

Letter to the IC

February, 2009

Hello Comrades,

For the first time since I have functioned as a member of the international leadership I am unable to make the IC meeting this year. My apologies. I would like to comment on the document which is being circulated—in particular points 4, 5, and 6.

“We expressed it in our own way, from 1992 onwards, in other words in the last two world congresses, with the triptych ‘New period, new program, new party.’” The text also suggests a “new phase” in the transformation of the FI. These new things do require our attention. Still, I write in the margins: “What are the limits and contradictions” of this “new” process? What, in the context of all that is new, are the implications of that which is not-so-new (what is described in point 6 as our “shared strategic vision”)? How do we work toward and apply that vision?

In point 5 we read: “How to transform the Fourth International in order to make it an effective tool in the perspective of a new international grouping is the key question which must be discussed at the next congress of the International.” This is the only sentence in the document I would actually disagree with. It reveals, however, a deeper imbalance—both in the text itself and in the underlying perspective. No. This is not “the” key question. It is only one of several key questions. Others ought to be: What are the limits and contradictions of this new process? What, in the context of all that is new, are the implications of that which is not-so-new (our “shared strategic vision”)? How do we work toward and apply that vision as we strive to make the FI an effective tool in the context of what is new?

Point 6 speaks of the role played by the FI “to keep alive the history of the revolutionary Marxist current.” This, I believe, is an honest statement of how the matter is conceived by a majority of the present international leadership. Comrades have (I would say for the last thirty years) approached the question of our shared strategic vision for building parties and taking power as if this were some historical memory rather than part of an active political toolbox which we utilize as we deal with new events. And yet, as we have tried to deal with all that is new over the past 30 years the traditional strategic problems continue to appear, often in quite classical forms:

- * the need for the working class and oppressed to maintain political independence from elements of the exploiting classes,
- * the need to fight for a revolutionary government in which the self-organization of the oppressed can exercise hegemony, rather than a “broad front” of “progressive” forces in which other class interests are allowed to dominate,
- * the need to create a revolutionary cadre with sufficient understanding of the necessary programmatic elements, using this as part of an active political toolbox, so that when

revolution does become possible the mass energy that is unleashed in society at large can break out of safe channels and actually lead to an overthrow of the old state power.

Based on what is said in point 1 of this text we should expect these problems to be posed for us (and for all of our partners in whatever “new” anticapitalist projects might arise) with increasing frequency. How to respond to such challenges has not been obvious, however, in recent decades—even to many who honestly seek a revolutionary, anti-capitalist alternative. It will not be obvious in the future, either, because the answers we need cannot be derived *strictly* or *exclusively* from our experience with all that is new. They must be developed consciously, by a cadre that understands the historical experience out of which the appropriate answers emerge, while simultaneously able to relate this experience to new events in a creative way. Such a cadre can only be organized through years of *active* political experience (not merely keeping alive a historical memory). History has a word or two to say on this question as well.

“We act and we will continue to act so that [the question of a new international] is not posed in terms of ideological or historical choices, which are likely to lead to divisions and splits. It must be posed on a double level, on the one hand real political convergence on tasks of international intervention, on the other pluralism of the new formations.” Yes, it is a key hallmark of the Fourth International that we proceed in this way. But something more must then be said—and never is: The question of what strategic choices this new international is going to make (what divisions exist among its potential constituents on which questions and how these are going to be dealt with) still has to be posed, actively and consciously, even as the FI tries to become useful in the context of all that is new.

Since the tumultuous revolutionary events of 1979 in Nicaragua and Iran the FI has stopped having conversations in which we consider our “shared strategic vision” and how that vision relates to new events in the world. Individuals write many intelligent things in the international press. But we no longer have the kinds of discussions, either in the international leadership or involving the ranks of the FI, which will make these intelligent things part of a *collective* understanding that permeates our *entire* movement (or else give us a chance to *collectively* challenge ideas that might be incomplete, imprecise, or ill-considered). Even when we do have partial discussions, as in the case of Brazil, these never rise above the level of “tactics.” Comrades consistently fail to consider how “tactics” in specific situations relate to “our shared strategy” for the working class to take power.

We, in the Fourth International (and especially in its leadership), need to rediscover the essential nature of conversations—among ourselves and with others—which consider how today’s “tactics” relate to various strategic visions and historical experiences. We need to do this in ways that avoid posing the question as a series of ideological or historical choices. We need to do it in the context of present-day convergences, respectful of different experiences that have led other revolutionary currents to conclusions that are parallel to our own in key respects. But we do still have to do it. The process of rediscovering how to do it ought to begin with the next world congress of the Fourth International.

Returning to point 4 we can see a way to begin this process: “On the basis of the experience of the class struggle, the development of the global justice movement, defensive struggles and anti-war mobilizations over the last ten years, and in particular the lessons drawn from the evolution of the Brazilian PT and of Communist Refoundation in Italy and from the debates of the French anti-liberal left, revolutionary Marxists have engaged in the building of the PSOL in Brazil, of Sinistra Critica in Italy, of the new party in France. The experience of the Bloco de Esquerda in Portugal is also part of this movement.”

Is this IC prepared to commission a document (or series of documents), then put a point (or points) on the world congress agenda and organize a collective discussion within the Fourth International as part of the pre-congress preparations, dealing with precisely what lessons should be drawn from these experiences? If we have the courage to do this I would like to suggest that it is likely to become just as much a “key question” at the next world congress as “how to transform the Fourth International in order to make it an effective tool in the perspective of a new international grouping.” If, on the other hand, we fail to do this then each member of the IC, each national section, each individual member of the FI can (and probably will, to the extent they consider the matter at all) continue to develop their own, often conflicting, ideas about what “the lessons of . . .” actually are. Asserting that we will proceed in the context of these lessons, then, defines nothing whatsoever in terms of a collective orientation.

This, it seems clear, is an essential challenge we face leading up to the next world congress.