abolish the conditions of its own life without abolishing all the inhuman conditions of life of society today which are summed up in its own situation. Not in vain does it go through the stern but steeling school of **labour**. It is not a question of what this or that proletarian, or even the whole proletariat, at the moment **regards** as its aim. It is a question of **what the proletariat is**, and what, in accordance with this **being**, it will historically be compelled to do”.*³

Class identity thus has an objective basis which remains unalterable as long as capitalism exists, but the subjective consciousness of “*what the proletariat is*” has long been held back by the negative side of the proletarian condition: the fact that “*man has lost himself in the proletariat*”, that this is a class which suffers the full weight of human self-alienation. In later works Marx would explain that the particular forms assumed by alienation in capitalist society – the process also known as “reification”, the veil of mystification inherent in the universal exchange of commodities – make it particularly difficult for the exploited to grasp the true nature of their exploitation and the true identity of their exploiters. And this is why there must be a “*theoretical consciousness of that loss*” and socialism would have to become scientific in its methods. But this theoretical consciousness is not in any sense divorced from the real conditions of labour and its revolt against the inhumanity of capitalist exploitation.

When Marx writes that the working class “*cannot emancipate itself without abolishing the conditions of its own life*”, the so-called “communisation” current take this to mean that any affirmation of class identity can only be reactionary, since it is no more than an exaltation of what the

3. *The Holy Family*, Chapter IV.

proletariat is within capitalist society, so that the communist revolution demands the immediate self-negation of the working class. But this is to lose sight of the dialectical reality of the working class as a class that is both of capitalist society and not of it, an exploited and a revolutionary class at the same time. We insist, along with Marx, that it is only by affirming itself, both at the level of its economic and social struggles, and as the candidate for the political direction of society, that the proletariat can pave the way to the real dissolution of all classes and the “complete re-winning” of humanity. This is why this report will focus precisely on the problem of class identity: from its initial development in the ascendant phase of capitalism, to its subsequent loss and future re-appropriation.

The formation of class identity

The proletariat is by definition the class of dispossession. It is originally formed by the dispossession of the peasant's small plot of land, or the artisan's instruments of production, and herded into the disease-ridden slums of early industrial society. Engels in *The Condition of the Working Class in England* writes about all the demoralising effects of this process which led numerous proletarians into drunkenness and crime, subjecting them to the most brutal competition among themselves. But Engels rejected any moralistic condemnation of these purely individual reactions to their condition and pointed to the alternative that was already taking shape: the collective struggle of the workers for the improvement of their condition through the formation of trade unions, educational and cultural associations and political parties like the Chartists – all of this inspired ultimately by the vision of a higher form of society. The physical bringing together of the workers in the cities and the factories was the objective premise for this struggle. This is one dimension of the association of labour which overcomes the relative isolation of artisan and peasant labour; but as a purely “sociological” process, the machinery of early industrialisation was so brutal and traumatic that it could also have resulted in the production of an indifferent mass of paupers, and even in the extinction of the proletariat through starvation and disease. It was the recognition of a common class interest, opposed to that of the bourgeoisie, which was the real basis of the initial class identity of the proletariat. The “constitution of the proletarians into a class”, as the *Communist Manifesto* put it, was thus inseparable from the growth of class consciousness and of organisation: “and consequently into a political party”, as the phrase continues. The working

class is not only an associated class “in itself”, not only objectively: association as the premise for a higher form of social organisation only takes shape when the subjective dimension, the self-organisation and unification of the class in struggle against exploitation, arises out of its place in the capitalist social relation.

But the proletariat remains the class of dispossession, and this would eventually apply to the very instruments it had created for its own defence. The first unions and political parties, at one level motivated by the understanding that the proletariat was not a class of civil society, by the project of dissolving the existing order, were also bound by the need for the class to improve its lot inside the system. And contrary to the first expectations of the founders of marxism, this system was still far away from any “final crisis” or period of decline, so that the longer and more extensively the proletariat forged its organisations inside the shell of capitalist society, the greater the danger that these organisations would become part of civil society tout court – would become institutionalised. As Engels put it in 1892: at a certain point, “*Trades' unions, hitherto considered inventions of the devil himself, were now petted and patronised as perfectly legitimate institutions, and as useful means of spreading sound economical doctrines amongst the workers*”.⁴ With the hindsight of bitter historical experience, we know that the road to revolution did not pass through the gradual building up of workers' mass organisations within the system. On the contrary, when the real test came with the onset of decadence, these organisations, which had become slowly but surely corrupted by the dominant society and ideology, were definitively recuperated by the ruling class to help it fight its imperialist wars and to combat the threat of revolution.

This was by no means a linear process. The proletariat was constantly being reminded that it was in essence an outlaw class – a force for revolution. Its initial efforts to build the most elementary combinations in its defence were ruthlessly suppressed by the bourgeoisie, which took a long time to understand that it could turn the workers' own organisations against them. Moreover, the political conditions of mid-19th century Europe would lead the proletariat into overtly insurrectionary struggles against the ruling class in Europe in at least two key historical moments: 1848 and 1871. In France, already the homeland of revolution after the experience of 1789-93, the working class took up arms against the state and, particularly in 1871, concretely posed the problem

of its destruction and replacement by the dictatorship of the proletariat. But class movements that pointed to a revolutionary future were not limited to France: in England, the country of “gradual reforms”, the strike movement of 1842 already revealed the outlines of the mass strike that would become the characteristic mode of struggle in a later epoch.⁵ The Chartist movement itself understood its demand for universal suffrage as a demand for the working class to take political power into its own hands, and its methods were not limited to petitioning the bourgeoisie: it also gave rise to a “physical force” wing which, in the Newport rising of 1839, did not hesitate to arm itself against the existing regime.⁶ The formation of the First International in 1864, even though it originated in the need for international co-ordination of defensive struggles, was a further indicator that the working class was pitted against the foundations of bourgeois society – that a really self-aware class identity could not be accommodated within the framework of the nation state.

The fear that the International and the Paris Commune inspired in the hearts of the bourgeoisie, as well as the objective conditions of capitalist global expansion in the last part of the 19th century, provided the basis for the eventual integration of the mass workers' organisations into bourgeois society and finally into the state apparatus itself. To these factors can be added the confusions and opportunist concessions that arose within the proletarian movement itself, not least the identification of the proletariat with the national interest, which the Second International, with its federal structure and its difficulties in understanding the evolution of the national question, was never able to overcome. But the sense of class identity that arose during the long period of social democracy, a period in which the organised labour movement provided a whole layer of workers not only with organs of economic defence and political activity, but a whole social and cultural life, by no means disappeared with the opening of the epoch of capitalist decline. On the contrary, transmuted into a mystification hostile to the proletariat, it would “weigh like a nightmare on the brains of the living”, and would in particular be taken over by the social democratic and Stalinist parties with aim of maintaining their control over the working class:

5. *World Revolution* n° 304: “History of the workers' movement in Britain, Part 2: Chartism and the 1842 general strike.”

6. This movement had been preceded by the Merthyr uprising of 1831, which, it could be argued, was better organised and more successful, even if the workers could only take power in one city and only for brief moment. It was also the first recorded moment that workers marched under the red flag.

4. Introduction to the English edition of *The condition of the working class in England*.

“Class identity is the recognition by the proletariat that it constitutes a distinct class in society, opposed to the bourgeoisie and having an active role in society. However, this does not mechanically signify that it recognises itself as the revolutionary class in society. For many years, class identity gravitated around the notion of a class of capitalist society aspiring to have a decent standard of living and enjoying recognition and a social potency.”

“Such an identity was constructed by the counter-revolution and notably by the trade unions and Stalinism, basing themselves on certain weaknesses that go back to the period of the Second International: a blue collar worker, militant, concerned with his rights in society, recognised by it, linked to the large enterprises and working class neighbourhoods, proud of his condition as a ‘worker citizen’ and enclosed in the universe of the great family of workers.”

“Such an identity was very much linked to a precise period: that of the zenith of capitalism (1870-1914), but its persistence in the period of decadence, in which the vision of a proletariat profoundly excluded from bourgeois society as announced by Marx, has led it to become a very dangerous false identity, full of illusions about being integrated into capitalist society, about reaching accommodation with it, and this destroying a real class identity and consciousness. The only identity possible for the proletariat is that of a class excluded from this society and which carries within it the communist perspective.”⁷

Main stages in the dispossession of class identity in the epoch of decadence

A text on the balance of class forces adopted by our international central organ in April 2018, citing our “Orientation Text on Confidence and Solidarity”,⁸ outlined two phases in the history of the workers’ movement since 1848. Its focus is on the growth and loss of the self-confidence of working class, but this question is very closely linked to the problem of class identity: the working class can only have confidence in itself if it is aware of its own existence and interests.

“During the first phase, extending from the beginnings of its self-affirmation as an autonomous class until the revolutionary wave of 1917-23, the working class was able, despite the series of often bloody defeats it suffered, to more or less con-

tinuously develop its self-confidence and its political and social unity. The most important manifestations of this capacity were, in addition to the workers’ struggle itself, the development of a socialist vision, of a theoretical capacity, and of a political revolutionary organisation. This process of accumulation, the work of decades and of generations, was interrupted and even reversed by the counter-revolution. Only tiny revolutionary minorities were able to maintain their confidence in the proletariat in the decades that followed. The historic resurgence of the working class in 1968, by ending the counter-revolution, began to once again reverse this tendency. However, the new expressions of self-confidence and class solidarity by this new and undefeated proletarian generation remained for the most part rooted in the immediate struggles. They were not yet based to the same extent as before the counter-revolution on a socialist vision and political formation, on a class theory, and on the passing on of accumulated experience and understanding from one generation to the next. In other words: the historic self-confidence of the proletariat, and its traditions of active unity and collective combat belong to the aspects of its combat which have suffered most from the break in organic continuity. Equally, they are among the most difficult aspects to re-establish, since they depend more than many others on a living political and social continuity. This in turn gives rise to a particular vulnerability of the new generations of the class and its revolutionary minorities”.

