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Fourth International history: “Livio Maitan’s last book”

Thursday 23 January 2020, by [O’MALLEY Philomena](#), [TURIGLIATTO Franco](#) (Date first published: 28 November 2019).

A new contribution to writing the history of the Fourth International was published in November 2019: *Memoirs of a critical communist; Towards a history of the Fourth International* by Livio Maitan.

Présentation

A contribution to the history of the Fourth International

The book was launched at a well-attended panel at the London Historical Materialism conference on 9 November 2019. The speakers included Penelope Duggan who edited and referenced the book, the main translator Gregor Benton speaking by video from Borneo, Franco Turigliatto a longtime comrade of Maitan in both the Italian section and the Fourth International leadership, and Josep Maria Antentas of Anticapitalistas, Spanish state.

Speakers underlined the picture of commitment through difficult periods as well as those of new upsurges and growth given in the book; and its contribution not only to a history of the Fourth International but understanding how the effort to understand the changing situation and how to build revolutionary organizations in downturns and upswings is the basis of this commitment.

Franco Turigliatto also traced in more detail Livio’s activity through his involvement in the Fourth International’s leadership, his contribution can be read in full here “Livio Maitan’s last book”.

Thursday 28 November 2019

Philomena O’Malley

Livio Maitan’s last book

*This address was given by Franco Turigliatto at the launch of Livio Maitan’s book *Memoirs of a critical communist: Towards a history of the Fourth International* at the Historical Materialism conference in London in November 2019.*

First of all I would like to thank the organisers for inviting to this conference. I would also like to thank the IIRE for publishing, the translator Gregor Benton for the huge task of translation, Penny Duggan for having done so much work on the notes and references.

The first time I met Livio Maitan was in the spring of 1969, in Turin, at a small meeting about the French May '68. I had been involved in the local university student movement in my home town, Turin, from early 1967, and having read *The Revolution Betrayed* and other Trotskyist publications in 1968, I began to look for a political reference point in the Fourth International.

The last time I met Livio was in the first days of September 2004, at his home in the suburbs of Rome. He had called me urgently to give precise instructions on what I should do with his books and his papers after his death. After I left him I called his son Marco to ask about his health, and he in turn reassured me that while his father's health was not good, there was no immediate cause for concern. This however was not Livio's viewpoint. Reading and writing for him had become increasingly difficult. He considered his time was coming to its end, and a few days later he passed away. But before passing he telephoned Lidia Cirillo, a long-time comrade of the Fourth International, telling her who were to be the speakers at his funeral: Lidia herself, Alain Krivine, and Fausto Bertinotti, the then secretary of *Rifondazione Comunista*.

For over three decades I discussed and worked with Livio: I learned many things from him, conversing and also trying, with various and uncertain results, to go beyond what we thought were the previous generation's limitations. Both in light of the great mobilisations of the 1960s across the world, and above all, those of the 1970s in Italy, right up to the last important shared political experience: the participation of our own political current in the activities and political dialectic of *Rifondazione Comunista*. So many meetings, so much political passion, so many demonstrations, debates, and also so many international meetings of the Fourth International in Brussels, Paris, and Amsterdam where Livio and I would share a narrow little dormitory room at the International Institute.

This book on the history of the Fourth International is Livio's last book, one of the many he wrote. I would just like to mention here that his personal library of 4100 books, 300 magazine collections and many other documents have been conserved in the Livio Maitan Library in Rome managed by our comrades. It is an official part of the Italian Library Service – which is a network of Italian libraries open to the public promoted by the Ministry of Culture.

It is a book, as he himself has written, that he felt compelled to write in order to leave a testimonial that others had not given, or could no longer give. It is not a full and exhaustive history, which would require a much greater and collective effort, but it is the outline of a journey, a map of events, all the more valid because it offers a first and indicative photograph in black and white. It includes: analysis of the big world events and international situations; the dynamics of capitalism; revolutionary processes; the building of and issues with national sections of the Fourth International; splits and fusions and the congress debates are examined attentively and acutely by the writer. The political narrative of many countries and organisations is outlined – Sri Lanka, Bolivia, Argentina, Brazil, Mexico, Iran, Poland, Spain and France – the list is long. A detailed chapter gives a balance sheet of the building of the FI over the 30 years following the Second World War.

