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WORKING DOCUMENTS

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The Socialist International*

by

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1. Historical development

The Socialist International (SI) was founded as the international organisation of the European labour movement in the late 19th century. The split between Socialdemocracy and Communism as well as the International's inability to unite successfully against World Wars and upcoming facism led to break-downs and refoundings. After World War II the SI was re-established in 1951. At that time the SI was in terms of membership, political program, and profile of activities mainly the international organisation of Western European Socialist, Socialdemocratic, and Labour parties¹.

The 13th SI congress of Geneva in 1976 marked a new beginning. Under the newly elected president Willy Brandt² and strongly supported in particular by Olaf Palme³ and Bruno Kreisky⁴ the SI pursued a set of new priorities:

1. **Globalization**, i.e. overcoming its Eurocentric profile by attracting non-European parties, giving special attention to problems like development and disarmament, and playing an active role in tackling the East-West and the North-South conflict;
2. New and **better global order**, i.e. to transform the international system according to the traditional values like freedom, solidarity, and justice into a more peaceful, just, and democratic order;
3. **Democratization**, i.e. continue and strengthen SI's traditional support for human rights, development of true democracy, and national independence;

* The views and opinions expressed in this paper are in the sole responsibility of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of the Friedrich-Ebert-Foundation, the Socialist International, or any SI member party. The author is professor for International Relations at the university of Giessen/Germany and at the IEE/Brussels and has published on SI developments and matters.

¹ Due to different traditions SI member parties carry different programmatic expressions for „Socialism“, while meaning the same political objectives. The term „Socialism“ is still used in European Mediterranean countries like France. The term „Democratic Socialism“ is synonymously for „Socialdemocracy“, which is mostly used in Central Europe like Germany and Sweden. While the British Labour Party has chosen „Labour“, one can find in Latin America SI member parties with names like „Radical“, „Revolutionary“, and „Labour“ party. Today, SI member parties have a common general programmatic orientation but keep such different namings.

² Willy Brandt, former German Chancellor, was at that time Chairman of the Socialdemocratic Party of Germany (SPD).

³ Olaf Palme was Swedish Prime Minister and Chairman of the Swedish Socialdemocratic Party (SAP).

⁴ Bruno Kreisky was Austrian Prime Minister and Chairman of the Austrian Socialdemocratic Party. Brandt, Palme, and Kreisky had cooperated closely since years and chaired the most influential SI member parties of that period.

4. **Active global engagement**, i.e. assist in the control and solution of regional conflicts and disputes about major global issues.

In addition to this new agenda the congress re-organized the SI to allow member parties better participation in decision-making, to establish a cooperative style of leadership, to set up numerous working groups, committees, etc., and to open meetings to guests and observers.

This combination of revitalization and globalization transformed the SI over the years into a global actor, which was actively involved in the search for constructive solutions for the East-West, the North-South, and many regional conflicts such as the Middle-East ones. Based on a steady globalization of membership the SI dealt both with global reforms as well as the promotion of regional cooperation in Europe, Latin America, Asia, and Africa. In addition, the SI elaborated concepts such as for global economic and political reform, for better governance, for an enhanced understanding of human rights and democratic development. Today, the SI constitutes an international organisation of reform-oriented parties, which aim to translate traditional values like freedom, equality, and justice into a peaceful and cooperative global community.

2. Identity and Self-Understanding

The SI defines itself not as a „superparty“ but as the „family“ of old and new Socialist, Socialdemocratic, Labour, and Radical parties, which unite in a common understanding and engage in common global cooperation. Willy Brandt had summarized this understanding in his speech at the Congress in Vancouver, 1978:

„Our societies are all different. But we are all united in the effort to create democratic systems in which not determination from outside or from above but responsible self-determination is to be the dominating social principle. (...). This does not mean that we are an international party or that we want to become one. We are not a closed society but an association of independent parties whose representatives feel they can learn from each other and can by joint effort achieve something useful (...).“

This emphasis on independence on the one side and constructive cooperation on the other has led to special characteristics, for which the SI is unique:

1. the „**family**“ **character**, due to which each member parties are considered as equal and are urged to work together;
2. the **informal character**, which means that the SI allows its leading politicians, its experts, and its governing and opposition parties to interact outside all diplomatic protocol;
3. the **learning character**, which means that member organisations learn from each other both in regards of solving national problems⁵ as well as developing a true global view.