We can add that even before the shattering blow of the defeat of the first revolutionary wave, the great battle of 1914-18 meant the loss of decades of patient labour in the construction of its unions and political parties, a loss which has been particularly difficult for the working class to accept and understand: even among the revolutionaries who opposed this betrayal, only a minority was able to grasp that these organisations had been irretrievably lost to the class. Subsequently, with the rise of Stalinism, what had been a difficulty of comprehension became the basis for the construction of the fake identity mentioned by the report on perspectives. But while this terrible burden inherited from the past was to have a disastrous impact on the progress of the revolutionary wave – expressed in particular through the theory and practice of the United Front – this period also shed light on the new form of class identity embodied in the mass strike, in the formation of workers’ councils and the rise of the Third International. As Marx had already put it, the proletariat is revolutionary or it is nothing: this rediscovered class identity was not really “new” but was simply bring-

ing out “what the proletariat is”: in the epoch of wars and revolutions, the class can only grasp its identity by organising itself outside all existing institutions and in direct antithesis to capitalist society.

The following decades of counter-revolution were to deepen this process of dispossession. In the 1930s the proletariat was confronted with the biggest economic crisis in the history of capitalism, the first real economic crisis of decadence. But the Communist Parties created to counter the treason of 1914 had in turn abandoned internationalism in favour of the infamous theory of socialism in one country and, through the Popular Front, were seeking to politically dissolve the working class into the nation and prepare it for war. Even the anarchist unions that had retained a proletarian life in Spain succumbed to this new betrayal. The outbreak of war in 1939 did not mean, as Vercesi argued, the “social disappearance of the proletariat” and thus the uselessness of organised political activity for revolutionaries. The social disappearance of the proletariat is impossible as long as capital survives, and the formation of revolutionary minorities obeys a permanent need within the class. But it certainly did signify a new step in its political disarray, not only through the terror of fascism and Stalinism but, more insidiously, through its incorporation into the project of defending democracy. And it included the rapid integration of the Trotskyist opposition into the war effort and the dispersal of its left fractions. The proletariat did manifest itself at the end of the war in certain countries, above all Italy in 1943, but contrary to the expectations of a large part of the Italian communist left (including Vercesi) this did not mean a reversal of the counter-revolutionary course.

The counter-revolution, taking ever more totalitarian forms, continued to hold sway during the period of post-war prosperity, while capital discovered new forms for undermining the proletariat’s sense of itself. This was the period in which “*sociologists could begin theorising about the ‘embourgeoisement’ of the working class as a result of the spread of consumerism and the development of the welfare state. And indeed both these aspects of capitalism after 1945 remain as important added weights on the possibility of the working class reconstituting itself as a revolutionary force. Consumerism atomises the working class and peddles the illusion that everyone can attain the paradise of individual ownership. Welfarism – which was often introduced by left parties and presented as a conquest of the working class, is an even more significant instrument of capitalist control. It undermines the self-confidence of the working class and makes it reliant on*

7. From a Report on the perspectives of the class struggle, December 2015.

8. *International Review* n° 111, 2001. “Orientation Text on Confidence and solidarity in the proletarian struggle.”

the benevolence of the state; and later on, in a phase of mass migration, its organisation by the nation state would mean that the issue of access to health, housing and other benefits became a potent factor in the scapegoating of immigrants and divisions within the working class."⁹

The revival of the class struggle after 1968, which reached its highest point with the mass strike in Poland in 1980, refuted the idea that the working class had been integrated into capitalism and gave us another glimpse of its essential identity as a force that can only express itself by bursting through its institutional chains. Wildcat strikes outside the unions, general assemblies and revocable strike committees, powerful tendencies towards the extension of the struggle – embryos or actual manifestations of the mass strike – renewed the perspective of workers' councils. At the same time it provided the soil for a small but important revival of the international communist movement which had come close to disappearing by the 1950s – an essential prerequisite for the future formation of a new world party.

And yet as the above-quoted passage from the text on Confidence and Solidarity argues, while May 68 and ensuing movements did raise the question of a new society at the theoretical level, the class struggle as a whole remained on the economic terrain and was not able to grow towards a political confrontation with capitalism. The limits of the proletarian revival contained the seeds of the new phase of decomposition which has seen the proletariat come close to losing its class identity altogether.

Class identity in the phase of decomposition

To understand why, since the end of the 1980s, the proletariat's awareness of itself as a social force has been in retreat, it is necessary to examine its different dimensions separately in order to understand how they operate together.

To begin with, a capitalist society whose very premises are beginning to unravel, a society in open disintegration, a society which has been through decades of decline and has been blocked in its further evolution, tends, more or less automatically, to exacerbate the social atomisation which has been a key characteristic of this society from its beginning, as Engels noted in *The condition of the working class in England*:

"However much one may be aware that this isolation of the individual, this narrow

self-seeking is the fundamental principle of our society everywhere, it is nowhere so shamelessly barefaced, so self-conscious as just here in the crowding of the great city. The dissolution of mankind into monads of which each one has a separate principle and a separate purpose, the world of atoms, is here carried out to its utmost extreme."¹⁰

In the final phase of this society, the war of each against all intensifies at every level: from growing estrangement between individuals, to violent competition between street gangs operating at the level of this or that housing estate or neighbourhood, to the frenzied struggle between companies for their share of a limited market, to the expanding chaos of military competition between states and proto-states at the international level. This tendency also underlies the search for communities based on a restricted identity that we referred to earlier – a reaction against atomisation which serves only to reinforce it at another level. This unravelling of social ties works continually and insidiously in polar opposition to the potential for the unification of the working class around its common interests – in other words, to the re-formation of proletarian class identity.

The bourgeoisie of course is directly affected by this same process – as we have noted in relation to its capacity to control its political apparatus, and in the growing difficulty of maintaining stable alliances at the level of relations between states. But unlike the working class the bourgeoisie can to a certain extent turn the effects of decomposition to its advantage and even reinforce them. The collapse of the eastern bloc, for example, was a prime example of the "objective" processes of decomposition, spurred on by a deepening and irresolvable economic crisis. But because of the particular historical circumstances involved in the formation of this bloc – the result of a defeated proletarian revolution which gave rise to a system apparently different from the capitalism of the west – the bourgeoisie has been able to fashion from these events a whole ideological onslaught against the proletariat, an attack on class consciousness which played a significant part in the reflux of the struggle from the 1990s onwards. Facing a working class which, already in the post-68 waves of struggle, was experiencing great difficulty in developing a perspective for its resistance, the 'death of communism' campaigns frontally attacked this essential dimension of class consciousness: its capacity to look forward and provide itself with an orientation for the future. But these campaigns didn't stop there: they proclaimed not only the end of any possibility of an alternative

to capitalism, but even the end of the class struggle and of the working class itself. In doing so, the bourgeoisie itself showed the need to undermine class identity as a means of combating the threat of proletarian revolution.

A third dimension of the undermining of class identity in the period of decomposition connects to this: that is to say, the insistence that the working class is an endangered or extinct species is deeply underpinned by the structural changes that the ruling class has been obliged to introduce in response to the economic crisis of its system – everything that goes under the misleading headings of neo-liberalism and globalisation, but above all the process of "de-industrialisation" of the oldest capitalist centres. This process was of course determined by the necessity to abandon unprofitable industries and to move capital to areas of the globe where the same commodities could be produced much more cheaply. But there was always a directly anti-working class element in this process: the bourgeoisie was well aware, for example, that in taking on the miners in Britain and closing down the mines, it would not only rid itself of a major economic albatross, but would also strike a serious blow against a very combative section of its class enemy. Of course, by shifting whole industries to the Far East and elsewhere, the bourgeoisie would be creating new proletarian battalions for the class war, but it also had a certain understanding that the industrial working class of the main capitalist centres represented a particular danger to it. The working class is not limited to the industrial proletariat, but this sector has always been at the very heart of the workers' movement and especially of the massive and revolutionary struggles of the past – shown for example by the role of the Putilov factory in the Russian revolution, the workers of the Ruhr in the German revolution, the Renault workers in the French mass strike of 68, the shipyard workers in Poland in 1980.

Along with the shutting down of many of these old industries, capitalism has tried to create a new model of the working class, especially in the service industries which have, in older capitalist countries like Britain, moved further towards the centre stage of economic life. This model is the so-called "gig economy", whose employees are urged to see themselves not as workers but as individual entrepreneurs who can, if they work hard enough, make it big, who can negotiate with the company individual by individual to improve their pay and conditions. Again, these changes are ultimately dictated by the needs of profit, but they are also seized upon by the bourgeoisie to prevent workers from

9. Resolution on class struggle, 22nd ICC congress.

10. From the chapter headed "The Great Towns".

seeing themselves as workers and as part of an exploited class.