On the other hand, this last book on the history of the Fourth International is incomplete for two reasons: the author, as he himself says, could not continue with the same methodological criteria used in the first half to write the second part of the text because his strength was failing. It is even more incomplete because he was unable to write a single line of the final chapter as he had conceived it, covering the period from 1993 to 2003, and which should have ended with the birth of the anti-globalisation movement.

We should respect Livio and an entire generation of militants for standing up personally, collectively, and intellectually, to the adverse currents of the time, that is, against those who wanted to simplify a dramatic historical reality. Their defence of a Marxist method of analysis, helps us understand better

the perverse and tragic roads taken by historical events and by the workers movement.

Theirs's was an attempt to try and comprehend the phenomenon of Stalinism, as well as combating it, without ever giving up on the anti-capitalist struggle. They also defended a concept and a project of a socialist society conceived as democratic participation, power and self-management of working women and men against the historical winds and tides, and against all facile and false simplifications.

Livio's historical reconstruction takes on a direct and personal quality from 1947, the year in which he joined the Fourth International, and even more in the years following, when he took a central role in the political life and leadership of the organisation.

In my view, three political and organisational stages emerge out of the book's history of the Fourth International after World War II:

- The first is that of an organisation with very limited resources that nevertheless managed an almost titanic effort, that of attempting to comprehend the new dynamics of the international class struggle that was taking place with different characteristics from the past, as well as making political forecasts arising from these analyses.
- The second stage is the arrival of the great mass movements of the 1960s and 70s which allowed political and organisational development to take place, one that included significant involvement in some countries, although still as a minority, as well as a central organisational structure that pushed the FI towards new tasks, and nourished great hopes for a possible political role in these mass movements.
- The third is the stage produced by the development and success of the capitalist counterattack which successfully pushed back the mass movements and which translated politically into what becomes known as "disillusionment."

The early period which lasts almost up to the threshold of the 1960s gives a picture of resources that were numerically weak but politically combative, and of an international that tried to bridge the big gap between their reduced operational capacity and the enormity of the world-wide class struggle.

The analysis of the new world that emerged after World War II required the leadership group to make an enormous effort of analysis and interpretation, and inevitably produced difficult debates and ruptures. But in order not to lose one's way, reality must be understood, and various past models must be put aside.

The list of difficulties is complex:

The schism between Moscow and Belgrade; the revolutionary victory in China; the Cold War and the Korean war; the rise and decline of Stalinism; the uprisings in Hungary and Poland and the XXth Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union; the discussion on whether or not a reformist outcome to the Stalinist dictatorship was possible; the full acquisition of a socialist democracy with a plurality of parties, and finally the Algerian revolution that for a significant phase was central to the life of the International. On the organisational level, there was the relationship with the social-democratic and communist mass parties, with the choice of membership within them, in an attempt to overcome a marginal status vis-a-vis the concrete reality of class struggle.

Livio's account grasps the huge effort (as well as the errors) that the leadership of the FI undertook in order to meet these political and strategic challenges, for there was not a strong enough relationship with mass sectors of the working class that would allow less fragile bridges to be built

with them, in order to cover the distance between analysis and concrete practical capacity.

A lot of irony has been expended on the furious discussions and the divisions that followed, but it is also true that the discussions were about real living events and struggles. It is difficult to claim to have full answers without having all the elements available, all the more so when entering into the specificities of problematic national issues in certain countries.

The world situation changed in 1968 with its great student movements, the May events in France, the Tet offensive in Viet Nam, the events in Czechoslovakia and Poland, and then the great workers' struggles in several European countries, while a few years later, the end of the dictatorships on the Iberian Peninsula. These events also changed the political/organisational framework on which the Fourth International was built. For the first time there was significant organisational growth in various sections that begin to give them an increased capacity to take part in society and the class struggle, remaining however minority currents.

They are crucial and dramatic years after the assassination of Che Guevara in Bolivia, the development of guerrilla war in some countries, and the harsh and difficult discussions about the choices facing the FI, marking the Tenth Congress of 1969 and then the following one in 1974.

As for myself, having joined the FI in 1969 and taken part in the 1974 Congress, I read these parts of the book through the spectacles of my direct involvement, comparing them with my own personal memories, all the more in the case of the following years, having by that stage begun to participate in the Unified Secretariat from 1978 onwards.

