

## Report to Seventh Congress of Socialist Equality Party (US)

**Build rank-and-file committees, the organs of 21st century working class struggle!**

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*The following is a report given by Eric London to the Seventh Congress of the Socialist Equality Party (US) in support of the resolution titled "Build the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees! For a global counteroffensive of the working class!"*

*London is a member of the national committee of the SEP. Read the full report on the Congress and the resolutions adopted at it.*

I speak to urge this congress to adopt the resolution "Build the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees! For a global counteroffensive of the working class!"

The passage of this resolution would be an important step forward for the party and the working class. The IWA-RFC is the necessary initiative for facilitating the democratic self-organization of rank-and-file workers and unleashing the independent strength of the working class on a world scale.

The necessity of the IWA-RFC for the international working class is being confirmed by the experiences of the party since its foundation in May of 2021. The IWA-RFC and its affiliated committees are the organizational form through which the billions-strong modern world proletariat will articulate its interests, unite across national boundaries and bring the decades-long social counterrevolution to an end. Through the IWA-RFC, the working class will gain consciousness of its role as the progressive social force to launch, broaden and *sustain* a globally coordinated counteroffensive capable of cutting a path to world socialist revolution.

In his opening report, Comrade North emphasized that the party is not preparing for some future crisis, but rather that a crisis of epochal proportions is already well underway. The capitalist class is dragging the world from catastrophe to ever greater catastrophe. The war, the pandemic, the economic crisis, the collapse of bourgeois democracy, the scarcity of food, the destruction of the planet, all make clear that the capitalist class is prepared to sacrifice billions of people, is willing to risk wiping out all of human civilization, to erase all our advances in production, art, music, literature and science, in order to protect the wealth it has amassed through centuries of exploitation.

We are correct to stress the profound dangers that arise from this crisis. We must sound the alarm. But any sense of fatalism or hopelessness about the present situation would be entirely out of place and profoundly damaging to the interests of the working class and to the fate of the revolution. We will leave self-pity to the petty-bourgeois types for whom resignation is a justification for the abandonment of those principles that get in the way of a nice and easy life.

Such an attitude has nothing to do with reality. We understand that there is a way out of this crisis, and that the greater the degree of recklessness, desperation, and madness in the conduct of the ruling class, the more ripe or over-ripe conditions are for the revolutionary transformation of global

society. That is the starting point for Marxists.

The dangers are great, but the working class of the 21st century is the most economically powerful, internationally interconnected, technologically advanced working class the world has ever known. The existing productive forces are so advanced, the scientific gains of mankind are so impressive, that the permanent elimination of scarcity is possible, if the productive forces can be freed from private ownership and the nation-state system.

The exponentially rapid development of technology over the last 30 years, and in particular the rise of cheap, mass access to the internet, and, to a similar extent, large container shipping, have transformed social existence.

In the last decade, this objective social process has found expression in three great insurrectionary waves which have spread across the world, each enveloping more and more people in more and more countries than the last. These upsurges make clear that all the political parties of the capitalist class and all the forces relied on to suppress the class struggle over the course of the 20th century have lost their ability to suppress the class struggle. The Stalinists, the Social Democrats, trade unions and the bourgeois nationalists are viewed by this young and urban working class as responsible for their deplorable conditions. The Comintern no longer exists to suffocate and misdirect the workers movement like it did during the revolutionary upheavals of the 1930s, whose defeat set the stage for the Great Terror, World War Two, the Holocaust, and Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Today, each wave shows the powerful and growing egalitarian and revolutionary aspirations of masses of people, while also making clear that these aspirations cannot be met on the basis of spontaneous anger and courage alone.

The first wave was the 2011 Arab Spring, which involved tens of millions of people across the Maghreb. The second was the mass protests of 2018-19, which involved hundreds of millions and was not limited to any one region, and took place in dozens of countries, including Chile, Lebanon, Sudan, Iraq, Ecuador, France, and elsewhere. The second wave of spontaneous protest carried forward the unmet grievances from the first in an even more explosive form. But like the Arab Spring, this second wave did not result in any lasting change to the living conditions of masses of people.

The ruling class responded to "pressure from below" not by making society more democratic, not by making economic concessions, but by cracking skulls. Trotsky described periods such as this as periods of the "highest flowering of the counterrevolutionary strategy of the bourgeoisie. We must understand this clearly and precisely," Trotsky wrote. "Counter-revolutionary strategy, i.e. the art of waging a combined struggle against the proletariat by every method from saccharine, professorial-clerical

preachments to machine-gunning of strikers, has never attained such heights as it does today.”

