WHAT NUMBER FOR THE INTERNATIONAL? – RESOLUTION OF THE DSA

(1)The crisis of the organisations claiming to be the Fourth International has led to a campaign to re-create the First International. Hence the perspective of this movement is to promote the connection between Marxist organisations with the trade unions. This is an understandable approach in the era of austerity and the isolation of Marxist groups from the working class. However the past cannot be re-created and it is important to recognise that the alliance between Marx and Engels with various trade union leaders was ultimately not a success, and the organisational coherence of the First International was undermined by factional disputes. As a result the First International was effectively disbanded in 1872. The First International had achieved various successes such as is solidarity support for the Paris Commune. (This solidarity was theoretically elaborated by Marx’s work on the Paris Commune) But an organisation consisting of Marxists, Anarchists and respectable trade union leaders could never be stable and therefore the First International was a rudimentary grouping that would eventually be replaced by something superior. It is nostalgic thinking to believe that it can be replicated in the present period. Furthermore, what is also implied is that we can go back to the works of Marx and Engels, and so reject what has occurred since this time. For better, or worse, Marxism has been interpreted by Kautsky, Plekhanov, Lenin, Luxemburg, Trotsky, Bukharin, Gramsci, and many other more recent intellectuals. There is not a pure form of Marxism that can ignore a relationship with the present. If Marxism is to be principled its concern must be with the issues of the class struggle of a contemporary nature. It must discuss programme and strategy, and in this context utilise the work of the most recent Marxist theory. Primarily we cannot be nostalgic about the First International because it was succeeded by a superior form of organisation that was able to make important gains.

(2)The First International was succeeded by the Second International. This was initially led by Engels and Kautsky and they made an impressive contribution to Marxist theory and practice. However the Second International was undermined by the tensions between revolutionary politics and reformism. Before 1914 the Second International became centrist and its politics fluctuated between a revolutionary wing led by Luxemburg and the reformism of Bernstein. In 1914 the beginning of the world war led to the effective collapse of the Second International and it fragmented into antagonistic national groupings based on imperialist war aims. The standpoint of national defence replaced the approach of international class struggle. Lenin proclaimed the necessity to develop a new third international. In the period after the world war an attempt was made to re-build the Second International but it was now openly based on the approach of Social Democracy or reformism. However occasional promising developments occurred such as the two and a half international that involved the Independent Labour Party. Kautsky was a centrist but a bitter opponent of the October revolution in Russia.

(3)The Third International was established in 1919, and it was based on the principled politics of the October revolution. But the primary contradiction of this organisation was that its politics were dominated by the Soviet Communist Party and the major contributors to its theoretical documents were all Bolsheviks. During the period of Lenin and Trotsky’s leadership of the Communist International this situation did not undermine support for the aim of world revolution. The years 1924-28 represented an intermediate centrist period when the leadership of the Communist International made serious errors, as in relation to the role of the Anglo-Soviet trade union committee and the Chinese revolution. Despite these regressive developments the programme of the sixth Comintern Congress (held in 1928) was still an important contribution to Marxist theory and practice. In 1929 Stalin established total control of the Soviet Communist Party and the Communist International, and the result was an ultra-left bureaucratic degeneration that led to the forced collectivisation of agriculture in the USSR, and the justification of the sectarian politics of the Third Period. The result of the latter was a failure to consistently call for a united front in Germany with the Social Democrats against the counterrevolutionary threat of the Nazi’s. The result was a split within the German working class that enabled Hitler to come to power in a constitutional and relatively peaceful manner. Despite these tragic events the Third International failed to make any self-criticism and so Trotsky began to make the preparations to call for the formation of a new Fourth International.

(4)The result of Trotsky’s activity was the creation of the Fourth International in 1938. However the major problem with this development was that the organisation that was formed was exclusively composed of followers of Trotsky. Hence the supporters of Bukharin were excluded and the programme that was created for the founding conference was flawed. It lacked a detailed analysis of the economic and political situation, and rejected any attempt to outline what was meant by the major aim of Marxism, which is the formation of socialism and communism. These defects were to have an important effect in relation to the troubled history of the Fourth International. The Fourth International quickly descended into crisis with a split in the American Socialist Workers Party concerning the social character of the USSR and the Soviet invasion of Poland.

(5)Despite the terrible death of Trotsky in 1940, and the severe repression of the Second World War, the Fourth International established principled credentials in the class struggle. In the immediate post-war period a new crisis developed concerning the class character of the Soviet expansion into Eastern Europe. The ultimate result of this discussion was the formation of a pro-Stalinist grouping led by Pablo. His perspective of war revolution undermined the conception of the international class struggle led by principled Marxist parties. Eventually an opposition to this opportunist trend was proclaimed in terms of the Open Letter of James Cannon, the leader of the USA SWP. This resulted in the formation of the International Committee, but this alternative trend was unable to defeat the influence of the Pabloite led majority of the Fourth International. Since the mid 1950’s the various forces claiming to be the Fourth International have been involved in constant crisis and splits. The result is a complex process of fragmentation. As a result there is no definitive organisation that can claim to represent the continuation of the Fourth International. However it is possible that some of these fragments also express the potential to re-build a principled Fourth International. This is why we support the slogan: “Re-build the Fourth International”. We call for the convening of an international conference that would present programmatic documents orientated to this task. It is also vital that organisations that are not necessarily Trotskyist, but in the Marxist tradition, be invited to this conference.