These are the years in which there is a consistent effort to give a concrete sense to the FI as an international organisation, with the setting up of a stronger central leadership group running daily operations, and with a qualitatively superior ability to follow the development of the various sections. We should also not forget the production of publications such as *Inprecor*, *International Viewpoint* and *Quatrieme Internationale* (Livio was the editor) while the choice to further strengthen the FI centre was confirmed at the 1979 Congress.

These are the years of great hope, involving different countries and different sections at different times. However, this hope was often followed more or less swiftly by the defeats of the working classes, which overwhelmed our organisations, and/or by mistakes that caused retreats and deep disappointment.

These are the years before and after the 1974 Congress, when there were great factional disputes, especially between the European and North American organisations, and also with the Moreno current in Latin America.

The Eleventh Congress is also where there is the pivot towards the industrial sector in an attempt to build sections embedded in the working class. This turn quickly ran into great difficulties and a lack of success, above all for objective causes: the evolving economic and employment situation, combined with the growth of the conservative offensive, made the task very arduous.

Livio sums up the gains and the limits of that Congress in a brief chapter with a symptomatic title: "A realistic balance sheet." He does not recoil from indicated a series of his criticisms about some analyses and political positions made by the leadership – just as he does in other parts of the book.

At the following Congress in 1985, the International has more or less the same organisational strength. However it takes place in the context of a strong conservative campaign by the bourgeoisie, and once more there are deep internal disputes that led to the political split with the American Socialist Workers Party in 1990, and above all to the realisation that the period of growth

has come to an end. Daniel Bensaid's address gives an account of this more realistic evaluation and brings in elements of self-criticism and second thoughts on the functioning of the International.

This consideration leads in the following years to the return of the cadres who had made up the central leadership structure of the International to their national sections: a choice that Livio did not really agree with. However, these are also the years in which the role of the Amsterdam Institute is strengthened and stabilised – the Fourth International centre for research and education – and there is also the introduction of the annual international Youth Camp meeting.

On the political level a new orientation makes headway, based on some positive national experiences, summarised by the term “regroupment,” that is the creation of, or participation in, political organisational experiences within other anti-capitalist currents.

In those years, Livio, while maintaining his international commitment, was heavily involved in the PRC – the Rifondazione Comunista party, actively participating in the construction of the Italian section. He followed with conviction and passion not only the internal discussions of the PRC but also of the European marches for employment, the great demonstration of the anti-globalisation movement in Genoa in 2000, and the World Social Forum in Florence in 2003. However, he no longer had the strength to write of these experiences as he would have wished.

Livio's history of the Fourth International instead concludes with the 1995 Congress, the congress of “disillusionment”, which Livio describes as being marked by the triple “alteration” of the world situation: the downfall of the Soviet Union and the downfall of Stalinism; the enduring persistence of capitalism, although greatly in crisis; and the changes in the world-wide anti-capitalist left and the Fourth International.

The texts produced become less defined; problematic observations and working hypotheses prevail. In the following years, despite the great hopes inspired by the anti-globalist movement and by some partial, including organisational, successes (all short-lived) the international situation is marked by the defeats of the workers movement and by the neoliberal offensive gaining ground, notwithstanding the numerous and important episodes of social resistance that continued to take place. Fortunately the contradictions of capitalism and its neo-liberal policies continue to produce new great mass movements in many countries worldwide as we can see in recent months and even in these recent days, such as the great international women's movement, and that for climate change action, both of which carry new hopes.

The 1995 Congress was the last time I was able to talk with another mentor, Ernest Mandel, as always an affectionate, attentive, and combative comrade, but who was also saddened by the situation of disillusionment and by the breakdown of so much hope.

It may have signposted the end of an historical period, but not the end of the need to build an anti-capitalist alternative and a revolutionary project, together with the need for new generations of militants.

Reading Livio's last book allows us to better understand a story, a political and social battle that has not ended, even if it is much more difficult than my generation imagined it would be in those brilliant years of the 1960s and 70s.

The epigraph to Livio's book gives his testament to us:

Helping to give birth to what must be born

is the very reason the revolutionary movement exists.

We have done this, in according with the time we live in,
yesterday, for years since, and from time immemorial.

There are more reasons than ever to continue to do so now.

Thank you Livio, for this book, for the work to which you gave your whole life.

Franco Turigliatto

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