Socialism and Democracy

Workers Unite! The International 150 Years Later by Marcello Musto (ed.)

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Published online: 08 Aug 2014.

To cite this article: George C. Comninet (2014) Workers Unite! The International 150 Years Later by Marcello Musto (ed.), Socialism and Democracy, 28:2, 215-220, DOI: 10.1080/08854300.2014.934082

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/08854300.2014.934082

What is most distinctive about this book is that, instead of being about “Marx and the International,” it is about the International Workingmen’s Association (IWA) itself – though fully recognizing the important role that Marx played within it. This makes it a rarity. More importantly, it is a unique anthology of documents from the International as a whole, including reports and resolutions from the Paris bookbinders, the Central Section of Working Women of Geneva, and other little-known or unknown authors – to say nothing of several by Mikhail Bakunin.

Marxists have tended to approach the First International as something of a sidebar to Marx’s career. Both the Second and Third Internationals claimed to be directly and fundamentally Marxist, and Lenin’s *State and Revolution* provided an especially powerful link between what Marx wrote about the Paris Commune – on behalf of the First International – and the Bolshevik politics of revolution. The solidification of this link in “official” Marxism during the Stalinist era effectively cast the retrospective reading of Marx – particularly his political writing in the era of the International – through a Bolshevik lens. Subsequently, neither anti-Communists nor Leninists of any stripe have had reason to challenge this view.

The perspective of this book, however, is fundamentally different. The centrality of Marx’s role within the International is, of course, not in question. Indeed, as Musto observes from the start, Marx was the “political soul” of the General Council (GC) of the IWA, writing all of its main resolutions and all but one of the reports of its Congresses. Yet Marx had no role in the decision to found the International; he was never able to take for granted that his views would carry the day in debates; and much of his “leadership” included taking responsibility for day-to-day matters (even to the extent of ensuring that adequate office supplies were on hand).

Perhaps because of the importance of retaining paper copies of all sorts of transactions at the time, and certainly due to the conscientious efforts of the IWA itself to make its work known through the publication of significant addresses and the resolutions of its Congresses,
a very large quantity of material relating to the organization has been preserved. Some of this material, such as Marx’s *Inaugural Address*, his *Value, Price and Profit*, and *The Civil War in France*, has been widely available ever since its publication by the International itself, or subsequently in the late nineteenth or early twentieth century in connection with the Second International. In commemoration of the 100th anniversary of the International, finally, there was a significant effort by Progress Publishers in Moscow to make the rest of the material (at least insofar as it conformed with its view of the IWA) available in limited editions intended for libraries and specialists.

But there has been no previous anthology from the documents of the First International (which in total amount to more than 7000 pages) intended for the general reader. Moreover, most of the previously published documents that were in French – including the proceedings of the Congresses – have never been translated into English. And the orientation not only of the Moscow-based publications, but also of Marxists generally, meant that the documents – indeed even the existence – of a Bakuninist International following upon the great split in 1872 did not receive appropriate recognition. In its efforts to overcome all these limitations, this book marks a crucial breakthrough.

All the most significant documents, including the major pieces by Marx that have long been widely available, are reproduced in the book. Yet, whereas those pieces have previously for the most part been presented in the context of collections of Marx’s political writings, here they are presented in their more immediate historical context as contributions to the collective formulation of political positions taken by the International as a whole. In addition to the previously disseminated addresses and resolutions, there are excerpts from the minutes of the GC and Congresses, including synopses of speeches by Marx, Bakunin, and many other participants. Importantly, the selection of such excerpts has not been made with a view towards highlighting the importance of Marx (which, of course, is also not denied), but to reveal the sometimes intense debates that were pursued, and the real importance of contributions from a variety of other participants, some of whom are barely known to history.

The Introduction and notes provide a clear and concise historical context for each of the documents, and accounts of their prior publication. Especially notable is the attention given not just to the positions taken by the GC, but also to those taken by local sections and federations on the major issues of the day. The independence of thought that can be seen in the history of these sections, and in the positions they articulated, is a revelation. We encounter not only the views of
Marx and his most notable antagonists, but also those of committed socialists who fell into neither camp.