In our January 2020 statement “The Decade of Socialist Revolution Begins,” Comrades Kishore and North cite a quotation from a leading intelligence firm which referenced the emergence of what they called “leaderless revolutions” in the wave of social protest that swept the world from 2018 to 2019, on the eve of the pandemic. But our task is to ensure that the emerging global upsurge must not remain “leaderless.”

Leaderless revolutions will fail. In his 1921 speech to the Third Congress of the Comintern, titled “A School of Revolutionary Strategy,” Trotsky writes the following:

The bourgeoisie, even though it finds itself in a complete contradiction with the demands of historical progress, nevertheless still remains the most powerful class. More than that, it may be said that politically the bourgeoisie attains its greatest powers, its greatest concentration of forces and resources, of political and military means of deception, of coercion, and provocation, i.e., the flowering of its class strategy, at the moment when it is most immediately threatened by social ruin. The war and its terrible consequences—and the war sprang precisely from the fact that the productive forces had no room to develop further within the framework of bourgeois society—the war and its consequences, have confronted the bourgeoisie with the terrible threat of destruction. This has rendered its instinct of class self-preservation sensitive in the extreme. The greater the danger, all the more does the class, like the individual, exert its vital forces in the struggle for self-preservation. ... They act the more resourcefully, cunningly, ruthlessly, all the more clearly their leaders take cognizance of the threatening danger.

Armed with this understanding, the Socialist Equality Party faces the emergence of a third wave of revolutionary upheavals. We are not a party that waits for revolution to emerge automatically out of objective events. We are a revolution making party.

Today, after the shock of the pandemic, this third wave of social protest is even more powerful than the first two. Intensified by the devastating social, economic and personal impact of the pandemic, war-related shortages and increasingly common extreme weather events, this wave of protest will involve not millions or hundreds of millions but billions of people.

This world movement is not isolated to any country or region. It emerged rapidly, in a span of weeks. Lenin and Trotsky said after the Russian Revolution that capitalism was breaking “at its weakest link.” Now workers are marching under banners written in all the languages of the world, this movement has united the very poorest informal workers in the global south with workers employed in the most advanced industries in the centers of world imperialism. It is not a question of one link breaking; the whole chain is coming undone.

The working class has passed through critical experiences in these three waves of social protest. The demands of the growing movement of the working class are not merely over contract issues, but more over fundamental social questions. Political issues are coming more to the fore. Sri Lanka is the tip of the spear of this process. The Sri Lankan masses are the first to begin to pose the social question which was posed by the Russian workers in 1917 and will soon be on the minds of billions: Which class shall rule the world?

The answer to this question will be determined by the work of our party in the coming period. The work of the Socialist Equality Party is the decisive factor in the resolution of the world crisis of capitalism. The

experiences of the party shows that achievements which would have been impossible in an earlier period are now possible. But they are not inevitable. They take place only when we fight for them, when we refuse to underestimate ourselves and what we can accomplish, when we *systematically* intervene in the struggles of the working class and fight alongside workers to show them why and what they are fighting, and to win them to socialism. This assessment must lead to a development of the work of the party, its branches, and to the work of each individual comrade. This report is aimed at supporting the resolution to build the IWA-RFC, and not as a timely tactical maneuver, but as a necessary element of the strategy of world socialist revolution.

## The international working class of the 21st century

The International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees is the organizational form that corresponds to the social character of the global working class of the 21st century. From 1980 to 2020, the development of the world’s productive forces increased the size of the working class by 2 billion people. A majority of the world’s population now lives in cities for the first time in world history and this figure rises by the millions each week.

Billions of workers who have moved from the backward countryside of India, China, Latin America and Africa into megacities have leapt forward centuries in single lifetimes. An estimated one billion African workers will enter the global labor force in the decades ahead.

