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Britain: The Fourth International and Socialist Resistance

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Socialist Resistance (SR) is currently in the process of seeking to build a new socialist organisation with the Anti Capitalist Initiative (ACI) and the International Socialist Network (ISN). This process may expand to include other groups. One of the things that has become clear is that activists from different backgrounds have sometimes only a partial understanding of what the Fourth International (FI) is. Others have completely wrong ideas. Liam Mac Uaid sets out what the FI is, what it is not, and why we think participation in it contributes to a more rounded understanding of our political tasks in the British state and our internationalism.

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The quickest and easiest way to find out for yourself what the Fourth International [1] and the organisations that belong do it are doing and saying is to visit its website International Viewpoint [2]. There you will find reports, interviews, longer analytical articles and significant documents from our conferences. By reading them for yourself you'll be able to draw your own conclusions about just how relevant the idea of trying to retain strong international connections between socialists is.

At our 2013 conference SR voted to dissolve itself if we were able to successfully merge with the ACI and ISN. This is a radical step which organisations only rarely commit themselves to. However we will propose that members of the new organisation will have the right to be part of a Fourth International caucus which would not be restricted only to former members of Socialist Resistance. This arrangement has existed in other organisations which have contained FI supporters such as Solidarity in the United States, a group which has recently decided to affiliate to the FI. Unfortunately we have not yet had an opportunity to discuss this with our partners in the regroupment process and our insistence has perturbed some of the people with whom we are looking to work. There is a fear that that SR will retain a secret organisation taking orders from an international leadership. This couldn't happen and current members of SR would be completely opposed to such a piece of political dishonesty.

The FI decided some years ago that it would no longer present itself as the 'world party of revolution'. The FI is not the SWP's International Socialist Tendency (IST) or the Socialist Party's Committee for a Workers' International (CWI) and now includes organisations whose origins are not

in the Trotskyist tradition.

It long ago ceased to define itself as a democratic centralist organisation and it does not seek to act as one. It does not impose decisions or policies on its sections or supporters, particularly when it comes to the matter of orientation at the national level. Such an approach is contrary to the FI's concept of internationalism. We take the opposing view as you can see by reading our account of our most recent World Congress [3]:

"The international Committee is a "federal" body, which means that each national reality has its own representatives... history taught this international current that a political line cannot be imposed from above, still less by a "guide" party."

What the FI does is discuss and advocate a general approach to the politics of the period. It debates and adopts political positions and statements on the big issues in world politics. Syria and the Arab revolutions are current examples. Sections and supporters are free to decide whether to support such positions and statements and often they don't. This can be seen currently in Greece where the official section supports Antarsya (contrary to views of most other groups in the FI) whilst a supporting organisation backs Syriza. SR had no hesitation in making our criticisms of our Greek comrades in public on our website [4], something that caused mild consternation in other political currents but for us is perfectly normal.

The same World Congress report is also blunt about the limitations of many of the groups which participated. There is no point misleading your own members or the outside world with exaggerated depictions of your strength:

" Obviously we have to keep a sense of proportion: we are talking in various parts of the world of small political organisations, sometimes small groups, even if generally they are activist collectives inserted in their national, social and political reality. But the fact of belonging to an international framework helps the preservation of a certain vitality and the ability to maintain a thread and a common discussion."

It is true that when the small group of anti-Stalinist revolutionary Marxists, led by Trotsky, who declared the formation of the Fourth International asserted that it was the World Party of Socialist Revolution. They had a perspective that the coming war would open up a new wave of revolutions which would destroy Stalinism and fascism. Many hundreds of them paid with their lives in Vietnam, France, Greece, Italy, Belgium and on the Arctic convoys for their commitment to this necessity of keeping alive a revolutionary Marxist thread which linked the Bolshevik revolution to the new revolutions. That history is part of where we come from but it is precisely that - history. The Fourth International today has a radically different conception of its role and contribution to the class struggle.