Populism and anti-populism

Since our last congress in April 2017 the populist upsurge has continued, despite the efforts of the most central factions of the bourgeoisie to erect a dyke against it, as with the election of Macron in France and the “Resistance” against Trump orchestrated by the Democratic party and part of the state security services in the US. The reliability of Germany as a barrier to the spread of populism has been severely weakened by the electoral rise of the AfD and the development of a pogromist street movement in places like Chemnitz. The divisions and near-paralysis of the British bourgeoisie over Brexit has intensified. The installation of a populist government in Italy, together with the opposition mounted by populist governments in Eastern Europe, has posed serious problems for the future of the EU. The threat to the unity of the Spanish state by the forces of Catalan and other nationalisms has not been overcome. In Brazil the victory of Bolsanaro is a new step in the rise of “strong leaders” who openly advocate state terror against any opposition to their rule. Finally, the phenomenon of the “Yellow Vests” in France and elsewhere shows the capacity of the populists not only to manifest themselves on the electoral terrain, but also on the streets, in large-scale demonstrations that can appear to take up some of the concerns and even the methods of the working class., while having the effect of further confusing the meaning of class identity

Populism, with its aggressively nationalist and xenophobic language, its contempt for evidence and scientific research, its manipulation of conspiracy theories, and its barely concealed relation to the naked violence of fascist street gangs, is without doubt a pure product of decomposition, the indication that the capitalist class is, even in its own terms, going backwards in the face of the historic stalemate between the classes. But while it emerges as a product of social decay and tends to undermine the bourgeoisie’s control of its entire political and economic apparatus, here again the ruling class can make use of the problems created by populism in its permanent war against class consciousness.

This is evident in the case of those fractions of the proletariat who, lacking any perspective of class resistance against capitalism and the effects of its crisis, have been drawn directly into populist politics and have fallen for a new version of the “socialism of fools”: the idea that their misery is caused by the growing

tide of migrants and refugees who are in turn the shock troops of sinister elites who aim to undermine Christian, white, or national culture. These delusions are combined with unquestioning support for the populist parties and demagogues who present themselves as an “anti-elite” force, as tribunes of the “real people”. The grip of such ideas – which can also lead a significant minority towards the practice of the pogrom and terrorism – clearly works against these fractions regaining their real identity as part of an exploited class, as a section of the class who have been “left behind” not by the plots of anti-national cabals but by the remorseless impact of the global capitalist crisis.

But, recalling Bordiga’s famous dictum that “the worst product of fascism is anti-fascism”, we must also point out that the bourgeois opposition to populism plays a no less important role in the ideological swindle that prevents the proletariat from recognising its independent, and antagonistic, class interests to all wings of the ruling class. Writing at the beginning of the Junius Pamphlet about the pogromist atmosphere that invaded Germany at the start of the First World War, Luxemburg noted that this “*Kishinev air... left the policeman at the corner as the only remaining representative of human dignity*”. In the US, the same appearance is created by the egregious pronouncements and practices of a Trump, so that the Democrats, liberal Republicans, supreme court judges and even the FBI and CIA start to look like the good guys. In Britain, the apparent domination of political life by a small gang of “Brextremists”, in turn linked to dark money and even the machinations of Russian imperialism, stimulates the development of a mass opposition to Brexit which, with the open encouragement of parts of the media, can mobilise up to 750,000 onto the streets of London to call for a second referendum. Although often derided as a polite middleclass movement, such mobilisations undoubtedly draw in large numbers of that educated urban proletariat who are angered by the lies of the populists but are not yet able to detach themselves from the liberal and left wing factions of the bourgeoisie.

In sum: the whole of political debate tends to be monopolised by the questions of pro- and anti-Trump, pro- and anti-Brexit, and so on, a debate entirely circumscribed by patriotic and democratic ideology. The bourgeois opposition to Trump presents itself as the Real America no less than Trump and his supporters, and it condemns the current administration above all for its violation of democratic norms; similarly, in the UK, the debate is always about the true interests of “our country”, and both sides

of the argument present themselves as the side interested in democracy and the will of the people. This same polarisation can be observed in the “culture wars” which have fuelled the rise of populism: as we noted earlier, populism is itself a form of identity politics, casting itself as the defender of the exclusive interests of this or that nation or ethnic group, and it engages in a mutually reinforcing battle with all the other forms of identity politics, whether the Islamist gangs who serve to misdirect the anger of a particular stratum of disaffected young proletarians stuck in urban ghettos, or the more left leaning campaigns around racial and gender issues. This polarisation is a real expression of a disintegrating and increasingly divided society, but, faced with the proletariat, decadent capitalism shows its totalitarian character, to the extent that this very polarisation occupies the social and political terrain and tends to block the emergence of debate or action on the terrain of the proletariat.

The danger of nihilism and the potential for a rediscovery of class identity

The capitalist world in decomposition necessarily engenders apocalyptic moods. It can offer humanity no future and its potential for destruction on a scale that beggars the imagination has become more and more evident to wide layers of the world’s population. The most extreme manifestations of this feeling that the world we live in is on its last legs expresses itself in the distorted mythologies of Islamic jihadism or right wing Christian survivalism, but this is a far more general mood. Increasingly disturbing reports of scientific panels about climate change, destruction of species and toxic pollution of all kinds have added to the sense of doom: if the scientists say that we have 12 years to prevent an environmental catastrophe, it is understood already that the governments and corporations of the world will do next to nothing to carry out the measures advocated by these reports, for fear of blunting the competitive edge of the national economies. Indeed, with the advent of populist governments, climate denial becomes more and more hysterical in face of the real dangers faced by the world, and opts for pure vandalism, withdrawal from international agreements and the removal of all limits to the exploitation of nature, as in the case of Trump in the USA and Bolsanaro in Brazil. Add to this the fact that imperialist war is becoming more chaotic and unpredictable while a growing number of states have access to nuclear weapons, then it is hardly surprising that nihilism and despair are even more widespread than they were in the period of

World War Two, despite the proximity of the shadow of Auschwitz and Hiroshima and the threat of nuclear war between the two imperialist blocs.

Nihilism and despair arise from a sense of powerlessness, in a loss of conviction that there is any possible alternative to the nightmare scenario being prepared by capitalism. It tends to paralyse reflection and the will to action. And if the only social force that could pose this alternative is virtually unaware of its own existence, does this mean that the game is up, that the point of no return has already been reached?

We certainly recognise that the longer capitalism sinks into decomposition, the more it is sapping the basis for a more human society. Again this is illustrated most clearly by the destruction of the environment, which is reaching the point where it can accelerate the tendency towards a complete break-down of society, a condition which does not favour the self-organisation and confidence in the future required to make the revolution; and even if the proletariat does come to power on a global scale, it will be faced by a gigantic labour not only to clean up the mess bequeathed by capitalist accumulation, but to reverse a spiral of destruction that it has already set in motion.

But we also know that despair also distorts reality, generates panic on the one hand, denial on the other, and does not permit us to think clearly about the possibilities that are still available to us. In a number of recent documents presented to congresses and meetings of its central organ, the ICC has examined a series of objective developments which have taken place (or rather continued) over the last few decades and which could act in favour of the proletariat. The most important of these developments are:

- The growth of the proletariat on a world scale, which we tended to deny in the past, driven in particular by the extraordinary growth of industry in China and other eastern and pacific countries. The idea advanced by some sociologists that we are living in a "post-industrial" society appears completely ridiculous when we can see that more than ever, capitalist society presents itself "as an immense accumulation of commodities"; and that the core of all this stuff, this frenzied building, production and distribution, is still carried on by human beings, despite the rapid advance of robotisation. Capitalism without the proletariat is a pure fiction. At the same time, we have seen a growing proletarianisation of countless "professional" and non-factory jobs.
- This economic growth—however fragile its underpinning—has, precisely because of its connection with modern communications technology, become increasingly globalised, an international chain which constantly balks at the limits of national borders and compels capitalism to organise itself on an international scale. The current trend towards nationalist protectionism is seeking to turn back this tide, but it is significant that most of its proponents are in reality incapable of breaking their links with "rootless" global capital. In Britain, for example, the leading financiers of Brexit (like Aaron Banks, whose offshore funds are currently under legal investigation) are all speculators on the world stage, and the same goes for Trump and some of his most committed supporters. And these tendencies have produced a working class that is increasingly international in its form and in its daily activities: the use of the internet to co-ordinate global production networks, the "movement of labour" across borders which necessarily accompanies the movement of capital, and so on. This is a fraction of the class which is also highly qualified, often university educated, and has a more "natural" resistance to populism and racism.
- These developments in the shape of the proletariat also includes a growing incorporation of women into associated labour – in the health and care industries in the west, into communications in India, for example, or into factory production in Bangladesh and China. This provides the objective basis for overcoming the gender divisions in the class and for the understanding that the sexual oppression of women, and other forms of sexual oppression, are at root a problem for the class, a pernicious obstacle to its unification. At the same time, the participation of female proletarians in the class struggle has always been a potent element in the development of its moral dimension.
- Technological developments – in marxist terms, the development of the productive forces – are also, potentially, a factor in recognising the obsolescence of the capitalist mode of production. In the process of production, the growth of computers and robots under capitalism generates unemployment on the one hand, overwork on the other, but their possible use in relieving humanity from drudgery also becomes increasingly obvious. At the same time, the use of digital technology in the spheres of distribution, payment and finance hints at the possibility that the commodity form is itself bankrupt, that the technology could be

used simply to measure distribution on the basis of need. This has given rise to various utopian "post-capitalist" theories which are deluded into thinking that such developments will arrive automatically from the use of technology itself,¹¹ but which nevertheless express a growing reality predicted by Marx: that "capital has outlived itself".

