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This series has the aim of showing that the members of the communist left and the internationalist anarchists have a duty to discuss and even work together. The reason for this is simple. Despite important disagreements, we share key revolutionary positions: internationalism; the rejection of any collaboration and any compromise with bourgeois political forces; the defence of workers taking their struggles into their own hands...[1]

Despite this, for a long time there have been practically no relations between these two revolutionary currents. Over the last few years we have only just begun to see the first efforts to discuss and work together. This is the fruit of the painful history of the workers' movement. The attitude of the majority of the Bolshevik party in the years 1918-24 (the indiscriminate banning of the anarchist press, the armed confrontation with Makhno's army, the bloody suppression of the Kronstadt uprising, etc) opened up a huge gulf between revolutionary Marxists and anarchists. But it was above all Stalinism, which massacred thousands of anarchists[2] in the name of communism, which led to decades of trauma[3].

Today there are still fears about debating and working together. To go beyond these difficulties, you have to be convinced that we do indeed belong to the same camp, the camp of the proletariat and the revolution, despite our disagreements. But that is not enough. We also have to make a conscious effort to develop the quality of our debates. "Rising from the abstract to the concrete" is always the most perilous step. This why in this article we will try to be more precise about the spirit in which this possible and necessary relationship between the communist left and internationalist anarchism needs to be approached.

The absolute necessity for constructive criticism among revolutionaries

Our press has often repeated, in different ways, the argument that anarchism still bears the original mark of petty bourgeois ideology. This radical criticism is often seen as unacceptable by anarchist militants, including those who are usually the most open to discussion. And for many, the use of the term "petty bourgeois" in connection with anarchism is enough for some to decide they don't want to listen to the ICC at all. Recently, on our internet forum, a participant who refers to himself as an anarchist has called this view a real "insult". But this is not our view. However deep our reciprocal disagreements, they should not make us lose sight of the fact that the militants of the communist left and of internationalist anarchism are debating together as revolutionaries. What's more, the internationalist anarchists also make many criticisms of marxism, such as its alleged natural penchant for authoritarianism and reformism. The website of the CNT-AIT in France, for example, contains numerous passages of this kind: "*The Marxists (after 1871) progressively became a force*

for lulling the exploited to sleep and gave birth to working class reformism”[4]. “Marxism is responsible for orienting the working class towards parliamentary activity...it is only when this has been understood that we can see that road to the social revolution passes through the happy land of anarchism and means by-passing Marxism”[5]. These are not “insults” but radical criticisms....which we obviously disagree with totally. It's in this sense of open criticism that our analysis of the nature of anarchism has to be considered. This analysis needs to be summed up here.

In a section headed ‘The petty bourgeois core of anarchism’ in our book *Communism is not just a nice idea but a material necessity*, we read:

“The growth of anarchism in the second half of the 19th century was the product of the resistance of the petty bourgeois strata - artisans, intellectuals, shopkeepers, small peasants - to the triumphant march of capital, a resistance to the process of proletarianisation which was depriving of them of their former social ‘independence’. Strongest in those countries where industrial capital arrived late, in the eastern and southern peripheries of Europe, it expressed both the rebellion of these strata against capitalism, and their inability to look beyond it, to the communist future; instead it gave voice to their yearning for a semi-mythical past of free local communities and strictly independent producers, unencumbered by the oppressions of industrial capital and the centralising bourgeois state.

The ‘father’ of anarchism, Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, was the classical incarnation of this attitude, with his fierce hatred not only of the state and the big capitalists, but of collectivism in all forms, including trade unions, strikes, and similar expressions of working class collectivity. Against all the real trends developing within capitalist society, Proudhon’s ideal was a ‘mutualist’ society founded upon individual artisan production, linked together by free exchange and free credit” (first published in 1994).

Or again, in ‘is it possible to reconcile anarchism and marxism’, in *International Review* 102 (2001)

“In the genesis of anarchism you have the standpoint of the worker who has just been proletarianised and who rejects his new status with every fibre of his being. Having only just emerged from the peasantry or the artisans, often half-way between worker and artisan (like the Jura watchmakers for example), these workers expressed a regret for the past faced with the drama of their descent into the condition of the working class. Their social aspiration was to turn the wheel of history backwards. At the heart of this conception was nostalgia for small-scale property. This is why, following Marx, we analyse anarchism as the expression of the penetration of petty-bourgeois ideology into the ranks of the proletariat.”

