The Construction Tasks of the Fourth International Following the General Council of 4, 5 and 6 December 2018

The general council of the Fourth International met 4, 5 and 6 December 2018 and decided, at the end of its works, to convene the 10th World Congress of the Fourth International in the first trimester of 2020.

We publish below excerpts from the notes that were written to allow us to open the discussion on our tasks of construction in the world situation. The discussion allowed us to put into place a truly international editorial board of La Vérité–The Truth.

The goal we fixed for ourselves was to move forward in defining, for each of our sections, how to create ties with the emerging forces to move forward on the axis of constructing the party.

In 1939, Leon Trotsky wrote:

“During a revolution, i.e., when events move swiftly, a weak party can quickly grow into a mighty one provided it lucidly understands the course of the revolution and possesses staunch cadres (...), but such a party must be available prior to the revolution inasmuch as the process of educating the cadres requires a considerable period of time and the revolution does not afford this time.” (The Class, the Party and the Leadership, 1939).

For Leon Trotsky, the leading revolutionary party will not be built before the revolution, but a revolutionary party must be built beforehand to become this leading party in the very movement of the revolution.

Trotsky’s fundamental axis remains just, but the world situation, like that of the labour movement, is no longer the same. The new developments (Trump, Brazil, China, Europe, etc.) and those of the labour movement do not leave us much time; the questions are falling due.

The general crisis of the system

We must no longer talk of a “turning point” in the world situation, but of a succession of abrupt and repeated turning points, of quakes, of explosions, of collapses.

The impasse of the regime of private ownership of the means of production has reached an unprecedented stage, threatening to throw humanity as a whole into barbarity, and a coming crisis in the world market could break out at any moment.

A great many leaders are alarmed. It was Trichet, the former president of the European Central Bank, who declared “the explosives are there, but the detonator is lacking”, and he added “the situation is more vulnerable than in 2008”.

These “explosives” are the financial bubbles that can explode at any moment, as with the sub-primes in 2008. The 2008 crisis was not the beginning of a more general crisis, but an expression at a given moment of the general crisis of the capitalist system, notably since 1971, and of the new shocks that could be stronger still.

Trichet stressed that this could come from anywhere. For example, “the non-refinancing of student debt in the United States is another possible factor”. One... among others. He underlined the cause: “private debt is galloping; public debt is monumental”.

Under a title saying that the debt was a bullet for Washington, the Wall Street Journal (12 November, 2018) wrote:

“During the last decade, the public debt in the United States has grown by 5.1 trillion dollars to 15.9 trillion. In 2017, interest on the general debt reached 263 billion, or 6.6% of all public expenditures and 1.4% of GDP. The Congressional Budget Office estimates that the cost of interest will
reach 915 billion in 2028, or 13% of public expenditures and 3.1% of GDP”.

Another study stresses:

“There is an extraordinary quantity of liquidity issued by the American and European central banks (…) but instead of serving productive investment by businesses, this money has been put into speculation.”

A 2018 Oxfam report observes that “82% of the wealth created in the world last year benefited the richest 1%” (report cited by the site Usbek & Rica).

These are the laws of the death agony of capitalism. Already, in 1971, we wrote:

“The threat is considerably aggravated by the fact that the arms sector of the economy is fed by the bourgeois states, which finance it through the inflation of credit and currency through all sorts of financial manipulations, which lead to the creating of a growing mass of fictive capitals, of which an ever-smaller fraction ends up invested in production.

It is there, and only there, that lies the cause of the crisis of the international monetary system… The trade and current account deficits, and principally the American and European ones, which are at the centre of this creation of huge amounts of fictitious capital, are an expression of the impasse of an economy based upon the private ownership of the means of production.” (Excerpt from a declaration by the OCI (Internationalist Communist Organisation) in August 1971)

These lines, written nearly 50 years ago, describe a process that, half a century later, is falling due.

But the deadline is coming. Like Trichet, numerous economists are alarmed by the fact that, contrary to 2008, when thousands of billions of dollars were spent in order to save the system, in 2018 or 2019 this safety net has disappeared, itself eaten up by the growth of public debt.

