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International Review

Economic debacle, "natural" catastrophes,
imperialist chaos...

**Capitalism is a bankrupt system
that must be overthrown**

Hot Autumn in Italy 1969 (ii)

**An episode in the historic resurgence
of the class struggle**

What are workers' councils? (iv)

**1917 - 1921: The soviets attempt to
wield power**

The decadence of capitalism (viii)

The age of catastrophes

The Communist Left in Russia

**The *Manifesto* of the Workers' Group
of the Russian Communist Party (continued)**

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Economic debacle, “natural” catastrophes, imperialist chaos...

Capitalism is a bankrupt system that must be overthrown

Since the crisis of the financial system in 2008 it seems nothing can hide the depth of the capitalism's historic crisis. Attacks on the working class escalate, poverty increases, imperialist tensions sharpen, hundreds of millions are malnourished, natural catastrophes grow more deadly. The bourgeoisie itself cannot deny the scale of the difficulties nor pretend that it can provide a better future. It concedes that the present capitalist crisis is the most serious since the thirties and that we will have to “learn to live with” the evil of worsening poverty. But the bourgeoisie has a strong capacity to adapt: if it has to admit – partly because of the evidence and partly out of political calculation – that things are getting bad and not about to improve, it knows how to present the problems without implicating the capitalist system as a whole. The banks are bankrupt and dragging down the world economy? The traders are to blame! Certain countries are so indebted that they cannot pay? Corrupt governments! War ravages the planet? Lack of political will! Environmental catastrophes and their victims are increasing? Nature's fault! Whatever differences exist in the many analyses of the bourgeoisie, they all have a common thread: they denounce this or that form of governance but not capitalism as a mode of production. In reality all the calamities suffered by the working class are the result of contradictions which are strangling society whatever the mode of government, deregulated or statist, democratic or dictatorial. To better camouflage the bankruptcy of its system the bourgeoisie also pretends that the economy is recovering slightly after the crisis of 2008. In fact this crisis is far from over. It expresses the gravity of the historic crisis of capitalism.

Capitalism sinks into crisis

The bourgeoisie is occasionally happy about the positive perspective announced by economic indicators that are beginning to show a timid growth. But behind this “good news” the reality is very different. In order to avoid the catastrophic scenario of the thirties the bourgeoisie has spent billions in support of the banks and put Keynesian measures in place. These measures consist of lowering the base rates of the central banks which determine the price of credit and the state paying the cost of economic recovery, usually through debt. Such policies are supposed to bring about strong growth. But what is striking today is the extreme weakness of world growth considering the astronomic sums spent and the vigour of inflationary measures. The United States thus finds itself in a situation that the bourgeois economists, lacking the benefit of a Marxist analysis, cannot understand: the American state is in debt by several hundred billion dollars and the base rate of the Federal Reserve is close to zero; but growth was only 1.6% in 2010, less than the 3.7% expected. As the American case illustrates, if the bourgeoisie has momentarily avoided the worst by

massive indebtedness, the recovery hasn't happened. Incapable of understanding that the capitalist mode of production is transitory, bourgeois economists don't see the evidence: Keynesianism has proved its historic failure since the 1970s when the contradictions of capitalism proved to be insurmountable even with the trick of debt.

Capitalism has survived with difficulty for some decades because of the prodigious expansion of debt in order to create an artificial market to absorb a part of its chronic overproduction. But capitalist debt is like opium: the more it is used the bigger the dose required. In other words the life belt with which capitalism has kept its head above water finally deflated in 2008.

The sheer size of budget deficits adds to the risk of bankruptcy of numerous countries, in particular Greece, Italy, Ireland, and Spain. All countries are reduced to governing from day to day, changing their economic policies from recovery to austerity in response to events, without being able to offer any lasting improvement. The state, the last resort against the historic crisis of capitalism, is no longer able to hide its impotence.

Everywhere in the world the attacks on the working class are reflected in the growing unemployment rate. The governments, whether of the right or left, are imposing reforms and budgetary cuts on the proletariat with an unprecedented brutality. In Spain, civil service workers have seen their wages cut by 5% this year by the Socialist government of Zapatero, which already promised a freeze in 2011. In Greece, the average retirement age has increased by 14 years while pensions are frozen until 2012. In Ireland, which the bourgeoisie recently vaunted for its dynamism, the official rate of unemployment has risen to 14% while the wages of state employees have been lightened by 5-15% and the dole and family credits reduced.

According to the International Labour Organisation the number of unemployed in the world has gone from 30 million in 2007 to 210 million today.¹ Behind the austerity plans that are hypocritically called reforms, and behind the redundancies and factory closures, entire families slide into poverty. In the United States, nearly 44 million people live below the poverty line according to the report by the Census Bureau, a rise of 6.3 million in two years. This must be added to the three preceding years that showed a sharp increase in poverty. The decade has been marked in the US by a strong reduction in purchasing power.

It is not only in the “rich countries” that the crisis creates poverty. Recently the Food and Agriculture Organisation was proud to observe a decline in 2010 of the number of malnourished particularly in Asia (578 million) and in Africa (239 million) out of a total of 925 million throughout the world. What these statistics don't reveal immediately is that this figure is larger than that published in 2008 before the effects of speculative inflation in the price of food that provoked a series of riots in numerous countries. The significant decline

1. These statistics show the general increase in the official rate of unemployment that the tricks of the bourgeoisie can no longer hide. However one must be aware that these figures are far from reflecting the scale of the phenomenon since, in all countries, including those where the bourgeoisie must provide some social welfare, after a certain time of fruitless job-seeking one is no longer considered as unemployed.

in agricultural prices has indeed modestly “reduced hunger in the world” but the tendency over several years, independently of the immediate economic conjuncture, is undoubtedly toward an increase. Moreover the heatwaves in Russia, Eastern Europe and recently in Latin America have seriously reduced world harvests which, in the context of price rises, will inevitably lead to greater malnutrition next year. So it is not only at the economic level that capitalist bankruptcy is expressed. Climatic instability and the bourgeoisie’s management of environmental catastrophes are a growing cause of death and destitution.

Capitalism destroys the planet

This summer the world’s population has been subject to violent catastrophes: fires have consumed Russia and Portugal and numerous other countries; devastating floods have drowned Pakistan, India, Nepal and China in mud. In the spring the Gulf of Mexico suffered its worst ever ecological catastrophe after the explosion of an oil platform. The list of catastrophes in 2010 is still longer. Their increase and severity is no accident because capitalism has a very heavy responsibility both for their origins and management.

