



1907: First Youth International

Mon, 04/09/2006 - 16:38

In the global movement against the war in Iraq, young people, in their hundreds of thousands have taken to the streets and led the way with militant direct action against the war. Yet, on the official organisational committees of the anti-war and anti-capitalist movement they are a tiny minority. In response, many young people are starting to discuss the need to build a new youth international. Jeremy Dewar draws the lessons we can learn from the first youth international.

In Britain, when only a handful of workplaces took strike action on the day the war started, tens of thousands of young people walked out of schools and colleges, blockaded roads and brought many city centres to a standstill. In many cases they had battles with the police who tried to deny them their right to demonstrate.

In every revolution, from the French revolution in the late 18th century through the revolutionary struggles against apartheid in the 1980s to the recent revolts that have brought down governments in Argentina and Bolivia, it has been young people who have been at the forefront of these struggles.

This is why laws have been created to bar young people from political activity and deny them any control over their lives. In Britain today, under-18s are denied the right to vote and teachers are not allowed to teach revolutionary politics to school students. Young people who fight back against oppression and exploitation are told to 'grow up' or patronised and told, 'it's only a phase'.

Marxists, in contrast, have always stressed the need to organise young people, defend them from the specific oppression they face, and guarantee them maximum control over their own lives and struggles. Young people rebel against injustice precisely because their outlook has not been tainted by years or decades of disappointment and defeat. They do not accept that bureaucratism, routinism and piecemeal reform is the best that can be achieved. They are not weighed down by family responsibilities that discourage them from giving everything in the fight for justice.

Revolutionary parties have always been overwhelmingly young. In 1907 60 per cent of the Bolsheviks were under 25 and a fifth of them teenagers, while only one third of the Mensheviks were under 25 years old and 5 per cent of them teenagers. Defending his party against the charge that the Bolsheviks had no experience in its ranks, Lenin quoted Frederick Engels:

"Is it not natural that youth should predominate in our party, the revolutionary party? We are the party of the future and the future belongs to the youth. We are the party of innovators, and it is always the youth that most eagerly follows the innovators. We are a party that is waging a self-sacrificing struggle against the old rottenness, and youth is always the first to undertake a self-sacrificing struggle."

The first socialist youth organisation

The first socialist youth organisation, Young Guard, was founded in Ghent, Belgium in 1886. While Young Guard was formally independent of the Socialist Party, members of the latter took the lead in setting it up and giving it material and moral support. Over the next 20 years, socialist youth organisations blossomed all over Europe: in Holland, Austria, Hungary, Sweden, Switzerland, Italy, Norway, Spain, Germany and elsewhere.

As capitalism spread into every sphere of life, young people were drawn, in ever greater numbers, into production. Through the apprentice system, they became a source of cheap labour, undercutting the wages of 'adult' workers.

The capitalist states developed secondary and university education, teaching working class and middle class students to read, write, do basic maths, and consequently formulate and express ideas. This aided the emergence of a vanguard of critically thinking youth.

The nation state rapidly transformed itself with a huge military and repressive apparatus to fight its interests in the struggle for raw materials, market share and territory against rival capitalist nation states. The standing armies also played a powerful disciplining role on the working class. Young people suffered particularly badly when conscripted into military service.

The economic struggle to protect young workers, the education of youth in socialist ideas so they could further the fight for political rights and the battle against militarism formed the basic diet of the early socialist youth organisations. And in these activities, the youth showed characteristic courage, imagination and energy.

The Belgian Young Guard developed a number of weekly, monthly and quarterly papers and magazines aimed at different groups.

Their papers, *The Conscript* and *Barracks* were both aimed at young army recruits and sold about 60,000 copies each, in both French and Flemish. *Vanguard* was directed at a student audience, while *Socialist Youth* and *Youth is the Future* were more general journals and enjoyed circulations of around 5,000.

