

# The implosion of the ISA: Can the good traditions of the CWI be saved?

*International Socialist Alternative (ISA)* is an international Trotskyist organisation that was created in 2019 after a split from the *Committee for a Workers' International (CWI)*. The split took place after the *International Secretariat (IS)* of the CWI (a small committee of about a dozen, based in London and dealing with the day to day running of the organisation) lost the majority in the much larger *International Executive Committee (IEC)* made up of about 80 members. The IEC represented more or less all the national sections of the CWI, then present in about 45 countries. The IS was a body elected by the IEC, which was (according to the Statutes of the CWI) the highest body between congresses in the international organisation, electing and (supposedly checking) the IS. The first time ever in its history when the IEC attempted to seriously check the IS, with a majority voting against some of its proposals, the IS (leading an international minority faction) went ahead and split the CWI.

The issue under debate seemed to be a secondary one (the hacking of some emails of the leadership group in Ireland). In the 2018 IEC meeting that began in the last days of October and finished in the first week of November, the IS initially lost the vote on a technical/procedural issue (related to the agenda). Within days, it discovered huge “fundamental differences” and “differences on issues of principle” and went ahead with the creation of a minority faction before the end of the IEC meeting. Nobody in the IEC had challenged the IS’s composition, nobody raised the need to remove or replace any of its members. But they still went ahead with the creation of an official faction clearly paving the way for the imminent split.

Very soon after the IEC meeting, in the very beginning of 2019, the Minority faced a serious internal split – it lost the sections of **Spain, Portugal, Mexico** and **Venezuela** who followed their own course outside of the ranks of the CWI.

**Thus, the Minority became an even smaller minority within the leading bodies of the CWI. Despite this it still went ahead with usurping the name of the CWI and all its resources! It was a blunt undemocratic move, trampling over the CWI Statutes and all the declarations about internal democracy! The resources of the CWI did not belong to the Minority; essentially therefore, they were stolen. It was an internal coup.**

After the split, the majority of the sections of the CWI created the ISA, but very soon differences developed.

Since its creation the ISA has essentially been in crisis. In 2021 it lost the [Greek, Turkish and Cypriot sections](#), who were soon to be followed by others to create [Internationalist Standpoint \(ISp\)](#). Differences and debates in the ISA after the 2021 split never stopped, although for quite a while the

leadership was attempting to keep them under the carpet, away from the membership. All of these came forcefully to the surface in the last couple of years.

Differences today in the ISA range on all issues:

- on Identity Politics and “socialist feminism”;
- on a correct/balanced approach to safeguarding issues;
- on the Ukraine war;
- on Palestine and the war on Gaza;
- on the United Front (i.e., the need to collaborate with other left organisations and currents in the working class);
- on perspectives, in relation to the crisis of capitalism, working class struggles and class consciousness;
- on democratic centralism (i.e., essentially on how democratic the internal regime is and to what extent the leadership and the political line is under the control and checks of the membership) etc.

It is, of course, impossible to write about the substance of the differences in the context of this article. An initial general idea is provided by the [resolution of the February 2023 Conference](#) of ISp on the splits in the CWI and ISA . Since then, differences inside the ISA have increased and have aggravated.

Today there are two poles in a head-on clash in the ISA, fully preparing for a final split: one around the Belgian and Irish sections and another based on the US and Swedish sections. The second has the support of the majority in the international leading bodies, but it’s a fragile majority. In many ways the split is already a fact, as the two sides use different web-sites to distribute their material, organize different events and some important, well-known individuals and groups have already left; the split is developing in a gradual way.

In the US section, the most important personality, with a very significant following around the **Workers Strike Back** (WSB) campaign, ex member of the Seattle Local Council, **Kshama Sawant**, has left the US section of the ISA together with a number of other leading cadres, embarking on an independent road. The conflict is not only between sections but also within sections and not all divisions have to do or are related to the international majority and minority factions. It’s also important to note that the two main factions are not homogeneous, there are serious internal contradictions within both.

**The ISA is faced with a devastating crisis. What will remain of it at the end of this internal battle is unclear.**

## A tragic development

This is a tragic development for an organization that hoped and claimed to overcome the deficiencies of the CWI, where it came from.