Recently the rupture of the badly maintained reservoir of an aluminium factory in Hungary caused an industrial and ecological catastrophe: more than a million cubic meters of toxic “red mud” spilled out around the factory causing several deaths and many injuries. Now, to “minimise the impact” of this pollution the bosses either poured millions of tons of red mud into the Danube or into an immense basin, when the technology has existed for a long time to recycle such effluent, in particular the waste from construction or horticulture.

The destruction of the planet by the bourgeoisie is not limited however to the innumerable industrial catastrophes every year. According to scientists global warming plays a major role in the increase of extreme climatic events. *“These events will reproduce and intensify in a climate affected by the pollution of greenhouse gases”* according to the vice president of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. With good reason: from 1997 to 2006, when the temperature of the planet continued to climb, the number of devastating catastrophes grew by 60% in relation to the preceding decade, bringing in their wake more and more victims. From now to 2015 the number of victims of meteorological catastrophes will increase by more than 50%.

While the scientists of oil companies may claim that global warming is not

the result of the massive pollution of the atmosphere, the scientific research as a whole shows a clear correlation between greenhouse gas emissions and global warming and the increase of natural catastrophes. However the scientists are mistaken when they claim that a little political will from the governments can change things. Capitalism is incapable of limiting greenhouse gas emissions because it must obey its own laws, those of profit, of cheap production and of competition. The necessary submission to these laws means that the bourgeoisie pollutes with its heavy industry, with the unnecessary transportation of goods for thousands of miles, amongst a host of examples.

The responsibility of capitalism for the scale of these catastrophes is not limited to atmospheric pollution and the unstable climate. The systematic destruction of ecosystems like massive deforestation, storing waste in natural drainage zones, anarchic urbanisation even in dried up riverbeds and in the heart of fire risk areas, have aggravated the intensity of the catastrophes.

The series of fires that hit Russia this summer, in particular a large region around Moscow, is testimony to the bourgeoisie’s inability to master these phenomena. The flames consumed hundreds of thousands of hectares, leaving many victims. For several days thick smoke enveloped the capital, doubling the daily mortality rate. And, for good measure, nuclear and chemical risks threatened those well beyond Russian frontiers because of fires in areas contaminated by the Tchernobyl explosion and the risk to arms depots and chemical products more or less abandoned in the countryside.

An essential element for understanding the role of the bourgeoisie in the scale of the fires is the stupefying neglect of the forests. Russia has extensive and dense forests, requiring particular care for the rapid isolation of outbreaks of fire in order to prevent them spreading and becoming uncontrollable. Now, many of the massive Russian forests do not even have access routes so that fire engines are incapable of extinguishing the heart of most of the fires. Russia only has 22,000 firemen, less than a small country like France, to struggle against the flames. The corrupt regional governors prefer to use their meagre resources for managing the forests for luxury cars as several scandals have revealed.

The same cynicism has been shown toward the peat zones, those areas of decomposing organic material that are particularly flammable. Not only does the Russian bourgeoisie abandon them but it builds houses in areas where extensive

fires occurred in 1972. The calculation is simple: property developers can buy these lands at knockdown prices.

In this way capitalism transforms humanly controllable natural phenomena into real catastrophes. And when it comes to horror, the bourgeoisie knows no limits. For several weeks torrential rain caused major flooding in Pakistan with mud slides, thousands of victims, 20 million homeless, and considerable material damage. Famine and the spread of disease, particularly cholera, worsened an already desperate situation. For more than a month, the Pakistani bourgeoisie and its army revealed an incredible incompetence and cynicism, blaming capricious nature. As in Russia, anarchic urbanisation and the impotent emergency services show the laws of capitalism to be the essential factor to understand the scale of the catastrophe.

But a particularly disgusting aspect of this tragedy is the way the imperialist powers tried to profit from the situation, using humanitarian operations as an alibi, to the detriment of the victims. The US supports the controversial government of Youssouf Raza Gilani, in the framework of the war within its Afghanistan neighbour, and very quickly profited from the events to deploy an important quantity of “humanitarian” aid consisting of helicopter carriers, amphibious assault boats, etc. Under the pretext of stopping Al Qaida terrorists from using the situation, the US put a break on the arrival of “international aid” coming from other countries – of course, this “humanitarian aid” also comprised the military, diplomats and unscrupulous investors.

For each sizeable catastrophe every country tries to advance its imperialist interests. Among the means used, the promise of aid has become systematic. All the governments officially announce substantial financial help, which is only really given if it satisfies the ambitions of the donors. For example, to date, only 10% of the international aid promised in January 2010 after the earthquake in Haiti has actually reached the Haitian bourgeoisie. And Pakistan is no exception to the rule: the millions promised will only be given against services rendered.

The bases of capitalism - the search for profit, competition, etc - are thus, at all levels, at the heart of the environmental problem. But the struggles around Pakistan also illustrate the growing imperialist tensions that ravage the planet.

Capitalism sows chaos and war

The election of Barack Obama at the head of the world’s principal imperialist power

gave rise to many illusions in the possibility of pacifying international relations. In reality, the new American administration only confirms the imperialist dynamic that opened with the collapse of the Eastern Bloc. We predicted that the rigid discipline of the imperialist blocs would follow this collapse, giving place to indiscipline and a rampant chaos, to generalised struggle of each against all and to the uncontrollable proliferation of local military conflicts. Our analysis has been fully confirmed. The period opened by the crisis in 2008 and the worsening of the economic situation have sharpened imperialist antagonisms between nations. According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute no less than 1,531 billion dollars have been spent on world military budgets in 2009, an increase of 5.9% compared to 2008 and of 49% compared to 2000. And yet these figures don't take account of illegal arms trafficking. Even if the bourgeoisie of certain countries is obliged by the crisis to cut down on its military expenses, the growing militarisation of the planet reflects the only future that it promises humanity: the proliferation of imperialist conflicts.

With their 661 billions of military expenditure in 2009 the US benefits from an absolutely incontestable military superiority. However since the collapse of the Eastern Bloc the country is less and less able to mobilise other countries behind it, as the war in Iraq since 2003 shows. Here, despite the pull out announced recently, there are still tens of thousands of American troops. Not only has the US been unable to enrol many powers under its banner, like Russia, France, Germany and China, but others have little by little disengaged from the conflict, in particular Britain and Spain. Above all the American bourgeoisie seems less and less capable of assuring the stability of a conquered country (the Afghan and Iraqi quagmires are symptomatic of this impotence) or a region, as the defiant stance of Iran shows. American imperialism is thus clearly on the decline. Its attempts to restore its leadership through war have only weakened it further.

Faced with the United States China is trying to realise its imperialist ambitions through military spending (100 billion dollars of military expenses in 2009, with annual double figure percentage increases since the 1990s) and on the ground. In Sudan for example as in many other countries it has implanted itself militarily and economically. The Sudanese regime and its militias, armed by China, continue to massacre the populations accused of supporting the rebels in Darfour, themselves armed by France, through the intermediary of Chad, and the US, the old adversary of France in the region. All these sicken-

ing manoeuvres have led to hundreds of thousands of deaths and displaced several million others.

