Karl Marx and the IWMA Revisited

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London, May 1870. In a back room in Holborn a meeting of the General Council of the International Working Men’s Association (IWMA) took place under dramatic circumstances. English union leaders and European émigrés were present. A number of “press reporters, greedy for news” were present as well, as Karl Marx reported Friedrich Engels in Manchester, since “rumours had been spread in London” that the members of the General Council were to be arrested in the meeting room.¹

Just before, leading members of the IWMA, called simply the International, had been arrested in Paris and other French cities. They were accused of plotting a conspiracy against the empire and the assassination of Napoleon III. It was a transparent police manoeuvre. The French Emperor wanted to have his personal sovereignty affirmed in a plebiscite. It became his last big success. The crime of the Paris section of the International merely consisted of appealing to abstention from voting as a demonstration against the Empire and for the social republic.²

In London an English newspaper reporter followed the meeting of the General Council of the IWMA. English union leaders and European émigrés excitedly discussed the purpose and content of a public declaration. A while later, more French intellectuals joined, who had been to a revolutionary dinner. The British unionists “always come back to the point that something must be sent to the papers to prove that they do not agree with assassination”. The non-English members on the other hand wanted the regime to be condemned.³

¹ Marx to Engels, 7 May 1870. (Karl Marx, Frederick Engels. Collected Works (Moscow 1988), vol. 43, p. 504, [hereafter, MECW].)
³ “A meeting of conspirators” in The Northern Echo (Darlington) No. 165 (13 July 1870), p. 4. – In 1864–65, the General Council comprised thirty to fifty members; in 1866–71, twenty-five to thirty; and in 1871–72, forty to fifty. For the entire period, 1864–72, the total came to approximately 200 persons. This council consisted equally of British union members, London radicals, and émigrés living in London. Among the British members were George Odger, George

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After some three hours of rambling discussion a sort of compromise was reached. “The part speaking against assassination is made clearer and stronger”, the reporter told. “At the request of the British, some beautiful passages about the sun conspiring against darkness are allowed to stand to please the foreigners.” In the declaration of the General Council the tasks of the International are emphasized: “The special mission of all our branches [is] to act ... as centres for the organisation of the working class”. And is “also to aid ... all political movements tending to the accomplishment of our ultimate end, the economical emancipation of the working class”. All of this happened “in open daylight”. “Every form of secret society” was rejected. The workers would “conspire publicly”, “as the sun conspires against darkness”. The declaration concludes with: “The noisy and violent measures against our French sections are exclusively intending ... the manipulation of the plebiscite.”

The declaration was written by Marx. His handwritten text was glued into the minute book. Almost every meeting of the General Council was recorded in such a minute. Four manuscript minute books have survived. The British reporter described how at the beginning of the meeting the secretary deposited a heavy minute-book upon the table. The secretary, a German tailor and refugee, seemed to have carried that great tome all the way from the other end of London.

The journalist also left us with a remarkable description of Marx: “The most noticeable man in the company is a German professor; he is of middle-age, and has a handsome leonine face; and is evidently what an American would call the 'boss' of the meeting.”

Marx was not a founding initiator. But he was present at the creation of the International. He authored its programmatic documents and drafted most of its statements, appeals, and reports. During eight years, from 1864 to 1872, Marx participated almost every Tuesday evening in the consultations of the General Council, which coordinated the international network of workers from

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6 MEGA², vol. I/21, p. 2074.