- The obsolescence of the commodity form, of value production, is expressed above all in what is perhaps the most crucial "objective factor" of all: the economic crisis. It is capital's inability to go beyond itself, by itself, which is the underlying factor behind the present crisis of civilisation; and when the contradictions arising from this historic state of affairs become most open, they tend to reveal to the exploited class the necessity for a new mode of production. The 2008 crisis – even if the form it took (a credit crunch that hit proletarians more as individual savers than as part of a collective class) and the means used to overcome it (the application of heavy doses of the same poison that had led to it in the first place) did not favour a massive and global development of class consciousness – nevertheless remains as a proof of the essential vulnerability and obsolescence of the system, which is heading towards even greater convulsions in the future. There are major storm clouds brewing over the world economy and there is no question that the growing inability of the ruling class to master the economic contradictions of the system, and thus the increasing necessity for frontal attacks on working and living conditions, remain a key potential factor in the revival of class struggle and of a more wide-spread proletarian self-awareness.

Necessity for a development on the subjective level

But we must bear in mind that these objective factors, while being necessary to the recovery of class identity and class consciousness, are not sufficient in themselves, and that there are other factors operating against the realisation of the potential they contain. Thus, the new generations of industrial workers in the east have often show high levels of militancy (for example, massive strikes in the textile industry in Bangladesh) but they lack the long political traditions of the western proletariat, even if the latter have been buried to a large extent. The integration of women into the workplace has, when class consciousness

11. See for example Paul Mason's book, *Post Capitalism, a Guide to our Future*, and its critique by the Communist Workers Organisation.

is low, often been accompanied by an increase in harassment. And we have also seen (certainly in the 1930s, but also to a certain degree in the wake of 2008) that the economic crisis can under certain circumstances become a factor of demoralisation and of individual atomisation rather than collective mobilisation.

The working class is the class of consciousness. Unlike the bourgeois revolution its revolution is not based on a steady accumulation of wealth and economic power. It can only accumulate experience, tradition of struggle, methods of organisation, and so on. In sum, the subjective element is crucial if an objective potential is to be seized and realised.

This subjective potential cannot be measured in immediate terms. The balance of class forces exists historically and we can say that, even if time is not on its side, even though decomposition is becoming a growing threat and the working class is experiencing considerable differences in emerging from its current retreat, globally the class has not been crushed since 1968 and thus remains an obstacle to the full descent into barbarism; it thus retains the potential for overcoming the whole system. But we can only continue to assert this by carefully examining more immediate expressions of rebellion against the social order. And these are not absent:

With regard to the open struggles of the class, we will look at two recent examples:

1. Struggles in Britain

In Britain in the last two years we have seen small but significant strikes by workers in the “gig” economy, as recounted in this article in *World Revolution*:

“One of the fears about workers in very precarious casual jobs, with a large proportion of immigrants among them, is that they will not be able to struggle, and so will be nothing but a competitive pressure to lower wages. Firms such as Uber and Deliveroo like to claim their workers are self-employed (so not getting minimum wage, holiday or sick leave). The recent strike at Deliveroo, which spread to UberEats drivers, has answered both questions. They are most definitely part of the working class, and most definitely able to struggle to defend themselves.

Threatened with a new contract that would change from hourly pay plus a bonus for each delivery (£7 and £1) with pay only for each delivery, despite their apparent isolation from each other and their precarious circumstances, Deliveroo delivery workers organised meetings to run their struggle, a protest moped and cycle

*ride through the streets in London, and a 6 day strike. They insisted on collective negotiation against the managing director’s ‘offer’ to speak to them individually. In the end the threat that they would lose their jobs if they did not sign up to the new contract was withdrawn, but it is being trialled by those who opt in. A partial victory. Some UberEats delivery workers came to Deliveroo meetings. They face similar conditions, being falsely given self-employed status; pay has fallen so they barely make the minimum wage, with no guaranteed pay, only getting £3.30 per delivery. After a wildcat strike one worker was sacked (or “deactivated” since he is not protected by employment law), underlining the courage needed by workers who struggle in such precarious industries...”*¹²

More recently, in October, workers at a series of fast food outlets in a number of cities in the UK – Macdonalds, TGI Fridays and JD Wetherspoon, together with UberEats drivers, came out on strike together and joined each others’ pickets and demonstrations. As the article in *World Revolution* says, these actions are based on a recognition that the employees of these firms are indeed part of a collective social body and not just isolated individuals. It was also significant that these strikes involved many immigrant workers alongside those born in the UK, while some of the actions were co-ordinated with strikes in the same firms in Europe. At the same time, according to the BBC, “the strikes are being held to coincide with industrial action over pay by fast-food workers in Chile, Colombia, the US, Belgium, Italy, Germany, the Philippines and Japan”.¹³

The notion of the “precarariat” applied to these workers implies that this is a new class, but precarious employment has always been part of the condition of the working class. In a sense, the methods of the “gig economy”, with workers increasingly employed on very short term and casual basis, takes us back to the days of building or port workers queuing for hire on a day to day basis.

The attempts of workers from different firms and countries to come together is an affirmation of class identity against the “new model” mentioned earlier, and shows that no section of the class, however dispersed and downtrodden, is incapable of fighting for its interests. At the same time, the fact that these workers have largely been ignored by the traditional unions has left a space for more radical forms of trade unionism: in the UK, semi-syndicalist

12. See the article on our website from 2016: “Deliveroo, UberEats: Struggles by precarious and immigrant workers”.

13. BBC website, 4/10/18: “McDonald’s, UberEats and Wetherspoon workers strike over pay”.

organisations like the IWW, Independent Workers Union of Great Britain and United Voices of the World have quickly taken advantage of this and have become the main force “organising” the workers. This is probably inevitable in a situation where there is no general class movement, but the influence of these radical unions testifies to the need to contain a genuine radicalisation amongst a minority of workers.

2. Struggles against the war economy in the Middle East

The strikes and demonstrations which erupted in July in many parts of Jordan, Iraq and Iran, described in several recent articles on our website,¹⁴ were a direct response by proletarians of the region to the miseries inflicted on the population by the war economy. The demands raised by the protests were heavily focused on basic economic issues: shortages of water and healthcare, poverty wages or unpaid wages, unemployment, testifying to the fact that these movements began on a class terrain. They also raised a number of political slogans which tend to assert proletarian interests against the interests of the ruling class and its wars: in Iran, for example, both “fundamentalist” and “reforming” factions of the theocracy were lumped together and the imperial pretensions of the Iranian regime were frequently ridiculed; in Iraq protesters cried out that they were neither Sunni nor Shia; and “Not only have government and municipal buildings been the target of demonstrators’ attacks but so have the Shia institutions belying their hypocritical ‘support’ for the wave of protests. The ‘radical’ populist al-Sadr had his delegation to the protesters attacked and seen off – this was shown in footage on social media”.¹⁵

Even more important, in the autumn of 2018 there were a number of very combative workers’ strikes in Iranian industry, with some clear expressions of solidarity between different enterprises, as in the case of the Foolad steel workers and the sugar workers at Haft Tappeh. The latter struggle also became well known internationally through the holding of general assemblies and statements from a key strike leader Ismail Bakhshi about their strike committee as a kind of embryonic soviet. This has been taken up by various elements in the milieu to imply that workers’ councils were on the immediate agenda in Iran, which we think is far from being the case. Other statements by Bakhshi show that there are serious confusions about self-management

14. See the following articles: “Class struggle in Jordan’s war economy”, July 2018; “Iraq: marching against the war machine”, August 2018; “Internationalist Voice and protests in the Middle East”, November 2018.

15. “Iraq: marching against the war machine”.

even among the more advanced workers.¹⁶ It's also the case that some of the slogans in the earlier street protests had a nationalist and even monarchist character. Despite these profound weaknesses, we still consider that this wave of struggle in Iran was an important expression of the intact potential of the class struggle. With war becoming a permanent reality for growing sections of the class, these movements are a reminder not only of the absolute antagonism between the proletariat and imperialist conflict, but of an embryonic awareness of this antagonism, expressed both in some of the slogans raised and in the international simultaneity of these upsurges in Iran, Iraq and Jordan.

The spread of social indignation

These examples are not presented as proof of a global revival of the class struggle or even of the end of its retreat, which would in any case require the emergence of important class movements in the central countries of the system. In these countries, the social situation is still marked more by an absence of major struggles on the proletarian terrain. On the other hand, we have seen a number of protests that express a growing indignation against the brutality and destructiveness of capitalist society. In the USA in particular, we have seen the direct actions at the airports against the detaining and expulsion of travellers from Muslim countries; huge demonstrations in the wake of police shootings of young black people in a number of cities: Charlotte, St Louis, New York, Sacramento... and the massive mobilisation of young people following the school shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida. Climate change and the destruction of the environment is also a factor sparking protests, notably the school strikes organised in many countries under the umbrella of "Youth for Climate" or the Extinction Rebellion protests in London. In the same way, outrage over the patronising and violent treatment of women – not only in "backward" countries like India but in the so-called "liberal democracies" – has also been expressed on the streets rather than being limited to internet forums.

