A new international rescue – intellectuals of the world unite

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It is 150 years since trade union leaders, intellectuals and left activists assembled in autumn 1864 in London to create the International Working Men's Association, commonly known as the First international.

It was followed by the Second or Socialist international in 1889 which still limps along in an attenuated, under-financed way today. Then Lenin created the Third or Communist International in 1919 which was wound up by Stalin in 1943 as a gift to his Western allies who were happy to fight Nazism with Stalin but which were staunchly anti-Stalinist, especially in Nordic states such as Sweden where social democracy exterminated – politically not physically – all traces of communism in trade unions.

There was a sort of self-proclaimed Fourth international launched by Trotsky in 1938 but after the old man was ice-picked the splits of Trotskyism meant the Fourth International never really got off the ground. The late Venezuelan leader Hugo Chavez announced he was creating a Fifth International in 2008 but, as with much of Chavismo, it was more words than reality.

That said, if ever there was a need to create a Sixth International or just re-create the 1864 International, it is surely today. Never has the capitalist world been less constrained in its greed and domination. Never have workers been so divided and powerless.

It is worth looking at the 1864 London gathering to see how profoundly realistic and sensible their demands were. Although turned into a movement that reactionaries had to crush, especially after the Paris Commune that briefly tried to turn the French capital into a proto-Bolshevik city-state, a kind of Ken Livingstone in-his-dreams model of socialism in one city, it is the extraordinary modesty of the 1864 demands that impress.

Re-reading Karl Marx’s inaugural address in an excellent collection of documents about the First International (Workers Unite! The International 150 Years Later edited by the Toronto academic Marcello Musto and published by Bloomsbury), there is nothing of the bombast of his communist manifesto written 16 years previously.

The long period of reaction that followed the failure of the European springtime of nations in 1848 (we are seeing something similar after the failure of the Arab Spring) was matched by ever-decreasing wages. “It is a great fact that the misery of the working masses has not diminished from 1848-1864, and yet this period is unrivalled for the development of the growth of commerce”, wrote Marx in best Piketty style.

That was Marx then but the same language can now be heard from mainstream economists and think tanks about the years of globalisation since 1980 which have seen unparalleled increases in commerce worldwide but simultaneously a sharp increase in inequality within and inside nations.

The answer in 1864 was to campaign internationally for the eight-hour day, co-operative models of production and distribution, rights for women, protection of young people from exploitation, a proper inheritance tax, more common ownership of land and above all the organisation of the working class into parties that might win power.

One hundred and fifty years later, these are surely still urgent demands. What Marx feared was the transformation of these broad demands of social justice and political power into small-minded national politics. The ultimate example being, of course, the creation of the nationalist Russian Soviet model which transformed post-1919 international labour movement and political work into a global Soviet support network which vitiated the hopes of transformationary socialism and allowed fascism to sink roots.

Today, the global progressive movement is weaker than ever. There are some trade union and party political international secretariats around but they are limited in staff, resources and always have to conform to the national prejudices of their affiliates. I tried as a member of the executive of the Party of European Socialists to promote greater workers and trade
union rules within the European Union but I was constantly sent orders from Gordon Brown’s office to drop such nonsense. Had the United Kingdom lined up other left parties in power in Europe.

10 years ago, the massive arrival of European workers to be exploited by British bosses free of any social Europe rules would not have been as numerous as it became.

Today’s lowest common denominator internationalism still does useful and important work but is no match for the boundless greed of global capitalism. Thanks to the need to mobilise all resources in two world wars to defeat authoritarian enemies and then after 1945 to defeat the internal Stalinism that threatened democracy and enlightenment values capital and power made an historic compromise with intelligent reformist left politics and unions.

But with the end of Sovietism in 1989 and then the fusion of capitalism and communism in China, there was no longer any threat to world capital and therefore no need to make the concessions that created fair pay and social improvement for the broad mass of people in advanced democracies after 1945.

There is an all-out rightist assault on the European Union with its modest but real insistence that trans-frontier commerce must accept some social regulation. The growth of anti-EU political forces, including some really unpleasant reactionary racists and anti-Semites, will not be satiated by a belief that national frontiers can protect, let alone enhance social justice. Today there is a resurgence of economic data about inequality with even the chair of the US Federal Reserve, Janet Yellen, saying better pay is needed. But there is no transnational body ready to put sufficient pressure on capital especially in its new heartlands of China and India to deliver social justice.

In 1864, there were a lot of socialist-minded workers and one or two socialist intellectuals like Marx. Today we are awash with socialist scholars but fewer and fewer workers who believe in or are inspired by socialism as preached by the PhDs. Nonetheless a new international is need needed or anew internationalism ready to defeat the nationalist isolationists of UKIP, the Tory Party, the offshore owned press and their slogan “British Jobs for British Workers”.

Intellectuals of the world unite! You having nothing to lose but your condescension towards workers and labour whose caution and sense of historical possibility remain profound.

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