At the opening of this issue of La Vérité – The Truth, we have decided to publish the integrality of the intervention made by our comrade Marc Gauquelin, editor of our publication, at the public meeting organized by the French section of the Fourth International (the CCI of the POI), Saturday 18 November 2017, to greet the topicality of the October revolution 1917, gathering 1 350 participants at the Espace Charenton in Paris.

Speech by Marc Gauquelin at the Public Meeting of November 18

Comrades, the French section of the Fourth International, which took the initiative of organizing this meeting, did not conceive of it as a gathering of specialists or historians. Not that the work of serious and competent historians is of no use for the emancipatory struggle of the working class. On the contrary. But it seems to us that the militants involved alongside those of the Fourth International – trotskyists or coming from other currents of the workers’ movement, such as Jo Salamero – in the class combat on various fronts: in Venezuela and the trial of strength being played out between the Venezuelan people and American imperialism; in Spain, in the struggle under way against the Francoist monarchy; in Russia; in France... might be better placed than “experts” to supply an answer based upon their own experience to the question: “What remains, 100 years later, of the October Revolution?”

I will not dwell long – even though it is unavoidable – upon the wave of hate-filled falsifications which has once again washed over the October Revolution and its actors on the occasion of this centenary: against the Russian proletariat, the tens of millions of Russian peasants, and the party which led them to victory.

Those who dare make of Lenin the precursor of Stalin, he who precisely made it his business to exterminate Lenin’s companions, the old Bolshevik guard and the command structure of the young Red Army which emerged victorious from the civil war, do not merit that we spare much time on them.

No more, moreover, than the accusation of terrorism aimed against the Bolshevik leaders who were forced to take up arms in order to defend the Republic of Soviets against the White armies of Kolchak and Denikin, supported and equipped by the imperialist governments of the Entente.
Let us leave the petty world of Courtois, Werth, Carrère d’Encausse and Co. to their petty trade.

The specter of revolution

On the other hand, what interests us today, in this outpouring of hate, is what it involuntarily tells us about the present situation.

It is no exaggeration to say: the specter of revolution haunts the summits of this society.

The contempt displayed for those millions of illiterate peasants, those millions of soldiers and workers who dared, for the first time since the Paris Commune, to take power into their own hands and put an end to the war, nationalize the land and industry – the contempt for these “nothings”, as Macron would say – ill disguises the fear that they instinctively feel of revolution. The fear of that moment when millions of men enter into movement and break out of the institutional framework which until then had ensured their exploitation.

Stéphane Courtois, author of the masterwork Le Livre Noir du Communisme (The Black Book of Communism), interviewed by The Echos, went so far as even to deny that there had been a revolution in October 1917, holding that it had been merely an “armed uprising by soldiers”.

But when he was asked the question “Would an October Revolution be possible elsewhere in the world?” , Courtois lowered his guard and promptly replied: “If there was an equally serious economic crisis, a discourse pitting the ‘proletariat’ against the financial powers could once again seduce a disoriented population. In the Lot-et-Garonne (a département in southwestern France – translator’s note) where I often reside, certain towns have more than half the population on welfare, undeclared work and a barter economy are spreading, and the police are often absent. Where the State disengages, the extremists are on the rise.”

This amounts to an admission!

This is the field of action by the party

Let us get back to the October Revolution. In a polemical response to accusations against the Bolsheviks of blanquism (a reference to the tactic of violent conspiratorial action by a relatively small group of revolutionaries, espoused in 19th century France by Louis Auguste Blanqui – translator’s note), Trotsky restores matters:

“No tactical recipes could have called the October Revolution into being, if Russia had not carried it within its body. The revolutionary party in the last analysis can claim only the role of an obstetrician, who is compelled to resort to a cesarean operation.”

In the same speech (given in Copenhagen in November 1932 – translator’s note), Trotsky said:

“In order to sweep away the outlived social order, the progressive class must understand that its hour has struck and set before itself the task of conquering power. Here opens the field of conscious revolutionary action, where foresight and calculation combine with will and courage. In other words: here opens the field of action of the party.”