Ninety percent of the world’s trade flows through a few dozen of the world’s largest megacities, where the working class occupies a position of immense potential power and is connected by the globalized process of production to workers in every corner of the world. In these cities, where inequality is laid out starkly for all to see and experience every day, the concentration of the working class gives them a power far greater than the sum of their parts. As the UK’s Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors wrote, “Urban areas can be epicentres of far-reaching change, whirlwinds of activity and learning, and drivers of change. But if they’re uncontrolled, they can also act as a distillation of enormous risk and potential instability. Where does revolution start? Always in the cities.”<sup>[1]</sup>

Just as slow and belated economic development fueled separatism and centrifugal tendencies in an earlier period of the growth of capitalism, today the process of globalization has done the opposite. It is creating similarities in living conditions across the world and forging the basis for unity in the social outlook of masses of working people regardless of nationality, race or ethnicity. This objective process has undermined the political basis for separatism and nationalism, making them seem archaic and irrational and facilitating the breakdown of the domination of the national trade unions and capitalist parties.

Breathtaking technological advances have also transformed the economy and opened new horizons for the development of political consciousness and human culture. Information and knowledge are now available on a scale whose social significance outpaces even that of the invention of Gutenberg’s printing press on the thinking of the peasants of 16th century Europe.

The democratic essence of social media, constrained as it is by corporate ownership of the various platforms, has so far released only a tiny portion of its revolutionary potential, and even this has been enough to help trigger waves of mass protests on a never-before-seen scale. Just as the printing press exploded the clergy’s monopoly on information, introduced masses of exploited peasants to Luther’s bible and triggered what was at that point the greatest revolutionary movement in world history, so today via the internet, the *World Socialist Web Site*, a beacon of truth in a world

of lies, is lighting more and more cell phones and computer screens and enlightening the rapidly opening minds of workers all over the world.

From 2000 to 2020, nearly 5 billion people accessed the internet, dealing an immense blow to national parochialism, social backwardness, illiteracy and the legacy of rural superstition. The time it took Twitter to reach 50 million users, for example, was nine months. It took the television 13 years to reach that many people, and radio 38 years.

Lenin, writing in *The Development of Capitalism in Russia*, recognized the profoundly revolutionary implications of the development of the national Russian economy and the emergence of a powerful urban working class out of the old agrarian and rural society:

All the changes referred to, which capitalism brings about in the old economic system, inevitably lead also to a change in the spiritual make-up of the population. The sporadic character of economic development, the rapid change in the methods of production and the enormous concentration of production, the disappearance of all forms of personal dependence and patriarchal relations, the mobility of the population, the influence of the big industrial centers, etc.—all this cannot but bring about a profound change in the very character of the [working class].

Lenin wrote these words in 1899, when the Russian working class consisted of a tiny portion of the population that was overwhelmingly rural and illiterate. Today, in the 21st century, the change in the character of the working class—its spiritual make-up, as Lenin so richly put it—is even more profound.

### The decade of socialist revolution

The past 20 years have witnessed an ever expanding and increasingly global movement of the working class. As the authors of the recent study *World Protests: A Study of Key Protest Issues in the 21st Century* note, “There are times in history when large numbers of people protest about the way things are, demanding change. It happened in 1830–1848, in 1917–1924, in the 1960s, and it is happening again today.”<sup>[2]</sup>

From the Arab Spring to the mass social protests of 2018–19 to the explosive protests of early 2022, hundreds of millions of workers have entered into the class struggle. In India, a 2020 general strike involved 250 million workers, the largest strike in history by an order of magnitude and more than the total population of all but four countries on earth.

According to the *World Protests* authors, not only has “the number of demonstrations increased steadily since 2006,” but “protests have become more political due to disappointments with malfunctioning democracies, frustration with politicians, and a lack of trust in governments.” The authors note that single-issue protests have been replaced by “‘omnibus protests’ in which demonstrators raised demands related to many issues.” The authors add, “There are also a number of international and global protests that happened in multiple countries simultaneously, and their number also keeps increasing steadily over the years.”<sup>[3]</sup>

The authors explain:

How did these grievances evolve over time? Beginning in 2006, there is a steady rise in overall protests each year up to 2020. Though generalizing is difficult, as the global financial crisis begins to unfold in 2007–2008, we observe an initial jump in the

number of protests. Protests intensified with the end of fiscal stimulus and the adoption of austerity cuts and cost-saving reforms worldwide after 2010, and they then peaked in 2012–2013. Protestors were primarily demonstrating for economic justice and anti-austerity reforms in the 2010–2014 period. Unresolved grievances, few decent jobs, poor social protection and public services, and failures of agrarian and tax justice, caused protests to become *more political*, sparking a new wave of protests starting in 2016, catalyzed by failures of democracies. Since 2016, protests have escalated, often becoming “omnibus protests” (protesting on multiple issues) against the political and economic system. Decades of neoliberal policies have generated more inequality, eroded incomes and welfare to both the lower and the middle classes, fueling frustration and feelings of injustice, disappointment with malfunctioning democracies and failures of economic and social development, and a lack of trust in governments. In 2020, the coronavirus pandemic has accentuated social unrest.

