

What internationalism do we need today?

Thursday 8 February 2024, by [KELLAWAY Dave](#) (Date first published: 29 January 2024).

Dave Kellaway discusses what we mean by internationalism today. We will be discussing all this and more this Saturday, 3 February online and in London.

I remember in the 1970s someone asking Tariq Ali why he was in the International Marxist Group and a supporter of the Fourth International – a party organised on a worldwide basis. His response is still valid today. He said he was an internationalist because he felt far closer to a Bolivian peasant demanding land reform, a dissident fighting for democracy in Stalinist Czechoslovakia or a French Renault worker occupying their factory, than to any British boss or capitalist.

Today Starmer is welcoming with open arms the Iceland Boss, Richard Walker. He fully supports the Labour Leader's vision of a national renewal, being the best party for British business and for defending decent moderate British values. Of course he applauds the eradication of Corbynist influence in Labour Party. Corbyn did challenge traditional notions of British nationalism. He put forward a progressive foreign policy and the need for international solidarity.

Corbyn was closer to the founding values and organisation of the labour movement and the left. Marx and Engels never, ever considered that workers would organise solely on a national basis. The International Workingmen's Association, described by Engels as "the first international movement of the working class" was persuaded by Engels to change its motto from the League of the Just, "all men are brothers" to "working men of all countries, unite!". It reflected Marx's and Engels' view of proletarian internationalism. Their analysis of the global nature of capitalism logically meant that workers had to be organised on a global scale and that socialism could not be built in a single country. Their approach was adopted in a context where the global penetration of capital in every corner of the globe was only at an early stage. The ecological crisis makes their internationalism even more correct; borders do not stop pollution or global warming. Consequently their understanding is even more relevant today. The Communist Manifesto ends with the slogan, 'Workers of the World Unite'.

When the First International broke up in disputes with the anarchists, the left did not retreat to building solely national parties. The Second International was set up which contained a whole range of left positions from reformist to revolutionary. You just have to go back and read the reports and documents of the first four Third International Congresses to get a sense of an authentic, vibrant internationalism. As Stalin consolidated his power, any democratic discussion was effectively closed down. International structures became transmission belts for what Stalin wanted. During what was called the Third Period, Stalin took an ultra left turn. He pushed the German Communist Party – the biggest and most powerful – to call the more reformist Social Democratic party social fascists. Any campaign for a united front to stop the rise of Hitler and actual fascism was sabotaged. Later on, but too late to stop Hitler's fascist victory, Stalin flip flopped to a popular front line which meant alliances based not on the working class, peasants and some of the middle layers, but agreements with the anti-fascist, 'national' wings of the bourgeoisie.

Trotsky, in some of his finest political writing, reported on this disaster. He predicted more or less

the trajectory of events, despite not even being in the country. He drew the conclusion that the Third International was dead and that a Fourth was necessary. The actual setting up of that body came a decade or so later in an extremely difficult period when fascism was still in power and the Second World War was already underway. Building it was particularly difficult after the Second World War when the revolution expected by most Trotskyists did not take place and the prestige of the Stalinists gained in fight against fascism delayed their demise until decades later.

Internationalism exists outside of the organisation of left currents who call themselves Marxists. Social liberal parties like the Labour party or the Italian Democratic party will put out statements occasionally in support of workers or peasant struggles in other countries. However even such vague, feel good declarations are less and less frequent. The Labour party at the time of the [Chilean coup in 1973](#) did officially support the refugees and some solidarity actions. Similarly it opposed Apartheid and supported Mandela. But in both these cases its official bodies did not really put much energy and resources into building mass solidarity. Internationalism is not high on the agenda. Labour is particularly reluctant to break with US foreign policy. Wilson's refusal to send UK troops to Vietnam and his lukewarm attitude to US intervention in Vietnam was probably the last time this happened. Starmer's criminal support for the Israeli genocidal offensive in Palestine today exemplifies the extinction of even minimal international, humanitarian gestures. In fact it is totally cynical, calling for the need for a truce today but defending Israel's right to continue the bombing (its 'right to self defence'). Lisa Nandy weeps in Palestine but refuses to call for a ceasefire.