But it is also tragic from the point of view of the revolutionary and Trotskyist movement in general. These forces are today seriously weakened compared to the past. Faced with one of the worst,

manyfold, multilevel crisis of capitalism, from which the system has no easy escape, the forces that speak in the name of Marxism/Troskyism/revolutionary socialism, go from split to split and present a picture of severe weakness and fragmentation. This is an international phenomenon essentially affecting all organisations of the anticapitalist Left and not restricted to the CWI current.

**The process of repeated splits and fragmentation naturally causes a generalized feeling of demoralization not only in the most advanced layers and the activists but also in the working class, the oppressed layers and the social movements in general.**

The general weakness of the socialist Left, particularly after the sell-outs by the parties of the “New Left”, of the kind of **Syriza** (Greece), **Podemos** (Spain), more recently **PSOL** (Brazil) etc., inevitably emboldens the enemies of the working class and of the mass movements. It pushes demoralized layers of the middle class but also sections of the working class to the **Far Right** which is on the rise internationally; and, within the Left (in the general sense of the word) it provides more favourable ground to petit bourgeois currents, especially **Identity Politics**, to undermine working class oriented and revolutionary socialist currents.

## CWI

Not everybody has an approach like the above. The leadership of the CWI for example, seems to be rejoicing from ISA’s crisis. In an article published on its web-site [on May 9 the CWI wrote](#):

*“The ISA emerged from the formation of an unprincipled bloc in the CWI in 2018, which resulted in a split, as they searched, in vain, for shortcuts, and turned away from the organised working class. The CWI, at the time, predicted that such an unprincipled political block would inevitably break up and fragment. Our warnings have been fully vindicated...”*

*“...We urge those ISA members who are striving for a genuinely Marxist approach ... to read the documents of the Committee for a Workers’ International (CWI) issued during the faction fight (2018-2019) ... We believe our analysis and criticisms are confirmed by the subsequent political trajectory of the ISA....”*

*“...We appeal to members and former members of the ISA who are looking for a way forward to build a revolutionary socialist international rooted amongst the working class to learn the lessons of the train crash unfolding in the ISA. We would urge them to read and re-read our material afresh in the light of this experience.”*

When the present CWI brings out statements like the above, it reveals a very deep problem.

First, it is distorting the truth of what happened in 2018 and 2019. The split was not caused by “an unprincipled block” that... fell from the sky. It was caused by the *blunt undemocratic methods* of the IS of the CWI which, *because of this*, lost the support of the majority. The IS minority, again, failed to predict the *split within its own ranks* with the departure of Spain, Portugal, Mexico and Venezuela. So, it’s rather bizarre and certainly arrogant to write of their warnings being “fully vindicated”.

Also, one obvious “question” stemming from the CWI’s statement is the following: who recruited, worked together, trained, educated etc, etc, for decades, all those forces that the CWI leadership kicked out and today describes as an “unprincipled block” which was “looking for shortcuts”, who “turned away from the working class” and who abandoned Marxism.

To put it otherwise, if the majority of the sections of an international organisation develops in the way the CWI leadership is describing, then what are the root causes for it and how is it possible for the international leadership not to have any responsibilities? How come that the international leadership was never able to predict this development, how could it not see the coming explosion against it from the majority of the sections?

An international organisation would need to be more serious. The position of the present CWI is that they *were* absolutely right, that they *are* absolutely right and that they have *always* been absolutely right; that they made no mistakes therefore there is nothing they have to correct. Their internal opponents split away simply because they abandoned Marxism, they are no longer revolutionaries – end of story.

**In reality the present CWI leadership fails to understand that the crisis of the ISA today is essentially a continuation of the crisis of the CWI *as a historical current*, that started back in 2018 (something that was also manifested in past splits that we cannot develop here).**

Thus, the present CWI as well as the leadership of the ISA, have not been able to draw any lessons about the real character of the crisis the CWI since 2018 – as a matter of fact they did not even attempt to do so. Some of the forces that come out of the historical CWI will of course play an important role in future, in the building of revolutionary forces globally. But the present CWI and the present ISA, in the form they have today, cannot unfortunately do that.

## The roots of the crisis of the ISA

The ISA has been, essentially, in crisis, since its inception in 2019 and its formal creation in 2020.