The analysts make another observation:

Our analysis shows that in the 2010–2014 period protestors primarily demonstrated for economic justice and against anti-austerity cuts. However, when their grievances were ignored, frustration set in due to the lack of jobs, inadequate social protection, poor public services, et cetera, such that protests turned more political. These failures of governments led to a new wave of protests starting in 2016–2017. The trend manifests itself in the Middle East and North Africa and in Latin America but is to be found in every region. In the Middle East and North Africa this tendency is even observed twice: there is a first inflection point in 2011 when failure of political representation protests begin to outnumber economic justice protests, then a second one in 2019, during what some observers have called the second Arab Spring. In both these instances protest events related to economic justice were very numerous, right up until protests against political failures exceeded them.<sup>[4]</sup>

This makes absolutely clear that the working class is looking for answers to the most fundamental political questions. This shows the importance of the IWA-RFC and the fight to introduce socialism into the struggles of the working class.

### The decline of the national trade unions

Over the decades in which the working class has grown immensely in size and economic weight, the national trade unions have not only failed to win a hearing, they have universally suffered declining membership and a collapse in legitimacy. This isn’t to suggest that workers in the trade unions are insignificant or that we should make them secondary in terms of our strategy, but the percentage of workers who belong to trade unions has fallen drastically on a global scale, from 36 percent of the international workforce in 1990 to 18 percent in 2016. In the United States, a third of private-sector workers were unionized in 1970, just 6 percent are today. In Western Africa, 35 percent of all workers were unionized in 1990 but only 10 percent are now. In Southeast Asia and the

Arab world, the rate fell from 28 percent in 1980 to 12 and 7 percent, respectively.

In Western Europe, once home to capitalism's most powerful trade unions, the rate of unionization fell from 40 percent in 1980 to less than 20 percent today. But this only partly expresses the changing class character of these organizations. According to a 2020 empirical study, "middle class and upper-middle class employees dominate the trade unions" in the bulk of European imperialist countries, including Germany, France, the Netherlands, Norway, and Sweden. "In these countries, employees from the working class form between 35 and 50 percent of the unionized employees."<sup>[5]</sup>

In the US, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, 4 million of the country's union members belong to "management and professional" occupations while 7.7 million work in the public sector, compared to just 1.2 million in manufacturing, 1.1 million in transportation, and 2.3 million in the service industry.

Additionally, in country after country, the so called "union wage premium" is collapsing. A 2020 paper published by Dartmouth College noted that in the UK, "pay settlements in the private sector by the end of the 1990s were no greater where trade unions were involved than in their absence."<sup>[6]</sup>

The wage premium in the US has been slowing as well. Annual wage growth in the US was just 4.5 percent in 2021 according to the US Census Bureau. Real wages for unionized workers rose on average just 3.3 percent, significantly below the rate for non-unionized workers, as unions signed a series of multi-year agreements locking in wage rises far below the current rate of inflation.

As the working class grew more powerful and interconnected, the trade unions, rooted in the nation-state systems and the imperialist state, consciously undermined their emerging power by carrying out decades of betrayal. Precisely when their objective power was growing, the trade unions weakened them, and their national character made it impossible to respond to the globalization of production. Over this period, the trade unions allied with "their" governments and national corporations in a global race to undermine wages and slash benefits. In every country, the trade unions entered into corporatist alliances with the governments and became appendages of the companies and the state. On a world scale, millions of union executives worldwide form a distinct parasitic social layer recognizable within the capitalist political establishment of every country.

There are growing concerns in ruling circles that the trade unions will be unable to prevent the explosion of social opposition emerging from the new working class of the 21st century. Take the June 2022 working paper from the ILO, "A global analysis of worker protest in digital labour platforms," like ridesharing, delivery and other low-wage semi-formal cheap labor apps.