The US and China are far from alone in the responsibility for the warlike chaos on the planet. In Africa for example, France, directly or through proxy militias, tries to save what it can of its influence, notably in Chad, in the Ivory Coast, or the Congo. The Palestinian and Israeli cliques, supported by their respective godfathers, continue an interminable war. The Israeli decision not to prolong the moratorium on construction in the occupied territories, while "peace negotiations" organised by the US are continuing, shows the impasse of Obama's policy which wanted to be more diplomatic than that of Bush. Russia, through the war in Georgia or the occupation of Chechnya, tries to recreate a sphere of influence around itself. The litany of imperialist conflicts is too long to deal with exhaustively. Nevertheless the propagation of conflicts reveals that all the national fractions of the world bourgeoisie, powerful or not, have no other alternative to propose than the spilling of blood in defence of their imperialist interests.

The working class returns to the path of struggle

Faced with the depth of the crisis that capitalism is sinking into, workers' militancy is clearly not up to the mark. Past defeats still weigh heavily on the consciousness of our class. But the weapons of revolution are forged in the heart of struggles that the crisis has begun to develop significantly. For several years numerous struggles have broken out, sometimes simultaneously on the international level. Workers' militancy appears simultaneously in the "rich" countries – in Germany, Spain, United States, Greece, Ireland, France and Japan – and in "poor" countries. The bourgeoisie of the rich countries spreads the dirty lie that the workers of the poor countries are taking the jobs of those in the rich countries. But it takes care to impose a blackout on the struggles of these workers that reveal they are also the victims of the same attacks of capitalism in crisis.

In China, in the country where the share of the wages in GDP has gone from 56% in 1983 to 36% in 2005, the workers of several factories have tried to free themselves from the unions, despite the strong illusions in the possibility of free trade unions. Above all the Chinese workers have co-ordinated their action themselves and spread their struggle beyond the factory. In Panama a strike broke out on the 1st July in the plantations in the province of Bocas de Toro to demand payment of wages and to

oppose an anti-strike reform. Despite strong repression by the police and multiple forms of union sabotage, the workers immediately looked, successfully, to spread their movement. The same solidarity and will to fight collectively has animated a wildcat strike movement in Bangladesh, violently repressed by the forces of order.

In the central countries, the workers' reaction in Greece has been relayed internationally in numerous struggles, in particular in Spain where the strikes have proliferated against draconian measures of austerity. The strike organised by the metro workers in Madrid is testimony to the will of the workers to extend their struggle and to organise themselves collectively through general assemblies. That's why it has been the target of a campaign of denigration orchestrated by the Socialist government of Zapatero and its media mouthpieces. In France, while the unions are able to contain the strikes and demonstrations, the reform to extend the retirement age has provoked a wide section of the working class. There have been significant but very minoritarian attempts to organise outside the unions through sovereign general assemblies to extend the struggles.

Obviously the consciousness of the world proletariat is still insufficient and these struggles, while simultaneous, are not immediately about to create the conditions for a common struggle at the international level. Nevertheless the crisis into which capitalism is sinking, the austerity cures and the growing poverty will inevitably multiply the struggles. These will tend to become more massive and as a result class identity, unity and solidarity will develop in small steps. This is the terrain for the conscious politicisation of the workers' struggle for emancipation. The road to revolution is still long but as Marx and Engels wrote in the *Communist Manifesto*:

“Not only has the bourgeoisie forged the weapons that will bring about its own demise, it has also called into existence the men who are to wield those weapons – the modern working class – the proletarians”.

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Hot Autumn in Italy 1969 (part ii)

An episode in the historic resurgence of the class struggle

In the previous article we talked about the major struggle undertaken by the working class in Italy at the end of the 60s, which has passed into history under the name of "the Hot Autumn". As the article says, this name is too narrow to describe a period which involved the workers in Italy from 1968 -1969 at the very least and which left a profound mark on the years that followed. We also showed how this struggle in Italy was just one of the many episodes in the process of an international resurgence of the class struggle, following a long period of counter-revolution that blighted the whole world after the defeat of the revolutionary wave in the 1920s. The conclusion of the first article recalled the fact that this enormous development of militancy, accompanied by important moments of clarification in the working class, nevertheless encountered serious obstacles in the subsequent period. The Italian bourgeoisie, like that of the other countries that had to confront the awakening of the working class, did not remain with its arms folded for long and used both direct police intervention and other methods to get around its difficulties. As we will see in the following article, the ability of the bourgeoisie to recuperate the situation was largely due to the weaknesses of a proletarian movement which, in spite of its enormous militancy, was as yet lacking in clear class consciousness and whose vanguard did not itself have the necessary maturity or clarity to play its role.

The weaknesses of the working class during the Hot Autumn

The weaknesses of the working class during the Hot Autumn were mainly linked to the profound organic break experienced in the workers' movement after the defeat of the revolutionary wave in the 1920s and to the stifling domination of Stalinism. This had a two-fold negative effect on class consciousness. On the one hand, the class' political heritage had been wiped out; the communist perspective had been confused with inter-classist programmes for nationalisation and the class struggle itself had been more and more confused with the struggle for the "defence of the fatherland"¹! On the other hand, the apparent continuity running from the revolutionary wave of the 1920s to the period of the most atrocious counter-revolution, with its Stalinist purges and millions of workers massacred in the name of "communism", impressed upon people the idea that Marxism and Leninism should be rejected, or at least seriously revised. This idea was also

1. In particular the destructive role played by the "resistance to fascism" which, in the name of a supposed "struggle for freedom", led proletarians to get themselves massacred on behalf of one fraction of the bourgeoisie or another in the war in Spain (1936-1939) and then in the Second World War.

reinforced by the false propaganda of the bourgeoisie about communists always being ready to oppress and exercise violence against people. When the working class awoke, in Italy and also internationally, it did not have the backing of any revolutionary organisation with a theoretical basis solid enough to support its return to the struggle. In fact nearly all the new groups that were formed by the momentum of the resurgence of the class struggle at the end of the 1960s, although they did take up the classics, did so with a sort of *a priori* critique which did not help them find what they needed. Even the formations of the Communist Left that had survived the long years of counter-revolution had not remained politically unscathed. The councilists - the almost obliterated testimony to the heroic experience of the German-Dutch Left in the 1920s - were still terrorised by the destructive role that might be played by a future degenerated party which, like the Stalinist party had done before, would impose its domination over the state and the proletariat. This led them to withdraw more and more into a position as "participants in the struggle" without playing any vanguard role and keeping the heritage of past lessons to themselves. In a way it was the same with the Bordigists and the Italian