This cooperative pattern is reflected in a decision-making process, which is dominated by constructive consensus-building and which is guided by the SI-President, who seeks both to integrate and move ahead. This pattern reflects both the strength and the weakness of the SI as political actor. Its strength lies in its ability to unite and stimulate member parties and organisations to engage in common actions, to coordinate both party as well as respective government activities, and to elaborate concepts and strategies for regional and global improvement. Its limits are set by minor financial means and the fact, that the SI can act only as a sort of moral political authority both towards its member organisations as well as towards the outside. As such, the SI cannot and does not want to replace governmental policies. However, it offers a risk-free, flexible, and constructive way to prepare, to pre-discuss, and to support foreign policy initiatives - especially innovative ones -, which in the past has proven as highly fruitful both for parties in government and opposition⁶.

3. Organisation

3.1. Congress

The Congress of the SI, which takes place at every second or third year, assembles all member organisations, elects the President, Vice-President, and General Secretary, appoints the Finance and Administration Committee, decides about the principles and guidelines of the activities, and decides on admission and suspensions in regard to membership.

⁵ In the past the SI often constituted the framework for special training of party organisations in matters like campaigning etc. and for exchange of experiences in political matters like social reform, employment policies, introducing better control of the military, etc.

Member organisations sent normally high-level delegations, i.e. party chairman, Prime Minister, leading political figures etc. - to the Congress consisting sometimes of over 10 official members. While Congresses of the past draw limited number of participants, today's Congresses gather several hundreds of participants and guests. Each member organisation has one vote⁷. Traditionally, important guests and observers are invited to speak and to participate in the debate in the Congress as well as in other SI meetings⁸. Therefore, the Congress as well as other SI meetings have developed to informal meeting places for political leaders and experts. The traditional „family“ character of SI meetings allows all participants to approach each other and discuss all issues of relevance without any protocol requirements. The fact, that most participants know each other since years, helps in creating the open-minded, friendly, and cooperative atmosphere of SI-meetings even in cases of political differences. In setting up working groups etc., the SI leadership normally follows a liberal and flexible approach; this means that engaged, concerned, and interested member organisations, which volunteer to participate in such activities, are welcome. However, it is important to note, that political professionalism, competence in substance, and willingness to follow the SI's philosophy of common engagement, increase the willingness of the SI leadership to include specific parties or persons in such activities. This gives even smallest parties from remote regions and with limited political power a fair real chance to shape SI thinking and activities, if they act professional, competent, and according to the general objectives of the SI. Member parties often refer to this open and constructive atmosphere as one of the special strenghts of the SI.

Congresses have special guiding messages but a broad political agenda, which reflects both global and regional concerns and engagement. The selection of Congress places -

⁶ Initiating, supporting, and re-vitalizing the Middle-East peace process is a typical example of the possibilities and limits of the SI in promoting constructive political solutions.

⁷ Voting - not participation ! - can be suspended, if the member organisation fails to pay the due membership fees. Before such a very rare measure, the Finance and Administration Committee consults the member organisation to solve the problem before the Congress. Membership fees, which are set up by the Finance and Administration Committee, are relatively modest. Richer parties are expected to contribute on a voluntary base in addition for special activities, meetings, conferences etc. Member organisations with financial problems are often supported by richer parties.