Socialist democracy

Perhaps more than any other Marxist current it has tried to theorise and implement an understanding of socialist democracy both inside its own organisations and in a socialist society. The title and much of the language belong to an earlier era but *The Dictatorship of the Proletariat and Socialist Democracy* [5] contains some of the major ideas that inform the way we do politics. These are the:

"Fullest internal democracy of the party itself, with full rights for organising tendencies and a refusal to ban factions and possibilities of public debates between them before party congresses."

Real integration of the party in a revolutionary international and acceptance of international comradely criticism by revolutionary organisations of other countries.”

Both of these concepts came out of an examination and a rejection of the way Stalinist parties and regimes operated. They suppressed all dissent outside very narrow limits with unity and obedience being prized above all other qualities, an attitude that was also pervasive in many groups which rejected Stalinism but retained some of its organisational conceptions. The effect of these ideas was to ensure that a narrow group of leaders dominated politics and society. By contrast the Fourth International argued that [6]:

“...there are no infallible parties. There are no infallible party leaderships, or individual party leaders, party majorities, “Leninist central committees,” etc. The Marxist programme is never a definitely achieved one. No new situation can be comprehensively analysed in reference to historical precedents.”

As recent debates on the British far left have vividly shown, references to Lenin and Zinoviev rarely clarify very much when one is trying to get grips with the disintegration of an organisation. Harking back to what revolutionaries of nearly a century ago said about completely different sets of circumstances gives the impression of a priesthood using the sacred texts to damn heretics. By contrast the FI's leadership bodies and those of its sections explicitly guarantee the rights of minorities. So, for example, if a position were to win thirty percent of the votes at a Socialist Resistance conference, its supporters would be entitled to thirty percent of the positions on the national committee. It may be that the minority was right and the majority was wrong and people change their minds.

Dissent protected

The right to disagree is guaranteed for all sections of the International. Unlike other currents which have an international organisation and insist that all their supporters are in a single national group, it's not uncommon for the FI to have members in two or three groups or parties in the same country. That's currently the case in France, Italy and the United States, for example. Sometimes people come to very different judgements on what has to happen in their own country and split. If they wish to retain their connection to the FI they are allowed to do so since political situations and assessments change. Clearly it would be better if all the FI's supporters were in a common organisation but to oblige them to do so would be a bureaucrat's response. As long as they in the same general political framework and they continue to participate in its bodies, they can stay in.

All international meetings of the FI (its International Committee and World Congresses) are fully democratic with the full right of dissenting organisation to present and advocate their views and differences. Minority positions expressed at World Congresses are fully represented on the International Committee.

In our view that the existence of an FI caucus in a new organisation coming out of the current regroupment discussions would be entirely compatible with the democracy of that organisation and would also have a lot to contribute to building it.

This is a model that has proved attractive to organisations coming from very different roots. The FI has made substantial advances in Latin America and Asia. In 2012 the Communist Party of Bangladesh-Marxist Leninist (CPB-ML) became a permanent observer organisation, a preliminary step to becoming a section. In 2003, at the FI 15th World Congress, the Revolutionary Workers Party - Mindanao (RWP-M) became an FI section. The NSSP in Sri Lanka joined the FI after leaving the

CWI and the International has also developed a relationship with the People's Liberation Party (PLP) in Indonesia, which is now a permanent observer.

Ecosocialist

The FI is the only international revolutionary Marxist current which defines itself as ecosocialist.

Ecosocialism is a declaration that the designation 'socialist' is no longer adequate; that the ecological issues cannot for us be an add-on but are central to everything we do, a fundamental component of our programmatic identity. It is a signal that we reject the capitalist logic of insatiable growth, which is built into the nature of the system and fuels the requirements of capitalist production. It means striving for a society based on ecological rationality, democratic control, social equality, and the predominance of use-value over exchange-value.

This means that our aim should be for growth in quality of life rather than in quantity of output, for abundance of free time rather than abundance of unnecessary commodities. It means progressively taking the decisions on production and distribution out of the hands of the 'free market' and submit them to rational democratic planning.

Capitalism is incapable of changing this. Its response to global warming is a combination of market measures and spreading of dangerous technologies, including more nuclear power, 'clean' coal, more tar sands and shale gas exploitation. The extension of the (western) capitalist model of endless commodity promotion and production to achieve maximum growth to emerging countries such as China, India and Brazil is the single biggest threat to the environment.