Left post 1943 (*Programma Comunista* and *Battaglia Comunista*) even though they, on the contrary, forcefully defended a role for the party. Paradoxically, because of their inability to understand the period they were living through and because of a sort of party-worship, combined with an underestimation of workers' struggles when waged in the absence of revolutionary organisations, they refused to recognise the Hot Autumn and the struggles at the end of the 1960s as the historic resurgence of the class at an international level. Because of this, their presence at the time was practically zero.² This is why the new political groups that were formed during the 1960s, both because of the distrust evoked by a confrontation with former political experiences, and also because of the absence of previously established political reference points, were obliged to reinvent positions and a programme of action. The problem was that their departure point was their experience within the old, decrepit Stalin-

2. "Having formed the party in 1945, while the class was still in the grip of the counter-revolution, and having failed since then to criticise this premature formation, these groups (who continued to call themselves 'the party') proved unable to distinguish between the counter-revolution and the end of the counter-revolution. They saw nothing of any importance for the working class either in the France of May 1968 or in the Italian Hot Autumn of 1969, and put these events down to mere student agitation. By contrast, our comrades of Internacionalismo (in particular MC, an old militant of the Fraction and the GCF); conscious of the change in the balance of class forces, understood the necessity of launching a process of discussion and regroupment with those groups that had emerged as a result of the change in the historic course. These comrades repeatedly asked the PCInt to appeal for the opening of discussion between the groups and to call an international conference inasmuch as the size and influence of the PCInt was far greater than that of our little nucleus in Venezuela. Each time, the PCInt rejected our proposal on the basis that nothing new was going on. Finally a first cycle of conferences began in 1973 following an appeal launched by Internacionalismo, a group in the United States close to the positions of Internacionalismo and of Révolution Internationale which had been formed in France in 1968. It was largely thanks to these conferences, which allowed a serious decantation to take place among a whole series of groups and elements that had come towards politics after May 1968, that the ICC was formed in January 1975." See the history of 30 years of the ICC (http://en.internationalism.org/ir/123_30years).

ist party. This is why a large number of militants from this generation positioned themselves in opposition to these parties and to the unions. They burnt their bridges to the left parties, but also in part to the Marxist tradition, they were searching for a revolutionary way that was “new” and which they thought they would come across in the street. This led to a considerable development in spontaneism and voluntarism because what still appeared in official dress was Stalinism in either its old form (USSR, CP) or in its new “Chinese” guise.

The dominant ideology of the Hot Autumn: workerism

It was within this context that workerism, the dominant ideology of the Hot Autumn, developed. The healthy reaction of the workers to take up the class struggle against the bureaucratised and asphyxiating structures of the Italian CP (PCI)³ and the unions, led them to lose all trust in these structures and to put all their confidence in the working class itself. This was clearly expressed in the intervention of a worker of the Milan Om at the Palasport in Turin on the occasion of a meeting of the newly formed *Lotta Continua* in January 1970:

“Unlike the Communist Party, we aren’t led by four members of the bourgeoisie. [...] We aren’t like the PCI because workers will be at the head of the organisation”.⁴

The judgement passed on the unions is particularly harsh:

“We don’t think that the unions can be changed ‘from within’ or that new ones – more ‘red’, more ‘revolutionary’, more ‘proletarian’, without bureaucrats – should be formed. We think that the unions are a cog in the bosses’ system... and that they must therefore be fought against, as must the bosses”.⁵

So in this article we will try to present the main aspects of workerism, in particular the version defended by Tony Negri, who is still one of the best known representatives of this political current. We will try to draw out its strengths and also the reason behind its failure in the end. In order

3. On the PCI, see the two articles “Breve Storia del PCI ad uso dei proletari che non vogliono credere più a niente ad occhi chiusi” I (1921-1936) and II (1936-1947) (*Rivoluzione Internazionale* n° 63 and 64). (“Brief History of the PCI for the use of workers who no longer want to believe in anything with their eyes closed”). The novel by Ermanno Rea, *Mistero Romano* (editor Einaudi) is particularly useful for understanding how heavy were the relationships within the PCI in this period.

4. Also Cazzulo, *I ragazzi che volevano fare la rivoluzione. 1968-1978. Storia critica di Lotta Continua* Sperling and Kupfer, eds, p.8.

5. “Tra servi e padroni”, in *Lotta Continua*, 6th December 1969, also quoted in Aldo Cazzullo’s book, *ibid* p.89.

to do so, we will refer to Toni Negri’s *Dall’operaio massa all’operaio sociale. Intervista sull’operaismo*.⁶ We will begin with a definition of workerism:

“What we call ‘workerism’ had its beginnings and took form as an attempt to reply politically to the crisis in the workers’ movement in the 50s, a crisis that was largely determined by the historic events in the movement around the 20th Congress”.⁷

We can already see from this quote that, in spite of the profound break with the official left forces, the definition of the latter – and in particular of the PCI – is completely inadequate and is not rooted in a deep theoretical understanding. The starting point is the so-called “*crisis in the workers’ movement in the 50s*” whereas, on the contrary, what is described as a “*workers’ movement*” was, at the time, no more than the international of the Stalinist counter-revolution. This was so because the revolutionary wave had already been defeated in the 1920s and the majority of the workers’ political cadres were annihilated because they were dispersed or massacred. This ambiguity towards the PCI was to find expression in a “love-hate” relationship with the party of origin and explains why, in time, so many elements had no problem returning to the cradle.⁸

Workerism was originally based on what was described as the mass worker, that is, the new generation of proletarians, most of whom had come from the south during the period of the expansion and modernisation of industry which took place from the second half of the 1950s to the early 1960s. It was to replace the old image of the professional worker. This new generation was generally obliged to do unqualified and repetitive jobs. The fact that this part of the proletariat, young and with no past history, was much less amenable to the sirens of Stalinism and syndicalism and much more ready to throw itself into the struggle, led the workerists of the period to come up with a sociological analysis

6. Antonio Negri, *From the mass worker to the social worker. An interview on workerism*. In Italian, Ombre Corte editions.

7. Antonio Negri, *op.cit.*, p. 36-37.

8. We cannot help being struck by the number of elements in today’s world - public figures, politicians, journalists, writers - holding the political positions of the centre left or even of the right, who in the past have passed through groups of the extra-parliamentary left and through workerism in particular. We will mention only a few: Massimo Cacciari, member of parliament for the PD (formerly the Margherita) and twice mayor of Venice; Alberto Asor Rosa, writer and literary critic; Adriano Sofri, moderate journalist for *La Repubblica* and *Il Foglio*; Mario Tronti, who returned to the PCI as a member of the central committee and elected senator; Paolo Liguori, journalist with management responsibilities for various television news broadcasts and other editorial undertakings for Berlusconi... There are dozens upon dozens of other names that could be added to the list.

stating that the PCI represented the strata of professional workers, a workers’ aristocracy.⁹ We will consider later where this sort of social purism leads in terms of political choice.

