

The bicentenary of Marx's birth, socialism and the resurgence of the international class struggle

David North
3 January 2018

"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, and consciousness is something that it *has* to acquire, even if it does not want to." [Karl Marx to Arnold Ruge, September 1843]

"The weapon of criticism cannot, of course, replace criticism by weapons, material force must be overthrown by material force; but theory also becomes a material force as soon as it has gripped the masses." [*Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law*, 1844]

"The *emancipation of the German* is the *emancipation of the human being*. The *head* of this emancipation is *philosophy*, its *heart* is the *proletariat*. Philosophy cannot be made a reality without the abolition of the proletariat, the proletariat cannot be abolished without philosophy being made a reality." [*Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law*, 1844]

"It is not a question of what this or that proletarian, or even the whole proletariat, at the moment *regards* as its aim. It is a question of *what the proletariat is*, and what, in accordance with this *being*, it will historically be compelled to do." [*The Holy Family*, 1844]

"Together with the thoroughness of the historical action, the size of the mass whose action it is will therefore increase." [*The Holy Family*, 1844]

"The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles." [*The Manifesto of the Communist Party*, 1847]

"Let the ruling classes tremble at a Communist revolution. The proletarians have nothing to lose but their chains. They have a world to win. WORKING MEN OF ALL COUNTRIES, UNITE!" [*The Manifesto of the Communist Party*, 1847]

1. This year marks the 200th anniversary of the birth of Karl Marx, the originator of the materialist conception of history, the author of *Das Kapital* and, with Friedrich Engels, the founder of the modern revolutionary socialist movement. Born on May 5, 1818 in the Prussian city of Trier, Marx was, to quote Lenin, "the genius who continued and consummated the three main ideological currents of the nineteenth century, as represented by the three most advanced countries of mankind: classical German philosophy, classical English political economy, and French socialism combined with French revolutionary doctrines in general." [1]

2. Marx died in London on March 14, 1883 at the age of 64. By that time, he and Engels had placed utopian socialist aspirations on a scientific foundation and laid the basis for a revolutionary political movement of the

international working class. Between 1843 and 1847, Marx carried out a revolution in theoretical thought that overcame both the limitations of the predominantly mechanical materialism of the eighteenth century and the idealist mystifications of Hegel's dialectical logic.

3. Extending philosophical materialism into the realm of history and social relations, Marx *proved* that the necessity of socialism arose out of the lawful development of the inherent contradictions of the capitalist system. He did not claim to have discovered the class struggle as a motivating force in history. His world-changing contribution to the understanding of history, as Marx himself explained in 1852, was "1. to show that the *existence of classes* is merely bound up with *certain historical phases in the development of production*; 2. that the class struggle necessarily leads to the *dictatorship of the proletariat*; 3. that this dictatorship itself constitutes no more than a transition to the *abolition of all classes* and to a *classless society*." [2]

4. Had Marx laid down his pen following the writing of *The Communist Manifesto*, his place in history would still have been assured. But what elevated him to the stature of a world historical figure was the writing of *Das Kapital*, which substantiated the materialist conception of history. In the 150 years that have passed since the publication of its first volume in 1867, several generations of bourgeois economists have devoted their professional lives to refuting Marx's work. In vain! Their efforts are confounded not only by the force of Marx's dialectical methodology and historical insight, but also, and even more, by the reality of capitalist crisis. However much the professors may protest, the capitalist world "moves" as Marx explained. Each assault on *Das Kapital* is invariably followed by a new practical demonstration of the insoluble economic and social contradictions of the capitalist system.

5. The last such lesson, which continues to this day, began with the global crash of 2008. The essential categories and concepts of Marxian political economy—such as *labor power*, *constant and variable capital*, *surplus value*, the *declining rate of profit*, *exploitation*, the *fetishism of commodities*, the *industrial reserve army*, and the *relative and absolute impoverishment of the proletariat*—are required not only for a scientific understanding of capitalism, but even for a basic understanding of daily political, economic and social developments.