As Marx wrote: “The limitation of capital is capital itself.”

It is precisely this situation of movement toward dislocation that leaves finance capital with no other path than to launch itself into this world economic war in an attempt to survive.

This “every-man-for-himself” necessarily brings with it a general offensive to destroy any barrier, norm or rule in the path of the expansion of capital. All that had been gained by the class struggle, notably in 1945, must disappear: “Goodbye, 1945”, affirmed a representative of French employers.

World disorders

We have entered a new period where competition and trade conflicts no longer oppose, as in the past, capital on national bases. The current situation is marked by outright struggle, a veritable war opposing trusts and monopolies for the conquest of markets, looting raw materials… For this, they seek to free themselves from all the hindrances, agreements, treaties, regulations…

The imperialist trusts and monopolies that confront each other trample the prerogatives of states, exerting on them a dislocating pressure. The bourgeois states have the great flaw of not having eradicated the judicial frameworks materialised by the social conquests won by the class struggle. But, at the same time, they use these states to implement their demands, to feed the industry of arms and war.

It is this murderous competition between the trusts that is at the basis of the wars and the dislocation of the states, while at the other end of the chain, the resistance of the peoples undermines their foundations. The pressure on the European states, as well as the offensive against Brazil and Venezuela, bear witness.

It is in these conditions that, with the passing years, contradictions have developed that tear apart the American dominant class, seeing several factions oppose each other in defence of their own interests, due to the absence of a strong power in the United States that would impose an iron heel on the planet.

Because the lion’s share of the defence of the world order falls on the American imperialist state, which it pains to ensure, and which has considerably aggravated the crisis.

Since the fall of the Kremlin bureaucracy, it must focus all the tasks of the counter-revolution and the keeping of order.

But this is beyond its capabilities, all the more so because its keeping of this world order, with fierce competition, including from American trusts, undermines the traditional American productive basis to the profit of de-localisation on the world market.

This has led to a modification of the situation in the United States itself. The social crisis being expressed in the United States reaches new heights, throwing tens of millions into poverty and exasperation.

This situation is the refraction in the United States itself of the social crisis into which imperialism is dragging humanity. American imperialism, the most powerful one, is hit with the same ills as the other countries of the planet. This crisis, as well as the anger of tens of millions of Americans being expressed in the mobilisations and partial strikes, notably the very massive teacher strikes, and the rejection of the elites have destabilised the whole of the American state apparatus.

This situation has led to a weakening of American imperialism on the world scale, which was expressed in the recent past by Obama’s about faces. Caught in the contradiction between the role of the monopolies and the rising anger of Americans, capable of leading to a major social explosion in the USA itself, the two parties of the
capitalist class were in trouble, as was seen in the vote for Sanders among the Democrats and for Trump among the Republicans, both of which were votes against the elites.

Trump’s election was the expression of this crisis of the dominant class, which uses this revolt of those “left behind”, to whom protection is promised, and, in the name of “America First”, to reorient the policies of American imperialism.

The often-chaotic announcements from Trump fit into this perspective. The United States must quit all the alliances that stifle and limit the most powerful imperialism on the world market. Against the European, Russian and Chinese declarations on multilateralism, Trump opposes unilateralism.

The announcements of trade war, including with his European allies, the decision to re-establish the embargo against Iran and the threat of sanctions against the European businesses that do not bend to the American decision, the withdrawal from the nuclear pact with Russia, the withdrawal from the climate pact, the pressures on Europeans to increase their financing of NATO, the stopping of financing of certain UN structures, of NAFTA and the threats to pull out of the WTO are expressions of this American readjustment.

“Trump attacks the constitutive alliances and institutions of the world order created, supported and guaranteed by the United States since 1945 in the “Free” (non-Soviet) world, the extension of which to the whole of the planet having become, at the end of the Cold War, the foreign policy objective, from Bush senior to Clinton to Bush junior (…) Mr. Trump considers that it has been of more benefit to competitors, adversaries or allies than to the United States itself.” (La Tribune, 18 July 2018).