⁸ The SI Congress of New York, for example, was opened by the General Secretary of the UN, which was a former SI Vice-President.

like those of the other meetings of the SI - carries a strong symbolical meaning⁹ and marks special engagement of the hosting party¹⁰. Congress resolutions and other decisions are prepared by standing committees, commissions, and ad-hoc-groups set up by the President but mostly open to interested parties. Like in other SI meetings, congress decisions are based on consensus, i.e. the willingness of all member organisations to find a constructive compromise¹¹. Although the SI knows majority voting, votes - and especially controversial votes - are extremely rare, because it is expected that conflicting member organisations concerned sit together and produce common solutions. Traditionally, the President or the Vice-Presidents, who act on his behalf, have a special guiding responsibility in producing joint solutions, which do not alienate member parties. Although the Congress has prepared list of speakers and limits participation in the discussion mostly to time restrictions, the list of speakers and interventions is carefully balanced and allows all parties - including the small ones - to take the floor and express its views. Normally, the Congress produces one major general resolution, which is prepared by an ad-hoc working group¹², adopts resolutions prepared by regional committees etc., and allows ad-hoc resolutions, elaborated during the congress. Drafting such resolutions is done by working groups, which present their drafts to the plenary and include plenary recommendations¹³.

3.2. Council

The SI Council consists of all member organisations and normally meets twice a year and during the congress to discuss and decide about ongoing activities. Often, observers and guest are invited to participate and sometimes to speak. Today, Council meetings count up to 150 participants, take 2 or 2,5 days, and focus on special themes. Mostly, the SIW has its Council meetings directly before the SI Council meeting; also committees and working groups meet in connection with the Council meeting to prepare resolutions and activities, which are then brought into the Council. Besides the Congress the Council meetings are the most important meetings of the SI.

⁹ The last Congress of New York, which laid special emphasis on the role of the UN in global governance was held in the UN plenary assembly hall.

¹⁰ This includes technical assistance, financial support, and special engagement in political preparation.

¹¹ In special cases member organisations can issue reservations or dissent, while accepting the decision in general.

¹² This working group is set up before the Congress but is often open to interested member organisations.

3.3. Working structure

In its working structure the SI has developed a number of different ways to pursue its political goals. The following are the most important ones:

1. Party leader conference

Normally every second year the party leader conference is a meeting of the leaders of the SI member parties with the SI leadership to discuss general political problems and to coordinate activities both on the regional as well as the national level. Party leader conferences have developed into quasi-Council meetings but do not replace the Council in its political competence; they allow in particular direct and informal leader-to-leader exchange.

2. Regional organisations (committees, etc.)

The SI promotes both international and regional cooperation with the understanding, that regional cooperation serves both a better cooperation of the parties within a region as well as the elaboration of the region's view on global issues. Regional organisations have first been set up for EC/EU-Europe to be followed by Latin America and the Caribbean (SI Committee for Latin America and the Caribbean, SICLAC) and the Asian-Pacific region (first the Asian Pacific Socialist Organisation, which was later transformed into a Committee for the Asian-Pacific region). The Middle-East Committee played and still play an important role in SI-activities to re-unite the region and promote better and peaceful regional cooperation; the Committee for Eastern Europe tried to assist member parties and friendly political forces in the socio-economic transformation and democratization process. Leopold Senghor's initiatives of an African International in the 70's did not meet full official support; however, it is expected that African parties will establish their regional committee as well.

Regional organisations play an important role in the SI. First, they are designed to promote better intra-regional cooperation, to introduce effective political conflict management and peace-building by the regions themselves, to promote economic and political cooperation, and to assist in the development of regional identities. Second, they are expected to prepare for the SI resolutions or proposals for political actions regarding the region and to present the region's viewpoint on global issues such as North-South conflict, environmental protection, human rights developments, global governance, etc. Regional committees meet regularly in the regions and invite other SI parties to participate. In a number of cases it is usual, that such regional activities involve parties and political movements, which are not member of the SI but share equal objectives. Regional activities are often based on parties of the region, which feel special responsibility to promote intra-regional cooperation and to undertake the necessary activities.