6. One can be certain that the bicentenary of Marx's birth will be marked by numerous academic seminars in which professors will poke around at Marx's theories. Many of them will focus on what they claim to be his errors or omissions. There will be some, a small minority, who will praise Marx's work. But the truest and most objective appraisal of Marx's life will take place outside the classrooms.

7. *This new year of 2018—the bicentenary of Marx's birth—will be characterized, above all, by an immense intensification of social tensions and an escalation of class conflict around the world.* For several decades,

and especially since the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, the resistance of the working class to capitalist exploitation has been suppressed. But the essential contradictions of the capitalist system—between a globally interdependent economy and the archaic bourgeois nation-state system; between a worldwide network of social production, involving the labor of billions of human beings, and private ownership of the means of production; and between the essential needs of mass society and the selfish interests of individual capitalist money-making—are now rapidly approaching the point where the further suppression of mass working class opposition to capitalism is impossible.

8. The level of wealth concentration in a small layer of the population has reached historically unprecedented levels. This is a global process. The world's richest one percent owns half the world's wealth. [3] The richest 500 individuals have, as of December 2017, a combined wealth of \$5.3 trillion, up \$1 trillion from 2016. [4] In the United States, three people—Jeff Bezos, Bill Gates and Warren Buffett—have more money than the bottom half of the population. In China, 38 billionaires added \$177 billion to their personal wealth in 2017. Despite economic sanctions imposed by the United States and Western Europe, Russia's 27 billionaires added \$29 billion to their collective wealth. Carlos Slim, the richest man in Mexico, increased his wealth to \$62.8 billion, an increase of \$12.9 billion over the previous year.

9. The distinctive feature of these massive fortunes is that they are bound up with the staggering rise on equity markets over the past 35 years, and especially since the 2008 Wall Street crash. The US Federal Reserve's policy of "quantitative easing" and the low interest rate policies of global central banks have led to a nearly four-fold rise of the Dow Jones Average over the past decade. In 2017, the explosive rise in the value of US equities was bound up with the expectation—which has since been realized—of a massive tax cut for the rich.

10. The enrichment of those at the summit of the capitalist oligarchy proceeds alongside the impoverishment of the broad mass of the world's population. According to a report published by Credit Suisse, "At the other end of the spectrum, the world's 3.5 billion poorest adults each have assets of less than \$10,000 (£7,600). Collectively these people, who account for 70 percent of the world's working age population, account for just 2.7 percent of global wealth." [5]

11. This gross disparity in wealth is not merely an unfortunate and reparable blemish on the face of contemporary capitalism. The extreme inequality is the consummate expression of the bankruptcy of the existing social system. Amidst all the urgent social needs of modern-day mass society—for education, housing, care for the aged, universal and high-quality medical care, development of advanced mass transportation systems, protection of the endangered global ecosystem, etc.—incomprehensibly vast resources are being squandered to satisfy the obscene and brainless whims of the superrich and their progeny. Resources that should be deployed to build schools, affordable housing, water treatment plants and hospitals, or to fund museums, orchestras and other vital cultural institutions, are being wasted on mansions, yachts, jewelry and countless other vulgar extravagances.

12. The modern capitalist ruling elites have themselves become an absolute impediment to the progressive development of human society. The growth of their personal wealth has acquired a grimly metastatic character, which provokes popular revulsion and portends the downfall of the system. The present state of affairs is *irrational*, in precisely the sense of the word as employed by Engels to describe the French monarchy on the eve of the revolution that was to sweep the aristocracy from power:

In 1789 the French monarchy had become so unreal, that is to say, so robbed of all necessity, so irrational, that it had to be destroyed by the Great Revolution, of which Hegel always speaks

with the greatest enthusiasm. In this case, therefore, the monarchy was the unreal and the revolution the real. And so, in the course of development, all that was previously real becomes unreal, loses its necessity, its right of existence, its rationality. And in the face of moribund reality comes a new, viable reality—peacefully if the old has enough common sense to go to its death without a struggle; forcibly if it resists this necessity. [6]