In this situation of disintegration of the world market, of generalised panic, Trump does not intend to re-establish a world framework, even under American control, because he does not have the capability, but only to look after American interests and act on a case by case basis, brutally imposing his decisions on his allies or adversaries. At the same time, this policy feeds the march to world disorders. Trump must act quickly; large American productive sectors are threatened. At the same time, the protectionism agitated by Trump is an illusion, since the imbrication of capital on the world scale is strong.

“Goodbye, 1945”

Trump’s offensive against his European allies, the crisis of NATO and, above all, the taxation of European imports disorganise and upend the heights of the EU, already in a crisis of dislocation. All the European governments are already in a major crisis, as is expressed in the Brexit in Great Britain, the crisis in Germany, that in Italy and elsewhere.

They are caught between the demands of capital and the resistance emerging in the populations. The growing pressure from the United States only sharpens this crisis.

The opening of the trade war with China threatens the whole world economy due to its place in world production.

The Chinese bureaucracy is caught between its own interests, the existence of a powerful working class and American pressure.

The Chinese bureaucracy, after having announced retaliation, has already made concessions to Trump by announcing a liberalisation of the private market and foreign investments. Trump has judged these announcements positive, but insufficient. The vice is tightening on the Chinese bureaucracy, confronted with the multiplication of partial strikes that can, at any moment, be the starting point of a general movement of this powerful working class.

This balance of power is a part of a situation in which the Chinese bureaucracy is dependent on the world market dominated by the United States and the dollar, but these two are also dependent on China, due to its industrial place and its exchange reserve of dollars.

This is an uncontrolled, unstable “world order” that is establishing itself chaotically in the place of that of 1945. The American attacks can plunge a country or a continent into dislocation at any moment. (See the resolution from the national direction of our Brazilian section on page 11, the text from our Venezuelan comrades on the consequences of the victory of Bolsonaro in their country, as well as that from our Mexican section on the “migrant crisis” in the preceding issue of La Vérité–The Truth.)

In a teetering world, Trump intends to go all the way with the 1971 American decision on the convertibility of the dollar. By taking this decision, Nixon imposed on his allies the necessary conditions for the stability of the American economic and social order, subordinating, with the dollar as the new standard, the European allies to the interests of the American bourgeoisie.

“But this decision did not make American imperialism a super-imperialism; Yankee finance capital, despite all its power, cannot totally impose its law (…). Capital remains capital. The other bourgeois states continue to defend their part of the constricted world market and resist American imperialism’s domination (…) a new repartition of the economic and financial positions on the international scale and new parities between the imperialists will be established, taking into account the real balance of power between the imperialist bourgeoisies that contend for the market. And afterwards… everything starts over, until when?” (Declaration from the OCI)

We are no longer in 1971. At the time, the American decision inaugurated a new phase of the world order. This period is ending. A councillor to whom Nixon posed the question “what will we do next time?” responded “war”.

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We are there.

For the threatened American imperialism, a page must be turned. It must free itself from any framework, alliance or institution that hinders it. At the same time, it cannot eradicate everything, conscious of the risks of deflagration. But it moves forward on this path, and whatever it might want, it provokes world upheavals and disorders.

Financial crises, wars and coups d’état will be combined with revolts and revolutionary situations, confronting capital and labour.

More than ever, the revolutionaries must understand the meaning of the response formulated in the OCI declaration “Until When?”: “Until the moment when the proletariat in each country abolishes private ownership of the means of production by overthrowing the class domination of each bourgeoisie incarnated in the bourgeois states” (OCI, 1971).

In other words, the question of power. Of course, it is not a question of an agitating slogan like a bunch of dogmatic sectarians, but the line of force making up our program of transitory demands leading to this conclusion: the taking of power, the necessary condition for the expropriation of capital.

This conclusion demands the construction of revolutionary parties of the Fourth International.

**At the centre, the working class and the labour movement**

This world offensive from capital to dismantle all that was gained after 1945 collides head-on with the labour movement and undermines its foundations.