For example, there is the position taken by the Central Section of Working Women of Geneva in 1872. Their mandated resolution for the Hague Congress included two fundamentally important points that they had developed independently:

Considering first: that the working woman’s needs are equal to those of the working man and that the pay for her work is much less, the central Section of Working Women requests the Congress to include in its resolutions that henceforth agreements reached between employers and strikers of a trade in which women are employed will stipulate the same advantage for them as for men . . .

Considering, secondly: that the more different groups of opinion there are on the ways of achieving the same aim, the emancipation of labour, the easier it is to generalize the working class movement without losing any of the forces (even the most widely diverging) to concur in the final result; that it is advisable to leave to individuals, within the principles of the International, the right to group according to their tastes and their opinions.

Consequently: the Working Women of the Central Section demand: that the General Council shall not have the power to reject any section, whatever particular purpose it proposes, whatever its principles, provided that purpose and principles are not capable of harming those of the International Working Men’s Association and are compatible with the General Rules.

This is an important call for a broad conception of the mission of the International. It tended to be favourable to the position of Bakunin within it, but was not itself Bakuninist, and seems to have genuinely favoured the widest possible range of views compatible with the International. At the same time, it conceived this position in conjunction with advancing the interests of women workers. It is very much to the Musto’s credit that he presents this position for us to consider.

The thematic selection and arrangement of documents encourages us to appreciate the International as a vitally democratic association. It opens with the founding documents of the International. It then continues, in accord with the actual development of debates, with sections on “Labour”, “Trade Unions and Strikes”, the “Cooperative Movement and Credit”, “Inheritance”, “Collective Ownership and the State”, “Education”, the Paris Commune, a broad range of international issues, and crucial issues of working-class political action and organization. The selections broadly reflect the ideas within the International as a whole, including not only those that are well known, but also less well-known positions put forward by Marx and his main opponents as well as ideas emanating from local sections and individual members.
Under “Labour”, for example, there is an excerpt from the report of the committee on labour and capital that was presented to the Lausanne Congress of 1867. The report’s authors were a Parisian book-binder, a Swiss artisan, a Parisian weaver, a mechanic from Lyon, and a Parisian bronze worker. The excerpt focuses upon the effects of machinery, and in brief compass addresses both its great promise and the enormous problems it brings:

The Committee acknowledges that, of all the means used to date, machinery is the most powerful to achieve the outcome we seek, namely the betterment of the material conditions of the working class; yet, to arrive at this end, it is of the utmost urgency that labour take hold of the means of production. . . . With the invention of machinery, the division of labour becomes necessary. . . . Unfortunately, in this way, all noble ambition in man has been annihilated and his liberty completely nullified as he passes into the condition of a machine, henceforth the property of the one who employs him and holds him in a state of complete dependence.

Also included in this section is a synopsis of an intervention by Marx on the subject of machinery at the 1868 GC meeting. As one might expect, the author of Capital made a number of important points, but the prior contribution from the committee of industrial workers stands up well even in direct comparison with Marx’s comments. It is enlightening to see not only that the workers were up to the task, but that they recognized the importance of this issue and undertook to address it within the broader mandate of their committee. Workers’ reports to other congresses make a similarly strong impression. All these reports were originally in French, and none has previously been translated into English.

One finds the same sorts of valuable documents in each section of the anthology. Under “Trade Unions and Strikes”, there are texts from two articles that Marx wrote at the request of the GC (he was in fact nearly always called upon to present the public face of the International, though at his suggestion all public statements were always signed by all members of the GC). These articles, on the need to oppose strikebreakers and on the Belgian government’s vicious massacre of workers, are not widely known, and they reflect an important aspect of Marx’s ideas and political commitment. The remaining eight documents, however, are from reports and resolutions prepared by others, primarily workers, for the annual congresses, six of which have never previously appeared in English.