¹³ Sometimes the Congress plenary demands several redraftings.

3. Committees, working groups, round-tables and conferences

The more substantial work is done in committees such as on security/disarmament, economic development, human rights etc., working groups on specific issues like unemployment etc., round-tables such as the SI-President's round-tables on reform of the welfare state, media, fundamentalism etc. and conferences often organised jointly with, for example, ICFTU etc. Normally, committees and working groups are established by Congress and Council and are open for engaged, concerned, and active parties. They elaborate resolutions, reports, concepts, and political proposals, which are presented to Council and Congress and constitute the core of the conceptual work of the SI. Participation in such working structures is regarded by member organisation as an important way to find common political solutions for current or upcoming problems, to elaborate innovative inputs, and to enlarge the programmatic and practical agenda of the SI and its member parties.

4. Missions

In special cases, mostly the Council or the Presidium set up missions for fact-finding, for exploring the background, or for direct consultations in conflicts or other political problems. Again, such missions report to Council and Congress, where decisions are made.

3.4. SI officials

The Congress elects the following SI officials:

1. President

Traditionally, the SI President has the role to promote unity and active engagement, to set daily priorities following the decisions of Congress and Council, and to politically prepare meetings and activities. The President is regarded as the leading authority of the SI; in cases of political differences parties are expected to follow his advice for compromise. The office of today's President Pierre Mauroy is in Paris.

2. Vice-Presidents and the Presidium

In order to achieve optimal participation, the SI has over 20 Vice-Presidents. Normally, Vice-Presidents are at the same time the leaders of important parties, which engage constructively in the activities of the SI. The composition of the list of Vice-president represents the global character of the SI and follows a certain regional representation. Vice-Presidents are often asked to take up responsibilities for special problems or conflicts, regions, issues etc. to assist the President in leadership. The Presidium consists of President, Vice-President, and General Secretary.

3. General Secretary

The General Secretary is responsible for organisational or management questions as well as for the information services etc. His office is in London.

3.5. Members and membership

Since 1976, when the SI was dominated by West European parties, the membership has multiplied and globalized. While the SI has still a stronghold in Western Europe and widen its influence in Eastern Europe, it is equally strong in Latin America and the Carribean, where the SI is represented in most countries and numerous governments. Efforts to widen the SI's representation and involvement in the Asian-Pacific and the African region have been given high priority on its political agenda. In India and the USA the SI has smaller member parties, which nevertheless have political influence¹⁴.

The SI consists of the following types of members¹⁵:

1. Member Parties

There are three types of status for member parties, which constitute the political core of the SI: Full Member Parties, Consultative Parties, and Observer Parties. Normally, parties seeking SI membership are first admitted as Observer Parties, then after some time¹⁶ upgraded to Consultative Parties, and then again after some time accepted as Full Member Parties. However, in special cases Congress gave Consultative status to newly admitted parties as well. The SI statute gives formal full voting rights to Full Member Parties. In reality, however, all three types of member parties are de facto treated as equal, when it comes to all SI activities. And given the fact, that voting is extremely rare and consensus-building the normal way of decision-making, such formal differences in status do not prevent parties on all level to fully engage and shape SI activities.

In some cases there is more than one SI member party from one country¹⁷. In general, the SI prefers the one-country-one-party model and therefore urges member parties to cooperate and eventually to merge in order to improve political effectiveness.

2. Fraternal Organisations

¹⁴ The Council Meeting in New Delhi, 1997, reflected the impact of the SI in India.

¹⁵ The latest updated list of membership, Vice-Presidents, etc.

¹⁶ Sometimes at the next Congress.

¹⁷ For example, Israel, or in the past Italy.