The global digital platform industry, the paper's authors write:

does not fit easily into established frameworks of labour relations. Formal employment and collective bargaining are rare, and rates of unionization low. Some platform workers are organized in traditional unions—most commonly in parts of Europe—but there has also been a growth of much smaller, new unions. Other platform workers—notably in the global South—organize informally in ad hoc groups drawn together around specific grievances. As a result, platform worker discontent is difficult to capture by conventional means.<sup>[7]</sup>

The report analyzes 1,271 instances of worker protests from January 2017 to January 2020, and they conclude:

Our findings underline that the remarkable upsurge of labour organization and militancy in platform work is driven from below, by processes of worker self-organization. In the 1,271 protest events we identified, there was evidence of union involvement in only a minority of cases—in the global South, their involvement was even less. We also found that platform workers adopt a range of protest methods, some familiar and some less so, and with considerable variation across different global regions.<sup>[8]</sup>

Much more predominant were the emergence of what the authors of the study call "workers groups." They explain:

Regarding the collective organizations involved in worker protests, self-organized groups of workers were involved in approximately 80 per cent of cases. These groups of workers were the key form of collective organization in platform worker protests across the globe, significantly outstripping union organization, either traditional or new. In 48.3 per cent of the protests that we identified, a group of workers acted without the involvement of any other organization. Indeed, in our data, protests where self-organized groups of workers were not involved were far less common than cases where they were. This important finding reflects how platform worker protest is driven by self-organization among workers, more so than by union organizing efforts, however important these might be in some settings. Clearly, this finding rebuts the still widely held but mistaken belief that unions cause labour unrest.<sup>[9]</sup>

Indeed it does. The authors make one more important observation, noting that the protest data shows that when workers self-organize, they are also more inclined to protest not against a single company, but to see their actions as protests against an entire system of companies. The authors wrote:

Some genuinely distinctive aspects of platform work became apparent through analysis of our data. In particular, the number of protests that were directed at multiple companies is a distinctive characteristic of platform work, which likely reflects the nature of platform labour markets, where workers often rely on multiple platforms to earn a living. It also suggests that platform workers are well networked, with strengthening sinews of solidarity that transcend individual companies. It is also important to note that platform labour protest tends to emerge from the bottom up, particularly in the global South, where such protests are overwhelmingly led by informal groups of workers.<sup>[10]</sup>

Rank-and-file committees are emerging organically, in Facebook pages, Telegram groups, Whatsapp threads and in industries like platform labor. The IWA-RFC's striving for the broadest possible unity, for a common struggle across companies, across countries, against not this or that boss but the entire capitalist system, addresses this social need.

### **The coming wave of austerity**

The pandemic and the war in Ukraine have had a catastrophic impact on the living standards of billions of workers all around the world. Due to the pandemic, 1 billion full-time jobs were lost in 2020 and 275 million people fell below the international poverty line of \$3 per day. The impact of the food crisis triggered by the war in Ukraine has thrown billions closer to starvation, and the impact on inflation from the poorest to the most advanced economies has been devastating for workers everywhere.

The IMF noted in July that “71 million people in the developing world have fallen into poverty in just three months as a direct consequence of global food and energy price surges. The impact on poverty rates is drastically faster than the shock of the COVID-19 pandemic.”<sup>[11]</sup>

Under these conditions, the ruling class, squeezed by economic crisis, is preparing to launch an offensive of brutally unprecedented proportions. When we say we follow not the war map but the map of the class struggle, here are the enemy’s battle plans.

According to a 2022 McKinsey Institute report, the intersection of the war in Ukraine, the coronavirus pandemic, rising inflation, slowing global growth and the growth of global debt is creating a “perfect storm” of economic dislocation.

In June, the World Bank issued an economic outlook report warning of the threat of “prolonged stagflation.” The report noted:

Forces supporting the global expansion of output in recent decades—which included technological advances, the shift of labor out of agriculture in many [Emerging Markets and Developing Economies], globalization, and rapid population growth—were strongly disinflationary. As these fade, alongside recent supply shocks, inflationary pressures could build, echoing the experience of the 1970s, when large supply shocks, accommodative policies, and a fading of structural forces that promoted growth and disinflation triggered prolonged stagflation. ... Supply disruptions driven by the pandemic and the recent supply shock dealt to global energy and food prices by Russia’s invasion of Ukraine resemble the oil shocks in 1973 and 1979–80. And between 2021 and 2024, global growth is projected to slow by 2.7 percentage points, more than twice as much as between 1976 and 1979.<sup>[12]</sup>

The World Bank also wrote, “If inflation remains elevated, the risk will also grow that expectations of higher inflation will become baked into wage behavior.”