13. It requires no great political insight to predict that the corporate and financial oligarchs will stop at nothing to defend their wealth. Accustomed to imposing their will upon society, they will respond to any sign of popular resistance with violent repression. Nevertheless, there are no major contemporary political and social issues—including mass unemployment, poverty, social inequality, escalating attacks on basic democratic rights, the mounting danger of an ecological catastrophe, unrestrained imperialist militarism and the threat of nuclear war—that can be solved within the framework of capitalism. Indeed, any serious attempt to implement desperately needed social reforms would require, at a minimum, the expropriation of massive private fortunes and a far-reaching redistribution of wealth. As long as the capitalist class holds state power, however, such reforms are impossible. Thus, the fight of the working class to defend its interests leads, as Marx foresaw, to social revolution.

14. The conquest of state power by the Russian working class in October 1917 substantiated the materialist conception of history and the political perspective elaborated by Marx and Engels in *The Communist Manifesto*. But the October Revolution was not simply the spontaneous outcome of an objective historical process. The victory of the working class depended upon the leadership of a Marxist political party that based itself on an international revolutionary strategy. Without such leadership, the socialist revolution cannot achieve victory, no matter how great the crisis of the capitalist system. At the Second Congress of the Communist International in 1920, Lenin warned the delegates that there were no "absolutely hopeless" situations for the ruling class.

The attempt to "prove" "absolute" hopelessness in advance is empty pedantry or juggling with concepts and words. Only experience can provide a real "proof" of this or similar questions. The bourgeois order is now undergoing an exceptional revolutionary crisis all over the world. We must now "prove" through the practice of the revolutionary parties that they are sufficiently conscious, that they possess sufficient organization, links with the exploited masses, determination and understanding to utilize this crisis for a successful and victorious revolution. [7]

15. Lenin's warning was tragically confirmed. In the years and decades that followed the October Revolution, there was no shortage of revolutionary situations that raised the possibility of the working class taking power. Despite two devastating world wars, mass popular uprisings all over the globe, and numerous episodes of severe economic instability and total breakdown, the survival of capitalism in the twentieth century is attributable, in the final analysis, to the absence of the necessary revolutionary political leadership in the working class.

16. With the outbreak of World War I, the Social Democratic parties of the Second International passed over to the side of imperialism, accepted the program of "national defense," and betrayed the post-war revolutionary upsurge of the working class. Within the Soviet Union, the growth of the Stalinist bureaucracy led to the destruction of the Third (Communist) International. The Stalinist program of "socialism in one country," unveiled in 1924, led to the subordination of the Third

International to the national interests of the Soviet state as determined by the ruling bureaucracy.

17. The transformation of the Social Democratic and Stalinist parties into political agencies of imperialism led to devastating defeats of the international working class in the 1920s and 1930s. The worst of these defeats were the destruction of the Chinese Communist Party in 1927, the victory of the Nazis in 1933 and the crushing of the socialist movement in Germany, and the betrayal of the Spanish Revolution and the coming to power of the fascist regime of Franco (1936–39).

18. In 1938, Leon Trotsky founded the Fourth International. This was the culmination of his political struggle, dating back to 1923, against the Stalinist regime's nationalist perversion of socialism, suppression of workers' democracy, and abandonment of the program of world socialist revolution. In the founding document of the new International, Trotsky identified "the crisis of revolutionary leadership" as the central problem of the transition from capitalism to socialism.

19. Eighty years later, in a new period of escalating global crisis of the capitalist system and increasing militancy of the working class, the question must be raised: What are the prospects for the resolution of the crisis of revolutionary leadership? Is it possible for the Fourth International to win the allegiance of the advanced sections of the working class, socially conscious youth and the most progressive elements among the intelligentsia, and lead the mass struggles of the working class to victory in the world socialist revolution?

20. The answer to this question requires that the study of the problem of leadership be placed in a broader historical context.

