

What is the Workers International Network?

NOTE: The following is an interview conducted with Roger Silverman, one of the founding members of Workers International Network (WIN). In it he not only describes what WIN is but also a view of the state of the workers' movement. One thing that has to be emphasized is the necessity of really listening to the workers' movement and the individuals who compose it.

What is WIN? When and why was it founded? What is its role?

The Workers' International Network emerged out of an online socialist discussion list (<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/socialistdiscussion>). This is a broad forum for the free exchange of ideas between socialists of a range of affiliations and of none, which I set up together with some co-thinkers in various countries (mostly but not exclusively former CWI members) in 2006.

WIN's ideas had been germinating over several years of discussion, both online and at occasional get-togethers. At one such international meeting, it was agreed to prepare a document putting forward the common consensus that had been arrived at by those comrades who had been corresponding and meeting over the years, and at the next meeting in Dublin in 2009 it was agreed that the draft document presented there would be extended and sent out to the whole list as a political statement under the title ***Preparing for revolution***.¹ Then in 2012 a new document was added, called ***The future International: socialists and the movement against capitalism***. These documents represent the views of one group, which for purposes of identification adopted the name Workers' International Network, among several that were already represented on this list.

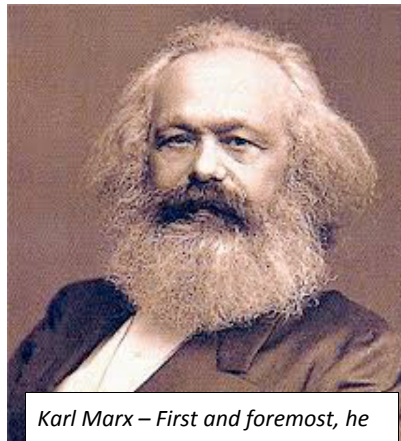
In that sense WIN is a distinct political tendency. But in the past, the word "tendency" was sometimes used as a deliberate euphemism for an organisation claiming to be a vanguard of cadres of the future revolutionary leadership. We say we have plenty of those already. Our documents spell out – uniquely among all other such documents – that establishing such a vanguard is ***not*** the immediate task of the day. We have no such pretensions. We are simply making a modest contribution towards the development of ideas which we hope will help to clarify the next steps forward. We are a tendency in the sense of its original definition: a group of like-minded people with a common outlook who wish to identify themselves as such and argue for their point of view. WIN is not a revolutionary party, even in embryo; it is a network. And its documents are not intended as a blueprint, but as a basis for discussion.

We hope to reach active committed workers engaged creatively in real struggles. Any hint of the old instant-answer I-told-you-so attitudes which were the negative side of the old left groups' tradition will alienate them, and rightly so. There is understandably a scepticism on the part of even the most experienced and committed activists at any hint of the old exclusivist messianic postures. This is a healthy attitude on their part. Yes, we are keen to place at the disposal of the new generation of fighters for a new world whatever theoretical lessons we think might be learned from history. And yet today, from Athens to Cairo to Santiago to South Africa, millions have been marching, mobilising,

1 <http://oaklandsocialist.com/2013/07/08/preparing-for-revolution/>

striking and above all talking. We can be sure that the heated debates they have had will have at least as much to teach us as whatever abstract lessons we may have gleaned from our study of the textbooks. We need to learn from their experience and their ideas, and to find ways to engage in mutual discussion of the way forward for workers throughout the world.

Certainly, historical precedents are crucial as a key to understanding events as they unfold. However, we should guard against the temptation to artificially graft preconceived templates on to living processes. The most important quality – something almost uncannily possessed by Marx, Lenin, Trotsky and other great revolutionaries – is an ability to listen. Who is to say that the embryo of a new revolutionary international is not already being created right now, in the debates that must be raging in workplaces, street corners and shanty towns across the world?



Karl Marx – First and foremost, he listened to workers.

How is WIN organised?

WIN is still in its very modest beginnings. It is a small and fairly loose network of activists in a few countries. WIN comrades have played a role wherever they are based: in leading strikes, peasant struggles and women's struggles in Pakistan, and helping to build a new united workers' party there; in the uprising of South African mine workers, in anti-cuts and anti-racist campaigns in Britain, in occupations and strikes in the USA, in campaigns for the rights of *sans-papiers* in France, in trade union struggles in Ireland, etc. Through our online network and in international visits, we have tried to make contact and engage in dialogue with worker militants worldwide. WIN members constantly correspond online and meet every few months to review perspectives and exchange political ideas.

What is WIN's perspective for workers' struggles?

The relocation of industry through globalisation has transformed the world's working class. There has been a haemorrhage of manufacturing jobs from their traditional location. One third of US manufacturing jobs have been lost since 2001. And the number of manufacturing jobs in Britain has fallen below three million for the first time since 1841!

Meanwhile, there are well over 100 million industrial workers in China – more than twice as many as in all the G7 countries put together (the USA, Germany, Japan, France, Britain, Italy and Canada). China has this year crossed the line to become a predominantly urban society. Of the world's three

billion wage workers, for every one worker in the West there are now five based in China, India, Russia, Eastern Europe, Latin America and South-East Asia. Women now constitute a majority of the world's workers, and the proletariat is now for the first time a majority of the world population.