In other words, as the cost-of-living spirals out of control, workers are being forced to fight for survival. The actions by the Federal Reserve in the United States and by central banks in Europe to raise interest rates are aimed first and foremost at reducing wages, creating mass unemployment and a downward pressure on wages, while doing nothing to alleviate rising prices.

One substantial difference between the late 1970s and today, however, is unprecedented levels of government debt. The World Bank June 2022 report notes:

By comparison [with the period before late 1970s stagflation], the 2010s featured the fourth (and current) wave of global debt accumulation involving the largest, fastest, and most broad-based increase in government debt by EMDEs in the past 50 years. A number of LICs are already either in or near debt distress. The sheer magnitude and speed of the debt buildup heightens the associated risks. Additional vulnerabilities have arisen from increased exposure to nontraditional official creditors and to commercial debt. This, combined with the risk that inflation

pressures will force steep monetary policy tightening among major advanced economies, raises the specter of a renewed series of financial crises in EMDEs, as in the 1980s.<sup>[13]</sup>

The massive global debt level has been substantially worsened by the corporate bailouts granted during the coronavirus pandemic as well as years of quantitative easing. This has raised calls by the IMF and World Bank for ruthless attacks on social programs and workers’ wages, who will be made to pay for these policies. African countries’ yearly debt payments have quadrupled since 2010 from \$17.3 billion to \$57.9 billion. Interest rate cuts in the imperialist powers are producing a rapid rise of debt servicing costs.

A 2021 economic paper published by the European Network on Debt and Development reviewed future IMF plans and warns “of an emerging post-pandemic fiscal austerity shock” that is “far more severe than the one that followed the global financial crisis” of 2007–08. The hardest-hit countries will be the most populous nations, including Vietnam, Indonesia, Nigeria, Brazil and Egypt—each with a population over 100 million. According to the report:

Analysis of expenditure projections shows that austerity cuts are expected in 154 countries in 2021, and as many as 159 countries in 2022. The trend continues at least until 2025, with an average of 139 countries each year. ... Austerity is projected to affect 5.6 billion persons in 2021 or about 75% of the global population, rising to 6.6 billion or 85% of the world population in 2022.<sup>[14]</sup>

It is widely recognized that Sri Lanka is a sign of what is to come on a global scale. Reuters quoted World Bank Chief Economist Carmen Reinhart saying at the end of June: “There are more Sri Lankas on the way ... My fear—but I think it’s fear founded on the basis of the historical experience,—is that to have a comprehensive approach that actually delivers substantive debt reduction will take a long while. Years.”

This planned offensive, which will continue for many years, has produced concerns over the ability of the trade unions to suppress social discontent. A 2021 report by the International Labor Organization notes that “trade unions generally welcomed their governments’ COVID-19 responses” and now confront opposition from below over widespread COVID deaths. According to a 2019 ILO report, the fact that “unions need to revitalize themselves and reach out beyond their present constituency in order to stay relevant is beyond doubt. In both industrialized and developing countries, trade unions struggle to expand.” This “narrows their agenda and erodes their legitimacy in collective bargaining and social dialogue,” the ILO warned.

Another ILO report, which goes through the state of the trade unions in each country, includes many quotations along the following lines. Referencing the main Greek trade union federation, it notes, “The task of expanding GSEE membership is made more difficult because there appears to be little trust in trade unions in Greece.” In Romania, “This lack of real dialogue and the rigidity of current arrangements have led to social conflicts in the form of strikes and spontaneous protests.” In France, the ILO complains that workers have a “low level of confidence in the social partners” which they say is due to “a lack of knowledge about their role.”<sup>[15]</sup>

Everywhere, the ruling elites view the unions as “social partners” and necessary tools to suppress the class struggle and control the labor force. One Latin American politician told *El País* in April 2022 that with rising prices, “If everything doesn’t explode, it’s because the social organizations are present in the working class neighborhoods.” An Oxford

Economics report from 2022 notes that unrest in West Africa is inevitable but that “the best governments can do to placate unrest would be through consultation with unions and civil society organizations—a job that will be made even harder by further losses in purchasing power.”