Anti-militarist propaganda was systematically mailed to every recruit and handed out in streets, bars and cafés - wherever soldiers frequented. Postcards with anti-army discipline jokes were sent off, along with songbooks and a pamphlet called *The Soldier's Catechism*, which on its own sold 100,000 copies in France and Belgium.

But they did not just want young people to read about socialism: they wanted to fight for it. Although they campaigned against conscription, the Belgian Young Guards did not refuse to join the army. The organisation maintained contact with its members once they were called up and helped them organise soldiers' unions.

At the height of this work, 15 separate but federated unions existed in the army, sometimes having up to two-thirds of the soldiers in a unit in their ranks. These unions campaigned against the brutal system of army discipline and called on soldiers to refuse to fire on strikers or protesters when they were ordered to. As they were marched off into the army, demonstrations and rallies were held under the slogan, "You will not shoot!"

The Czech socialist youth staged mock funeral processions - with the support of the soldiers' mothers - headed by symbolic red coffins to remind the young recruits of their class background before they were posted to the barracks. The Swedish young socialists also waged a successful joint campaign with the Norwegians against the threatened war to annex Norway by calling on soldiers "to ignore mobilisation orders, if such are issued, and should they have to use arms, to desist from turning them on the Norwegian people".

The success of this work can be measured by the following. First, the authorities were very harsh in handing out sentences to anti-militarist agitators; some received sentences of up to three years' jail. Soldiers found guilty of anti-militarism were so badly punished that the duty of administering the torture was itself used as a deterrent for officers who stepped out of line. On the other hand, officers trying to prevent young socialists from handing out leaflets in the streets were also sometimes set upon by older workers.

Secondly, the socialist youth organisations did have a huge effect on army morale and discipline. In his famous pamphlet, *Militarism and Anti-militarism*, (which earned him 18 months in prison in 1907-8) the German socialist Karl Liebknecht wrote:

"On 3 May 1905, 61 men of the 10th Company of the 32nd Infantry Regiment simply left the barracks for a place nearby because of bad food and ill-treatment. In September 1906, the soldiers arranged a demonstration in connection with a suicide of a reservist in the Compeigne garrison, sang the 'Internationale' and insulted the officers. NCOs leaving the infantry school at Saint-Maixent expressed anti-militarist ideas [to the French War Minister!] and explained

that they were remaining in the army in order to win over adherents to their ideas. Above all we must draw attention to a number of strikes - for example at Dunkirk, Le Creusot, Longwy and Montceau-les-Mines - when the soldiers called in to intervene declared their solidarity with the strikers."

Finally and most importantly, the anti-militarist campaigns won the socialist youth enormous support from the working class as a whole, and led to a huge influx of youth into their ranks.

The first youth international

The youth did not just echo the political line of the Social-Democratic parties; they joined in the debates. The Russian Revolution of 1905 had a lightening effect on the youth, drawing their organisations to the left. Crucially, they also fought for their right to independence and to form their own socialist youth international. Twenty delegates from the socialist youth organisations of 13 countries founded the International Union of Socialist Youth Organisations (IUSYO) in Stuttgart, Germany in March 1907.

The fight for independence was not so easy. The German Social-Democratic Party (SPD) was the most influential party in the Second International. But it was engaged in a battle between left and right.

A powerful right-wing, led by Eduard Bernstein, took revolution off the 'socialist' agenda and began the fight to turn the SPD into a reformist party. These reformists were particularly strong in the trade unions.

The left, led by Rosa Luxemburg, Karl Liebknecht, Franz Mehring and Clara Zetkin, fought the right-wing - over reformism, work among women, the general strike, the fight against the impending world war. The 'centre', around party leader Karl Kautsky, often sided with the left at conferences but invariably acted with the right in practice.

German socialist youth organisations faced even more draconian anti-socialist laws than the SPD itself. In 1904 Liebknecht first called for a German youth organisation. By 1906 two socialist youth groups were formed: the Association of Male and Female Workers of Germany (Prussia) and the Union of Free Youth Organisations of Germany or ZJD (Bavaria). Under Prussian law, under-18s were not allowed to join political organisations at all, while Bavaria strictly limited them to 'non-political' activities.