From the partyist conception to the dissolution of the movement

The general context of the 1960s; the enormous strength and duration of the class movement in Italy at the time, the fact that there was no past experience that pre-existing proletarian organisations could have transmitted directly, led this generation of young militants to conclude that a revolutionary situation had arrived¹⁰ and that it was necessary to set up a relationship of permanent conflict with the bourgeoisie, a sort of dual power. It was the lot of the groups who defended this idea (mainly *Potere Operaio*) to assume a leadership role in the movement’s debates (“*act as a party*”) and to develop continuous and systematic action against the state. This is how Toni Negri expressed it:

“The political activity of *Potere Operaio* will be to systematically gather together the class movement, the various situations, the different sectors of the working class and the proletariat and to lead them towards significant points, towards moments of mass confrontation that are able to damage the state reality as it appears. The exercising of a counter-power, a counter-power that is linked to specific experiences but which aims increasingly to protect itself and act against state power, is also fundamental as a subject for analysis and a function of the organisation.”¹¹

Unfortunately, in the absence of a critique of Stalinist practice, these groups – workers or otherwise – entrenched themselves behind a logic that remained a Stalinist one. The idea of “*exemplary action*” that is able to push workers to behave in a given way, weighed particularly heavily:

“I didn’t hold pacifist positions”, said Negarville, one of the steward leaders who was looking for, and found, confrontations with the police on Corso Traiano (3rd July 1969: 70 policemen wounded, 160 demonstrators arrested). “The idea of *exemplary action* which provokes police reaction was part of the theory and practice of *Lotta Continua* from the beginning, street confrontations are like workers’ wage struggles, useful at the beginning of the movement”, says

9. We do not share Lenin’s analysis that there exists a labour’ aristocracy within the working class. See our article: “Labour aristocracy. A sociological theory to divide the working class”. (*International Review* n° 25)

10. An idea that was widely held at an international level as well.

11. Antonio Negri, *op.cit.*, p.105.

Negarville. There is nothing worse than a peaceful demonstration or a good contract. What is important is not to attain an objective, it is rather the struggle in itself, the struggle “*is continuous*” in fact.¹²

This is the same logic that would later push the various terrorist formations to challenge the state, on the backs of the workers, acting on the belief that the more the attack is brought to the heart of the state, the more the proletariat will be encouraged. Experience shows that, on the contrary, each time terrorist gangs have stolen the initiative from the working class, placing it in a situation of blackmail in fact, the consequence has always been the paralysis of the working class.¹³

However, this search for continual confrontations not only drained the energy of the workerist formations in the long term, it also made it difficult for them to find room for serious political reflection, which is so necessary:

“In fact, the organisational life of Potere Operaio was continually interrupted by the need to deal with decisive moments that, more and more often, went beyond the capacity to react on a massive scale. In addition, there was often little implantation within the masses, which made it impossible to confront these moments”.¹⁴

Moreover the class struggle, which had accelerated considerably with the development of important struggles at the beginning of the 1970s, began to decline. This put an end to the experience of *Potere Operaio* and the group was dissolved in 1973:

*“...as soon as we realised that the problem raised was insoluble given the current situation and balance of forces, we dissolved the organisation. If our strength was not enough to resolve the problem at that time, the strength of the mass movement would have to resolve it in one way or another or else put forward a new way to pose the problem.”*¹⁵

The basic hypothesis that there was a proletarian attack upon capital that was permanent and growing in a linear way and that therefore the material conditions were ripe for the construction of “*a new revolutionary party*”, was soon shown to be unfounded and out of tune with the negative reality of the “*reflux*”.

12. Aldo Cazzullo, op.cit., p. XII.

13. On this point see: “Terror, terrorism and class violence”, (*International Review* n° 14); “Sabotage des lignes SNCF: des actes stériles instrumentalisés par la bourgeoisie contre la class ouvrière” (ICC on line, 2008); “Débat sur la violence (II): il est nécessaire de dépasser le faux dilemme: pacifisme social-démocrate ou violence minoritaire” (ICC on line, 2009).

14. Antonio Negri, op.cit., p.105.

15. Antonio Negri, op.cit., p.108.

But instead of accepting this, the workerists gave themselves over bit by bit to subjectivism, believing that they had produced a crisis in the economic system through their struggles and they gradually lost any materialist basis for their analyses, sometimes going so far as to adopt interclassist positions.

From workerism to workers' autonomy

The political themes characterising workerism are not always the same, and they can be presented with varying degrees of force. Even so, all the positions of *Potere Operaio* (and of workerism in general) contain this need for direct confrontation with the state, an opposition that must be ostentatious and continuous and is a sign of political action, an expression of vitality. What was to change gradually was the reference to the working class, or rather the image of the worker to whom reference is made. At first it was the mass worker but this was gradually diluted into that of a so-called “*social worker*” when there were less struggles. This change in the social reference point goes a long way to explaining the whole evolution of workerism, or more precisely, its political involution.

In order to try to explain this evolution in workerism's positions, a certain picture of capital is painted; one in which capital tends to undo workers' militancy – apparently based in the factory – by dispersing the class geographically:

*“...capitalist restructuring became equivalent to a colossal operation around the composition of the working class, an operation to liquidate the form taken by the working class in the 1970s and which characterised it then. At that time what predominated was the mass worker as a pivotal figure in capitalist production and in the production of social value concentrated in the factory. Because of this internal political rigidity between production and reproduction, capitalist restructuring was forced to play on the isolation of the mass worker in the factory in relation to the process of socialisation of production and to the image of the worker, which became more diffuse socially. On the other hand, in as far as the production process spread socially, the law of value began to operate only in a formal way, that is, it no longer worked on the direct relationship between individual, specific work and the surplus value extracted, but upon social work as a whole.”*¹⁶

So the reference image of the worker became that of an imaginary “*social worker*”, an image that was so vague, in spite of

16. Antonio Negri, op.cit., p.113.

Negri's precisions,¹⁷ that at the time the movement saw a bit of everything in it.

The transition from the mass worker to the social worker spelt the dissolution of workerism (*Potere Operaio*) or its degeneration into parliamentarism (*Lotta Continua*) and a new phenomenon was born; workers' autonomy,¹⁸ which saw itself as a movement in continuity with the experience of workerism.