Changes in global demography also presage ruthless attacks on the young and old. The elderly live for too long and waste too much money on medical attention. According to a 2020 report by former Bank of England economist Charles Goodhart, rising life expectancies are leading to “worsening fiscal problems, as medical, care and pension expenditures all increase in our aging societies.”<sup>[16]</sup>

What economists cynically call the “dependency ratio” is rising as baby boomers retire across the world. The problem, according to Goodhart, is that “the young and old, who are not working, consume, but do not produce.” As a result, “an unhappy aspect of the rise in life expectancy has been the increasing proportion of those with the infirmities of aging,” infirmities which “do not kill quickly ... but leave their sufferers incapacitated” and therefore burden the state and caregivers.<sup>[17]</sup> These facts make clear that the ruling class’s “let it rip” pandemic policy was by design. Worldwide, governments are raising retirement ages, cutting health care to cut life expectancy, and lowering minimum-age requirements to reintroduce forms of child labor, all in collaboration with the unions.

At the same time, those under 30 now comprise over half the world’s population and two-thirds the population in Sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East and South and Southeast Asia. Roughly 2.6 billion people are under the age of 20. There are profound concerns over the radicalizing impact of what economists call “the youth bulge.” Particularly concerning to analysts is that young people, by and large, do not belong to trade unions. Among OECD countries, the unionization rate among the radical generation aged 16-25 is lower than 5 percent in Portugal, France, Spain, the US and Mexico, and lower than 10 percent in Greece, the UK, Australia, Italy and many other countries. Given the discussion in recent days on our orientation, this point must be stressed: we are not oriented to some vague, abstract conception of the “youth,” we are oriented to *working class* youth, which comprise a substantial portion of the global international proletariat.

## The experiences and tasks of the party

To review: the present situation contains both tremendous dangers and immense revolutionary potential. The prognosis of the decade of socialist revolution is correct. After decades of the suppression of the class struggle, a new era of social explosions has begun. Three waves of international social struggle have developed in the last decade, with each wave larger and broader than the one preceding it. The latest wave, the most explosive and international in scope, is spurred by the war and the pandemic. The intractable economic crisis means that ruthless attacks on the working class are forthcoming. This will fuel the explosive growth of strikes and protests everywhere. But the spontaneous upsurge is not enough, there must be socialist leadership. The national trade unions are obstacles on the development of the class struggle and they are hostile to socialism. The working class is larger and more technologically advanced than ever before, but its consciousness of its revolutionary role lags behind social being. How the party responds will more and more directly change the course of events.

What tasks flow from this assessment? In Comrade North’s speech to the 2019 SEP Summer School, he explained that we are now in the fifth stage of the history of the Trotskyist movement, and stressed the task that flows from this. He wrote:

The International Committee of the Fourth International has begun the fifth stage of the history of the Trotskyist movement. This is the stage that will witness a vast growth of the ICFI as the World Party of Socialist Revolution. The objective processes of economic globalization, identified by the International Committee more than 30 years ago, have undergone a further colossal development. Combined with the emergence of new technologies that have revolutionized communications, these processes have internationalized the class struggle to a degree that would have been hard to imagine even 25 years ago. The revolutionary struggle of the working class will develop as an interconnected and unified world movement. The International Committee of the Fourth International will be built as the conscious political leadership of this objective socioeconomic process. It will counterpose to the capitalist politics of imperialist war the class-based strategy of world socialist revolution. This is the essential historical task of the new stage in the history of the Fourth International.

The IWA-RFC is a critical element of this essential historical task in the fifth stage. The working class is not only the exploited but also the revolutionary class under capitalism. Its heterogenous social and political composition is the product of a complex historical process, involving periods of economic boom and bust, the impact of globalization and deindustrialization, waves of mass migration from countryside to city and between nation-states, technological developments, the weight of religious conceptions, the legacy of past social struggles, the impact of the mass media and political parties, etc. The IWA-RFC is a mechanism for encouraging the strivings for independence, for unity, for overcoming barriers based on nationality and identity. It is a lever for workers to use to break free of the old institutions that have held back the class struggle for so many decades. And it is a training ground for the party to build a powerful vanguard of revolutionary socialist workers, to carry out the movement’s essential historical task.

This is the purpose of our interventions in the working class. In his January 1932 article “What Next,” Trotsky writes:

The progress of a class toward class consciousness, that is, the building of a revolutionary party which leads the proletariat, is a complex and a contradictory process. The class itself is not homogeneous. Its different sections arrive at class consciousness by different paths and at different times. The bourgeoisie participates actively in this process. Within the working class, it creates its own institutions, or utilizes those already existing, in order to oppose certain strata of workers to others.

