

The Third International

Sat, 01/10/2005 - 17:00

The Third International, also known as the Communist International, was born out of the revolutionary opposition to the first World War. Small and isolated at first, this opposition held its first conference in Zimmerwald, Switzerland, in September 1915. The Zimmerwald movement rallied increasing support as the horror of the war hit home.

Opposition to the war took on a mass character as a result of the two revolutions in Russia in 1917. The October revolution, which brought the Bolsheviks to power and led to the withdrawal of Russia from the war, especially raised the standard of working class internationalism and inspired workers everywhere to join the revolt.

By January 1918, mass strikes, with munitions workers to the fore, spread across Austria, Poland, Hungary and Germany. Workers' and soldiers' councils sprang up throughout Germany, the Kaiser abdicated and fled and power literally fell into the hands of the workers' councils with the German Social Democrats at their head. Unfortunately, the Social Democrats were led by the same treacherous leaders as had supported the war.

Under Friedrich Ebert, Philip Scheidemann and Gustav Noske, the Provisional Government provoked the inexperienced revolutionary vanguard workers of Berlin into an armed uprising in January 1919. They then crushed it with the aid of the protofascist Freikorps militia, who murdered Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg, the two foremost revolutionary leaders in Germany. Reformists and revolutionaries now had, quite literally, a river of blood between them since the reformists had acted as the direct agents of the counterrevolution.

The Bolsheviks, now renamed the Russian Communist Party, took the lead in convening a conference to found a third, Communist International in Moscow in March 1919. The decision to found the new International was quickly confirmed as correct. Several large workers' parties joined within months. In October 1919, the Danish Socialist Youth broke away from the parent party and affiliated to the Communist International. A month later, the delegates of 14 revolutionary youth groups claiming 300,000 members united in the Communist Youth International.

The Communist International was not simply a body that would pass resolutions and issue proclamations. It aimed to become the means for implementing them internationally. It was to become a real world party, organising and directing action around the world. It was to become the first truly global International of the working class.

In this task, in just over a year, it was to prove enormously successful. When the Communist International (?Comintern?) convened on 19th July, 1920, for its second congress it was a very different and much stronger organisation. There were 217 delegates representing 67 parties and organisations from over 40 countries.

In the first years of its existence, the Comintern was the motor force for many significant achievements by the world working class ? the defence of the October Revolution in Russia against imperialist encirclement and internal counter-revolution; the establishment of communist parties around the world; the development of revolutionary policy on the trade unions; the struggle against imperialism and national oppression; the building of revolutionary women's and youth movements; the elaboration of the tactics of the united front and the workers' government; and many other issues.

But the fate of the Communist third international was bound up with the international class struggle. Failed workers' revolutions in Germany, Austria and Hungary left the Russian Revolution isolated in a backward peasant country with an economy utterly ruined by seven years of war. The working class shrank and the soviet democracy of 1917 withered into a single party dictatorship which the Bolsheviks had neither aimed at nor wanted.

From the early 1920's, a growing bureaucracy around Stalin took power and started to preach the need for 'socialism in one country' and peaceful co-existence with global capitalism. Now, the world revolution had to be subordinated to protecting the Soviet Union (in fact, its ruling bureaucratic caste). Workers' democracy was all but extinguished in the soviets, the trade unions and the Communist Party. By the late 1920's, the Communist International itself had become a totally pliant instrument in the hands of the Stalinists.

This led to a sequence of unnecessary defeats; that of the Chinese revolution in 1929; Hitler's rise to power without a shot being fired; the Popular Front in France and the defeat of the Spanish Revolution in 1937. In the end, Stalin wound up the Communist International altogether in 1943 to please his wartime allies, the US and Britain.

The terrible fate of the Third International carries a warning for the future. If a revolution in one country fails to spread in time, if working class democracy is suppressed, if the goal of revolution is restricted to defending capitalist democracy, if coalition governments (popular fronts) are built with capitalist parties, if a bureaucratic caste in one working class state abandons world revolution in favour of 'peaceful co-existence' with global capitalism, then even the boldest and most potent of revolutionary parties can be transformed into its opposite: an instrument of counter-revolution.

Source URL: <https://fifthinternational.org/content/third-international>