Contrary to the caricature of the Bolshevik Party that the Stalinists presented for decades, the discipline which characterized it, its capacity to closely wed the movement of the masses in order to place itself at their head at the right moment, was entirely due to the solid theoretical and political cohesion of its leaders, which was built bit by bit during decades of clandestine struggle, and which was strengthened in 1905 and in the years of Tsarist repression of 1905-1907.

In 1905, Lenin perceived in that revolution, with its mass political strikes, the rising up of a young proletariat. He measured all its force and concluded that 1905 had prepared the terrain, throwing into relief the place of each of the political forces present, making this first confrontation with the regime a veritable “dress rehearsal”.

When war broke out, demonstrating the complete impasse of the whole system of private ownership of the means of production in its imperialist stage, Lenin was convinced that this conflagration would shake the warring States to their foundations and open up breaches into which the proletarian revolution would rush.

Combating the betrayal of the leaders of the IInd International, Lenin in 1916 wrote Imperialism the highest stage of capitalism. He therein extended and completed the conclusion drawn by Marx and Engels in the The Communist Manifesto and then developed in Capital, according to which the contradictions of the capitalist system can only be resolved by the expropriation of capital. He further reinforced and demonstrated this with his analysis of the imperialist stage which the system had entered into with the opening of the 20th century.

In the conclusion of his study of the development of concentrations of capitalist monopolies which characterize imperialism, Lenin wrote:

“...it becomes evident that we have socialization of production ..., that private economic and private property relations constitute a shell which no longer fits its contents, a shell which must inevitably decay if its removal is artificially delayed, a shell which may remain in a state of decay for a fairly long period..., but which will inevitably be removed.”

He summed up this position in his 1920 preface to the work, in which he wrote that imperialism and its wars are the prelude to proletarian revolution. It was on the basis of this fundamental appreciation, after the February
revolution broke out, that the Bolsheviks engaged their battle, conceiving of it as the first link in a chain of world proletarian revolution.

The Bolshevik leadership knew that in the imperialist stage, the democratic tasks of the bourgeois revolution can only be realized under the leadership of the proletariat.

The Bolshevik leadership knew – and Lenin unceasingly repeated this in his Letters From Afar sent from Zurich, as in the April Theses which he presented on his arrival in Petrograd – that they must accord no confidence to the provisional governments constituted with representatives of the bourgeoisie with the sole aim of denying the masses their victory, re-establishing order and re-inserting Russia in the imperialist war alongside the Entente.

In mid-revolution, after the July days, Lenin embarked upon the writing of his State and Revolution. In the heart of the action, he believed that in order to guide events it was necessary for him to revisit the theoretical generalizations made by Marx and Engels with reference to the Paris Commune of 1871. He considered it indispensable to clarify the class nature of the State, the necessity of destroying all the components of the bourgeois State. He concentrated all his strength upon conveying his conviction that the Soviets which had surged up had an historic role to play, that of the organs of dual power, and then as the embryos of a workers’ State, in order to satisfy the three watchwords or demands: bread, peace and land.

**The first link in the world revolution had no sequel**

One hundred years have gone by. The first link in the chain of world proletarian revolution had no sequel, it remained isolated.

Not that the German revolution never happened. It surged forth in all its power in November 1918, prompting the flight of the Kaiser. But the German bourgeoisie for its part was able to draw lessons from October 1917, lessons which the German revolutionaries had not learned. It immediately confided the chancellorship to Ebert and the social democrats. The German ‘‘Left’’ -- mired in ‘‘leftist’’ policies, to Lenin’s great chagrin – was unable to build a party rooted in the working class which the class needed in order to take power into its own hands. To reprise a formula that Trotsky employed, the difference between November 1918 in Germany and February 1917 in Russia comes down to a sole factor: the presence in Russia of the Bolshevik Party.

The workers’ State was encircled, starved out. Exploiting a cooling in the ardor of the working class, the Stalinist bureaucracy came to power, destroying through pillage the foundations of the Soviet Republic, right up until its total demolition in 1991.

One hundred years have gone by...What remains of October 1917 for militants involved in the class struggle today? To put it briefly, there remain all the problems that the October Revolution posed, multiplied a thousandfold.