Nevertheless, both organisations carried out energetic and fruitful activity in the workplace that brought in many working class members, who were then educated in Marxist politics. Eventually these activities brought the youth organisations into conflict with the bureaucratic trade union leaders and the state.

At the founding conference of the IUSYO, Ludwig Frank from the ZJD and Karl Liebknecht himself were elected onto the International Youth Bureau. A year later in 1908 the Prussian laws were extended across Germany, thus outlawing the ZJD. What would the SPD do?

Robert Schmidt, a right-wing trade union leader, was not going to wait to find out. Eight weeks after the passing of the law, he spoke at a union congress against the need for a separate youth organisation. Schmidt argued that youth should spend their time 'eating good sausages' not reading 'bad magazines"! If nothing else, the youth learned that the right wing will co-operate with the capitalist state to stitch you up.

While he was in prison Liebknecht penned a defence for the youth, Working Youth. But it was to no avail. The SPD conference closed down the ZJD and replaced it with 'local youth organisations of an apolitical nature that are run with the agreement of adults'. Membership naturally stagnated, then fell. Two years later, the SPD withdrew support for the IUSYO, having manoeuvred Kautsky's supporter Robert Dannenberg into the youth leadership.

Alongside the Western European socialist youth organisations, young people were entering the fray in Tsarist Russia - but in very different circumstances. Effective socialist and trade union activity was illegal. The youth, as ever, were more repressed than most. However, the Bolsheviks did not sideline youth work. Far from it. The party directly participated in the IUSYO and organised young workers and students in struggle - recruiting the best and swiftly placing them in positions of responsibility. In 1917, the majority of the St Petersburg leadership of the party were under 30 but, as one commentator pointed out, collectively they 'had been arrested a total of 44 times and exiled 11 times -

proof that they were experienced revolutionary leaders."

Nevertheless, no separate youth organisation was set up. As a student in 1907, Nicolai Bukharin did attempt to build one, but police repression ended the experiment quickly. Throughout this period though, according to historian Pierre Broué, Lenin's wife Nadezhda Krupskaya "hoped to see an organisation of young revolutionaries directed by youths themselves, that could risk committing its own errors, which she saw as preferable to seeing it strangled under the tutelage of well-intentioned "adults?."

At first sight, Lenin's approach to special work among youth appears contradictory. On the one hand, he says to a new group of school students:

"Concentrate your efforts on self-education as the main purpose of your organisation, in order to develop into convinced, steadfast and consistent Social-Democrats. Draw the strictest possible line of demarcation between this extremely important and essential preparatory work and direct political activity."

Lenin also argued that university students - who were often the first section of society to launch militant political protest against Tsarism - should not ignore the differences on the left. In advice which could still act as a guide to students today he wrote:

"[Students] are the most responsive section of the intelligentsia, and the intelligentsia is so called just because they most consciously, most resolutely and most accurately reflect and express the development of class interests and political groupings in society as a whole. Students cannot be an exception to society as a whole - however unselfish, pure, idealistic, they may be - and the task of the socialist is not to gloss over this difference but, on the contrary, to explain it as widely as possible and to embody it in a political organisation."

On the other hand, Lenin was also aware of the special role that youth would play in a revolution: a vanguard role. During the 1905 revolution, he urged the Bolsheviks to discard "propaganda circle" methods of party work and go directly to the newly active youth:

"All we have to do is to recruit young people more widely and boldly...without fearing them. This is a time of war. The youth - the students and still more so the young workers - will decide the issue of the whole struggle... Do not fear their lack of training, do not tremble at their inexperience and lack of development... events themselves will teach them in our spirit."

In particular, Lenin ordered the Bolsheviks not to limit themselves to organising young party members. The natural instinct of youth to take the boldest line of advance in revolutionary upheavals meant that they had to be drawn into the revolutionary movement as quickly as possible:

"Their mood of protest and their sympathy for the cause of international revolutionary social-democracy in themselves suffice, provided the social-democrats work effectively among them."

