

What is WIN?

Roger Silverman, introduction to debate – WIN political committee May 2021

The question we're discussing is: what is WIN? How do we define our objectives? A difficult question because it's ambiguous, or elastic. As I prepared this, and expanded on the history of the internationals, it became too long and unwieldy. So I cut it drastically, and if it seems disjointed, that's the reason.

WIN emerged out of an online socialist forum launched at the turn of the millennium, itself evolved over the previous decade starting with the split in the CWI. We formally adopted the name about twelve years ago. It therefore represents ideas evolved over two or three decades of discussion, in face-to-face conversations, in daily e-mail correspondence, and more recently on zoom, both online and at regular international meetings. That period covers two sharply contrasting objective settings: at first a relatively stagnant, paradoxical and politically difficult period, which then suddenly changed to a period of unprecedented turmoil and crisis.

The first step towards building the foundations of a new international is a free exchange of ideas and experiences between worker activists on the front line. Socialist theory and perspectives are a lifeline for activists today, working in various countries. It was a political workshop in which we could all sharpen up our ideas and political skills and learn from one another's experiences.

In 2009 a draft document setting out the common consensus we had arrived at was published under the title ***Preparing for Revolution***. As the ice began to break, in 2012 we published another: ***The Future International – socialists and the movement against capitalism***. From 2018, in pace with the accelerated speed of events, we began publishing a regular journal, ***On The Brink***, and more recently the world perspectives document ***2020 Vision***.

What began as a relatively introverted discussion circle has emerged into a miniature prototype of a genuine international forum. Despite its name, then, it would therefore be wrong to say WIN is just a "network" – what Lenin at one time sarcastically described the Socialist International as: a post office. Discussion is not an exercise indulged in for its own sake; it's an indispensable means to an end; it's a journey, the end being a clarification of our tasks.

On a very small scale, we are beginning to reach newly active committed workers engaged in real struggles. We are striving to learn from, absorb and generalise their experience and to find ways to engage in mutual discussion.

But the Workers' International Network is not just another sectarian left group. It is a network of activists linked across several countries who are in the process of actively learning from one

another's experiences, and who recognise that the task facing socialists today is to unite the worldwide struggle against capitalism into a single world workers' party.

That objective is not a case of sentimental self-indulgence, but an immediate practical necessity. That's especially crucial today, in the age of globalization; but it was also so from the very beginning of capitalism.

The immediate impetus for the creation of the First International was the need to build links between the London Trades Council and French workers' organisations due to the default use of foreign strikebreakers in British strikes. Internationalism is rooted in the elementary tendency of workers in struggle towards solidarity. To this day it has been a feature of every major strike – in Britain the miners' strike and the Liverpool dockers – and in political movements from the Spanish civil war to the anti-apartheid movement.

So first, we are internationalists. It was the internationalism of the London Trades Council that founded the First International, with reference to the American civil war, etc.

But today, as then too, it straddles two functions: the elementary provision of mobilising solidarity action, and the more profound task of absorbing the theoretical and political lessons of each struggle. And as the movement developed, it oscillated between the two and progressed to sharper and more clearly defined conclusions.

The First International's General Council consisted of very different elements: English trade unionists, French Proudhonists, Polish and Italian nationalists, and later anarchists. Marx compared it to the narrower pre-history of the International, the Communist League, and concluded: ***"It will take time before the revival of the movement allows the old boldness of language to be used. We must be fortiter in re, suaviter in modo (firm in principle, mild in manner)."*** And Engels too explained that the aim of the IWMA was ***"to weld together into one huge army the whole militant working class of Europe and America. Therefore it could not set out from the principles laid down in the (Communist) Manifesto."***

The creation of the IWMA was a momentous historical turning-point, described in the editorial column of ***The Times*** as equivalent to the birth of Christianity. And it didn't take long before it became a crucial workshop in which the tools of analysis were forged and sharpened, the arena of furious debate, against the background of the world's first workers' uprising.

