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1907: The birth of socialism's great divide

Sunday 21 August 2011, by [RIDDELL John](#) (Date first published: 20 July 2007).

For socialists, this month marks a significant anniversary. One hundred years ago, a congress of the Second — or Socialist — International took a bold stand in the struggle against capitalist war. The congress pointed the way toward the Russian revolution of 1917 and provided an enduring guide for socialists' anti-war activity.

Founded in 1889, the Second International united mass socialist and labour parties, mostly in Europe.

The 1907 congress, which met in Stuttgart, Germany, on August 18-24, revealed a divide in the International between those aiming for capitalism's overthrow and the "opportunists" — those who sought to adapt to the existing order.

The congress took place at the dawn of the epoch of modern imperialism. Europe was teetering on the edge of war between rival great-power alliances. A revolutionary upsurge in Russia in 1905 had inspired mass strikes and demonstrations across Europe. In such conditions, how was the International's longstanding opposition to militarism and colonialism to be applied?

As the 884 congress delegates from 25 countries began their work, the International's principles were challenged from within. A majority of the congress's Commission on Colonialism asked the congress not to "reject in principle every colonial policy" as colonization "could be a force for civilization."

Defenders of this resolution claimed that Europe needed colonial possessions for prosperity. When German Marxist Karl Kautsky proposed that "backward peoples" be approached in a "friendly manner", with an offer of tools and assistance, he was mocked by Netherlands delegate Hendrick Van Kol, speaking for the commission majority.

"They will kill us or even eat us," Van Kol said. "Therefore we must go there with weapons in hand, even if Kautsky calls that imperialism."

After heated debate, the congress rejected this racist position, resolving instead that "the civilizing mission that capitalist society claims to serve is no more than a veil for its lust for conquest and exploitation." But the close vote (127 to 108) showed that imperialism was, in Lenin's words, "infecting the proletariat with colonial chauvinism."

There was a similar debate on immigration. Some US delegates wanted the International to endorse bans against immigration of workers from China and Japan, who were, they said, acting as "unconscious strikebreakers." US delegate Morris Hillquit said that Chinese and other workers of the "yellow race" have "lagged too far behind to be organized [in unions]."

Kato Tokijiro of Japan commented acidly that US delegates were "clearly being influenced by the so-called Yellow Peril"—the racist fear of Asian domination.

US socialist Julius Hammer noted that Japanese and Chinese workers were learning fast how to fight

capitalism and “could be very effectively organised.” He argued, “All legal restrictions on immigration must be rejected.”

The congress made no concessions to Hillquit’s racism, but neither did it adopt Hammer’s call for open borders.

Similar debates cropped up regarding women’s oppression. In the women’s suffrage commission, an influential current favoured giving priority to winning the right to vote for men. Rejecting this view, the congress insisted that the right-to-vote campaign must be “simultaneous” (for both genders) and “universal.”

On the decisive question of the great powers’ drive to war, a tense debate extended through six days.

All agreed to condemn war as “part of the very nature of capitalism”, oppose “naval and land armaments”, and, if war seems imminent, exert “every effort in order to prevent its outbreak.”

But what did “every effort” mean, concretely? Delegates from France, led by Jean Jaurès, pressed the congress to commit to mass strikes and insurrections against a threatened war. German socialists, led by August Bebel, said such a stand would endanger their party’s legal status, and, anyway, tactics could not be dictated in advance.

An acrimonious deadlock was broken thanks to an initiative of a small group of revolutionary socialists, led by Rosa Luxemburg and Lenin.

Luxemburg called on delegates to learn from the lesson of the 1905 Russian revolution. This upsurge “did not merely result from the Russo-Japanese war, it has also served to put an end to it.” The anti-war resolution must project a struggle not merely to prevent war but to utilize the war crisis to promote revolution, she said.

Luxemburg’s proposal projected radical action, pleasing Jaurès, while obeying Bebel’s injunction not to decree tactics. And a wording was found that did not endanger the German party’s legality.

“In case war should break out,” the unanimously adopted resolution read, it is socialists’ duty “to intervene for its speedy termination and to strive with all their power to utilize the economic and political crisis created by the war to rouse the masses and thereby hasten the downfall of capitalist class rule.”

Yet as the Bolsheviks later noted, the International’s stand was “ambiguous and contradictory” on a key point. Both Bebel and Jaurès were pledged to loyalty to the homeland in “defensive” wars — a valid position in countries fighting for national liberation, but not for the imperialist powers like France and Germany. The resolution neither supported nor condemned this concept. The “defensive war” excuse was used by socialist leaderships, in 1914, to rally support behind the war efforts of their respective capitalist rulers—with disastrous results.

Lenin hailed the resolution for its “firm determination to fight to the end.” But he also warned that the congress as a whole “brought into sharp contrast the opportunist and revolutionary wings within the International.”

Over the following decade, war and revolution led to a decisive break between these the two wings, whose divergent courses still represent alternative roads for progressive struggles today.

The revolutionary wing led by Luxemburg, Lenin, and their co-thinkers held to the anti-war policy of

Stuttgart until revolutions in Russia in 1917 and Germany in 1918 brought the First World War to an abrupt end.

A century after the 1907 congress, the socialist positions voiced there on war, colonialism, and oppression retain their importance, and provide a basis for building many fronts of resistance around the world.

John Riddell, August 20, 2007

The quotations from the congress in this article are from "Lenin's Struggle for a Revolutionary International," ed. John Riddell, published by Pathfinder Press. Another version of this article is being published this month by the UK newspaper Socialist Worker.

Related reading: V.I. Lenin: The International Socialist Congress in Stuttgart1.

P.S.

* <http://johnriddell.wordpress.com/2007/08/20/1907-the-birth-of-socialism's-great-divide/>