Workers' Autonomy was formed in 1973 at the Bologna Congress in a period in which a large number of young people identified with the image of the social worker invented by Toni Negri. For this “*young proletariat*”, the path to liberation was no longer by means of the conquest of power but through the development “*of a social atmosphere able to incarnate the utopia of a community which awakens and which is organised outside of the economic model, of work and wages*”¹⁹ and so by the creation of “*communism right away*”. Politics became “*a luxury*”, dictated by and subject to desires and needs. Taking shape around the social centres, where young people from working class districts congregated, this “*communism right away*” took the form of an increase in direct action, especially “*proletarian expropriations*”, seen as a “*social wage*”, “*auto-reduction of bills, the occupation of lodgings*” both public and private, and a confused experience of self-management and living alternatively. Moreover, the voluntarist attitude, which takes its desires for reality, was strengthened to the point that it envisaged a situation in which the bourgeoisie would be assailed by the social worker:

“...the situation in Italy is now characterised by an indomitable, radical counter-power, which no longer has anything to do with the factory worker; with the situation set up by the ‘labour laws’ or with the institutional structures determined by the post-68ers. On the contrary, we are in a situation in which, within the whole process of reproduction - and this must be stressed - workers' self-organisation has been definitively achieved”.²⁰

This analysis was not applied to the Italian situation alone but was extended to the international level, especially to those

17. “When we say ‘social worker’, what we really mean – and this is extremely precise – is that surplus value is extracted from this subject. When we speak of the ‘social worker’, we are talking of a subject that is productive and when we say that he is productive, we are saying that he produces surplus value, in the long or short term”. Antonio Negri, op.cit., p.18.

18. On this question, see our articles: “L'area della Autonomia: la confusione contro la classe operaia” in *Rivoluzione Internazionale* n°s 8 and 10.

19. N. Balestrini, P. Moroni, *L'orda d'oro*, Milan, SugarCo Editioni, 1988, p.334.

20. Antonio Negri, op.cit., p.138.

countries in which the economy was most developed, such as the United States and Great Britain. The conviction that the workers' movement held a position of strength, was so firm that it led Toni Negri (and the autonomists of the period) to believe that states had decided to put their hands in their wallets and try to stem the flow of the proletarian offensive by distributing a larger proportion of the revenue:

*"...these are phenomena with which we are very well acquainted in economies that are more advanced than our own, phenomena that found complete expression during the 60s, in the United States or in Great Britain, where there was a real attempt to block the movement, on the one hand through the destruction of the subjective vanguard of the movement, and on the other – and this is important – through control mechanisms based on the availability of a great sum of cash, on an intensive structuring of the distribution of revenue".*²¹

Therefore, in a situation in which *"the whole process of value no longer exists"*, the bosses would even be willing to gain nothing if only to *"restore the laws of accumulation"* and *"completely socialise the instruments of control and command"*.²² In other words, they imagined that their struggle had destabilised the state, that they had created a crisis situation within it, but without even realising that, increasingly, on the streets there were only young people who had less and less to do with the world of the factory and of work and who consequently had less and less chance of imposing a favourable balance of forces against the bourgeoisie.

What characterised the period was the concept of *"workers' self-realisation"* which, over and above aspects linked to material gains, referred to *"moments of counter-power"*, that is, *"political moments of self-determination, of separation of the reality of the class from that which is the global reality of capitalist production"*.²³ Within this context, *"the proletarian conquest of revenue"* would be able to *"destroy at times the equation of the law of value"*.²⁴ Here there is a confusion between, on the one hand, the ability of the class to obtain higher wages and so reduce the proportion of surplus value extorted by the capitalists, with, on the other hand, a so-called *"destruction"* of the law of value. On the contrary, the law of value, as the history of capitalism has shown, has always survived even in those countries of so-called *"really existing socialism"* (the Eastern countries

that in the past were insidiously called communist).

From all of this we can see that the autonomist milieu was full of illusions that the proletariat could create and enjoy within bourgeois society a relatively *"stable"* position of counter-power, whereas in reality the situation of dual power is a particularly precarious one, typical of revolutionary periods. It must either evolve into a victorious offensive of the proletarian revolution with the development of the exclusive power of the working class and the destruction of bourgeois power; or it must degenerate into a defeat for the class.

It is this serious disconnection from material reality, from the economic base of the struggle, which led to a fantastical and student-like development in the political positions of autonomy.

One of the positions particularly in vogue with the militants of workers' autonomy was the **refusal to work**, closely linked to the **theory of needs**. To the correct observation that the tendency must be for the worker not to remain stuck within the logic of the bosses' interests and for him to demand satisfaction for his basic needs, autonomy's theoreticians superimposed a theory that went further by identifying workers' self-valorisation with sabotaging the bosses' machinery, to the point of claiming that such acts of sabotage are a pleasure. This is what emerges from Negri's satisfied description of the *"freedom"* exercised by the Alfa Romeo workers when smoking on the production line without worrying about the damage done to production. No doubt it sometimes gives great satisfaction to do something that there is no point in defending, to do something at any rate that the arrogance of force forbids you to do. It is a psychological – even a physical – satisfaction. But what has this got to do with the conclusions drawn by Toni Negri, who sees this act of smoking as *"an extremely important thing [...], almost as important theoretically as the discovery that it is the working class that determines the development of capital,"* According to Negri, *"the dominion of needs"* is no longer that of material, objective, natural needs but rather something that is created gradually, *"which permeates, and succeeds in dominating, every opportunity provided by the counter-culture"*.

In a way, the correct refusal to remain alienated, not only materially but also mentally, at the workplace, which is expressed in disobedience to factory discipline, is presented as *"a qualitatively remarkable fact; something that is in direct proportion to the degree to which needs expand. What does it mean to enjoy the refusal to work, what else could it mean if not to build a series*

of material capacities for enjoyment which are completely alternative to the rhythm, work-family-bar. This is useful for breaking with this stagnant world; alternative, radical possibilities and power are discovered through the experience of revolt".²⁵

In fact, by losing itself in chasing after empty illusions without any perspective, workerism, in its social worker form, degenerated completely. It became dispersed among a number of separate initiatives, each one aiming to satisfy the needs of this or that category, which was a million miles away from the expression of class solidarity expressed during the Hot Autumn and which reappeared later when the working class took the stage once more.

The reaction of the state and the epilogue to the Hot Autumn

As we said at the beginning of this article, the ability of the bourgeoisie to recuperate the situation is largely due to the weaknesses of the proletarian movement that we have described. We must add however that, although the bourgeoisie was initially taken completely by surprise, it was subsequently able to launch an unprecedented attack against the workers' movement, both in terms of direct repression and in the form of manoeuvres of every kind.