Engels made a similar point about the formation of the Second International, when he said that the Second International made up in breadth for what it lacked in depth. But he considered the formation of the Socialist International, an assembly of mass workers' parties numbering millions, the culmination of their lives' work. He wrote: ***"True, the International itself lived only nine years. But that the eternal union of the proletarians of all countries created by it is still alive and lives stronger than ever, there is no better witness than this day. Because today, as I***

write these lines, the European and American proletariat is reviewing its fighting forces, mobilised for the first time, mobilised as one army, under one flag, for one immediate aim... And today's spectacle will open the eyes of the capitalists and landlords of all countries to the fact that today the working men of all countries are united indeed. If only Marx were still by my side to see this with his own eyes!"

Engels could not have foreseen the betrayals and defeats that were still to come, as the storms approached of the impending twentieth century and the epoch of world wars, revolutions and counter-revolutions. In the context of imperialist crisis, that international was soon to become the arena for raging political debate, and eventually a catastrophic split. Its members soon found themselves facing one another, not in debates at international congresses, but in the blood-soaked battlefields of Europe, and not in the language of resolutions and votes but in that of bullets, poison gas and bombs.

The needs of the hour created the necessary forms of organisation. They soon led to the formation of a very different new Third International, which rightly felt the necessity of imposing strict political conditions of membership, firmly banging shut the doors to any risk of reformist degeneration, a fighting force fit for the imperative tasks of the day. Similarly, when Trotsky raised the banner of a future Fourth International, holding a founding conference (NOTE: not a "congress") in anticipation of the mass revolutionary force that seemed certain to materialise amid the ruins of the coming world war, it was all the more mandatory to insist on sharp, clear, firm Bolshevik principles.

As we know, events unfolded along different lines, with a whole new lease of life for a whole generation of greatly strengthened versions of both reformism and Stalinism, so that international never materialized. A sprouting of manifold introspective fantasy Fourth Internationals continued since then to bubble away, far from even the fringes of the real labour movement. To call today for a Fourth International sounds like arcane gibberish to socialist activists and worker militants today. In Trotsky's day the call had an immediate resonance, because there were already millions of organised workers actively mobilized in mass parties owing allegiance to both the Second (Socialist) and Third (Communist) Internationals. The call for a Fourth International struck an immediate chord, with its implicit reproach to those internationals that they were no longer fit for purpose. Today it is meaningless. Even more ridiculous is the group which even calls itself a Fifth International. If we count all the stillborn or failed internationals, why just a 5th, rather than a 17th or a 99th?

Most of the existing Marxist groups today consciously model themselves on the strict formulae of those products of the twentieth century. Today, with the reduced or crippled authority and in some cases even the collapse and outright disappearance of the old reformist and Stalinist

traditions, these sects look freakish and alien. They maintain the discipline of their shrinking memberships by an almost religious reference to the principle of democratic centralism.

But this is a perversion of the original meaning of the term. Democratic centralism is the principle of unity in action, and its necessary corollary: democratic discussion. We have called that the law of the picket line projected on to the political plane.

However, a free exchange of ideas is necessary not only prior to the establishment of the picket line, but also while standing along it, throughout the course of the struggle. Freedom of open discussion enriches the movement and is ultimately the only possible guarantee of a correct policy.

Internal democracy and political clarity are two sides of the same coin. Every little sect today insists upon a rigid display of unanimity, all in the name of a grotesque distortion of Bolshevism. To take the analogy once again of the picket line, the implication of many of these sectarians that the expression of alternative views is equivalent to strikebreaking is ludicrous.

Marx and Engels had no need to declare themselves a vanguard before plunging into the pioneering work of the First International. It was the resulting clash of ideas within it between various strands of anarchism and Marxism, tested in the end against the objective backdrop of the Paris Commune, which ensured that once the Second International came into life it was founded unequivocally on Marxist ideas. In its turn, that International became a new arena of struggle between reformism and revolution. When the Third International arose out of the ashes of its predecessor in the world war, it had amassed the authority to lay down 21 strict conditions of membership. These debates had not been an academic diversion; they proved a vital factor in the sharpening of the political weapons of the working class.

A century of defeats later, any implication that a new international might start with the authority to impose the equivalent of the Third International's 21 conditions would obviously be absurd. With the demise of the traditional industrial working class and the growth of a precariat in the West, and the development of a massive young proletariat on new territory, the link with the old traditions is largely broken. The fate of the revolution now lies in the hands of a powerful virgin proletariat with enormous potential but shallow traditions. The lessons of history need to be learned afresh. The need for democracy is not just an ethical issue but ultimately a political one. It is a necessary means to an end.