(6)Workers Power argues in favour of the creation of a Fifth International. They contend that because the various tendencies within the Fourth International collapsed into centrism in the period 1948-51 this is sufficient reason to call for the Fifth International. However whilst they identify centrist errors within the various strands of the Fourth International they cannot establish a process of counterrevolutionary degeneration. In other words whilst the most opportunist tendencies are right wing centrist the transformation into reformism has not occurred. Thus in general the various groups claiming to be the Fourth International have not capitulated to imperialism and capitalism. The various fragments of the Fourth International have not carried out a betrayal similar to that of the Second and Third Internationals. Right wing centrism has not become the basis for the justification of counterrevolutionary politics, except in one or two instances. Consequently we believe that the call for a fifth international is both sectarian and premature. But if a mass trend occurred that was in favour of a fifth international we would not consider the number as a sufficient reason not to consider an application to join.

(7)The question of the number of the international is secondary to the content of the programme that should be the basis for organising and promoting the revolutionary politics of Marxism. We would argue that a principled programme should consist of (i) an action programme of opposition to the austerity policy of the EU. This should outline the reasons why a mass movement should be developed in order to reject the justification of austerity by the ruling class. We would suggest that the culmination of this development would be an international general strike in order to promote the realisation of the aim of a workers government. (ii) Summary of the most important events in the class struggle during the past ten years, including an explanation of why the aim of socialism has become unpopular. This analysis would include a defence of the perspective of revolution and rejection of the dilution of this approach in terms of a more limited and reformist standpoint.(iii) An explanation of what is meant by democratic socialism in terms of firstly, the mass character of opposition to capitalism, and secondly, the elaboration of the most important principles of a socialist society.(iv) The relationship of the opposition of oppression on the basis of gender, race and sexuality to the class struggle.(v)The importance of ecology as an argument for socialism.(vi)Discussion of the relationship of the party to the process of the realisation of socialism.(vii)What is meant by imperialism in the conditions of globalisation. Is inter-imperialist war possible?

(8)Obviously the content of the action programme is not limited to these items and it will be possible to open discussion on other items. The point of discussion is that it will create the prospect of establishing whether a principled international can be formed. The process of discussion should not be restricted and it should be open to all currents that define themselves as revolutionary Marxists. This means that all the various tendencies of Trotskyism would be welcome to participate alongside the organisations that belong to the Council Communist movement. Indeed one of the reasons for the Open Conference would be to try and overcome past divisions and instead promote new forms of unification. What is important to avoid is discussion of the class character of the USSR. Instead it should be possible to accept that the question of what was the USSR has been resolved by its historical demise, and instead the resolution of Workers Power defining Russia as imperialist should be the basis of present discussion about its contemporary character. (1) We are aware that if discussion achieves this broad character an issue of dispute will be the question of the relationship of Marxism to Leninism. Some currents may reject Leninism in the name of Marxism. Whilst we accept that there are no easy answers to these types of historical questions we believe that it is possible to uphold the principles of an action programme that is based on compromises about the problematical issue of the connection of Leninism to Marxism. In this context, we would argue that the conception of the socialist offensive outlined by Professor Meszaros represents the ability to reconcile any contradictory aspects in the approach of Marxism and Leninism. (2)

(9)If the attempt to form a new international should be successful we would argue that it has an urgent theoretical task. This task is expressed by the importance of elaborating important reasons why we still consider the working class to represent revolutionary possibilities. In this so-called post industrial society the collective capacity of the working class to engage in effective struggle in its interests has been called into question. The Marxist Left has failed to engage with this issue, and has instead comforted itself with consolationist schemas about how the rate of profit is leading to the collapse of capitalism. We reject this determinist approach and instead maintain that it is only by means of class struggle will capitalism become transformed into socialism. (3) With relation to practical tasks – that is connected to this urgent theoretical question – we would contend that the Left has miserably failed to advance the creation of a mass movement against the austerity policy of the ruling class. We agree with Ken Loach’s view that there is no substitute for the Marxist left to become an integral part of working class communities. It is necessary to develop the spontaneous solidarity of the working class into a conscious force for the aim of socialism. This process will not occur if the Marxist organisations maintain a self-imposed isolation from the working class.

(10)It is necessary to recognise that the existing forces of the Marxist left continue to fragment and are in an ideological condition of pessimism. It will not be straight forward to overcome this condition but we believe that progress towards unity can provide important reasons why the activities of Marxist groups can be provided with a new sense of self confidence. In the years 2014 and 2015 it is self-indulgent to perpetuate division and differences when unity is needed in order to promote the development of the international class struggle. It will be argued by some that it is not possible to unite centrist and revolutionary forces. (The creation of the half-way house) We reject this scepticism about the prospect of creating a united revolutionary party. If the process of elaborating a new programme is taken seriously we believe that it can only be of a revolutionary character, and centrist distortions will be overcome. However we must not consider the revolutionary label as a pretext to exclude centrist formations from the new international party. The test of seriousness about the party will be expressed by commitment to the new programme. However, we believe that the most enthusiastic forces about the aim of creating a new party will be of a revolutionary character. It is to be expected that ossified centrist forces like the USFI will not want to join a new organisation.(It is likely that they will argue they are already the Fourth International) Despite these objections we believe that the call for a new international can attract a positive response.

FOOTNOTES:

(1)Resolution of the International Executive Committee of the LFI: The Resurrection of Russian Imperialism, In Fifth International No 15, Autumn 2014, p33-48

(2)Istvan Meszaros: Beyond Capital, Merlin Press, 1995 p673-738

(3)Phil Sharpe: The Class Struggle 1914 -2014, In Socialist Standard NO 3 2014, DSA Website