Chinese industrial working class – over 100 million strong.

These demographic changes account largely for the relative eclipse of proletarian and socialist traditions in the old industrial societies of the USA and many Western European countries. At the same time, they are a source of unshakable hope in the revolutionary potential of the world working class and the future of socialism worldwide.

The current underground strike wave in China recalls the 1890s in Russia: a period of rapid industrialisation when millions of young peasants are being uprooted from medieval conditions and transplanted into high-tech modern industrial factories. That economic boom in Russia ended in a general strike, the birth of Soviets, and the 1905 revolution – events that transformed the international working class and ushered in an era of world revolution.

How does WIN envisage the development of a future International?

The old mass movements of organised labour in their previous strongholds have been eroded by the collapse of Stalinism; by capitalist triumphalism and political disorientation; by organic changes in the composition of the working class; by major trade-union defeats, the strangulation of the ex-colonial countries, and the long credit boom. But a new, stronger, more cohesive international class is being built, bestriding every continent, and rapidly learning anew the strategy and tactics of the class struggle.

Workers everywhere are beginning to rise to their feet again. But their struggles are diffuse and uncoordinated. There is no International, and no organised programme to change society. Now more than ever we need a single party of the working class. Civilised life, war and peace, and environmental survival all depend upon it. In the absence of such a party, the alternative is a nightmare. Dark forces stalk the world: nationalism, racism, bigotry, fascism, fundamentalism, nihilistic terror. That is the face of reaction today. The choice is: socialism or barbarism. Marx'

aphorism once seemed little more than a rhetorical flourish, but it is quite literally and imminently the choice now facing humanity.

The creation of a worldwide party of the working class is not at all an abstract or unreal idea. Every day, in every continent, we see new evidence that such a party is straining right now at every nerve to materialise. Mass communications and the “information revolution” have made the present generation incomparably better informed than their grandparents. The world has drawn together and a new global consciousness has arisen. The size and specific weight of the proletariat have grown everywhere.

In 2003, thirty million people worldwide marched to protest at the impending war on Iraq. In 2011 the occupy movement spread across the planet. On 14th November 2012, workers across Southern Europe will go on a one-day international general strike.



When tens of millions of workers and young people protest – on the same issues, with the same slogans, often on the same day in internationally synchronised action – that means that the world party of the future is almost a reality now. The international movement against capitalism needs to be embodied in a permanent thriving organised movement. It is the task of socialists to give conscious expression to this process.

How are perspectives affected by the environmental crisis?

Recent years have seen some of the biggest recorded natural disasters, in the form of earthquakes, hurricanes, tsunamis, floods, volcanic eruptions, forest fires, and in Japan the resulting nuclear crisis, some of them undoubtedly linked to climate change. Quite apart from environmental disaster, faith in the boundless potential of technology has gone; in its place has come a conviction that society is fast reaching the limit of the world’s finite resources, especially in terms of energy. There is a widespread understanding that capitalism has despoiled the planet, that civilisation itself is under threat. In the absence of a socialist answer, it is understandable that this helps create feelings of helplessness; of fatalistic resignation to the inevitability of Armageddon.



*It's not true that "people" are destroying the planet;
capitalism is.*

There are few illusions left about the dictatorship of corporate power. What is

lacking is confidence in the power to overthrow it. There is an awareness of the sheer enormity of the task of breaking the stranglehold of the corporations, and a lack of any conception of what could replace it. It is therefore the prime task of socialists today to re-establish once again theoretically the rationality of socialism. It has to be demonstrated all over again before it can become once again a living force. The ideological case for socialism has to be argued all over again, in an entirely new context, to inspire a politically virgin proletariat.

What does WIN say about the struggles of women today?

The assault by the neo-liberal ruling class on the welfare state and the social gains made since the Second World War is having a massive impact on women, both as users of these services and as those employed within them. The primitive accumulation of capital is happening this time in the robbery of the welfare state and all the gains that women have won in the last sixty or more years. In some countries, such as Zimbabwe, the welfare state is already virtually dismantled; in others, such as Greece, it is the subject of bitter struggle. Other states are manoeuvring towards the same objective.

WIN recognises the role of women in patriarchal society, both feudal and capitalist, in defending the population from the robbery and primitive accumulation of the ruling class, and the persecution that follows. Violence against women is used to repress mass resistance.



How does WIN envisage a new International will be created?

When Marx and Engels helped to found the First International, their objective was to unite all the disparate, nascent workers' organisations around the world – no matter how limited. Even outside the parameters of the working class, they strove to encompass all genuine movements of protest against the existing order. Their mission was to try to unite all the existing embryonic organisations of resistance to capitalism into a single worldwide movement. That would give them the framework within which to pit what they considered their scientific ideas against those of the assorted sectarians peddling their quack panaceas. The IWMA was to become a worldwide ideological workshop, in which all the rival ideas could be tested out in practice against the experiences of the workers in victory and in defeat. What was needed – then as now – was a forum in which to debate the issues.

