Why we need a Fifth International

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In the opening years of the twenty-first century, resistance to imperialism, war and corporate capitalism assumed a truly global scale.

Vast mobilisations against international financial institutions, continental counter-summits, Social Forums of scores of thousands, cross-border actions and joint days of action - all these have changed the shape of the class struggle.

The idea of Internationalism, for decades little more than an aspiration of the most militant and far-sighted activists, has become a practical reality, influencing and strengthening resistance everywhere.

This wave of globally co-ordinated mass actions reached a high point in the world-historic action of 15 February 2003, when 20 million marched in every major city on the globe against the US/UK attack on Iraq - the highest level of co-ordinated anti-imperialist action in human history.

Internationalism has shaken the planet - now it must change it.

To transform the imperialist "War on Terrorism" into a global war on imperialist terror, to set millions in motion against the system that causes war, our networks, forums and co-ordinations need to take a new and bold step: the formation of a Global Party of Socialist Revolution - the Fifth International.

We call on the hundreds of thousands that have assembled in the European, Asian, South American and Middle Eastern social forums, the trade unions and anti-capitalist initiatives that have linked up in action around the world, the mass working class parties that have taken to the streets against neo-liberalism, capital and war, the revolutionary youth to unite at the highest possible level. This means forming the new International as soon as possible - not in the distant future but in the months and years ahead.

Why take this step? Because the level of unity so far achieved - inspiring as it may be - is not enough to defeat the capitalists. At present we can co-ordinate action. But we have not been able to break the hold of the union leaders and reformists over the mass organisations of the working class. That was why we could call 20 million onto the streets but still not stop the Iraq war. There were marches but very few strikes of the millions who can bring the world to a standstill. The reason: there was no global alternative organisation to the cowardly leaders who let us down.

At present we can discuss and debate the need for "another world". But we have not set ourselves a common goal: the overthrow of the capitalists' state power and the creation of a new power based on the working and popular masses.

We have many publicists and writers who expose, analyse and condemn the capitalist system. But we have no common programme, no guide to action that bases itself on the hard-learned lessons of 150 years of anti-capitalist struggle. Without an agreed programme, the tragedies of the past loom ahead of us again as real and present dangers.
Millions back Lula’s Workers’ Party in Brazil, which is sharing power with capitalist politicians and which has compromised with the IMF. The radical Italian party Rifondazione Comunista plays a prominent role in the anti-capitalist movement, but has shared power with the capitalists in the past, refuses to rule it out in future and preaches peace at all costs to the Italian workers and youth.

Without a common programme, the movement has no alternative to the catastrophic error of governing with the bourgeoisie except Zapatista or anarchist fatalism, which renounces the struggle for working class power altogether and disorganises the revolution as a result. We have no common party - and so can mount no united challenge for our own government, our own power.

Yet history is moving quickly - great opportunities to struggle for power have emerged in recent years and will occur in one country after another, with increasing frequency, in the years ahead. The vast mobilisations of February 2003 herald still greater days to come.

To arm the workers of each country with a perspective and guide to action; to correct errors that arise inevitably when a movement is restricted to a national terrain; to inform the workers of each country of the real events that face their brothers and sisters abroad; to draw the workers and peasants of every country into democratic deliberation of the tasks confronting the movement; to co-ordinate the struggle for power, fighting off the fatal influence of reformism, bureaucracy, nationalism and wavering elements of every type; to spread the revolution across national boundaries onto the continental and global terrain: these are the preconditions of victory.

All these demand the formation of a new International.

This is no mere dream. The anti-capitalist workers have done it four times before. We can do it again. If we learn from the past, we can build on the successes of the first four Internationals, avoid the errors that led to their decline and defeat, and build a Fifth International to organise our global victory.

The First International proved that it is possible to rally diverse forces to a world association of the workers. But if, under the influence of anarchism, part of the International resolutely opposes political struggle, unity cannot last for long. The Fifth International must aim to draw the broadest layers of fighting forces together - but it must quickly define its political goals, and resolutely reject anarchist or syndicalist demands that we renounce the only methods that can defeat capitalism: working class government and working class power.

Therefore we will press for the International to pursue relentless political struggle, not fearing a rupture with anarchists, populists or the liberal publicists of the NGOs that cannot accept our class goals.

The Second International proved beyond doubt that political struggle, trade union action, electoral campaigning and wide-scale agitation and propaganda can rally mass forces to working class parties everywhere. But when a bureaucracy emerges in a national labour movement, based on privileged sections of workers, it will quickly make its peace with the exploiters and back even the worst excesses of the bourgeoisie, marshalling the workers for fratricidal war as the Second International did in 1914 and as its national sections, including the British Labour Party, have been doing ever since.

Like the Second, the Fifth International must use the techniques of mass political action to rally not scores of hundreds in propaganda societies, but hundreds of thousands to parties of the working class. But we must never repeat the fatal error of tolerating reformist officials and careerist place-seekers in our ranks. Bureaucracy, national chauvinism, parliamentary or trade union reformism mean bloody defeat for the anti-capitalist movement.
The fight for the Fifth International is inseparable from the fight to prise the workers' movement from the grip of warmongers and traitors. We call on working class parties that have taken the road of struggle against capital to rally to the Fifth International - at the same time we demand that they break irrevocably any links with the capitalists and drive bureaucratic traitors from their ranks. To do otherwise means to prepare the International for destruction at its first decisive test.