It was after the 2nd imperialist war that an important series of working-class conquests were gained, not only in Europe, but also on the world scale, notably the independence of a great number of colonial countries, along with new conquests. Since this date, principally in Europe, but also on other continents, the leaderships of the union organisations have depended on these conquests, and their management in exchange for containing the class struggle.

A new period has opened. By concentrating its offensive against all that had been gained, capital brutally undermines what had constituted the foundation of the unions and their leaderships.

This unprecedented offensive provokes within the organisations a search for resistance from militants and leaders, opening breaches at all levels of the leadership. We take part in this movement of defence of the existence and independence of the unions, since we know that, despite the policies of the leaderships, the unions, because they only organise workers, are a materialisation and a recognition that society is divided into antagonistic classes.

It is not the same for the political parties pretending to defend or represent the class. The social-democratic parties integrated in the bourgeois state and the Stalinist parties subservient to the Kremlin have suffered the consequences of the double crisis of the disappearance of the Kremlin and the crisis of the national bourgeois states destabilised by the appetites of finance capital, thus accelerating their adaptation to its new demands, bringing about an unprecedented crisis. It is in these conditions that, in Europe, the right-left alternations, the coalitions and national union have provoked an immense rejection of the traditional parties by the workers.

In Europe, the Stalinist parties are on the path of extinction, and the social-democratic parties are collapsing. This is not unique to Europe, although it takes different forms according to the continent or country.

In a great number of countries oppressed by imperialism, the petty-bourgeois parties that often came out of national independence (in Latin America, in Palestine, in North and sub-Saharan Africa) are also collapsing, caught between imperialist pressure and the resistance of the peoples.

But, if we take the question of Brazil, for example, it presents itself differently: the PT, even though it has suffered the backlash from its 13 years in government, because it was created at the end of the dictatorship as a party “without a boss”, as a framework for bringing together the working class, but which in an oppressed country closely combines with the question of the nation and its sovereignty vis-à-vis imperialism, remains the organisational framework of the class.

We do not see in the collapse of the Stalinist, social-democratic or petty-bourgeois parties a step back or a danger for the labour movement and the working people. This crisis of the counter-revolutionary leaderships frees up forces that seek the path of combat. This is a contradictory and complex process that demands of us, on our orientation of transition concerning the construction of the party, to find the ways and means to create ties with these sectors and find the form to organise them.

**At the centre of the general council’s discussion: our construction**

In a different historical period, Leon Trotsky wrote:

“The preparatory period of propaganda has provided us with officials without whom we would not be able to move a step forward, but we have also inherited the fact that entirely abstract conceptions of the construction of a new party and a new International can be expressed within our organisation (…) these sectarians often add that the revolutionary events inevitably push the workers toward us. This passive expectation, covered by an idealist messianism, has nothing to do with Marxism. The revolutionary events always and
inherently pass over the heads of all the sects. One can, by means of a propaganda literature, if it is good, educate the first officials, but one cannot gain the proletarian vanguard, which does not live in a circle or a classroom, but in a class society, in a factory, in the mass organisations, a vanguard to whom we must know how to talk in the language of their experiences. The best prepared propaganda officials can only disintegrate if they do not enter into contact with the daily struggle of the masses; the Bordigist waiting for the revolutionary events to push the masses to them as a reward for their “correct” ideas is the cruellest of their illusions. During the revolutionary events, the masses do not seek the address of one sect or another but pass above them. To grow faster in the period of flux, during the preparatory period, we must know where to find the points of contact in the consciousness of broad circles of workers.

We must establish adequate relationships with the mass organisations. We must find the correct starting point, corresponding to the concrete conditions of the proletarian vanguard in the person of diverse groups. And, for this, we must not only not take ourselves for a palliative in lieu of a new party, but simply for the tool for its creation” (translated from D’un groupe propagandiste au travail de masse, octobre 1934, Œuvres, tome 4, p. 228-229).

Of course, the political situation is no longer the same, but the strategic line put forth by Trotsky remains fundamentally pertinent.

In relation to what we have analysed concerning the major instability of the situation and the processes within the labour movement, we must focus our discussion on the turning point that we must make to take a step forward in the field of construction… if we do not want the “revolutionary events” to go over our heads.

