



4 August 1914: the betrayal of the Second International

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THE SECOND International, founded in 1889, was an organisation of the world's socialist, social democratic and labour parties. From its founding conference in Paris, it set out to coordinate the activities of mass organisations formed over the previous two decades. These centred on winning universal suffrage and an international campaign of strikes and mass mobilisations on May Day for the eight-hour day.

From the beginning, the International set itself the task of combating war, which it clearly linked to the overthrow of capitalism. Towards the end of the century and into the new one, a series of wars and clashes outside Europe, where the European powers and the USA carved out new colonies, set the scene for a whole new epoch of capitalism, one that Marxists were to call imperialism.

Between 1900 and 1914, the International debated the relationship between changes in the structure of capitalism, the exploitation of colonies and the dangers of war.

Colonial seizures by the major powers pushed the question of naval power to the forefront. Britain had succeeded in grabbing 'the lion's share' because of the worldwide reach of its battle fleet. But this provoked an arms race, as Germany, France, Russia, Italy and the USA tried hard to catch up.

In 1904, Britain and France formed an alliance that became known as the Triple Entente, when Russia joined it a year later. Faced with the potential of a war on two fronts, Germany and Austria formed a counter-alliance with Italy and became known as the Central Powers.

Conscription created huge standing armies, capable of being mobilised at short notice. Advances in military technology; heavy guns, machine guns, fortifications, all ensured that war, when it came, would be unbelievably more destructive than the wars of the nineteenth century.

As Frederick Engels wrote, as early as 1887:

'No war is any longer possible for Prussia-Germany except a world war and a world war indeed of an extent and violence hitherto undreamt of. Eight to ten millions of soldiers will massacre one another and in doing so devour the whole of Europe until they have stripped it barer than any swarm of locusts has ever done.

'The devastations of the Thirty Years' War compressed into three or four years, and spread over the whole Continent; famine, pestilence, general demoralisation both of the armies and of the mass of the people produced by acute distress; hopeless confusion of our artificial machinery in trade, industry and credit, ending in general bankruptcy; collapse of the old states and their traditional state wisdom to such an extent that crowns will roll by dozens on the pavement and there will be nobody to pick them up; absolute impossibility of foreseeing how it will all end and who will come out of the struggle as victor; only one result is absolutely certain: general exhaustion and the establishment of the conditions for the ultimate victory of the working class.'

The International

'So how did socialists develop the tactics to combat the war drive in Europe?

The Second International held nine international congresses between 1889 and 1914. Those held at Stuttgart in 1907

and in Basel in 1912 were particularly significant for the fight against war. Here it became clear that the compromise between reformist and revolutionaries, which was central to the International, would become a critical weakness. Engels and the German Marxists believed optimistically that reformism was in fact an old and declining middle class viewpoint. After all, Marxists dominated the German Social Democratic party (SPD), had fought off an attempt by Eduard Bernstein and his followers to make the party openly reformist.

At the Stuttgart Congress, Bernstein and his supporters argued for reform of colonial policy, rather than outright support for the fight against colonial oppression. Gustav Noske declared: 'The Social Democrats will not lag behind the bourgeois parties and will shoulder their rifles. We want Germany to be as well armed as possible.'

The resolution adopted at the Congress rejected such chauvinist ideas. Vladimir Lenin, Rosa Luxemburg and Julius Martov drafted its last sections jointly: 'The Congress holds that it is the duty of the working classes, and especially their representatives in parliaments, recognising the class character of bourgeois society and the motive for the preservation of the opposition between nations, to fight with all their strength against naval and military armament and to refuse to supply the means for it, as well as to labour for the education of working class youth in the spirit of the brotherhood of nations and of socialism, and to see that it is filled with class consciousness.'

If there were an outbreak of war, the parties of the International solemnly pledged themselves to 'strive with all their power to make use of the violent economic and political crisis brought about by the war to rouse the people and thereby to hasten the abolition of capitalist class rule.'

However, the First Balkan War, in the autumn of 1912, set alarm bells ringing. The International Bureau met to decide what action to take. An emergency congress was held in Basel, Switzerland but it added nothing to the resolution passed at Stuttgart. Above all, beyond mass demonstrations of protest and a refusal to vote war credits in parliament, it did not agree what measures to take if a war approached.

Ominously, it never settled the issue of so-called 'defensive' wars. While opposing imperialist war for plunder and annexation, it allowed the parties to support their countries if they were 'attacked'; in that case, 'defence of the fatherland' was permitted.

Karl Kautsky (according to Lenin) pointed out that 'at times of patriotic excitement', it was 'often quite impossible to make out' if 'a particular war has been brought about with defensive or aggressive aims', and that 'Social-Democrats would be entangled in a net of diplomatic negotiations if they took into their heads to determine their attitude to a war by this criterion.'