October 1917 was not relayed, contrary to what the Bolsheviks expected, by the victory of a European proletariat. Imperialism has enjoyed a respite, during which it has continued to decompose, to develop all its parasitic aspects, taking all its contradictions to the point of paroxysm.

This has cost Humanity dear. It has paid the price of a second world war, and all the armed conflicts which have spread up until today and which, while not being accorded the title of third world war, nevertheless crush vast zones of the Middle East, the Sahel, throwing tens of millions of refugees onto the road of exodus.

One hundred years have gone by... Revolution has not triumphed, but the struggle of the exploited masses has not ceased. Powerful revolutionary waves have swept all the continents, particularly since the Second World War. While they have not succeeded in slaying capital, imperialism has been forced, in order to preserve its own power, to yield a number of positions.

The struggles for national liberation, guided by petit-bourgeois nationalist leaders, have won independence, in many aspects strictly formal, and which has become incompatible with the pillage extorted at the demand of the big financial groups warring with each other for total control of raw materials.

The revolutionary mobilizations of the proletariat which swept Europe – canalized by the leaderships of the workers' movement in the framework of Popular Fronts (the provisional governments of the time), as was the case in France and in Spain in 1936 or in France in 1945 with the support provided by the PCF for the reconstruction of a bourgeois State compromised with the Nazi occupiers – won important positions which have since become wholly contradictory with the rate of exploitation demanded by the representatives of imperialism. All that had been wrested from imperialism must now imperatively be destroyed.

It is in this that the whole world situation into which we have entered is concentrated.

What remains of the problems posed by October 1917 for Brazil, in Venezuela, for Algeria, in South Africa?

Let us put the question to our Brazilian, Venezuelan, Algerian, Azanian comrades, and we will see how the question of the respective place of the proletariat and the national bourgeoisie, subservient whether it likes it or not to the system of private ownership, surges up again in the
struggle for national emancipation. As many questions as were at the heart of the October Revolution.

What remains of the problems posed by October 1917 in Europe today, at a time when the crisis of accelerated decomposition of the institutions of the European Union combines with that of all the institutions, all the State forms by which the imperialist domination of Europe is maintained through constant adjustment?

Hearth of development of the capitalistic system, of bourgeois nations and of imperialist expansion, Europe (the European imperialisms) has since the Second World War been gradually expelled from the zones it once dominated unilaterally, finding itself directly under sharp attack from the battering ram blows of the main monopolist groups, mostly American.

While, faced with the revolutionary wave which shook Europe after World War II, maintenance of the bourgeois order required that the dominant imperialism (American imperialism) consent to the reconstruction – under its control – of the old nation-States wrecked by the war, on the other hand the orgy of takeovers and fusions that the world is seeing, the brutal reorganization of the “value chain”, is threatening to upset this “equilibrium”.

These phenomena give an idea of the forces at work for the dismemberment and destruction of the old industries built up within the shelter of national borders, for the desertification of whole swathes of national territory, condemning broad sectors of the population – and not only the proletariat – to poverty and decline, undermining the foundations of the old nation-States.

The legal action brought by the Americans against Airbus, against Volkswagen and the “dieselgate” cartel in Germany, the symmetrical breaking up of Alstom and Siemens, the drastic “reorganization” of General Electric plants in Europe and the announcement yesterday of the suppression of 13,000 jobs at Siemens... give an idea of the war which has been unleashed – in the name of so-called resistance against Chinese competition – among the principal groups of finance capital for control of the markets.

In order to stay in the competitive race, they need to wipe out everything that imperialism has had to yield to the working class since the end of World War II.

Whether this concerns, as in France, what we call “the gains of ’36 and ’45, or in Spain the labor regulations won by the working class after the death of Franco despite the terms of the Moncloa Pact, or the system of collective agreements in Germany... all of this must disappear.

The scale of the attack surpasses anything that we have seen hitherto. It is coming down with full force on all the social conquests, whose management provides, for the apparatuses that head the workers’ movement, the material foundations of their control.