Today, the Fraternal Organisations consist of the International Falcon Movement/Socialist Educational International (IFM/SEI)¹⁸, the International Union of Socialist Youth (IUSY), and the Socialist International Women (SIW). It has been a priority of the SI since 1976 to improve involvement and engagement of young people and women in SI activities. IUSY and SIW have Vice-Presidents in the SI leadership and traditionally play a role in SI activities. The SI encourages new member parties to establish or to strengthen their youth and women organisation and to increase their involvement in IUSY and SIW.

3. Associated Organisations

Associated organisations such as Labour Sports International, International Union of Social Democratic Teachers, etc. traditionally exist but had limited impact on the SI compared to member parties.

In addition to formal categories, one has to mention two very important and closest cooperation partners. First, the Socialdemocratic Party of Europe (SPE)¹⁹ and the closely related Socialist Group of the European Parliament²⁰. Given the special engagement of the European Parliament in international politics²¹ and its potential role in a further widening and deepening European Union, this special relation is of major political relevance. Second, the SI cooperates closest with the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) both in the global dimension of trade union rights, employment policies, and labour interests as well as in special regional and country cases. This cooperation is based on the common view that labour rights are essential parts of human rights and democracy.

Decisions on membership issues are prepared by the Finance and Administration Committee, discussed beforehand in the Council Meetings before and during the Congress, and then finally decided by the Congress. Membership issues consist of admission, change of status, and suspension:

Admission of new parties is a lengthy process, which is normally started when a party applies officially for membership after sufficient consultation²² or - and this is the exception - the SI leadership invites the party to apply for

¹⁸ The Falcon movement concentrates on young people in their teens.

¹⁹ This party developed from a sort of regional organisation of the European parties, whose countries were member of the EEC/EU called Confederation of Socialist Parties of the European Communities.

²⁰ The Socialist Group is now the largest political grouping in the European Parliament.

²¹ The Socialist Group played a leading role in organising activities of the SI in Africa since the 80's.

²² Normally with a letter to the SI President.

membership or to join. After this the Finance and Administration Committee gathers information about this particular party such as program, political profile, political record etc. and checks, whether this party would fit into the SI. The Finance and Administration Committee then makes a recommendation to the Council Meeting, which debates the issue, and makes a recommendation to the next Congress, which then votes upon the issue²³. Rapid membership growth in the past and the need to fully integrate each new party into the SI-„family“ have led the SI to a more restrictive policy of admission and to develop links to new parties gradually²⁴.

Change of membership status, which means mostly upgrading to Consultative or to Full Member Party status, is easier. While formal procedures are again the same, i.e. recommendation by the Finance and Administration Committee, debate in the Council, and final decision by the Congress, the decisions depend mainly of the constructive engagement of the particular party in SI activities.

Suspension of membership has been extremely rare since 1976 but happened²⁵. Again, it follows similar procedures like admission but allows the particular party to present its case and defend its membership status. The SI suspends membership only in extreme cases, where a member continues to violate directly political essentials of the SI²⁶.

5. Common goals and joint actions

The years after the Geneva congress, which are sometimes called the „Era Willy Brandt“²⁷, led to a number of political activities, which transformed the SI towards a global actor with political influence, initiated numerous constructive developments, and led to a major conceptual and programmatic overhaul of the SI's guiding ideas. These activities can be summarized as follows:

1. Programmatic work

With its declaration of principles, adopted at the Congress of Stockholm 1989, the SI defined itself not only as against the conservative, communist, and fundamentalist model of the state and an undemocratic and unjust international

²³ Once again, it has to be underlined that it is the Congress, which decides on membership.

²⁴ Part of this policy is to invite potential future member parties to meetings and even to include them in other SI activities.

²⁵ Suspension of membership should not be mixed up with suspension of voting in case of not paying membership fees.

²⁶ In a case of the past, a party, which was later suspended, was said to cooperate with the extremely repressive military dictatorship of its country.