However, given the general loss of class identity, there is little to prevent these kinds of protests falling into the traps of the bourgeoisie – into mystifications around identity politics and reformism, and thus being directly manipulated by left and democratic bourgeois factions. The Yellow Vest phenomenon also shows the danger of the class further losing itself in inter-classist movements dominated by the ideology of

populism and nationalism.

It is only through the class regaining a sense of itself as a class, through the development of the struggle on its own terrain, that all the energy and legitimate anger that today is being channelled in sterile or harmful directions could tomorrow be "recuperated" by the proletariat. That this is more than a vague wish is shown by the dynamic of the Indignados movement in 2011. Motivated by "classic" working class issues – unemployment, job insecurity, the impact of the 2008 crash on living standards – this was a movement which also raised questions about the future of humanity in a system which many of its participants saw as "obsolete". It consequently organised all kinds of discussions about morality, science, the environment, questions of sex and gender, and so on – in this sense clearly reviving the spirit of May 68 by posing the question of an alternative to capitalist society. This was an expression of a proletarian movement which had begun to understand that it contains the answer to "particular wrongs" as well as "wrong in general". It showed that the class struggle needs to extend not only across wider sectors of the capitalist economy, but also into the spheres of politics and culture.

Nevertheless, the problem remains that even if the Indignados was in essence a movement of the proletariat, largely made up of employed, semi-employed, unemployed, university and high school students, the majority of its protagonists saw themselves above all as citizens, and were thus particularly vulnerable to the ideology of "Democracy Now" and other leftists who tried to drag the assembly movement towards incorporation into a reformed parliamentary regime. There was, of course, a substantial proletarian wing (in the political rather than the sociological sense) of the movement which saw things differently but they remained a minority and seem to have given birth to a far smaller minority of elements who have moved towards revolutionary politics. The "identity problem" of the Indignados movement was further emphasised in 2017 when so many of those who had been genuinely indignant against the future offered by capitalism fell for the fraud of nationalism, particularly its Catalan version.

One of the key weaknesses of the movement was its lack of connection between the movement in the streets and squares and the struggles in the workplaces, and this gap is something that future struggles will have to overcome. We have seen glimpses of this in the recent movements in the Middle East, and perhaps more explicitly in the metal workers' strikes in Vigo in 2006. For just as gaining the street is essential

for bringing together workers from different sectors, as well as the unemployed, so the movement in the workplaces is key to reminding all those on the street that they are part of a class which has to sell its labour to capital.

This conjunction will also be important in solving the problem of the unitary organisation of future massive movements – the problem of the workers' councils. In past revolutionary movements, the workers' councils tended to arise from the centralisation of general assemblies in the large industrial units. This will no doubt remain an important factor in regions where such units still exist (Germany for example) or have been developed in the recent period (China, Indian sub-continent, etc). But given the importance of the old centres of the class struggle, above all in Europe, which have been subjected to a long process of deindustrialisation, it is possible that councils will emerge from a coming together of assemblies held in central workplaces such as hospitals, universities, warehouses etc, and mass meetings held on streets and squares where workers from more dispersed workplaces, the unemployed and precariously employed can unify their struggles.

The fact that major parts of the population have been proletarianised by the combined impact of the crisis and changes in the "skin" of the working class implies that assemblies based on territorial rather than industrial units will retain a working class character, even if there is evidently the danger of the influence of petty bourgeois and other strata in such forms of organisation. Such dilemmas lead us to the question of the autonomy of the class and its relation to the transitional state in the revolution of the future, since the working class, having rediscovered its identity as a revolutionary social force, will have to maintain this autonomous identity politically and organisationally during the transitional period, until all have become proletarians and thus none are proletarians.

It is also likely that this newly-found revolutionary identity will take a more directly political form in the future: in other words, that the class will define itself through a growing adherence to the communist perspective, not least because the profundity of the social and economic crisis will have sapped away at illusions in any possible "return to normal" for capitalism in decomposition. We saw an indication of this in the appearance of the proletarian wing in the Indignados movement: its proletarian character was based not so much on its sociological composition, but

16. "Response to *Internationalist Voice* on strikes in Iran".

Report on the question of the historic course

Introduction

The report on the question of the historic course from the 23rd ICC Congress, which we are publishing here, confirms a significant change of analysis in relation to the one elaborated in a basic ICC text from 1978 entitled “The historic course”.¹

Briefly, this change in analysis flows directly from the modification of the world situation that followed the fall of the eastern imperialist bloc, which led in turn to the disintegration of the western bloc. In this new situation, which marked the definite entry of the world into capitalism’s period of decomposition, it was necessary to analyse the consequently significant change in the evolution of the balance of forces between the classes; in particular the fact that the alternative between revolution and the destruction of humanity through world war was no longer posed in the same terms, given that, with the disappearance of the imperialist blocs, world war was no longer on the agenda.

By making the necessary change in our analysis, we were adopting the method of Marx and the marxist movement since its inception, which consists of changing positions, analyses and even the programme as a whole as soon as it no longer corresponds to the march of history; this is fully in line with the goals of marxism as a revolutionary theory. The most celebrated example of this is the important modifications which Marx and Engels made to the *Communist Manifesto* itself, summarised in the later prefaces they added to this fundamental text, in the light of the historic changes that had taken place.

*“Marxism is a revolutionary world outlook which must always strive for new discoveries, which completely despises rigidity in once-valid theses, and whose living force is best preserved in the intellectual clash of self-criticism and the rough and tumble of history.”*²

Rosa’s insistence, in this period, on the necessity to reconsider prior analyses in order to remain faithful to the nature and method of marxism as a revolutionary theory was directly linked to the profound significance of the First World War. The 1914-18 war marked a turning point in capitalism as a mode of production, its passage from a period of ascent and progress to a new period of decadence and collapse which fundamentally changed the conditions and the programme of the workers’ movement. But only the left wing of the Second International began to recognise that the previous period had definitely ended and that the proletariat was now entering into the “epoch of wars and revolution” as the Third International was to call it. The opportunist right of Social Democracy had falsely claimed that the first inter-imperial-

ist war was a war of national defence like the limited, minor wars of the 19th century – and thus joined forces with the imperialist bourgeoisie – while the centrist wing argued that the war was just a temporary aberration and that things would go back to normal after the cessation of hostilities. The representatives of these two currents ended up fighting against the revolutionary proletarian wave which put an end to the First World War, whereas the leading figures of these proletarian uprisings such as Rosa, Lenin and Trotsky, in the newly formed Communist parties, preserved the “honour of international socialism” by setting aside the outmoded formulae of social democracy, which were now being used to justify the counter-revolution.

The unprecedented changes marked by the end of the Cold War in 1989 were not of the same breadth of those of 1914. But they did mark a significant step in the development of capitalist decadence, coinciding with the emergence of its final phase, the phase of social decomposition. While the turning point of 1989 did not change the programme of the working class, which retains its validity throughout the decadence of capitalism, it did imply a major change with regard to the conditions within which the class struggle had evolved up until then, in the seven decades between 1914 and 1989. The report we are publishing here is a contribution to the critical effort to develop a marxist analysis of this major turning point in world history.

In 1989, at the time of these world-shaking events, the ICC was already analysing, in various texts, the very important changes taking place. “In the Theses on Decomposition”³ and the text “Militarism and Decomposition”,⁴ the ICC predicted that

the ensuing period would be dominated by an accelerated putrefaction, the descent into chaos of a dying system, still suffering the violent and destructive contradictions of capitalist decadence but in a new form and context. The resurgence of the proletarian class struggle, which had begun in 1968 and which had prevented a third world war from being unleashed, would now come up against new difficulties and a long period of retreat and disorientation, even though the aggravation of the world economic crisis would in the future push the proletariat to take up the struggle again.

Furthermore, the collapse of the eastern bloc had put an end, perhaps definitively, to the division of the world into two armed camps, which had been the principal way that the world imperialism had operated in its decadent phase. The first and second world wars, as well as the events that preceded and followed them, showed that capitalism could no longer evolve thanks to colonial expansion as in the 19th century, and that what remained for the rival imperialisms was to attempt to carry out a new division of the world market to their own advantage, through the massacre of war. And this attempt was articulated through a tendency towards the grouping of various countries behind the two most powerful gangsters, a process fully confirmed after 1945. After the 1914-89 period dominated by the division of the world into two rival imperialist blocs, the tendency towards the formation of blocs ceased to be the dominant one in inter-imperialist relations, and each power would from now on follow its own blood-soaked path in a world of “every man for himself”.

The report examines and reaffirms this analysis following the modifications after 1989. But it extends it further.

In 2015, the 21st ICC Congress launched a long-term project of reviewing 40 years of its existence, of “making as lucid an examination as possible of our strengths and weaknesses; of what was valid in our analyses and what errors we have made in order to arm ourselves to overcome them”.⁵

The report on the question of the historic course from the 23rd Congress is a consequence of this specific effort and pushes forward the analysis already

1. *International Review* n° 18

2. Rosa Luxemburg, *An Anti-critique*.

3. *International Review* n°62, 1990.

4. *International Review* n° 64, 1991.

5. *International Review* n°156, “40 years after the foundation of the ICC”.

contained in the texts produced 30 years ago, re-examining point by point the original text on the historic course from 1978. In doing so, it concludes that the very term “historic course” can no longer be considered as adequate for covering the conditions pertaining to all historical periods of the class struggle. It applies to the period from Sarajevo in 1914 to the collapse of the USSR in 1989, but not to the periods before and after this. In drawing this conclusion, the report underlines a very important distinction between two different concepts:

- on the one hand, the concept of the historic course, applicable to the period

from Sarajevo to the fall of the Berlin wall (including its different phases) and which concerns the dynamic of society during this period, indissolubly linked but not identical to the balance of forces between the classes;

- on the other hand, the concept of the balance of forces between the classes, which is applicable to all periods of the class struggle between bourgeoisie and proletariat.