Many of us came from and learned from the now defunct Militant tendency – or the now shattered CWI. (I was its original fulltimer and devised that rather unwieldy name.) The truth is that Militant paid constant lip service to democratic debate, but in practice cracked down so sharply on any display of dissent that anyone who questioned the leadership soon retreated. That came principally not from an iron organizational discipline but from the genuine respect of

a younger generation for an outstanding theoretician from the past who had taught them basic principles, but over the decades had clung to increasingly fossilized formulae which in a new epoch were found inadequate to the new tasks of the age. It was the quite understandable but eventually unhealthy deference shown over years and decades to the leadership which ended in the political decay and downfall of both Militant and its successor the IMT. We must all draw the appropriate conclusions if we are not to suffer similar consequences. For WIN, democratic discussion is not a peripheral diversion but a vital means to an end. It has raised our collective level and enabled us to reach a genuine and lasting consensus, while retaining the flexibility to evolve our ideas. It is the bedrock of our political clarity and solidarity.

By its very nature, the working class strains instinctively towards solidarity, a goal which is implicit in its conditions of existence and the indispensable guarantee for its capacity to struggle. At its highest political expression this is manifested in conscious internationalism.

So what are the principles which we aspire to? In the words of Marx and Engels 173 years ago: *"The Communists, therefore, are on the one hand, practically, the most advanced and resolute section of the working-class parties of every country.... On the other hand, theoretically, they have over the great mass of the proletariat the advantage of clearly understanding the line of march, the conditions, and the ultimate general results of the proletarian movement."*

So WIN is more than a "post office". A network, yes, but also through shared experiences and democratic interchange of ideas, hoping to evolve more and more into a distinct political tendency.

A new international will look initially much more like the First than the Third. It will necessarily encompass a broad range of opinion. It will be an international projection of the confusions and conflicts within each country's nascent parties. We will find ourselves working alongside all kinds of disparate and naive forces. The simple but strict proviso for uniting our forces will be our common sincerity in fighting capitalism, and our common recognition of the key role of the working class. In the furnace of struggle, all the competing ideas will be tested, and the best will win out. The new international will be alive with debate.

The Internationals of the past reflected the working class of their times. The First International was actually called an association of working men. Even the Third International was almost entirely concentrated in Europe. The International that can emerge from the coming struggles will encompass tens of millions of men, women and youth from all the continents. A new international will be built by uniting together all the movements of real struggle today, irrespective of ideology, on the basis of clear and free debate. That way, we too can hope to see our ideas become a material force.

The relentless march of the super-corporations towards absolute global rule is putting a brutal end to the historic anomalies of the past. Capitalism has developed to its utmost extremes. All the trends outlined in the Communist Manifesto have extended to grotesque lengths.

The gigantic political obstacles of the past no longer pose the same dangers as before. The long movement towards a new world will not be a simple repetition of the past. Capitalism has enormously simplified the issues and the tasks. The confusions, traps and pitfalls which created fatal dangers to the working class in the past – reformism, nationalism, populism, bonapartism, Stalinism, etc. – will no longer pose quite the same threat that they did then.

This does not mean an end to the workers' quite legitimate wish to seek reforms (something that we all, incidentally, share), but a weakening of reformism by its classic Marxist definition: the existence of a labour bureaucracy – an "alien social caste" – able for a period to justify its existence by the winning of occasional reforms, but with an entrenched stake in defeating revolution by conscious and systematic betrayal.

This does not mean that there will be no risk of mistakes within the workers' movement. It doesn't need a bureaucracy to make disastrous blunders. Of course workers will hope at first to cure the worst excesses of capitalism by reforms. But there are fewer illusions in capitalism today than at any time before. The general attitude of workers today to capitalism is not, as was the case a generation ago: "let us gradually reform capitalism until we have achieved socialism", but a sense of awe and inadequacy at the enormity of the challenge ahead.

The fight for a workers' international is the fight to unite the struggles of the workers of all continents, social, gender and ethnic groups; to link with the environmentalist and anti-capitalist protest movements, and to build worldwide solidarity.