Likewise, the International never settled on what tactics to use when the ruling class would not tolerate opposition from mass parties that would undermine army morale. The spectre of defeat would drive them to dictatorship and that in turn would raise the spectre of revolution.

Franz Ferdinand?

On 28 June 1914, Serb nationalists assassinated the Archduke Franz Ferdinand, Crown Prince of Austria-Hungary, alongside his wife in Sarajevo. Then, on 23 July, Austria issued an ultimatum to Serbia, one it clearly could not accept. Tsar Nicholas II declared that if his Serb ally were attacked, Russia would mobilise against Austria. The German government then announced that if this occurred it would stand by Austria. Europe prepared for war.

As had been agreed, the sections of the International organised mass demonstrations all over Europe. Hundreds of thousands demonstrated in Berlin and the SPD's Berlin daily Vorwärts, repeatedly denounced the war:

'The class conscious proletariat of Germany, in the name of humanity and civilisation, raises a flaming protest against this criminal activity of the warmongers,' it thundered, 'Not one drop of blood from a German soldier shall be sacrificed for power-hungry Austrian rulers and imperialistic profit interests.'

On 28 July, Austria did declare war on Serbia. The alliances swung into action; a series of mobilisations and then declarations of war followed. The International's leaders met on 29 July in Brussels. Here, a different picture emerged

from that presented at the mass demonstrations. Viktor Adler of the Austrian Social Democracy gloomily claimed, "We can do nothing". Others protested at his pessimism but no specific action was agreed.

As it became all too clear that nothing would stop the war, socialist leaders called off antiwar demonstrations. Right wing SPD parliamentarians assured Chancellor Bethmann-Hollweg that they would vote for war credits, whatever the party itself decided. They argued to their supporters that if the party abstained it would be declared illegal, with all its funds and property confiscated and its leaders arrested. This produced a total collapse of the other SPD deputies' already daunted spirits. Even the left agreed that unity and party discipline were necessary.

Thus, on 4 August, every single SPD member of the Reichstag, including Karl Liebknecht, voted for war credits; and with that, international solidarity was shattered into pieces. "It cannot be, it must be a forged number," exclaimed Lenin when he read a report of it in *Vorwärts*. "When socialist parties in the belligerent countries, except Serbia and Russia, followed suit, the Second International was no more. Europe embarked upon the bloodiest war in its history, in which millions of working class men and women killed one another on behalf of the capitalist class.

Rosa Luxemburg was the harshest critic of this betrayal. She wrote: "Since 4 August 1914, German Social Democracy has been a stinking corpse."

The lessons for today

Today, also a time of deepening inter-imperialist friction and clashes and of immense confusion on the left, there is a burning need to begin seriously the struggle to build a new International, a world party of social revolution, that can organise and co-ordinate the struggle against capitalism, imperialism and war; a Fifth International.

In taking up this task we will do well to learn the positive as well as the negative lessons of the Second International. As Trotsky pointed out,

"The Second International has not lived in vain. It has accomplished a huge cultural work. There has been nothing like it in history before. It has educated and assembled the oppressed classes, the proletariat does not now need to begin at the beginning. It enters on the new road not with empty hands." (*War and the International*)

The Second International proved that trade union action, electoral campaigning and wide-scale agitation and propaganda can rally mass forces to working class parties everywhere. Like the Second, a Fifth International must use the techniques of mass political action, but we need to learn the critical lesson that Lenin expressed immediately after the collapse of 1914;

"The epoch of imperialism cannot permit the existence, in a single party, of the revolutionary proletariat's vanguard and the semi-petty-bourgeois aristocracy of the working class, who enjoy morsels of the privileges of their "own" nation's "Great-Power" status."

In short, we must not repeat the fatal error of tolerating reformist officials and careerist place-seekers in our ranks. Bureaucracy, national chauvinism, parliamentary or trade union cretinism will lead to a bloody defeat for the working class. The only way forward is the one that ends in the seizure of power and the revolutionary overthrow of capitalism by the working class.

That is the main lesson we have to learn from the failure of the Second International on August 4 1914.

Unlike the Second, the parties of a new International must have a common programme, a programme that is not divided into "maximum" and "minimum" objectives. It needs an action programme that, whilst it starts from the immediate needs of the working class, relates them to the tactics and forms of organisation that bring nearer the struggle for working class power. Above all, it must present a strategy to which all tactics (trade union action, electioneering) are subordinated as component parts.

We should not forget that August 1914 led, within just three years, to October 1917. Those who say the era of October is over, or that no revolutions are foreseeable for a decade or more, ignore the little matter of prolonged capitalist crises and wars.

The succession of revolutionary and counterrevolutionary events in the Middle East and Ukraine, and Nato's new war drive, speak decisively against such political passivity. A weak combination of abstract revolutionary propaganda, reformist practice and 'broad parties' like those of the Second International will not do. They will only prepare another Fourth of August for us.

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