[Trotsky continues:] The proletariat moves toward revolutionary consciousness not by passing grades in school but by passing through the class struggle, which abhors interruptions. ... The task of the party consists in learning, from experience derived from the struggle, how to demonstrate to the proletariat its right to leadership.

Comrades in the United States have passed through important political experiences in helping workers “create *their* own institutions” through the fight for rank-and-file committees. In concluding this report I would like to stress one point about our own recent experiences.

In case after case, the party was able to dramatically alter the course of critical struggles and substantially increase the party’s stature in the American working class.

In the Stanford Hospital strike earlier this year, the party's presence in the hospital threw the hospital and the union into crisis, greatly empowered the nurses, and facilitated a rebellion that paved the way for the growth of the health care workers rank-and-file committee across the country. This committee has held meetings involving dozens, and even hundreds, of nurses from across the country and played a prominent position in the campaign to defend Radonda Vaught. Deep opposition among nurses to Vaught's prosecution forced the state to issue the most mild sentence possible for fear of triggering wildcat strikes nationwide.

In our intervention among the parts workers at Dana last summer and fall, the party facilitated the rejection of a sellout contract and established a committee linking workers across multiple states, uncovering deplorable conditions of 80-hour work weeks and winning broad respect for our coverage of the death of Danny Walters, whose widow, Marcia, has just given a powerful statement in support of Will Lehman's campaign for UAW president.

In Will Lehman's campaign, the political development of a revolutionary autoworker is challenging not only the UAW dictatorship but also the federal government, which hoped they could block us from participating in the presidential election by requiring that Will win the nomination of delegates at the convention that took place this past July. We have just proven that they underestimated us. I believe that a fundamental takeaway from this congress must be that it would be the greatest political danger to underestimate ourselves and the impact of our interventions.

Similar examples can be given in other industries. In each of these campaigns we have placed the question of socialism before workers not in a didactic or formal way, but we have attempted to show the workers that their experiences make clear they must take up political questions in their striving for unity and independence.

This is not to suggest that we should be content with the impact we can have with limited resources. We must recruit in the working class, and as we do, our influence on masses of workers will grow exponentially. We must establish a substantial presence in critical factories, warehouses, schools and workplaces now, so that we can exert the maximum degree of political influence on the movement in the United States as it continues to grow and develop.

We have to learn to forge political relationships with workers, to speak to workers regularly and not merely when a contract is expiring, not to lecture them but to educate them about socialism through their experiences, not to adapt to the present level of consciousness but to elevate their aspirations and expunge their illusions. Our interventions must be planned as carefully as possible in advance, prepared by thorough political discussion, and aggressively carried out with as high a degree of professionalism and coordination as one would expect in a revolutionary army. Interventions must be followed through, their lessons discussed and internalized so they can be made the property of the party and of the class and brought forward into the next struggles. We must proceed from the understanding that we are active participants, at the center of every struggle, not passive observers commenting from without.

This can only be done by a cadre which is trained in the historical experiences of the International Committee and prepared to dedicate themselves to fighting for our perspective in the working class. It will require the active, dedicated, professional and consistent work of all comrades, without exception. This is not a party for individuals who will not carry out the work required, who do not communicate with their branch secretaries, who are not actively engaged in any specific area of work. Behind such abstentionism there is always a political outlook, rooted in a belief that the working class is not a revolutionary social force.

In conclusion, one more quote from Trotsky's speech, "School of Revolutionary Strategy":

The task of the working class consists in counterposing to the thoroughly thought-out counter-revolutionary strategy of the bourgeoisie its own revolutionary strategy, likewise thought out to the end. ... In this struggle the party, which is actually moving steadily to the head of the working class, has to maneuver, now attacking, now retreating, always consolidating its influence, conquering new positions until the favorable moment arrives for the overthrow of the bourgeoisie.

Comrades, this is a time for attacking and conquering new positions. Here, in the center of world political reaction, we must aggressively develop a section of the American working class that is prepared to fight for socialist revolution. On this basis, we can build the IWA-RFC, unleash the tremendous potential power of the working class, end imperialist war, crush the threat of fascism and cut the path to socialist revolution.

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