Whereas the SPD leaders feared that the youth would bring the workers' movement into a violent confrontation with the state machinery, Lenin saw them as essential for this reason. Even an experienced revolutionary party like the Bolshevik Party could hesitate when the moment for insurrectionary activity approached. The 1905 revolution was sparked by a massacre in January that year. Lenin wrote despairingly to party organisers in October:

"It horrifies me - I give you my word - it horrifies me to find that there has been talk about bombs for over six months, and yet not one has been made! And it is the most learned people who are doing the talking... Go to the youth, gentlemen!... Let them arm themselves at once as best they can, be it with a revolver, a knife, a rag soaked in kerosene for starting fires, etc."

The Bolsheviks' specific contribution to socialist youth work can be summed up in these three strictures.

First, concentrate on Marxist education and involve the youth in all the main political debates of the day, including the disputes between the various tendencies on the left.

? Second, do not restrict youth work to the minority who will all at once accept the party?s programme, but seek out a path to the masses.

? Finally, allow events to teach the youth by encouraging them to take the boldest actions against the class enemy - actions which older revolutionaries might shrink from.

The outbreak of war in 1914, the collapse of the Second International and the 1917 Russian Revolution were to fuse these methods with the tradition of mass youth organisations in the west and lay the basis for a new kind of revolutionary youth movement.

The socialist youth organisations were the first to reorganise after the historic betrayal of August 1914, when nearly all the socialist parties of the belligerent countries voted to support ?their own? side in the first world war.

In April 1915 the IUSYO held an international conference in Bern, Switzerland. Fourteen delegates from nine countries, representing 34,000 members, attended.

The main debate at Bern was over tactics against the imperialist slaughter. Led by the delegates from Switzerland and Scandinavia, where the adult parties had taken a pacifist stance, the conference voted to campaign for ?recognition of the demand for disarmament in the programme of the workers? movement of their countries". Only the Polish and Russian delegates voted against this, preferring the revolutionary defeatist position: turn the imperialist war into a civil war. As a compromise the final resolution aimed to ?compel the ruling classes to conclude peace through the resumption of the class struggle by the working class".

The IUSYO also performed a valuable role in resurrecting the socialist movement. Eleven issues of its journal, Youth International, were produced before the end of the war, providing the main forum for all the left - including Lenin, Rosa Luxemburg and Leon Trotsky - to debate the main issues of the day. By the end of the war, the IUSYO had been won over to the revolutionary position on war, away from pacifism towards ?revolutionary defeatism? and support for colonial uprisings.

Of equal importance, during this period the youth sections effectively became independent political organisations. The Russian Revolution of October 1917 spurred the youth across Europe to split from the Social-Democracy. In Austria, the Socialist Young Workers split and renamed themselves the Communist Young Proletarians.

The French Committee for Autonomy, the left wing of the socialist youth, split and later formed the kernel of the Communist Party. The Italian Socialists refused to recognise their own Socialist Youth Federation (FGSI) after left winger Amadeo Bordiga had won it to a defeatist position. And in mid-1918 the German ZJD split, with the left wing becoming the Free Socialist Youth (FSJ). After the war, demobbed soldiers joined the FSJ in droves, many of them going on to found the German Communist Party (KPD) and play a leading role in the failed January 1919 insurrection.

At its first conference after the war (held in different locations across Berlin in November 1919 to avoid being broken up by the police), the IUSYO changed its name to the Communist Youth International (CYI) and affiliated to the Communist International (Comintern). As the Comintern itself recognised, the youth sections had ?acted as the vanguard in the revolutionary struggle".

The early years of the CYI were marked by two big debates: one political, one organisational, but both intimately connected. Most of the youth had received their political education in revolutionary struggles. It was this which attracted them to the Bolsheviks and the Comintern in the first place. But as the revolutionary tide ebbed across Europe a new perspective and new tactics were needed.