This in turn has opened a political crisis which threatens the power of capital within the old imperialist fortresses of the Old Continent.

A crisis more serious than all those that Europe has known these last decades, and which is the origin of the simultaneous opening of the institutional crisis which is shaking the institutions of the Vth Republic in France, the monarchy in Spain and the democratic parliamentary regime in Germany.

Industrial and health scandal related to the use by Volkswagen, from 2009 until 2015, of various techniques to circumvent by fraud the polluting emissions of some of its diesel and gasoline (petrol) engines during their certification tests.

But in the years 1945-50, imperialism was able to benefit from the collaboration offered it by a Stalinist apparatus at the summit of its power and by social democracy for the restoration of order. Today, the Stalinist and social democrat parties are discredited and rejected by the masses, and have collapsed, while millions of men are preparing to go into action for their survival. At the heart of this unfurling, a broad layer of hundreds of thousands of workers, of militants and young people are seeking an orientation in order to fill the vacuum left by this collapse and help the class open the political way forward.

**A vast field of work is opening for us**

All the questions that worker-militants have asked themselves in the course of the whole history of the workers’ movement – including those which had appeared to have been resolved – are surging up again in a new situation. The question of party-trade union relations. The question of parties. The party form does it ineluctably contain its own political degeneration, as one hears more and more often? The relation between democracy and the class struggle, and not forgetting the old question of a workers’ State as transition towards socialism.

As militants of the Fourth International, we in no way claim to possess the answer to all the political questions that arise, all the more so given this situation which is in many ways without precedent.

On the other hand, we believe that it is our duty to participate in debate, in the elaboration of answers to concrete questions posed on the terrain of the political struggle for the expropriation of capital and the establishment of socialism by not letting go of the thread of continuity in this fight.

A continuity which is expressed in the program of the Fourth international in which Trotsky, in his turn,
gathered together the political lessons of the tragedy which struck the proletariat in the 1930s, closely linking in a program of transition the defense of class positions with the question of government power.

In conclusion I would like, at a time when the slanders against "lambertist" trotskyists have arisen again as if by magic, to quote Comrade Lambert upon this fundamental point about continuity. In a speech that he made in 1969 on the history of Trotskyism, after a long quotation from Trotsky’s Journal of Exile, he said:

"Trotsky, referring to the capitulation of the veteran revolutionary Rakovsky, who held out six years, from 1928 to 1934, in Stalin’s camps, clearly indicates that the bureaucracy of the Kremlin, in its struggle against the proletarian revolution, and in order to protect its privileges, sought at any price to destroy the links of continuity which, since 1848, since the League of Communists, materialized the slow and difficult combat of successive generations of proletarian revolutionaries, transmitting the accumulated experience of the old to the young generations (...)

In 1935, he asked for five years of life to ensure transmission of the inheritance. Those five years, he would have them, and those five years would be the hardest, the most poignant, of the whole of his existence. He would see the liquidation of the whole generation of October, all the companions of Lenin, exterminated, tortured, besmirched and slandered by Stalin... And those five years were decisive for the arming of the young generation with a revolutionary method."

One hundred years have gone by...

The time lapses have been terribly much longer than Lenin, Trotsky and their comrades hoped. The putrefaction of imperialism which has taken place during this time lapse, and which has had terrible consequences for Humanity, only replaces on the order of the day with yet greater acuity all the political lessons of the only victorious proletarian revolution in History.

Lessons which are a prolongation of those that Marx and Engels drew from the Paris Commune. Lessons enriched by the analyses of Trotsky of the degeneration of the workers’ State, of the setbacks suffered by the working class on the eve of the war, an elaboration which has been continued in the framework of the Fourth International founded in 1938.

A new situation has opened up, full of promise.

I can only invite the comrades present to associate themselves with the militants of the Fourth International in order to debate these lessons, to provide themselves with the means of jointly elaborating the political responses to bring to bear for the grouping together of the working class with its organizations, in order to overcome the offensive of imperialism.

It is through such exchanges based upon the entire history of the fight of the working class in its diversity that we will build the revolutionary party that the working class needs in order to wrest victory.