21. Yet another anniversary will be observed this year: the fiftieth anniversary of the events of May–June 1968, the mass general strike that brought capitalist France to the very brink of a socialist revolution. The events of 1968 still resonate in popular imagination: in addition to the mass protests and general strike in France, it was the year of the Tet Offensive in Vietnam, extreme instability in the United States (expressed in two political assassinations and the outbreak of riots in major American cities), and the anti-Stalinist Prague Spring in Czechoslovakia, which was suppressed in August by the armed intervention of the USSR and the Warsaw Pact.

22. The events of 1968 set into motion a process of international working class radicalization. The period between 1968 and 1975 was marked by the greatest international revolutionary movement of the post-World War II era, including strike waves in Italy, Germany, Britain, Argentina and the United States. The Social Democrats formed their first government in Germany since the victory of Hitler's Nazis. The Allende government came to power in Chile in September 1970. A miners' strike in Britain in the winter of 1973–74 forced the resignation of the right-wing Tory government. The Greek military junta was overthrown in July 1974. Facing impeachment, Richard Nixon resigned from the American presidency in August 1974. The fascist regime that had been in power in Portugal since 1926 collapsed in April 1975. The death of Franco in November 1975 exposed the fragility, not only of the old dictatorship, but of capitalist rule in Spain. Powerful anti-imperialist movements of national liberation swept through the Middle East and Africa.

23. And yet, despite the international scope of these mass struggles, the capitalist system not only survived the upheaval, it was able to inflict defeats (as in the overthrow of the Allende regime in Chile in 1973) and lay the basis for a counter-offensive against the working class. This was begun by the ruling class in the late 1970s with the coming to power of Margaret Thatcher (followed shortly thereafter by the election of Ronald Reagan).

24. The survival of capitalism amidst the global upheavals between 1968 and 1975 depended, above all, on the fact that the Stalinist and Social Democratic parties and trade unions were still the dominant forces in the mass workers' movements of the time. With memberships that

numbered in the millions, they employed their bureaucratic power to restrain, divert, undermine, and, where necessary, orchestrate the actual defeat of the struggles of the working class. The Stalinist regime in the Soviet Union and the Maoist regime in China systematically falsified Marxism and used all the resources at their disposal to subvert revolutionary movements that threatened their efforts to improve relations with the United States and other imperialist powers. Within the less developed countries, the Stalinist and Maoist regimes sought to maintain the influence of various bourgeois national movements over the working class, thus undermining the struggle against capitalism and imperialism.

25. During this critical period, the International Committee of the Fourth International fought against the political influence of Stalinism, Social Democracy and bourgeois nationalism. But it did so under conditions of extreme political isolation that were imposed upon the International Committee not only by the large bureaucratic organizations of the Social Democrats and Stalinists, but also by the insidious political role of the opportunist organizations that had broken with Trotskyism in the 1950s and early 1960s.

26. Named after the principal theoretician of anti-Trotskyist revisionism, the Pabloite organizations specifically rejected the necessity of building independent revolutionary parties of the working class based on the program of the Fourth International. Michel Pablo and his principal political associate, Ernest Mandel, rejected Trotsky's characterization of the Stalinist bureaucracy as counterrevolutionary. They argued that the Soviet bureaucracy, under the pressure of objective events and the spontaneous movement of the masses, could be compelled to carry out revolutionary policies. Similarly, the pressure of objective events could compel the Social Democrats and bourgeois nationalists to play a revolutionary role.

27. The conclusion that was to be drawn from these far-reaching revisions of Trotskyism was that there was no need to build the Fourth International. The Pabloites found and glorified countless "alternatives" to Trotskyism, such as Castro in Cuba and Ben Bella in Algeria. For refusing to accept the political liquidation of the Fourth International, the Pabloites denounced the International Committee as "ultra-left sectarians."

28. Fifty years ago the Social Democrats, the Stalinists, the Maoists, and various forms of bourgeois nationalism exerted immense influence over the working class and mass anti-imperialist movements. But what remains of these organizations today?