A new international today will not in its incipient stages mean a monolithic world party with a sharply defined ideological line. Today is not 1920, when no less than 21 conditions were laid down for affiliation, and, to make doubly sure, Lenin even added a list of named individuals who would never under any circumstances be admitted to the new International. Neither is today 1938, when Trotsky had to denounce in a single breath the Stalinists and social democrats along with bourgeois liberals and fascists.

These were not at all expressions of sectarianism. They were a measured response to the reality of such historic betrayals as collusion in the mutual slaughter of the first world war, and the signing of the Hitler-Stalin pact. They belong to the era when mighty social armies had been established at enormous sacrifice by the working class, which had then fallen prey to traitors. The task then was to replace these traitors with leaders worthy of the rank-and-file. Today the generals no longer betray and collaborate; if only things were so simple. They have openly switched sides, and their armies have largely disbanded.



The First International was an amalgamation of disparate pioneering campaigning radical groups, with all their confusions and misconceptions – incipient workers' parties groping towards a common outlook. Marx and Engels used the crucial few years of the International's meteoric growth as a political workshop in which to forge a coherent world programme and ideology. As Engels explained, 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.”*** Yet it is a stunning tribute to Marx and Engels that within seven short years they had already won the argument. Although the IWMA itself was dashed against the rocks of reaction, once the tide had turned and the newly emergent mass parties and trade unions throughout Europe and beyond had established the Socialist International in 1889, it was under the banner of the ideas of the Communist Manifesto.

The task ahead of revolutionaries today is far closer to those facing Marx and Engels in their day. The future International will not arise principally from mass splits in long-established traditional parties, in revolt against their ruling bureaucracies. It 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 quite probably 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 rival ideologies 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 will emerge from the coming struggles will encompass tens of millions of men, women and youth from all the continents.

How does WIN differ from existing left groups?

The left groups all have their origins in a period when there were mass socialist or communist parties numbering millions. Generations of workers lived, fought and died defending their political heritage. All that was holding them back from victory were the material interests of the bureaucratic cliques – reformist and Stalinist – at their head. The mission of the left opposition groups was to expose the crimes and betrayals of the leadership of those parties and prove themselves a worthier alternative vanguard.

The task facing socialists now is different. Historical, economic and demographic factors have changed the political landscape. Today it is a question of rebuilding the movement itself, rather than simply providing an alternative programme and leadership for it.

To varying degrees the old left groups succeeded in educating their cadres and sharpening their skills as theoreticians, writers, speakers and organisers, achieving in some cases admirable results. The loyalty of these activists to those organisations to which they have given their lives is an understandable and praiseworthy quality. However, it carries with it the risk of cliquism and conservatism; of a sectarianism which consists of an unwillingness to put the needs of the wider movement above the petty advantages of their own organisation. In such a situation, they risk losing a sense of proportion. They would indignantly deny it, but in practice many of the old left groups still sincerely believe that the future depends on their winning leadership of the workers' movement, and this leads them in practice to give priority to the need to build their own organisations before the objective needs of the class. They might agree formally that the tasks have changed; however, their style, structure and persona have not changed accordingly. They often present themselves still as a vanguard, as having all the answers; their internal regime is still insulated from the movement.

Within the left groups there are many admirable and dedicated workers. At the same time to varying extents they have drawn distorted conclusions from the special circumstances of the Bolshevik party in the Tsarist underground and of the Russian revolution during the civil war and its aftermath, which have helped foster a culture of lifelong mandates, an implicit tendency towards leadership cults, resulting splits, the discouragement of dissent, even the outright suppression of factions, and other blemishes. On a miniscule scale, the kind of petty abuses that have scarred the left groups would never have been tolerated if they had had an active mass working-class membership.

Within the old left groups, attitudes and understanding of the role of women in the class struggle was limited. WIN sees the struggles of women across the globe as a fundamental aspect of class struggle.

As the class struggle reawakens from its relative state of hibernation, it is to be hoped that the healthiest elements from within the existing left groups will abandon their obsolete pet shibboleths and join together with the fresh ranks of the new mass movement.

Tell us something about your own political background.

I was a devoted member of ***Militant*** for more than thirty years, from the age of 18, and the first full-timer for the CWI. I was instrumental in founding the CWI, for which I worked full-time from 1973 to 1993, based for much of that time in countries throughout Europe and Asia, having previously worked for a year in Russia. Following the split in the CWI in 1991, in which I opposed the breakaway faction but maintained a critical and independent attitude towards the majority, I became in 1993 the earliest victim of the purges which were subsequently to convulse and disfigure the CWI. In 1996 I wrote a balance sheet of the history of the CWI which marked my definitive break with the tendency, and soon afterwards linked up with other former CWI comrades in the USA and elsewhere in an online discussion group, the precursor to the present socialist discussion list. I consider my recent role in the development of WIN as my most worthwhile political contribution to date.