In other words, we recognise that, from its birth, anarchism was marked by a profound feeling of revolt against capitalist exploitation and barbarity but that it also inherited the vision of the “artisans, shopkeepers and small peasants” who played a key role in this birth. This does not at all mean that today all the anarchist groups are “petty bourgeois”. It is obvious that the CNT, the KRAS[6] and others are animated by the revolutionary spirit of the working class. More generally, throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, many workers espoused the anarchist cause and really fought for the abolition of capitalism and the coming of communism, from Louise Michel to Durruti or from Voline to Malatesta. During the revolutionary wave which began in 1917, the anarchists were often in the front line of the workers’ ranks. Within the anarchist movement there has since been a constant struggle against this original tendency to be influenced by the radicalised petty bourgeoisie. This is partly what lies behind the deep divergences between the individualist, mutualist, reformist and internationalist-communist anarchists, with the latter alone really belonging to the revolutionary camp. But even the internationalist anarchists still show the influence of the historic roots of their

movement, as can be seen for example in a tendency to replace the struggle of the working class with calls for “autonomous popular resistance”. The ICC thinks that it is its historical responsibility to honestly bring all these disagreements into broad daylight in order to make a contribution to strengthening the revolutionary camp as a whole. As it is the responsibility of the internationalist anarchists to bring out their criticisms of marxism. This should not be an obstacle to holding fraternal debates and eventually working together, on the contrary[7].

For the ICC, is the relationship between marxists and anarchists one of teacher to pupil?

The ICC does not address these criticisms to the anarchists like a teacher correcting a pupil. However, interventions on our forum have reproached our organisation for having a “professorial” tone. Leaving aside matters of taste for this or that literary style, there is a real theoretical question behind these remarks. Does the communist left have a role as a guide for internationalist anarchism or represent a model for it to follow? Do we think that an enlightened minority has to inject the truth or a clear understanding? Or, as a more concrete example, do we see the ICC as some kind of tutor for the CNT-AIT?

In fact, such a notion would be in total contradiction with the approach of the communist left; on a deeper level, it poses the question of the link between revolutionary communists and their class.

In his letter to Ruge, published in the *Franco-German Yearbook* in 1843, Marx affirmed: *“We do not confront the world in a doctrinaire way with a new principle: Here is the truth, kneel down before it! We develop new principles for the world out of the world’s own principles. We do not say to the world: Cease your struggles, they are foolish; we will give you the true slogan of struggle. We merely show the world what it is really fighting for”*

Revolutionaries, be they marxists or internationalist anarchists, do not stand above the working class; they are an integral part of it. Their organisations are the collective secretion of the proletariat.

The ICC has never seen itself as an organisation whose task is to impose its views in the working class or on other revolutionary groups. We fully identify with these lines from the 1848 Communist Manifesto:

“The Communists do not form a separate party opposed to the other working-class parties. They have no interests separate and apart from those of the proletariat as a whole. They do not set up any sectarian principles of their own, by which to shape and mould the proletarian movement”.

It was the same principle that *Bilan*, organ of the Italian communist left, brought to life in the first issue of its review in 1933:

“Certainly, our fraction lays claim to a long political past, a profound tradition in the Italian and international movement, an ensemble of basic political positions. But it does not argue that its political past of itself means that others should accept the solutions it puts forward in the present situation. On the contrary, it is up to revolutionaries to verify in the light of events the positions it currently defends as well as the political positions contained in its basic documents”.

Since its origins, our organisation has attempted to cultivate the same spirit of openness and the same will to discuss. Thus, as far back as 1977, we wrote:

“In our relationship with groups of this type, who are close to the ICC but outside it, our aim is clear. We attempt to engage in fraternal debate with them and take up the different questions confronting

the working class....We can really only fulfil our role...if we are able:

a. to avoid considering ourselves as the one and only revolutionary group that exists today;

b. to firmly defend our positions in front of them;

c. to maintain an open attitude to discussion with them, a discussion that must take place in public and not through private correspondence" ('Resolution on proletarian political groups', IR 11)

This is a **rule of behaviour** for us. We are convinced of the validity of our positions (while remaining open to a reasoned critique), but we don't take them as the solution to all the problems of the world. For us they are a contribution to the collective struggle of the working class. This is why we attach such importance to the culture of debate. In 2007, the ICC devoted a whole orientation text to this one question: *"If revolutionary organisations are to fulfil their fundamental role of the development and spreading of class-consciousness, the cultivation of collective, international, fraternal and public discussion is absolutely essential"* 'The culture of debate – a weapon of the class struggle' IR 131.