The Third International - a mass revolutionary response to the First World War and the Russian Revolution - proved that to oust the reformist misleaders, to resist imperialist war, to unite the workers in struggle for our own power, the movement must combine the fullest internal democracy with centralised action on a global scale. Without democracy no possibility exists of genuine unity, of drawing the workers of all countries together to formulate an international strategy, of resisting bureaucratic control.

Without strict centralism - requiring national parties and leaders to respect democratic international decisions - there is no possibility of resisting national pressures, no possibility of common revolutionary action. The Fifth International must combine the maximum internal democracy with the maximum unity in action; both are preconditions for effective revolutionary struggle.

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 securing capitalist democracy, if coalition governments 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 revolutionary parties can be transformed into their opposite: instruments of counter-revolution.

Stalinism is a stain on the history of the working class movement. With it, no compromise is possible. Communist Parties that rally to the call for the Fifth International must break with Stalinism's reactionary programme, its shameful methods and its cowardly goals. Without this, the International will never rally the new generation to the banner of human liberation.

Alone in the once-mighty Communist movement, the Fourth International stood against the horrors of Stalinism and the terrible defeats it inflicted on the working class. It passed on to future generations a priceless political heritage. Workers' democracy not bureaucratic planning; the rule of workers' councils, not the dictatorship of a privileged caste; internationalism, not national chauvinism; uninterrupted (permanent) revolution, not an endless bloc with the "democratic" capitalists; a programme that links the daily struggles of the workers to the seizure of working class power, not a catalogue of reforms disconnected from the final goal of revolution. There is not one of these principles that is dispensable today - all are urgently needed if the anti-capitalist and working class movement is to open the road to freedom in the twenty-first century.

It is now over fifty years since the Fourth international was destroyed as a revolutionary instrument. In the aftermath of World War Two, it abandoned its independent working class programme and instead adapted its policy to left-wing social democrats and Stalinists, finally declaring that the "epoch of October" is dead and seeking a new international only on a reformist programme. In the anti-capitalist movement today, the United Secretariat of the Fourth International defends the most liberal and reformist sections of the movement against revolutionary criticism.

The main split from the Fourth International - the International Socialist Tendency and its leading party, the SWP - renounced almost every revolutionary principle of the International. Today it uses radical revolutionary phrases whilst systematically refusing to challenge the reformist trends within the movement. It explicitly states that a precondition of common action with reformists is suspension of revolutionary
Instead of a consistent revolutionary action programme it advances Alex Callinicos' hopelessly inadequate "Anti-Capitalist Manifesto" for the global movement. In Britain it stands in elections on a reformist platform. Most recently at the national People's Assembly, the SWP blocked the development of people's assemblies in towns and cities across Britain.

These vestiges of the Fourth International follow a policy which in the history of movement has been called centrist. These organisations are revolutionary in words but prove unable to chart a consistent revolutionary course, independent of the bureaucratic apparatuses. They advocate and create political organisations that present to the masses only a diplomatic agreement between revolutionary and opportunist trends. This can achieve only one thing: the silencing of the revolutionary message and the shielding of reformists from revolutionary criticism.

Instead of analysing what is necessary for the working class and then fighting for it, the centrist fragments of the Fourth international adapt their policy to the prevailing consciousness of the working class at any given time. Centrism relies on the revolutionary "process", the crisis, the spontaneity of the masses, to do the job that the revolutionaries themselves should do - point the way ahead, warn of the pitfalls, identify today's false friends as tomorrow's enemies.

The Fifth International must rally forces from across the anti-capitalist and workers' movement. But there must be no let up in challenging the reformist programmes advocated by those who promote today a repetition of the failed methods of the collapsed Internationals. A "negotiated political settlement" between them may serve to unite bureaucratic leaders: for the fighting unity of the working masses, it is worse than useless.

Therefore, for revolutionaries, not only is criticism of the reformists necessary in the struggle for the new International, but so too is unsparing criticism of centrist vacillation.

Each of the four revolutionary Internationals embodied great gains for the working class movement and rich lessons for future generations. Yet each of them eventually succumbed to degeneration and collapse.

The urgent task of the world working class is to found a Fifth International, the most important weapon of all in the struggle against global capitalism.

Sceptics argue that it is "too soon" to found a new International. Nothing could be further from the truth. The lack of international co-ordination and leadership is the key weakness afflicting us today. To remain at the level of networks will eventually paralyse the anti-capitalist movement and throw it into reverse. To take bold strides forward to global fighting unity - that is the central task in every country and on every continent.

Global capitalism is plunging the world into a new cycle of annihilating war. In reaction it is raising up once again its historic gravedigger: the global working class, and in greater numbers, with greater potential and more closely interconnected than ever before.

We still have a world to win. The chains that bind us are strong but our power has never been greater. If we will it, we can smash them to atoms.

Workers, peasants, revolutionary youth - unite in the fight for the Fifth International. It is the banner of unbroken struggle against capitalism and for your birthright - global human freedom.