²⁷ Willy Brandt was reelected as President at the congresses of Vancouver (1978), Madrid (1980), Albufeira (1983), Lima (1986), and Stockholm (1989). He was not able to participate in the congress of Berlin (1992), which elected the former French Prime Minister Pierre Mauroy as President, and died shortly after. Pierre Mauroy was reelected in the congress of New York (1996).

order but developed a common and global idea for today's democratic socialism. It reaffirms freedom, justice, equality, and solidarity as indivisible and global and presents an elaborated idea of human rights - including the rights of women, young people, minorities etc. - and democratic development, in which different societies must find their own ways of implementing fullest democracy. In addition, it introduces global values like peace, socio-economic solidarity, and fair chances for development, adds environmental protection as an essential objective, and supports the idea of a better and more democratic global governance through a reformed UN.

2. Global and regional conflicts

The SI devoted much of its activities to the management and solution of the East-West- and the North-South conflict. This has led both to major conceptual work of how to overcome such conflicts through disarmament, development, and international reform as well as to a number of concrete initiatives to bring conflicting sides together and seek common solutions. In addition to such global conflicts the SI devoted another part of its political capacity towards the solution of regional conflicts. This assistance in conflict solution covered the conflicts in Central America in the 80's, the introduction of peaceful cooperation in Latin America as a whole, the conceptualization and support of the peace process in the Middle East, and numerous activities to assist in de-escalating conflicts in Asia, Africa, and elsewhere. The SI has left no doubt that it strongly supports peace-keeping activities both in the framework of regional organisations as well as the UN system.

3. Regionalisation

As it was said before, the SI actively supports regionalization and a stronger political and economic self-reliance of regions. This has been pursued not only in setting up regional organisation within the SI structures and supporting regionalisation efforts and regional organisation such as OAU but as well in preparing expertise for economic, political, and security cooperation within the particular regions. The SI regards regionalization and globalization not as contradictory but as complementary; therefore the support for regionalization means at the same time to support inter-regional cooperation and a strengthened global cooperation.

4. Basic issues

Within its elaborated working structure and the very active involvement of leading figures of SI member parties in international commissions set up by the UN the SI has produced a number of substantial proposals, advices, and strategies to solve structural and actual problems. Following its traditional reform-orientation the SI always seeks to combine the „wishable“ with the „feasible“; this means to elaborate ideas, which are both progressive and realistic. Of special interest for member parties and organisations have been SI ideas, which have been presented in resolutions, reports, papers, articles, and books - towards better growth and development, disarmament and military confidence-building, common security and peace-making, economic growth

understood both in quantitative and qualitative terms, employment and overcoming poverty, welfare and the reform of the old welfare system, new medias etc. Again, member parties consider such activities as a stimulating source for their own policies as well as a window of opportunities for common regional as well as global action.

6. The SI - seen from a member party perspective

Seen from a member party's view the SI

1. cannot replace governmental foreign policy and international activities but can **assist in its stimulation, preparation, and complementation**,
2. is despite the fact, that many member parties come from powerful or influential nations, not a global power but influences global politics because of its **political authority**, which is based on its consequent defence of **human rights, democratic development, and a better world order**,
3. constitutes an **informal, flexible, and high-level meeting place** to inform oneself and others, to develop new common actions, and to initiate global cooperation,
4. **supports regionalization** through transfer of regionalization know-how and support for regional cooperation of SI member parties,
5. constitutes a **mutual learning process**, in which member parties get new ideas, new expertise and advice, and develop joint regional and global initiatives.

Thus, SI membership can be regarded as a politically valuable supplement for government policies, as an even more important opportunity to improve, widen, and enrich party activities both in programmatic, issue, and professionalism terms, and as a way of participating in a global „family“ network, in which others are willing to listen and to cooperate. However, one has to remind, that SI membership should be regarded not only as beneficial for oneself but as a major opportunity to actively engage in a political movement towards a better, i.e. more fair and more democratic global community.