Of course, the attentive reader will have noticed that all these quotations also contain, alongside affirmations of the need for debate, the insistence that the ICC must firmly defend its political positions. There is no contradiction here. Wanting open discussion does not mean that all ideas are equal and that everything is valid. As we underlined in our 1977 text: *"Far from being in contradiction with each other, firmness in our principles and openness in our attitude mutually complement each other. We are not afraid of discussion precisely because we are convinced of the validity of our positions"*.

In the past as in the future, the workers' movement has had and will have a need for frank and fraternal discussion between its different revolutionary tendencies. A multiplicity of points of view and approaches will confer a whole richness to the struggle of the proletariat and the development of its consciousness. We are repeating ourselves, but inside the territory shared by revolutionaries there can be deep disagreements. These must absolutely be raised and discussed. We are not asking the internationalist anarchists to renounce their own criteria or what they consider to be their theoretical patrimony. On the contrary, we want them to draw it out with as much clarity as possible in response to the questions posed to all of us; we want them to accept critiques and polemics in the way that we do – not to see them as the final word but as contributions to an open debate. We are not saying to these comrades: throw down your weapons in face of the superiority of marxism.

We profoundly respect the revolutionary nature of the internationalist anarchists. We know that we will fight side by side when massive class movements appear on the scene. But we will defend with equal conviction (and, we hope, no less convincingly) our positions on the Russian revolution and the Bolshevik party, on centralisation, the period of transition, the decadence of capitalism, the anti-working class nature of trade unionism.....

We are not here to pose as schoolteachers or just to persuade a few anarchists to join us but to play a full part in the debate between revolutionaries; a debate which will be both animated and passionate.

To conclude this series of three articles on the communist left and internationalist anarchism we will finish with a few words from Malatesta:

"If we anarchists could make the revolution on our own, or if the socialists[8] could do the same, we could have the luxury of acting on our own account, perhaps lending each other a hand now and again. But the revolution will be made by the whole proletariat, the whole people, in which the

socialists and the anarchists are just a minority, even when the people have lot of sympathy for one or the other. To divide us from each other is to divide the proletariat, or more exactly, it is to cool down its sympathy and make it less inclined to follow this noble common socialist orientation which the anarchists and socialists together can help to triumph within the revolution. It is up to revolutionaries, and the anarchists and socialists in particular, to make sure this happens, by not accentuating their disagreements and above all by occupying themselves with goals that unite them and help them attain the best possible revolutionary result".(Volunta, 1 May, 1920)

ICC September 2010

[1]. The first two articles in this series appeared in WR 336 and 337.

[2]. As well as thousands of Marxists and millions of proletarians in general.

[3]. See the second part of this series 'On the difficulties of debating and the ways to overcome them'.

[4]. http://cnt-ait.info/article.php?id_article=472&var_recherche=r%E9formis... [1]

[5]. To be exact, this is a quote from Rudolf Rocker which the CNT-AIT takes up.

[6]. The KRAS is the Russian section of the International Workers' Association with whom we have had very good comradely relations for some years, publishing a number of its statements in our press.

[7]. This said, during the debate that has taken place recently, anarchist comrades have rightly protested against certain exaggerated formulae which appear to pronounce a definitive and unjustified sentence on anarchism.....

[8]. At the time Maletesta wrote this article, the Italian Socialist Party, along with reformists, also regrouped the revolutionary elements who went on to form the Communist Party of Italy in January 1921 at the Livorno Congress.

Deepen:

- [Left communism and internationalist anarchism](#) ^[2]

Political currents and reference:

- [Internationalist anarchism](#) ^[3]

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Links

[1] http://cnt-ait.info/article.php3?id_article=472&var_recherche=r%E9formisme+marxisme

[2] <https://en.internationalism.org/tag/28/1292/left-communism-and-internationalist-anarchism>

[3] <https://en.internationalism.org/tag/political-currents-and-reference/internationalist-anarchism>