In terms of repression

This is the classic weapon of the bourgeoisie against its class enemy, although it is not the decisive weapon for creating a real balance of forces against the proletariat. Between October 1969 and January 1970, charges were drawn up against more than three thousand workers and students.

"Students and workers, more than three thousand between October 1969 and January 1970, were prosecuted. Fascist laws, which punish 'subversive propaganda' and 'the instigation of hatred between the classes' were dug up. Police confiscated the works of Marx, Lenin and Che Guevara".²⁶

In terms of the interplay fascism/anti-fascism

This is the classic weapon used against the student movement, although it is used less in conflicts with the working class. It aims at derailing the movement into sterile street confrontations between rival gangs with reference, perforce, to the *"democratic and anti-fascist"* members of the bourgeoisie. In short, it is a way of getting the sheep back into the sheep pen.

21. Antonio Negri, op.cit., p.116-117.

22. Antonio Negri, op.cit., p.118.

23. Antonio Negri, op.cit., p.142.

24. Antonio Negri, op.cit., p.142.

25. Antonio Negri, op.cit., p.130-132.

26. Alessandro Silj, *Malpaese, Criminalità, corruzione e politica nell'Italia della prima Repubblica 1943-1994*, editor Donzelle, p.100-101.

In terms of the strategy of tension

This was certainly the masterpiece of the Italian bourgeoisie during these years and it succeeded in changing the political climate dramatically. Everyone remembers the massacre at the Banca dell'Agricoltura, Piazza Fontana in Milan on 12th December 1969, which caused 16 deaths and 88 wounded. But not everyone knows, or remembers, that from 25th April 1969, Italy suffered a continuous series of attacks:

*“On 25th April, two bombs exploded in Milan; one at the central station and the other, which caused around twenty wounded, at the Fiat stand in the trade fair. On 12th May, three explosive devices; two in Rome and one in Turin, failed to explode by pure luck. In July the weekly magazine Panorama repeated rumours of a right-wing coup d'état. Neo-fascist groups called for mobilisation, the PCI placed its sections on a state of alert. On 24th July, an explosive device similar to those found in Rome and Turin was discovered, unexploded, at the law courts in Milan. On 8th and 9th August, eight attacks against the railways caused serious damage and left some wounded. On 4th October in Trieste an explosive left in an elementary school and timed to explode when the children came out of school, failed to go off because of a technical malfunction; a militant of Avanguardia Nazionale²⁷ was accused. In Pisa on the 27th October, the toll of a day of confrontations between police and demonstrators, who were protesting against a demonstration of Italian and Greek fascists, was one dead and 125 wounded. [...] On 12th December, four explosive devices went off in Rome and Milan. There were no victims from the three in Rome but the one in Milan, in Piazza Fontana opposite the Banca dell'Agricoltura, caused 16 deaths and 88 wounded. A fifth explosive device, also in Milan, was found intact. So there began in Italy what has in deed been called the long night of the Republic”.*²⁸

In the subsequent period, the rhythm slowed down slightly but it never stopped. From 1969 to 1980 12,690 attacks and other incidents of politically motivated violence were recorded, killing 362 and wounding 4,490. The number of dead and wounded per attack rose to 150 and 551 respectively; with a total of 11 attacks, the first in December 1969 in Piazza Fontana in Milan, the most serious (85 dead and 200 wounded) at Bologna railway station in August 1980.²⁹

“...the violence of the state was revealed above all expectation: it organised the attacks, held enquiries, arrested innocent

*people, one of whom – Pinelli – it killed and it did it all moreover with the blessing of certain newspapers and the TV. The 12th December uncovered an unforeseen dimension to the political struggle and even revealed the breadth of the front that we had to fight against [...]. So, with Piazza Fontana a new enemy was discovered: the state. Beforehand, the adversary was the teacher, the team leader, the boss. The references went across national borders, they were of different regions of the world: Vietnam, the French May, the Black Panthers, China. The uncovering of the terrorist state opened up a new horizon to the struggles: that of plots, of making use of the neo-fascists”*³⁰

The aim of this strategy was obviously to intimidate and disorient the working class as much as possible, to spread fear of the bombs and insecurity, and this was a partial success. It also had another effect that was certainly more harmful; with Piazza Fontana the state was seen, at least by certain minorities, to be the real enemy, this was the entity with which it was necessary to settle the score. This diverted a series of proletarian and student elements towards terrorism as a method of struggle.

Encouraging the terrorist dynamic

Terrorism therefore became the way in which many brave but adventurist comrades destroyed their lives and their political engagement by engaging in a practice that has nothing to do with the class struggle. This practice also led to dire consequences by provoking a reflux in the whole of the working class, which was confronted with the two-fold threat of state repression on the one hand and blackmail from the “brigadist” and terrorist world on the other.

The unions make up ground by means of the Factory Councils

The last element, but certainly not the least important, on which the bourgeoisie depended was the union. As they could no longer rely on repression to keep the proletariat at arms' length, the bosses who, in all the years from the post-war period to the dawning of the Hot Autumn, had been extremely hostile to the unions, suddenly discovered that they were democratic and lovers of good factory relations. The trick obviously is that what you cannot get through bad relations, you try to get through good ones and you do it by trying to set up a dialogue with the unions, seen to be the only possible intermediaries able to control the struggles and the workers' demands. This granting of a wider democratic terrain to

the unions led to the setting up and development of the Factory Councils, a form of base unionism in which it was not necessary to be a card-holder in order to participate. This gave the workers the illusion that this much at least they had won and that it was possible to have confidence in these new structures to pursue their struggle. In fact, the workers' struggle, although often very critical in its relations with the unions, has not managed to make an in-depth critique of them, but limits itself to denouncing their inconsistencies.

In conclusion...

In these two articles we have tried to show, on the one hand the strength and potential of the working class and, on the other, how important it is that its action be supported by a clear consciousness of the path it must take. The workers who awoke to the class struggle at the end of the 1960s in Italy and in the whole world, did not have at their disposal the memory of past experience and so they could depend only on the empirical gains that they gradually accumulated. This was the main weakness of the movement.

Today, in the various representations of France 1968 and the Italian Hot Autumn, there are many who sigh with nostalgia when they recall that this period is long gone and that the struggles seem unable to rise up again. We think that the opposite is the case. The Hot Autumn, the French May and all the struggles that shook society internationally at the end of the 60s were only the beginning of the class struggle, whereas the subsequent years saw a development and a maturation of the situation. In particular, today there is a more significant international presence of political, internationalist vanguards (although still very much a minority) which, unlike the sclerotic groups of the past, are able to debate together, to work and intervene together with the common aim of developing the class struggle.³¹

Moreover, today there is more than just a basic militancy in the class that makes it possible for various struggles to hatch out throughout the world,³² there is also the general feeling that the society in which we live no longer has anything to offer economically and also that can it give no security against environmental disaster

27. An extreme right wing group.

28. Alessandro Silj, op.cit., p. 95-96.

29. Alessandro Silj, op.cit., p. 113.

30. Statement of Marco Revelli, who was a militant of *Lotta Continua* at the time. In: Aldo Cazzullo, *ibid*, p. 91.

31. It is not possible to list here all the various articles dealing with this new generation of internationalists, so we invite our readers to see our web site en.internationalism.org, where they can find a great deal of information.