These two concepts – historic course and balance of forces between the classes – are thus neither identical nor synonymous, but the 1978 text doesn’t clearly make this distinction.

Report

According to the materialist conception of history developed by Marx, the contradictions of the capitalist system lead to a historic alternative: socialism or barbarism; either a struggle leading to the overthrow of the bourgeoisie by the proletariat or the mutual ruin of these contending classes and society itself.

Understanding the development of the class struggle within capitalism – its different historical stages, its advances and retreats, the changing relative strengths of the adversaries – has therefore been of decisive importance for the analyses of the communist vanguard of the proletariat and an intrinsic aspect of the application of the marxist method.

The major changes in the parameters of the world situation in 1989, brought about by the collapse of the Eastern Bloc and the entry of decadent capitalism into its final phase of social decomposition, led the organisation to take into account the growing difficulties of the proletariat in this new situation, and to modify its analyses of the dynamic of society in relation to the balance of forces between the classes. In point of fact, this analysis, contained in the text on the Historic Course (HC78) from the 3rd Congress of the ICC in 1978¹ was no longer entirely appropriate to a post-1989 world where imperialist rivalries would no longer be channeled into the confrontation of two imperialist blocs and where the resulting capitalist response of another imperialist world war was removed from the historical agenda for the foreseeable future. The texts produced by the ICC immediately after the collapse of the Eastern Bloc such as on “Militarism and Decomposition”,² the “Theses on Decomposition”,³ the article “After the collapse of the Eastern bloc, destabilisation and chaos”,⁴ already clearly framed the scenario of the world balance of class forces in a different way to the paradigm of the HC78 text.

In the intervening two decades the ICC has elaborated this change of analysis of

the balance of class forces, and what this implies for the dynamic of society, in many texts and articles, particularly in published reports and resolutions on the class struggle for its International Congresses, confirming in particular the increased difficulties and threats to the proletariat created by the period of the social decomposition of capitalism.

In this regard for example, we can point to the report on the class struggle for the ICC 13th Congress in 1999⁵ or the report on the class struggle for the 14th Congress in 2001 which was subtitled “The concept of the historic course in the revolutionary movement”.⁶

Other articles dealing with the problem of the balance of class forces in the period of decomposition should also be taken into account, such as “Why the proletariat has not yet overthrown capitalism”,⁷ and the article “Understanding the decomposition of capitalism”.⁸

However, despite having developed the main theoretical elements to understand what has changed in the balance of class forces the organisation up to now has carried out no specific re-examination of the HC78 text. Obviously a rectification of this anomaly – even if belated – is required if we

We are happy to say that, prior to its publication, the report has already stimulated a public debate (a number of contributions to our online forum on the question since July), since its main conclusions already figured in the Resolution on the International Situation from the 23rd Congress which had already been published. This is not the time to make a balance sheet of this debate which is only just beginning. But it needs to develop. Critical debate is an essential part of the marxist effort to develop a new understanding as we negotiate the “rough and tumble of history”.

are to be scrupulously true to our historical method of not only amending or changing our analysis and argumentation in the light of major events but also of justifying this change in specific reference to the original analysis. Our political method has never been to abandon previous positions or analyses without publicly settling accounts with what went before, because an ahistorical invariance or monolithism is impossible and a barrier to the clarification of class consciousness. What remains valid in the HC78 text, what has been overtaken by the changed historical context within decadent capitalism, and how the latter has revealed the limitations of the HC78 text must be more explicitly understood and explained, in order that any remaining anachronisms can be revealed and clarified.

A summary of the points of the HC78 text

Point 1) Revolutionaries need to make predictions. In fact it is a specific capacity and need of human consciousness to predict (cf Marx’s comparison of the instinctive bee with the conscious human architect). Marxism, as a scientific method, like science as a whole, “*by transforming a series of experiences into predictions, and by confronting these predictions with new experiences the researcher can verify (or invalidate) these hypotheses and advance his understanding.*”

Marxism bases its prediction of the communist revolution on a scientific, materialist analysis of the collapse of capitalism and of the class interests of the revolutionary proletariat.

This general and long term perspective is relatively straightforward for Marxists. The difficulty for revolutionaries comes in making medium term predictions of

1. “The historic course”, *International Review* n° 18, 1978.

2. *International Review* n° 64, 1991.

3. *International Review* n° 62, 1990.

4. *International Review* n° 61, 1990.

5. *International Review* n° 99, 1999.

6. *International Review* n° 107, 2001.

7. *International Review* n° 103 and 104, 2000 and 2001.

8. *International Review* n° 117, 2004.

whether the class struggle is advancing or retreating. In the first place Marxism cannot obviously rely on controlled experiments as laboratory science can.

Point 2) Moreover, the proletarian class struggle is characterised by very different periods of evolution, of extreme troughs and peaks, as a result of the fact that the working class is an exploited class with no power base in the old society and therefore destined for long periods of subjection. The relatively short upsurges of its combat are determined by periods of crisis in capitalism (economic crisis and war). The proletariat cannot advance from strength to strength as new exploiting classes have been able to do in the past. In fact, the proletariat's final victory is conditioned by a long series of painful defeats. Hence Marx's statement in *The 18th Brumaire of Louis Napoleon* of 1852 about the extremely uneven evolution of the class struggle. The existence of such a jagged development of the class struggle was obvious in the past but the length and depth of the counter revolution between 1923 and 1968 has tended to obscure it.

Point 3) Nevertheless, accurate medium-term predictions by revolutionaries for the evolution of the balance of class forces are essential. The consequences of mistakes in this regard are eloquent: the adventurism of Willich-Schapper after the defeats of the 1848 revolutions; the KAPD's "theory of the offensive" as the revolutionary wave ebbed in the 1920s, Trotsky's inauguration of the 4th International in 1938 in the depths of the counter revolution.

In contrast to these examples some predictions have been shown to be perfectly valid: Marx and Engels recognising that after 1849 and 1871 a period of working class retreat was inevitable; Lenin's prediction in the April Theses of 1917 of the flood tide of the world revolution; the Italian left's identification of the 30s as a period of decisive defeat.

Points 4/5/11) Predicting the direction of the class struggle indicates whether revolutionaries swim with or against the stream. Mistakes or ignorance about what this direction can be catastrophic. This has been particularly true in capitalist decadence where the stakes, imperialist war or proletarian revolution, are so much higher than in the period of capitalist ascendancy.

Point 6) The opposition and mutual exclusion of the two terms of the historic alternative, war or revolution. While the crisis of decadent capitalism can result in either of these alternatives, the latter do not develop in unison but antagonistically. This point is addressed particularly to Battaglia

Comunista and the CWO who saw, and still see, world war and revolution as equally possible in the period since 1968.

Points 7/8) These points are dedicated to showing that the imperialist world wars of the 20th century and particularly that of 1939-45 could only unfold once the proletariat had been defeated, once its revolutionary attempts were crushed and once it had then been mobilised behind the war ideologies of its respective imperialist masters with the help of the treachery of former workers' parties which had crossed to the other side of the class line.

Point 9) The situation of the proletariat since 1968 is not the same as it was prior to the previous two world wars. It is undefeated and combative, resistant to the mobilising ideologies of the imperialist blocs, and thus provides a barrier to the unleashing of a third world war.

Point 10) All the military and economic conditions for a new world war already exist, only the adhesion of the proletariat is missing, a point also addressed to Battaglia who had other, implausible, explanations for why world war had not broken out yet.

Commentary on the HC78

What remains true in the text

The first five points of the HC78 text retain all their relevance to the importance and necessity for revolutionaries to forecast the future evolution of the class struggle: the vindication of the need for such predictions from the point of view of the marxist method; the pertinency of the historical examples which show the critical nature of the forecasts of revolutionaries concerning the class struggle and the serious consequences of mistakes in this regard; the arguments against the indifference or agnosticism of Battaglia and the CWO on this question.

The central argument of the text also retains all its validity for the period 1914-1989. With the onset of the period of the decadence of capitalism the conditions of the evolution of the balance of class forces changed fundamentally from those of the period of ascendancy. The tendency of imperialism in the period of decadence to lead to world-wide conflagrations between rival blocs requiring the mobilisation of the working class en masse as cannon fodder broke out with full force in the First World War. The outbreak of hostilities depended on a political defeat of the main battalions of the world proletariat. The Social Democratic Parties and the trade unions, putrefied by a long process of opportunist and revisionist degeneration, failed at the

critical moment in 1914, and, apart from a few exceptions, abandoned internationalism and joined the war effort of their own national imperialisms, dragging the disoriented working class behind it. The experience of the unprecedented slaughter of workers in uniform in the trenches and the misery on the "home front" however led, after a few years, to the recovery of the weight of the proletariat on the scales of the balance of class forces and opened a world revolutionary wave from 1917-1923, which as a consequence obliged the bourgeoisie to bring the war to an end to forestall the contagion of proletarian revolution.