At its Third Congress in July 1921, the Comintern called for a turn to the masses:

"The Communist youth organisations can no longer limit themselves to working in small propaganda circles... In conjunction with the Communist parties and the trade unions, they must organise the economic struggle."

Inevitably, many of the best youth saw the turn to mass work as a retreat to reformism. They saw preparation for insurrection as always the order of the day. In 1920, for example, at the height of the Turin wave of factory occupations, the FGSI had only two kinds of organisation: military squads and discussion circles. They had no trade union or workplace cells. That contributed to the communists' failure to win their strategy among the working class.

In March 1921 the German working class suffered an even greater defeat, when the mass of workers refused to heed the KPD's call for a revolutionary advance.

In the end the youth organisation of the Comintern was convinced that they needed to be more than just discussion and propaganda circles of young people and that a turn to organising and agitating amongst the working class was not a retreat towards the reformism they fought against in the Second International.

Over the next couple of years, the CYI sections involved themselves in a wide range of activities that ensured the French, Italian and German youth sections all led non-party youth in mass struggles. The French Young Communists (JC) even led a miners' strike in late 1922 and launched a mass campaign against the French occupation of the Ruhr in 1923. The FGSI was at the forefront of the anti-fascist struggle.

Proof of the vitality of the internal life of the youth sections can be found in the Russian youth organisation, the Komsomol. While the Komsomol's main work was in the Red Army during the civil war, in mass educational and cultural work among the peasantry and the working class and in constructing the new society, the Komsomol also took a lead in protecting young workers' wages and conditions.

Consequently, the Komsomol was drawn into the struggle between the growing Stalinist bureaucracy in Russia and the Trotskyist opposition to it. In December 1923, Pravda reported a meeting of 400 party youth complaining against growing bureaucratisation that the "party consisted of 40,000 members with hammers and 400,000 with briefcases". A month later, when nine members of the Komsomol leadership accused Trotsky of "dragging in the question of the youth by the hair" into factional disputes, eight leading Komsomol youth publicly rallied to his defence.

Unfortunately, the CYI did not survive the Stalinist degeneration of the Comintern. Tens of thousands of Trotskyist youth were expelled from the Komsomol in 1926. The youth sections - and even the Pioneers movement which organised 10-13 year olds - were ruthlessly used in the battle against "Trotskyism". In 1926, the Yugoslav Trotskyist sympathiser Vujo Vuyovitch was dismissed from his role as Secretary of the CYI and suspended from the party. The CYI became a Stalinist plaything losing its independence.

Trotsky and the revolutionaries who went on to forge the Fourth International (FI) never lost sight of the importance of the youth. And in their efforts to build a youth movement - despite the terrible persecution and isolation they suffered - they handed on to our generation an understanding of the key things needed for success in this decisive sphere of revolutionary work:

? The need for adult socialists to consciously prioritise youth work, with special papers, tactics and organisations

? The need to allow youth to make their own mistakes and to decide their own practical priorities and as such have their own independent organisation

? The need to educate young workers and students in socialist politics without patronising them or stifling their tendency to question everything

? The need for youth cadres who can take the party's politics into the wider layers of working class youth, explaining why not every compromise is a betrayal, why not every retreat is a disaster, and why winning a battle is not the same as winning a war.

The history of the socialist youth organisations of the Second International also provides us with many lessons for today.

Young people are the future. It is from their ranks that the tomorrows? revolutionaries will come. Socialist youth organisations can have powerful radicalising effect on the wider working class and play a leading rôle in the fight against reformism and bureaucratism.

Any attempt to limit their political and organisational independence only serves the interests of reformism and reaction and as such we must be champions of the rights of young people to have their own independent organisations.

We can see from history that young people can aid the formation of a new workers International and mass revolutionary parties.

Just as the international workers? movement needs a new International to organise the struggle against capitalism on a global scale, the youth of the world need a new youth International,... too. The socialist youth group Revolution issued a call to build a new youth international at the ESF in Paris. It is a call that every socialist and revolutionary should support and do all they can to aid its formation.

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