The roots of the present crisis of the ISA have a lot in common with the roots of its last major crisis, in 2021, which led to the [creation of Internationalist Standpoint \(ISp\)](#), as well as to the original CWI crisis of 2018. These are: an inability to correctly and in a balanced way approach the political challenges of the epoch combined with a scandalous arrogance by the leadership who think that they are the only ones with correct analysis and Marxist method on the planet (something that in our previous material we described as “messianism”).

Political differences would be inevitable in the present epoch (as they are in every epoch, in different ways) because of the generalized retreat of the working class and its consciousness in the course of the past few decades. Despite the deep crisis of capitalism, the working class and its organisations show a serious inability (in general – there are of course very important exceptions) to make progress, to provide mass resistance to the neoliberal attacks successfully, and *to challenge the system*. These conditions inevitably create differences, debates and frictions. Such differences are of secondary

importance and should be allowed to coexist in the same organisation, in a process of comradely discussion; and allow for time to clarify, where possible, the contested issues.

But then the issue of the “internal regime” comes in. Trained by the founders and leadership of the CWI in the past, the newer generations both in the present CWI and the ISA, in their majority (important exceptions did and do exist) show a strong inability to accommodate differences; they tend to consider any diversion from their approach and political positions to be equal to the abandonment of Marxism. They even refuse to allow minority opinions to be freely expressed: according to the perception of most of the CWI and the ISA leaders, a minority can raise differences to be discussed only if the majority agrees for this to take place.<sup>1</sup>

**These practices however are the exact opposite of the experience of the Bolshevik party and of the *Communist International* in its first years of existence, before the rise of Stalinism in the Soviet Union (after Lenin’s death in 1924). In those times, debates were continuous, and in most cases public –not only between individual comrades with different opinions within the same section but also between different sections.**

## Lessons to be drawn

The historical CWI had a series of “deadly” deficiencies that led to its severe crisis of 2018. But it also had a number of *very strong positive characteristics* that remain vital to the building of the forces of the socialist revolution, today and for the future.

Such vital and important characteristics were among others:

- its persistent orientation to the working class;
- the deep understanding of working-class consciousness;
- the careful extrapolation of demands and tasks for the mass movement (the *transitional programme*);
- flexibility in tactics but intransigence as regards revolutionary strategy and principles;
- a correct, balanced and flexible, understanding of the United Front tactic;
- no element of sectarianism in its approach to mass organisations of the working class and towards mass movements.

Based on such qualities the CWI was able to lead mass struggles that in some cases made history, as was for example the struggle of the **Liverpool** local council against Thatcher and the **Poll Tax** campaign that brought down Thatcher in the 1980s. Very important struggles were led by the CWI also in **Ireland**, in the **US**, and other countries, in the 1990s and 2000s. These led to important increases in membership and electoral successes in parliamentary and local/regional elections. Based on these characteristics and successes, the CWI was able to develop into the most significant revolutionary international organisation by the late 2010s, before its 2018 crisis.

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<sup>1</sup> One example out of many, in the ISA, was the refusal of the ISA leadership to allow the circulation of a discussion document (i.e., not one to be voted upon) produced by the leadership of the Greek Section (Xekinima) in the context of a pre-congress period(!) in January 2020! (You can read the document in reference [here](#))

**The only way to approach seriously the crisis in the CWI would be to meticulously study the whole historical course of the CWI, so as to understand what went wrong, to look at events and the methods employed by the CWI, not superficially but critically, in order to keep the best elements of the CWI tradition and discard the worst ones.**

This, unfortunately, is not happening either with the present CWI or with the ISA leaderships. Compared to the past when the CWI led great struggles, today, both the CWI and the ISA are shadows of their previous selves. But they still refuse to go through a process of re-examination of their method – they continue the tradition of ferociously fighting against any internal political differences branding them as departure from Marxism and revolutionary principles. This, again, is not only a characteristic of the CWI and the ISA, but of many organisations in the anticapitalist Left – and this is a major factor in their marginalization.

The standard position of the different warring sides in the CWI and ISA debates (and in other anticapitalist groups) was and still is “we’ll be better off without them”. This is what was reiterated by the CWI leadership in 2018-9, but this is what was also stressed by some of those that created the ISA (particularly the Irish leadership) in the events that followed <sup>2</sup>. This sad picture is seen also in the present faction fight in the ISA: “we are better off without the others”. This however is a mirage. It is the classic sectarian approach of people who end up splitting and re-splitting contributing to today’s picture of a multi-fractured marginalized anticapitalist Left.