Paradoxically, it is precisely in the period of lockdown, when logically we're all supposed to be retreating into our shells, that not only has the revolution been surging ahead worldwide, but WIN has experienced a significant growth of contact and influence. We've expanded our circle to double or treble the number of countries where we have co-thinkers and even succeeded in touching the nerve of a few of the new uprisings that have erupted in most of the world's continents.

And yet... we must not get carried away. We are not an International, not even its embryo. We are still a tiny handful, a drop in the ocean of the proletariat worldwide. We need energy, confidence, audacity. But I want to repeat a point I made at our recent conference: we need a sense of proportion. One of Ted Grant's sayings was: you can't shout louder than your voice. We must strain every nerve to offer practical solidarity. But if we make grandiose commitments which we don't have the resources to fulfil, we will risk tainting our reputation. We're far from

an International yet, and we must resist the temptation to fall prey to inflated ambitions. What we can offer is commitment to international solidarity and serious analysis and perspective.

A small group can't hijack the movement of the masses. That's where strategy and tactics come in: the distinction between propaganda and agitation. I've repeated before Lenin's quotation of Plekhanov's definition: ***"A propagandist presents many ideas to one or a few persons; an agitator presents only one or a few ideas, but he presents them to the mass of people..."***

Let's keep in mind Trotsky's metaphor: ***"The revolutionary tendency is the cog, the cog engages the wheel... The goal is... first to understand and develop our own theoretical understanding, then develop the cadres, explain and amplify the understanding of the vanguard with revolutionary propaganda."*** There could be no better advice for us now.

Developing this metaphor further, he wrote: ***"The impatient attempt to connect the party wheel directly with the gigantic wheel of the masses... would have given rise to the danger of breaking the teeth of the party wheel, and nevertheless not setting sufficiently large masses in motion... Without a guiding organization, the energy of the masses would dissipate like steam in a piston box. But nevertheless what moves things is not the piston or the box, but the steam."***

This is timely advice. There's no shortage of steam today. In beginning to build an international, we are hoping to create the mechanism by which it can move the world. And, to return to Trotsky's original metaphor, to try to engage directly in mass agitation without first winning the key cadres through theoretical education and propaganda would put us in danger of "breaking our teeth" in a doomed adventure.

As I said in my lead-off at the first session of this conference: what would Marx and Engels do today? Their practice was 1) active participation in the established labour movement (in their case, for instance with the London Trades Council); 2) building links worldwide (they worked tirelessly to establish contacts with socialist circles on the continent, irrespective of sometimes fundamental political differences); and 3) above all, political education: in thorough research and scientific study (developing the theoretical foundations of Marxism). We are striving today on a small scale to follow their example.

WIN is still a small and fairly loose network of activists in a few countries. Over the last year or so, our reach and influence has grown substantially. We have comrades identifying with WIN in around 20 countries spread over four continents, and contacts in more. And last week on May Day, at a magnificent rally organised by our Iranian comrades, we established contact with active militants in a number of new countries including Iraq and Afghanistan. I hope they will speak at future meetings.

It is the openness and vibrancy of our debate and our readiness to engage with a range of ideas and experiences which has raised our collective level of understanding and our influence. We are not afraid of ideas and challenges. This is how international unity is forged.

The best proof of our success comes from the comments of people who are outside WIN. A few days ago I received news of a conversation between members of two other organisations who are also sincere internationalists, in which they each acknowledged that WIN has the best international contacts of any left group in Britain. That's a tribute which should give us confidence.

NOTES – a reply to the discussion

The question of how we make the transition from a "network" to a "tendency" is, as I said at the beginning, ambiguous or elastic: it's a sliding scale. The fact that we are working now to draw up a manifesto, and that we submit documents for approval, show that we are more than just a discussion circle or a "post office". We will never end up dictating a compulsory "line" from above, but in the course of discussion our common position will inevitably sharpen into ever clearer focus. That happened also in the First and Second Internationals, although in their cases not without major disputes and internal polarisation, ending in the latter case in a complete split. (We don't expect that outcome in our case!). But our discussions don't just go round in circles; they reach conclusions.