The real concerns of the members of the International, and the serious debates that they had over many basic issues of socialism,
the advancement of class interests, and forms of political practice, emerge clearly from these documents. It is not only that there were important political differences from the start, and other, even more profound, differences that came to the fore over the life of the International. What is even more striking is the extent to which many of the positions being put forward, familiar to so many today, were being articulated more or less for the first time. Here is a record of the working class initially feeling its way through the issues that have since become central to socialism, trade unionism, anarchism, and social democratic reform.

Musto, in the Introduction, gives an excellent account of each of the major periods of the International, from a balanced but critical perspective. He is attentive to all the positions that co-existed within the IWA, treating each fairly and without partisanship. His acknowledgement of the important role played by Bakunin and his supporters is rare from someone who is so clearly himself a Marxist. Indeed, he goes further, to give serious consideration to the “autonomist” IWA established by the Bakuninists, which lasted for five years after the 1872 Hague Congress expelled Bakunin. Moreover, Musto treats this organization as part of the history of the IWA, rather than conceiving the International as having come to an end with the removal of the GC to New York. Such an approach could never have been taken by anyone associated with the Communist Parties of old. Even the “centralist” IWA, which survived in New York from 1872 to 1876, is incorporated as a part of the overall history. Documents from both these organizations which survived after the end of the London GC are included.

Musto also challenges the figures that have been put forward regarding the membership of the IWA, which has been hugely inflated by friend and foe alike. Tracking down numbers from the most reliable sources, he arrives at figures that are only one-half to as little as one-twentieth of previous estimates. This scrupulous attention to historical accuracy is evident throughout the book, as is Musto’s even-handedness. One can be confident that his account of the IWA’s struggles – and of the ideas of its central protagonists – is reliable.

Notes provide information for each of the excerpts and their authors. The bibliography lists all the reports from the congresses and conferences that were published by the IWA at the time, as well as the collections of original documents that were primarily published in the 1960s and 1970s. There is also a comprehensive listing of the major secondary works, not only in English, but also in French, German, Italian and Spanish. Finally, included as an appendix are the lyrics to the workers’ anthem, The Internationale.
The last time that the First International received much attention was in 1964, in conjunction with its 100th anniversary. Much of what has been written in the past reflected political and academic positions associated with the Cold War, and the world has of course changed enormously since the mid-1960s. Not only is this anthology unique (one would have to access more than 10 volumes, several in French, and none readily available outside research libraries, to read the material otherwise); it has been put together with present-day concerns in mind, as men and women from 150 years ago speak to us today in all their diversity.

What do they say? We can read, from 1867, the assertion that work is the main expression of human destiny in the modern age, displacing the role of religion, and that it is for this reason that women should have every right to fully and freely engage in the world of work – with maternity leave among the means to make this feasible. We read calls from the workers of one nation to those of another to respect an ongoing strike – a call which is successful and leads to victory. We read Bakunin arguing, despite his opposition to the state in every form, that the state should outlaw inheritance, with Marx responding that this is surely to put the cart before the horse, and that what needs to be abolished is the power of capital, after which inheritance is hardly an issue at all. We read Marx discussing the strengths and weaknesses of the systems of public education in some American states, asserting the importance of the American war against slavery as ushering in a new era of the rights of labour, and maintaining the crucial novelty of the International itself as an organization founded by workers and built through their own efforts to become a force for them “to emancipate themselves”. We read the American General Secretary in New York putting forward the view that “When, upon its birth, bourgeois society solemnly proclaimed ‘the freedom of the individual,’ a new slavery of the working classes resulted from this principle.”

Much in this anthology is surprising, some of it is moving, and all of it is valuable. If you have ever been stirred by The Internationale, this book is for you. Yet, aside from those with a strong commitment to either Marxism or anarchism, and those for whom the history of the working class is deeply important, this book will be useful to anyone with an interest in the actual practice of politics, and especially the relationship between grassroots activism on the one hand and visionary leadership on the other.

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http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/08854300.2014.934082