To win the vanguard, we must “know where to find the points of contact”, or, in other words, have an assessment of the processes underway, of the development of the forces within the class, rejecting all dogmatism, which would divert us from new developments.

We must implant ourselves “in the businesses and mass organisations”. Which is to say to seek to resolutely implant ourselves in the working class, and thus in the union movement. In the current situation, the struggle against the offensive to destroy the organisations is a decisive leverage to create ties with large sectors of these organisations that seek the path of combat.

We must have a dialog with “a vanguard to whom we must know how to talk”. The decisive question for our construction is therefore to publish a newspaper, the framework for elaboration and dialog.

And, above all, we must not take ourselves “for a palliative in lieu of a new party, but simply for the tool for its creation”.

This is the central issue: to reject any “self-proclama- tory” conception or self-affirmation to, on the contrary, find the forms to create ties with the sectors of the vanguard that come forth and which will not spontaneously join us.

The elaboration of the line of transition responds to this objective in terms of construction of the party. Of course, it must be reassessed in function of the new world situation, the developments within the labour movement, the crisis of decomposition of the Communist, Socialist and petty-bourgeois parties and the developments within the union organisations.

As Trotsky explained in the quote that introduced these notes, the leading revolutionary party will only be constructed during the revolutionary crisis, but a party must be constructed beforehand to be able to act during the surge of the masses.

But he specifies that this takes time. However, today, our time is limited. We must therefore at once reinforce the numeric and political forces of the Fourth International and find, at the same time, the flexible organisational frameworks to create ties with this vanguard. (…)


“The whole of the experience of the class struggle attests that an independent workers party and an international are indispensable because the final result of the class struggle is not to obtain a change in bourgeois society. It is a question of the very existence of humanity, dragged into the abyss by imperialism.

And to accomplish the revolutionary tasks, there is no ready-made solution. Marxism is the scientific method of organised construction of the tool indispensable for helping the masses to work for their emancipation themselves. But the solution is not to be found in any book. We begin with the Fourth International, we establish, with the help of the program, that there is no other solution to the crisis of humanity than the socialism guaranteed by the abolition of private ownership of the major means of production and worker democracy. Countless difficulties have come up. We will persevere.

And there is nothing contradictory in observing the complexity of the revolutionary processes and to conclude that, for the revolutionaries, things are simple.

Things are simple: begin with what is, and to understand what is, begin with the program. The victory of the world revolution has been delayed, delays bring with them suffering and failures; but the failures on the road of revolution, jointly organised by the social-democratic and Stalinist treasons, particularly highlight the power of the revolutionary movement of the masses, the receptivity of the workers and the youth to the political ideas and principles set forth in the Transitional Program. No one can foresee the inevitable stages, the unforeseen combinations by which the march to the revolution will continue, but Marxism remains the only scientific method, because, by unifying theory and practice, it provides the only political means – thus of organisation – to raise the fight of the vanguard to be equal to the needs of history.

To conclude, at the risk of repeating ourselves, we say: it is through organised practice that the events must be confirmed; it is not by words, but by life, that the discussions
and divergences will be settled. It is absolutely inevitable that the largest diversity of political opinions develop, since the march to the world revolution embracing hundreds of millions of people, across all the continents, will bring to the surface, everywhere, in all countries, in all the organizations, the slag produced by the decomposition of the system of imperialism and bureaucracy, and the advanced elements to the search for progressive solutions. It will all be tangled together. The sorting will take place everywhere. Faithful to Marxism, to Bolshevism, to the principles of the program, we will not let ourselves be turned away from our path.

Because imperialism is doomed. Because the bureaucratic usurpers are doomed. Because the revolutionary crisis will continue through failures and advances, it will extend. And this is what will provide the material, in light of the principles of the program, to elaborate the means to build the Fourth International. And it is indeed this that they do not pardon us.”

As Lambert said: “It will all be tangled together. The sorting will take place everywhere”.

First page of the 2019 calendar edited by the Brazilian section of the Fourth International, at the centennial of the Third International.