### **Is there a way to save the best traditions of the CWI?**

What is characteristic of the CWI tradition and the main protagonists of the internal debates in the ISA today, however, is not characteristic of the membership and some of the groupings that have appeared in the course of the present faction fight.

There are many people who are critical, or at least with very serious questions, on both sides, in the present faction fight in the ISA. There are individual comrades, groupings, tendencies or even sections in the ISA that refuse to identify with either one of the two main factions, and who may vote in one way or another depending on the issue. Some have already left, as already mentioned.

**Such forces, that are not willing to identify with the present majority-minority set-up, whether outside or still inside the ISA, can start an exchange. They can begin to exchange views and material, meet on line and also, at a later stage, meet physically. Their main aim would be to draw the lessons from the collapse of the CWI as a historical current and the present crisis of the ISA and begin to discuss what is the way forward.**

**This is the only way, through a comradely, patient and in-depth discussion to secure that the best traditions of the historical CWI are not lost. This is the way to make sure that such comrades and**

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<sup>2</sup> This was never the case with the leadership of the Greek Section, that initially played a key role in the formation of the ISA. As early as Spring 2019 the key Greek comrades had warned that the main danger facing the new international organisation (that was to become the ISA) was multiple splits – every earthquake is followed by aftershocks. This warning was never taken seriously by the majority of the ISA leadership.

**groups will be able to play an important role in the future, in the building of mass socialist revolutionary parties and of an international organisation.**

There will also be comrades within the CWI who are observing the crisis in the ISA not with dismissive arrogance but with an open and questioning mind. Some will have always been uneasy with the tactics adopted by the IS in 2018-2019. Others will have doubts about the perspectives of the CWI, and its lack of growth and forward momentum. The idea that the CWI are “right” and everyone else is “wrong” will not be accepted by all members of the CWI sections.

One of the things that are very clear to ISp is that if we want to build a sizeable revolutionary International in the future, the top-down bureaucratic conception of what is called “**democratic centralism**” must be ditched once and for all. Discussion must be free and ongoing and tones must be kept low and comradely. In case of differences, the option should be open to the minority view to express itself in public. This was practiced by the Bolsheviks and the Communist International one century ago and it is absolutely outrageous to deny it today!!

Balanced perspectives are an absolutely crucial factor. An organisation cannot go forward without a correct understanding of the potential and the opportunities present in every historical conjuncture as well as of the complications and difficulties; and related to these, an understanding of the changes as regards the objective situation and consciousness in the working class and social movements. Just to site an example, in our opinion the CWI leadership back in the 2010s was conservative as regards the approach to new movements like the **environmental** and the **feminist** one. On the other hand, they were right to criticize the leadership of the Irish section for entering a road that would lead them to partially submerge the section into petit bourgeois identity politics. If a comradely and open-minded discussion could have taken place, the right balance could have been struck and positive lessons for all involved in the discussion could have been drawn. At least, the losses would have been minimized. Instead, the minority went ahead with a coup de état.

There is a clear link between correct perspectives, political ideas, tactics, slogans, etc and the internal regime. Correct and balanced ideas can only be arrived at, through internal discussion and debate in a democratic atmosphere both nationally and internationally.

It’s already been mentioned that such conclusions do not relate only to the forces that have come from a CWI tradition. They relate to the whole Trotskyist space.

Since our departure from the ISA, ISp has come into contact with numerous organisations, groups or currents that are searching for answers in a similar direction. There is a lot of ground, for search, for discussion, for common initiatives and activities and in a number of cases, where there is sufficient agreement, for unity. The ISA and CWI leadership accuse the ISp of building not a revolutionary organisation but a “loose network”. Nothing is further than the truth. The aim is always and clearly for an international organisation based on democratic centralism. At the same time however, this revolutionary organisation has a duty to work closely together with other groups with which there is not sufficient agreement to allow for a unified organisation – in such cases it is correct to establish “networks” of collaboration and friendly exchanges.

Such an approach, as described above, as regards balanced perspectives, a healthy internal regime and relations with other revolutionary organisations and currents can gradually, in our opinion, lay the basis for a mass socialist revolutionary international in the future.