

# The First International

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The International Working Men's Association (IWMA), later to be known as the First International, was founded on 28 September 1864 at St Martin's Hall in London. Despite the fact that it only existed for 12 years, it had an enormous influence on the world working class and anticapitalist movement. It was the first organisation which consciously set out to organise the working class into a worldwide force struggling against capitalism for its own emancipation.

Though it was mainly concentrated in Europe, many labour movements in north and south America owe their origins directly to the IWMA and its militants, many of whom emigrated after the defeat of the Paris Commune in 1871. All future internationals claimed a historic link and debt to the First International and most recognised Karl Marx's role in its leadership.

The IWMA was founded by extremely diverse forces. Its birth represented the fusion of important mass workers' organisations, especially the British trade unions, with European socialist and radical democratic activists. It involved anarchists ? followers of Proudhon and Bakunin ? Marxists, and trade unionists committed to neither current. Its 12 years of existence were marked by a series of struggles between these different tendencies as its leading body, the General Council, fought to clarify what policies the International should fight for.

The IWMA introduced the politics and economics of Marxism to the growing working class movement. The Communist Manifesto, and then Capital, became known to millions as a result of the work of the International. Its congress resolutions elaborated the role of the working class in overthrowing capitalism and defeating the ruling class.

It outlined the important role of trade unions not only in organising the economic struggles of the working class but also in providing a means by which workers could challenge the entire basis of exploitation by creating political parties. It developed positions on political action, including participation in elections separately from, and independent of, all bourgeois parties. It set the fight for reforms, like the eight-hour working day, in the context of the struggle for 'the complete emancipation of the working class'.

The International popularised key parts of the Communist Manifesto and developed its programme of demands, positions that are still with us today: progressive income tax, socialisation and planned production, not simply localised co-operation; the need for a workers' militia to combat the bosses' army; support for national struggles such as freedom for Poland and Ireland. It led campaigns, especially in Britain, over questions such as the eight-hour working day, social insurance and housing. The International, by its practice and its struggle, even laid down the rudiments of a democratic and centralised international organisation with an international programme, discipline and goal.

It supported the first revolutionary seizure of political power by the working class ? the Paris Commune. It learned and developed from the Parisian workers' actions the necessity for workers to smash the repressive forces and bureaucratic administration of the capitalist state, and replace it with the power of the

armed workers ? a workers? state ? which should be based on elected and recallable councils of delegates (communes).

This semi-state, a state involving the mass of the people in administration and self-defence, would be a dictatorship over the capitalists ? a dictatorship of the proletariat. It was necessary in order to prevent the old ruling class recovering its power and property but it would wither away as planned production brought about full social equality and abolished the division of society into classes. This crucial lesson was opposed by the anarchist followers of Bakunin who believed in insurrections carried out by small conspiratorial groups, sparking a mass spontaneous upheaval and the possibility of immediately ?abolishing the state?, after which society would be based on small, decentralised productive units.

The bloody defeat of the Paris Commune in 1871, despite its heroism, wrecked the disunited and still fragile basis of the International. It was crushed by the combination of a savage period of reaction which swept Europe, when membership of the International was outlawed in most countries, with the sharpening battle between the anarchists and the Marxists within its ranks. The former had been organising as a secret faction ever since 1864 and opposed nearly all the policies the International had developed.

In addition, the British trade unionists had begun their thirty year love affair with the Liberal Party and abandoned the TUC?s pledge to create a working class party. In 1872, at its Hague congress, the decision was taken to move its headquarters to New York. By 1876, it ceased to function as an organisation. The anarchists tried to maintain it in Europe but it was a disorganised and ineffective rump.

The First International proved that, while it is possible to rally diverse forces to a world association of the workers, if part of the International resolutely opposes political struggle, i.e. the struggle for power, if it fails to accept a common programme and a central leadership, democratically chosen at its congresses, then unity cannot last for long.

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