From the First World War onwards therefore the notion of a historic course in the class struggle toward either war or revolution acquired a profound veracity. In order to impose its military response to the crises of capitalist decadence imperialism required the defeat of the revolutionary aspirations of the proletariat and, when these were crushed, its mobilisation behind the interests of the bourgeoisie. Conversely a resurgent proletariat provided a major obstacle to this endeavour and opened the possibility of the proletariat's solution: communist revolution.

The defeat of the revolution in Russia and in Germany and elsewhere in the 1920s facilitated the course to a Second World War. Contrary to the period that followed the First World War, the period after the Second did not see a reversal of the course, the proletariat having been defeated not only politically but also physically by the unprecedented brutality and terror of Stalinism and fascism on the one hand and democratic anti-fascism on the other before, during and immediately after the mass carnage. No revolutionary wave emerged from the ruins of the 1939-45 war as it had from the war of 1914-18. This situation of continued proletarian defeat did not however lead to a third world war after 1945, as revolutionaries at the time thought it would. The 1950s and 60s entailed a long economic reconstruction and a protracted Cold War, with proxy local wars. During this period, the proletariat gradually recovered its strength, and the weight of the war ideologies of the 30s receded. With the outbreak of a new world economic crisis, a new resurgence of class struggle began in 1968 which frustrated another imperialist solution of a third world war. But the working class wasn't able to move from its defensive struggles to a revolutionary offensive. The collapse of one of the two contending imperialist blocs, the Eastern Bloc, in 1989, effectively put an end to the possibility of world war, although imperialist war itself continued to accelerate in a chaotic form under the impulse of the worsening world economic crisis.

Where the HC78 text is no longer applicable

To understand this problem we will first quote extensively from a plenary meeting of our international central organ in January 1990:

“In the period of capitalist decadence, all states are imperialist, and take the necessary measures to satisfy their appetites: war economy, arms production, etc. We must state clearly that the deepening convulsions of the world economy can only sharpen the opposition between different states, including and increasingly on the military level. The difference, in the coming period, will be that these antagonisms which were previously contained and used by the two great imperialist blocs will now come to the fore. The disappearance of the Russian imperialist gendarme, and that to come of the American gendarme, as far as its one-time ‘partners’ are concerned, opens the door to the unleashing of a whole series of more local rivalries. For the moment, these rivalries and confrontations cannot degenerate into a world war (even supposing that the proletariat were no longer capable of putting up a resistance). However, with the disappearance of the discipline imposed by the two blocs, these conflicts are liable to become more frequent and more violent, especially of course in those areas where the proletariat is weakest...

“...trend towards a new division of the world between two military blocs is thwarted, and may even be definitively compromised, by the increasingly deep and widespread phenomenon of the decomposition of capitalist society as we have already highlighted.⁹

“In such a context of loss of control of the situation by the world bourgeoisie, it is not likely that the dominant sectors of the world bourgeoisie are today in a position to implement the organisation and discipline necessary for the reconstitution of military blocs...

“...This is why it is fundamental to highlight that, if the solution of the proletariat – communist revolution – is the only one that can oppose the destruction of humanity (which constitutes the only ‘response’ that the bourgeoisie can provide to its crisis), this destruction would not necessarily result from a third world war. It could also result from the continuation, up to its extreme consequences (ecological disasters, epidemics, famines, unleashed local wars, etc.) of this decomposition.

“The historical alternative ‘Socialism or Barbarism’, as highlighted by marx-

ism, after having materialised in the form of ‘Socialism or World Imperialist War’ during most of the 20th century, has become more specific in the terrifying form of ‘Socialism or Destruction of Humanity’ during the last decades due to the development of atomic weapons. Today, after the collapse of the Eastern Bloc, this perspective remains entirely valid. But it should be emphasised that such destruction may come from generalised imperialist war OR from the decomposition of society. (...)

“Even if the world war cannot, at the present time, and perhaps definitively, constitute a threat to the life of humanity, this threat may very well come, as we have seen, from the decomposition of society. And this is all the more so since if the unleashing of the world war requires the adherence of the proletariat to the ideals of the bourgeoisie, a phenomenon which is by no means on the agenda at the moment for its decisive battalions, decomposition does not need such adherence to destroy humanity. Indeed, the decomposition of society does not, strictly speaking, constitute a ‘response’ of the bourgeoisie to the open crisis of the world economy. In reality, this phenomenon may develop precisely because the ruling class is not in a position, due to the non-recruitment of the proletariat, to provide its own specific response to this crisis, the world war and the mobilisation for it. The working class, by developing its struggles (as it has done since the late 1960s), by not allowing itself to be enrolled behind bourgeois flags, can prevent the bourgeoisie from unleashing world war. On the other hand, only the overthrow of capitalism can stop the decomposition of society. Just as the struggles of the proletariat in this system cannot in any way oppose the economic collapse of capitalism, so the struggles of the proletariat in this system cannot constitute an obstacle to its decomposition.”

Thus, 1989 marks a fundamental change in the general dynamics of capitalist society in decadence.

Before that date, the balance of power between the classes was the determining factor in this dynamic: it was on this balance of power that the outcome of the exacerbation of the contradictions of capitalism depended: either the unleashing of the world war, or the development of class struggle with, in perspective, the overthrow of capitalism.

After that date, this general dynamic of capitalist decadence is no longer directly determined by the balance of power between classes. Whatever the balance of power, world war is no longer on the agenda, but capitalism will continue to sink into decay, since social decomposi-

tion tends to spiral out of the control of the contending classes.

In the paradigm that dominated most of the 20th century, the notion of a “historical course” defined the two possible outcomes of a historical trend: either world war or class clashes. Once the proletariat had suffered a decisive defeat (as on the eve of 1914 or as a result of the crushing of the revolutionary wave of 1917-23), world war became inevitable. In the paradigm that defines the current situation (until two new imperialist blocs are reconstituted, which may never happen), it is quite possible that the proletariat will suffer a deep defeat without this having a decisive consequence for the general evolution of society. One may wonder, of course, whether such a defeat could have the consequence of permanently preventing the proletariat from raising its head. We would then have to talk about a definitive defeat that would lead to the end of humanity. Such a possibility cannot be ruled out, particularly given the increasing weight of decomposition. This threat is clearly indicated by the 9th Congress Manifesto: “Communist Revolution or Destruction of Humanity”. But we cannot make a prognosis in this direction, neither in relation to the current situation of weakness of the working class, nor even if this situation worsens further. This is why the concept of the “historical course” is no longer able to define the dynamic of the current world situation and the balance of power between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat in the period of decomposition. Having become a concept inadequate for this new period, it has to be abandoned.

To conclude: the HC78 text, while preserving all its veracity from the point of view of method and the analysis of the period 1914–1989, is now limited, firstly, by having been overtaken by major and unprecedented historic events; secondly by its tendency to identify the notion of historical course and the notion of the evolution of the balance of power between classes as the same, whereas they are not identical. In particular, the HC78 text speaks of the historical course to describe the different moments of class struggle in the 19th century when, in fact:

- an increase in workers' struggles did not mean the prospect of a revolutionary period at a time when proletarian revolution was not yet on the agenda, nor could it prevent a major war from breaking out (for example, the war between France and Prussia in 1870 when the power of the proletariat was rising);
- a major defeat of the proletariat (such as the crushing of the Paris Commune) did not result in a new war.

9. See *International Review* n° 57.

In a way, this tendency to mistakenly identify the historical course with the balance of class forces in general is similar to the imprecise way the concept of opportunism has been used. For some time, there was, within the ICC and more broadly in the political milieu, an identification between opportunism and reformism. At the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th, even if such an identification was already a mistake, it was based on a reality: indeed, at that time, one of the major manifestations of opportunism was constituted by reformism. But with the entry of capitalism into its period of decadence, reformism no longer has its place in the workers' movement: organisations or currents that advocate the replacement of capitalism by socialism through progressive reforms of the current system necessarily belong to the side of the bourgeoisie, while opportunism continues to constitute a disease that can affect, and carry away,

proletarian organisations.

We have tended, on the basis of what the working class experienced during the 20th century, to identify the notion of the evolution of the balance of power between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat with the notion of a "historical course", whereas the latter indicates a fundamental alternative outcome, the world war or revolution, a sanction of this balance of power. In a way, the current historical situation is similar to that of the 19th century: the balance of power between classes can evolve in one direction or another without decisively affecting the life of society. Similarly, this balance of power or its evolution cannot be described as a "course". In this sense, the term "defeat of the proletariat", if it retains all its operational value in the current period, can no longer have the same meaning as in the period before 1989. What is important, on the other hand, is to take into account and study constantly, the

evolution of the balance of power between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat: can we consider that this evolution is in favour of the proletariat (which does not yet mean that there can be no turning back) or that we are in a dynamic of the weakening of the class (knowing that this dynamic can also be reversed).

In a more general and long term sense dispensing with the concept of the "historic course" brings into sharper relief the need of revolutionary marxists to make a more profound historical study of the entire evolution of the proletarian class struggle in order to better understand the criteria for evaluating the balance of class forces in the period of capitalist decomposition.

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Turkey in 2013.

Confidence in its own strength as a class is a key element of the struggle of the proletariat that has been sorely lacking. In the cases of the two important movements just mentioned, the overwhelming majority of participants did not recognise themselves as working class. They saw themselves as "ordinary citizens", which is very dangerous from the point of view of the impact of democratic illusions but also in the face of the current populist wave.