29. The Soviet Union no longer exists, and the global network of Stalinist parties has largely disappeared. In China, the Communist Party is the political and state organization of the capitalist ruling elite. The Social Democratic parties are virtually indistinguishable from the most right-wing bourgeois parties. Nowhere do workers see them as defenders of their interests. To the extent that the Social Democrats attempt to preserve a shred of credibility by executing a feint to the left (i.e., Corbyn in Britain), this fraudulent exercise will be exposed as a sham as soon as they are elevated into a position of political power, as occurred in Greece.

30. As for the bourgeois nationalist movements, nothing remains of their anti-imperialist and anti-capitalist pretensions. The evolution of the African National Congress into the ruling party of South Africa—ruthlessly defending the interests of the rich and shooting down striking workers—is the quintessential expression of the historical trajectory and class essence of bourgeois nationalism.

31. Finally, the Pabloite organizations, along with the various movements that comprise the pseudo-left, have integrated themselves into the bourgeois political establishment—expressed most clearly in the rise to power of Syriza (The Coalition of the Radical Left) in Greece, where it enforces the austerity measures and anti-immigrant policies demanded by the European banks.

32. The explanation for the political decay and downfall of these organizations is to be found in the deep-rooted contradiction between their

provincial national-reformist programs and the development of capitalism as a globally integrated economic system.

33. The common political element of the Stalinist, Maoist, Social Democratic, bourgeois nationalist and Pabloite opportunist organizations was the dependence of their programs on the possibility of achieving reforms within the economic framework of the national state. As the process of economic globalization accelerated in the 1980s, the perspective and program of these nationally grounded organizations lost all viability.

34. The potential for the successful resolution of the crisis of working class leadership resides in the alignment of the program of the International Committee of the Fourth International with the objective process of global economic development and the international development of the class struggle. This is the real basis for the vast change, since 1968, in the relationship of political forces between Trotskyism, as represented by the International Committee of the Fourth International, and all the political representatives of anti-Marxism and pseudo-leftism.

35. Thirty years ago, in the aftermath of its expulsion of the final remnants of Pabloite opportunism from the Fourth International, the International Committee developed the international political analysis that was to guide its work in the decades that followed. This perspective, published in 1988, insisted that revolutionary parties of the working class could be developed only on the basis of an international program that corresponded to the objective tendencies of capitalist development. It explained that the “massive development of transnational corporations and the resulting global integration of capitalist production have produced an unprecedented uniformity in the conditions confronting the workers of the world.” [8]

36. The International Committee drew from this analysis the following strategic conclusion:

It has long been an elementary proposition of Marxism that the class struggle is national only as to its form, but that it is, in essence, an international struggle. However, given the new features of capitalist development, even the *form* of the class struggle must assume an international character. Even the most elemental struggles of the working class pose the necessity of coordinating its actions on an international scale. [9]

37. At the Thirteenth National Congress of the Workers League (predecessor of the Socialist Equality Party in the United States) in August 1988, the practical implications of this analysis were explained:

The search for national solutions to the international crisis leads inevitably to the subordination of each national labor movement to the trade war policies of the bourgeoisie. There is no way out of this impasse except on the basis of revolutionary internationalism, and we mean by this not the invocation of holiday phrases. The supreme strategical task that confronts the Trotskyist movement is the unification of the working class of the entire world into what Trotsky once referred to as “a single international proletarian organization of revolutionary action having one world center and one world political orientation.”

We do not conceive of this as some sort of utopian mission. Our scientific analysis of the epoch and the nature of the present world crisis convinces us not only that this unification of the proletariat is possible; but also that only a party whose daily work is based upon this strategic orientation can become rooted in the working class.