This means that with the melting of the ice caps and the increased prevalence of extreme weather events the question of human created climate change must remain at the centre of our concerns. We have to put ourselves at the centre of the campaigns around these issues and integrate the environment at every level of our practical work.

Feminist

Both Socialist Resistance and the Fourth International define themselves as feminist organisations and agreement on the significance of feminism for Marxists is one of the major points of agreement that has made our convergence with the ACI and ISN possible. There is a social basis for the specific oppression of women in this society which makes it essential that women have their own political expression. A feminist movement makes this possible and obliges political organisations to learn from its experiences and insights.

We aim to integrate women's experiences into our political practice because while there are many ways in which individual women can struggle for their personal economic and sexual independence only an active combative movement makes possible the reaffirmation of women's identity both individually and collectively.

One of the ways in which this will develop is through a radical questioning of the traditional divisions in the family and the working class. The first of these is the sexual division of labour, an issue that the current wave of austerity is making ever more pressing as women are disproportionately affected by wage reductions, casualisation, cuts to caring services and job losses

We draw some organisational conclusions from this. Women's caucuses are a permanent feature of

both SR and FI conferences. We seek to have a majority of women on the committees which deal with internal complaints and we set a target of 50% women on leadership structures.

Broad Parties

A major part of Socialist Resistance's work for the past number of years has been in support of developing a party with mass roots to the left of Labour. We were involved in the Socialist Alliance and Respect. We tried to engage with TUSC and are now strongly supportive of Left Unity. Our connection with the FI has informed much of our activity in this area. Our comrades in Portugal, Denmark, Italy, France and Germany, among others, have had a range of positive and negative experiences in building parties to the left of social democracy and we have followed them closely. Our book *New Parties of the Left* [7] is an attempt to pull together and make accessible to an English reading audience the significance of these developments in Europe. Our starting point is that social democracy, in particular the British Labour Party, has shifted significantly to the right in the last two decades under the pressure of neo-liberalism. We think that the political space exists for an organisation of 20-30,000 which can contain revolutionaries, people radicalised by the new anti-capitalist movements, militant trade unionists and former members of the Labour Party. Respect offered a glimpse of this potential and Left Unity is also showing that there is a need for such an organisation.

Drawing on our time in Respect and what we have learned from comrades in the FI we have developed a firm view that there are some general rules which can make such a project successful. It has to be democratic and able to contain a range of views. It has to be free from the domination of a figurehead leader. It has to function as a party rather than as a non-aggression pact or an electoral alliance. Far left organisations which participate in it must not seek to hegemonise it by using organisational means to win political arguments. We are not aware of any other current on the radical left which has drawn similar conclusions and feel that our links with the FI were essential in developing these views which our shared now by many in the ACI and ISN.

Conclusion

We think that the Fourth International has done more than any other Marxist current to both retain the essential principles of the revolutionary tradition and to take into account the fact that the early 21st century is not the same as the early 20th century. We have absorbed the significance of climate change and feminism for revolutionary Marxism. We examined in great detail the absolute centrality of democracy and pluralism in socialist organisations and post capitalist societies. In much of Europe we are responding to the slow decay of social democracy by actively engaging in the new left parties that are emerging in response. There is no hidden agenda in our wishing to retain a link with our comrades in other parts of the world. We feel that this connection will do nothing but contribute to the strengthening and political development of a new organisation.

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P.S.

* November 3, 2013:

<http://socialistresistance.org/the-fourth-international-and-socialist-resistance/5595>

Footnotes

[1] <http://www.internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article179>

[2] <http://www.internationalviewpoint.org>

[3] ESSF (article 16645), [Fourth International: The International becomes a perspective](#).

[4] <http://socialistresistance.org/we-want-syriza-to-win/3628>

[5] <http://www.internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article921>

[6] Idem.

[7] <http://socialistresistance.org/broad-parties-and-the-fight-for-left-unity-in-britain/5219>