Confidence in the future, and, in particular, in the possibility of a new society, has also been absent beyond a few very general

insights or the capacity to pose in a very embryonic way questions about the state, morality, culture, etc. These reflections are certainly very interesting from the point of view of the future. However, they have remained very limited, and in general far below the level of reflection that existed in the most advanced movements in 1968.

The development of consciousness and coherent and unified thought comprise one of the elements, as noted in point 13 of the Theses, that face enormous obstacles in this phase. Whereas 1968 was prepared by a significant level of social upheaval amongst various minorities and afterwards, at least for a while, gave rise to a proliferation of

searching elements; we should note that very little such social maturation prepared and followed the movements of 2006 and 2011. Despite the seriousness of the historical situation - incomparably more serious than in 1968 - no new generation of revolutionary minorities has appeared. This shows that the traditional gap within the proletariat - as Rosa Luxemburg emphasised - between objective evolution and subjective comprehension - has sharpened in a very important way with decomposition, a phenomenon that should not be underestimated.

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(and especially with the first revolutionary wave of 1917-23). This rupture was illustrated by the weakness of the revolutionary organisations of the communist left current that had fought Stalinism in the 1920s and 1930s.

This means that an enormous responsibility lies on the communist left as a

bridge between the former party that has disappeared (the 3rd International) and the future party of the proletariat. Without the constitution of this future world party, proletarian revolution will be impossible and humanity will end up being swallowed up by the barbarism of war and/or the slow decomposition of bourgeois society.

*"Theoretically, the communists have over the rest of the proletariat the advantage of a clear understanding of the conditions, the march and the general ends of the proletarian movement as a whole."*⁶

May 2019

6. Ibid.

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on its fight to defend the autonomy of the assemblies and a general perspective of social transformation against the various leftist recuperators. The party of the future could well emerge through the inter-action between such large proletarian minorities and the communist political organisations. Of course the fragility of the existing milieu of the communist left means that there is

no guarantee that this rendezvous will be made. But we can say that the appearance of new elements gravitating towards the communist left today - some of them very young - is a sign that the process of subterranean maturation is a reality and that it is continuing despite the very evident difficulties of the class struggle. Even if we understand that the party of the future will

by no means be a mass organisation that seeks to encompass the class as a whole, this dimension of the politicisation of the struggle brings out what is profoundly true in the classic marxist phrase: "constitution of the proletarians into a class, and thus into a political party".

28.12.18

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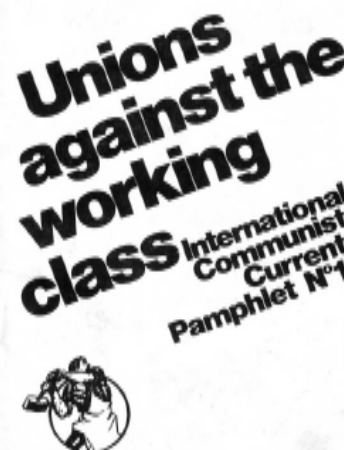
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Why trade unions can no longer be used as the organisational form for working class struggle. How the unions consistently sabotage independent class action.



The Dutch communist left is one of the major components of the revolutionary current which broke away from the degenerating Communist International in the 1920s. Well before Trotsky's Left Opposition, and in a more profound way, the communist left had been able

to expose the opportunist dangers which threatened the International and its parties and which eventually led to their demise. In the struggle for the intransigent defence of revolutionary principles, this current, represented in particular by the KAPD in Germany, the KAPN in Holland, and the left of the Communist Party of Italy animated by Bordiga, came out against the International's policies on questions like participation in elections and trade unions, the formation of 'united fronts' with social democracy, and support for national liberation struggles. It was against the positions of the communist left that Lenin wrote his pamphlet *Left Wing Communism, An Infantile Disorder*, and this text drew a response in *Reply to Lenin*, written by one of the main figures of the Dutch left, Herman Gorter.

In fact, the Dutch left, like the Italian left, had been formed well before the first world war, as part of the same struggle waged by Luxemburg and Lenin against the opportunism and reformism which was gaining hold of the parties of the Second International. It was no accident that Lenin himself, before reverting to centrist positions at the head of the Communist International, had, in his book *State and Revolution*, leaned heavily on the analyses of Anton Pannekoek, who was the main theoretician of the Dutch left. This document is an indispensable complement to *The Italian Communist Left*, already published by the ICC, for all those who want to know the real history of the communist movement behind all the falsifications which Stalinism and Trotskyism have erected around it.

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BASIC POSITIONS OF THE ICC

The International Communist Current defends the following political positions:

* Since the first world war, capitalism has been a decadent social system. It has twice plunged humanity into a barbaric cycle of crisis, world war, reconstruction and new crisis. In the 1980s, it entered into the final phase of this decadence, the phase of decomposition. There is only one alternative offered by this irreversible historical decline: socialism or barbarism, world communist revolution or the destruction of humanity.

* The Paris Commune of 1871 was the first attempt by the proletariat to carry out this revolution, in a period when the conditions for it were not yet ripe. Once these conditions had been provided by the onset of capitalist decadence, the October revolution of 1917 in Russia was the first step towards an authentic world communist revolution in an international revolutionary wave which put an end to the imperialist war and went on for several years after that. The failure of this revolutionary wave, particularly in Germany in 1919-23, condemned the revolution in Russia to isolation and to a rapid degeneration. Stalinism was not the product of the Russian revolution, but its gravedigger.

* The statified regimes which arose in the USSR, eastern Europe, China, Cuba etc and were called 'socialist' or 'communist' were just a particularly brutal form of the universal tendency towards state capitalism, itself a major characteristic of the period of decadence.

* Since the beginning of the 20th century, all wars are imperialist wars, part of the deadly struggle between states large and small to conquer or retain a place in the international arena. These wars bring nothing to humanity but death and destruction on an ever-increasing scale. The working class can only respond to them through its international solidarity and by struggling against the bourgeoisie in all countries.

* All the nationalist ideologies - 'national independence', 'the right of nations to self-determination' etc - whatever their pretext, ethnic, historical or religious, are a real poison for the workers. By calling on them to take the side of one or another faction of the bourgeoisie, they divide workers and lead them to massacre each other in the interests and wars of their exploiters.

* In decadent capitalism, parliament and elections are nothing but a masquerade. Any call to participate in the parliamentary circus can only reinforce the lie that presents these elections as a real choice for the exploited. 'Democracy', a particularly hypocritical form of the domination of the bourgeoisie, does not differ at root from other forms of capitalist dictatorship, such as Stalinism and fascism.

* All factions of the bourgeoisie are equally

reactionary. All the so-called 'workers', 'Socialist' and 'Communist' parties (now ex-'Communists'), the leftist organisations (Trotskyists, Maoists and ex-Maoists, official anarchists) constitute the left of capitalism's political apparatus. All the tactics of 'popular fronts', 'anti-fascist fronts' and 'united fronts', which mix up the interests of the proletariat with those of a faction of the bourgeoisie, serve only to smother and derail the struggle of the proletariat.

* With the decadence of capitalism, the unions everywhere have been transformed into organs of capitalist order within the proletariat. The various forms of union organisation, whether 'official' or 'rank and file', serve only to discipline the working class and sabotage its struggles.

* In order to advance its combat, the working class has to unify its struggles, taking charge of their extension and organisation through sovereign general assemblies and committees of delegates elected and revocable at any time by these assemblies.

* Terrorism is in no way a method of struggle for the working class. The expression of social strata with no historic future and of the decomposition of the petty bourgeoisie, when it's not the direct expression of the permanent war between capitalist states, terrorism has always been a fertile soil for manipulation by the bourgeoisie. Advocating secret action by small minorities, it is in complete opposition to class violence, which derives from conscious and organised mass action by the proletariat.

* The working class is the only class which can carry out the communist revolution. Its revolutionary struggle will inevitably lead the working class towards a confrontation with the capitalist state. In order to destroy capitalism, the working class will have to overthrow all existing states and establish the dictatorship of the proletariat on a world scale: the international power of the workers' councils, regrouping the entire proletariat.

* The communist transformation of society by the workers' councils does not mean 'self-management' or the nationalisation of the economy. Communism requires the conscious abolition by the working class of capitalist social relations: wage labour, commodity production, national frontiers. It means the creation of a world community in which all activity is oriented towards the full satisfaction of human needs.

* The revolutionary political organisation constitutes the vanguard of the working class and is an active factor in the generalisation of class consciousness within the proletariat. Its role is neither to 'organise the working class' nor to 'take power' in its name, but to participate actively in the movement towards the unification of struggles, towards workers taking control of them for themselves, and at the same time to draw out the revolutionary political

goals of the proletariat's combat.

OUR ACTIVITY

Political and theoretical clarification of the goals and methods of the proletarian struggle, of its historic and its immediate conditions.

Organised intervention, united and centralised on an international scale, in order to contribute to the process which leads to the revolutionary action of the proletariat.

The regroupment of revolutionaries with the aim of constituting a real world communist party, which is indispensable to the working class for the overthrow of capitalism and the creation of a communist society.

OUR ORIGINS

The positions and activity of revolutionary organisations are the product of the past experiences of the working class and of the lessons that its political organisations have drawn throughout its history. The ICC thus traces its origins to the successive contributions of the *Communist League* of Marx and Engels (1847-52), the three Internationals (the *International Workingmen's Association*, 1864-72, the *Socialist International*, 1889-1914, the *Communist International*, 1919-28), the left fractions which detached themselves from the degenerating Third International in the years 1920-30, in particular the *German, Dutch and Italian Lefts*.

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