We anticipate that the next stage of proletarian struggles will develop inexorably, beneath the combined pressure of objective economic tendencies and the subjective influence of Marxists, along an internationalist trajectory. The proletariat will tend more and more to define itself in practice as an international class; and the Marxian internationalists, whose policies are the expression of this organic tendency, will cultivate this process and give it conscious form. [10]

38. On the basis of this analysis, the International Committee implemented significant changes in its organizational and practical work. Until 1995 the sections of the International Committee existed as *leagues*. In June of that year, the Workers League in the United States established the Socialist Equality Party, a change in organizational form that expressed, in the midst of the crisis and breakdown of the old mass bureaucratic organizations, the emergence of a new relationship between the revolutionary Marxist tendency and the working class. The selection of the name for the new party identified the struggle for equality as the great aim of socialism and anticipated the popular outrage against capitalist inequality. In the months that followed, all the sections of the International Committee carried through the same political reorganization. Following the transformation of the old leagues into parties, the International Committee adopted a new form of political work, utilizing the communications technology associated with the development of the Internet. The launching of the *World Socialist Web Site*, almost exactly twenty years ago, in February 1998, was a truly revolutionary political initiative. As the International Committee explained:

We are confident that the WSWS will become an unprecedented tool for the political education and unification of the working class on an international scale. It will help working people of different countries coordinate their struggles against capital, just as the transnational corporations organize their war against labor across national boundaries. It will facilitate discussion between workers of all nations, allowing them to compare their experiences and elaborate a common strategy.

The ICFI expects the world audience for the *World Socialist Web Site* to grow as the Internet expands. As a rapid and global form of communication, the Internet has extraordinary democratic and revolutionary implications. It can enable a mass audience to gain access to the intellectual resources of the world, from libraries and archives to museums. [11]

39. The daily publication of the *World Socialist Web Site* over a period of 20 years is, by any objective measurement, an extraordinary political achievement. The ability of the cadre of the International Committee to sustain publication for such an extended period of time, *without missing a single day of scheduled publication*, testifies to its theoretical and political clarity and its considerable organizational unity and strength. There is not another publication in the world that even remotely resembles the *World Socialist Web Site*. It is not only the socialist publication of record, analyzing and commenting on the main events of the day. It is also the strategist and tribune of the working class in struggle.

40. During the past year, Google has sought to blacklist and censor the *World Socialist Web Site*. These efforts are failing. The readership of the WSWS continues to grow. It is drawing strength from the emerging movement of the working class and the youth.

41. The past is prologue. All the theoretical, political and practical work of the International Committee has been the preparation for the resurgence

of the international class struggle. The overriding task is to build a revolutionary leadership, systematically, consciously and aggressively. It is on this task that a progressive resolution to the basic question facing mankind—socialism or barbarism—depends. The challenge of 2018 is to expand the work of the International Committee of the Fourth International, to extend the reach of its sections among workers and youth entering into struggle, to win new forces to the program of World Socialist Revolution, and to undertake their education in the history and world scientific outlook of Marxism. The International Committee of the Fourth International will celebrate the bicentenary of the birth of Karl Marx in accordance with his most famous maxim:

“The philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point, however, is to change it.”

Footnotes:

[1] Karl Marx,” in *Collected Works*, Volume 20 (Moscow, 1964), p. 50

[2] Letter of Karl Marx to Joseph Weydemeyer, March 5, 1852 in *Marx-Engels Collected Works* (New York, 1983), Volume 39, pp. 64–65

[3] “Richest 1% own half the world’s wealth, study finds,” in <https://www.theguardian.com/inequality/2017/nov/14/worlds-richest-wealth-credit-suisse>

[4] “World’s Wealthiest Became \$1 Trillion Richer in 2017,” in *Bloomberg*, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2017-12-27/world-s-wealthiest-gain-1-trillion-in-17-on-market-exuberance>

[5]

<https://www.theguardian.com/inequality/2017/nov/14/worlds-richest-wealth-credit-suisse>

[6] *Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy* in *Marx-Engels Collected Works*, Volume 26 (Moscow, 1990), pp. 358-59

[7] *The Second Congress of the Communist International*, Volume 1 (London: 1977), p. 24

[8] “The World Capitalist Crisis and the Tasks of the Fourth International,” *Fourth International*, Volume 15, Nos. 3-5, July-December 1988, p. 4

[9] Ibid

[10] David North, “Report to the Workers League Thirteenth National Congress,” *Fourth International*, Vol. 15, Nos. 3-4, July-December 1988, pp. 38-39

[11] <https://www.wsws.org/en/special/about.html>



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)