We have seen that there is another story of internationalism shown at the grass roots by campaigns or trade unions. Workers in Scotland blockaded vital aircraft parts needed by the Chilean fascist junta. Today Amazon workers are building links across the world. Local unions and trades councils have linked up with local communities in countries where big struggles have taken place like Nicaragua, [Cuba](#) or [Kurdistan](#). There were mass movements on Vietnam, South Africa and against the war in Iraq. The radical left outside Labour has shown its historical usefulness by being instrumental in the mass impact of these campaigns. It has continued that role today over Palestine.

However some international campaigning has also been tainted by a campist view of the world. This is when solidarity is organised without a problem where the US or British imperialists are the main invaders or allies of oppressive states. However where the situation is more complex and there are other imperialisms like Russia or China involved, a much weaker or wrong response is evident. Sometimes it is even worse when workers' struggles in some countries are not supported because the regimes oppose US imperialism or are allied with Russia or China.

So in Syria the role of Russia is not highlighted or opposed and the reality of the revolution against Assad is denied. Over Ukraine demonstrations are not organised against Russia and the resistance to the invasion is not supported on the false basis that the Ukrainian regime is just a proxy for US imperialism. So some on the left deny the agency of Ukrainians, make pacifist calls for peace talks and refuse to support arming the resistance to the occupation. The old Marxist slogan that was absolutely correct in the First World War – the enemy is at home – is crudely copied and pasted onto a much more complex situation.

[Campism](#) is also alive and well in relation to solidarity with Latin American countries. Originally the Nicaraguan solidarity campaign did tremendous work supporting the FSLN and its fight for social progress and against US imperialist intervention. However the [Ortega regime](#) has repressed and killed people during mass protests for democracy and imprisoned many, including ex FSLN leader – even one who helped lead a successful attack that freed Ortega from prison! If you read the solidarity sites you find no mention of the repression. The Cuban Solidarity Campaign similarly does not provide much information about political prisoners in Cuba. Yes the US blockade contributes greatly to the dire state of the economy and the penury but its role does not explain everything. The

solidarity campaign with Venezuela also looks at the regime through rose colored spectacles.

How can we build strong but critically informed solidarity campaigns today? How can we build better links between unions? The international hard right or neo fascist front is coordinating increasingly effectively. Left forces are much less well organised. We have some initiatives like the Progressive International but this is not an international like the Second or Third Internationals but rather a social media exchange of views. Often such initiatives can organise interesting meetings but there is a sort of protocol that prohibits intervening in the affairs of sovereign countries. I noticed they organised something where the main Brazilian speakers were basically from the Lula government. The left in Brazil is much wider than this.

Building an international today with revolutionary currents is not unproblematic. Even with such minority movements you can observe how the biggest organisations in one country or another find it difficult to allow truly democratic debate which allows for its views to become a minority tendency in one section of another. Several Trotskyist attempts at Internationals have collapsed because of this command type sectarian organisation. Small minority currents need to be aware that you are not an already formed embryo of some future International. You need to have an approach that is more open to other currents, including those from outside the Leninist or Trotskyist traditions. We do not need a propaganda organisation that puts out endless portentous statements about every political event. We need a useful international where radical activists can learn from each other and our history so as to more effectively build a socialist project through trade union, community, feminist, anti-racist, LGBT+ struggles and campaigns.

If you are interested in the issues raised in this article, you may find the discussion at the Internationalism Today day school organised by Anti*Capitalist Resistance this Saturday, 3rd February, interesting.

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P.S.

- Anti*Capitalist Resistance. 29 Jan 2024 :
<https://anticapitalistresistance.org/what-internationalism-do-we-need-today/>
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