32. On the current development of the class struggle, we refer you to our internet site, drawing particular attention to the articles on Vigo (Spain), Greece and Tekel (Turkey).

or war, etc. This kind of feeling tends to become more wide-spread to the point at which you can sometimes hear people, who have no political experience, talking of the need to make the revolution. At the same time, most of these people think that the revolution is impossible, that the exploited do not have the strength to overturn the capitalist system:

“We can summarise this situation in the following way: at the end of the 1960s, the idea that the revolution was possible could be relatively widely accepted, but the idea that it was indispensable was far less easy to understand. Today, on the other hand, the idea that the revolution is necessary can meet with an echo that is not negligible, but the idea that it is possible is far less widespread.

“For consciousness of the possibility of the communist revolution to gain a significant echo within the working class, the latter has to gain confidence in its own strength, and this takes place through the development of massive struggles. The huge attacks which it is now facing on an international scale provides the objective basis for such struggles. However, the main form this attack is taking today, that of massive lay-offs, does not initially favour the emergence of such movements; in general, [...] moments of sharply rising unemployment are not the theatre of the most important struggles. Unemployment, massive lay-offs, have a tendency to provoke a temporary feeling of paralysis in the class [...]. This is why, in the coming period, the fact that we do not see a wide-scale response from the working class to the attacks should not lead us to consider that it has given up the struggle for the defence of its interests. It is in a second period, when it is less vulnerable to the bourgeoisie’s blackmail, that workers will tend to turn to the idea that a united and solid struggle can push back the attacks of the ruling class, especially when the latter tries to make the whole working class pay for the huge budget deficits accumulating today with all the plans for saving the banks and stimulating the economy. This is when we are more likely to see the development of broad struggles by the workers.”³³

This feeling of impotence has been, and still is, a weight upon the present generation of proletarians and it serves to explain the hesitations, the lateness, the lack of reaction to the bourgeoisie’s attacks. But we must look upon our class with the confidence that comes from the knowledge of its history and its past struggles. We must work to recreate the link between

past struggles and those of the present. We must participate in the struggles and inspire courage and confidence in the future, accompany the proletariat and stimulate it to rediscover the consciousness that the future of humanity rests on its shoulders and that it has the capacity to accomplish this immense task.

Ezechiele 23/08/10

33. “Resolution on the international situation from the 18th congress of the ICC”, 2009, *International Review* n°138.

What are workers' councils? (iv)

1917 - 1921: The soviets attempt to wield power

In previous articles in this series, we followed the appearance of the workers' councils (i.e. *soviets* in Russian) during the revolution of 1905; their disappearance and resurgence during the revolution of 1917, and their crisis and revival in the hands of the workers which led to their seizure of power in October 1917.¹ In this article we will deal with the attempt by the soviets to wield power, a fundamental moment in the history of mankind: "*For the first time, not the minority, not the rich alone, not the educated alone, but the real people, the vast majority of working people, are themselves building a new life, are by their own experience, solving the most difficult problems of socialist organisation*"².

October 1917 - April 1918: the rise of the soviets

Driven along by wild enthusiasm, the working masses set about the task of consolidating and continuing what they started before the revolution. The anarchist Paul Avrich described the atmosphere of those early months, by underlining that "*the Russian working class enjoyed a degree of freedom and a sense of power unique in its history*"³.

The mode of functioning the soviet power attempted to adopt was radically different from that of the bourgeois state in which the executive – the government – has virtually absolute power while the legislature – parliament – and the judiciary, which in theory should act as a counterbalance, are in reality very much subordinate to it. In any event, the three powers are completely divorced from the vast majority of the people whose role is limited to routinely placing voting papers in ballot boxes.⁴ Soviet power was based on two

1. See *International Reviews*, n°s 140, 141, 142.

2. Lenin, *Letter to the American workers*, 20 August 1918, Lenin, *On the United States of America*, Progress, 1967, p.345.

3. Quoted by Marcel Liebman, *Leninism Under Lenin* (Merlin Press, 1975), p.335. This is an interesting and well-documented work by a non-communist writer. Whenever possible the quotes from this book have been taken from the English translation published by Merlin Press. However, this is a shortened and revised version of the French original and does not contain some of the passages quoted. Where this is the case the translations have been made by the ICC.

4. There was a previous phase in the life of capitalism, when it was still a progressive system, when parliament was a place where different fractions of the bourgeoisie unified or fought over the government of society. The proletariat had to participate and try and influence the actions of the bourgeoisie in defence of its own interests and do it despite the dangerous illusions in the system this could entail. However,

completely new premises:

- the active mass participation of the workers;
- that it's the mass of workers themselves who discuss, take decisions and implement them.

As Lenin said at the Second Congress of Soviets: "*In the eyes of the bourgeoisie, strength is manifested when the masses go blindly to the slaughter. The only government which the bourgeoisie recognise as strong is one which can use all the power of the state machine to put the masses anywhere it pleases. Our conception of strength is different. In our eyes, a government is strong in proportion to the consciousness of the masses. It is strong when the masses know everything, judge everything, accept everything consciously*"⁵

However, once they took power, the soviets ran into an obstacle: the Constituent Assembly, which represented the very negation of all these premises and a return to the past: the allocation of power and its exercise by a bureaucratic caste of politicians.

When confronting Tsarism, the workers' movement in Russia had demanded a Constituent Assembly as a step towards a bourgeois republic, but the revolution of 1917 had largely gone beyond this old rallying cry. The weight of the past clearly continued to have an influence, even after the proclamation of soviet power, not only on the large masses of workers but also

even at this time, the three powers were still divorced from the vast majority of people.

5. Quoted by Victor Serge, militant anarchist convert to Bolshevism, in *Year One of the Russian Revolution*, p.83, chapter 3, subheading: "The Great Decrees: Peace", Allan Lane Penguin Press.

on many Bolshevik Party activists who believed the Constituent Assembly to be compatible with soviet power.

"*One of the most serious and fateful errors of the bourgeois-socialist coalition government was that time and again mainly legal considerations persuaded it to postpone the election and opening of the national [Constituent] Assembly*"⁶

The succession of governments between February and October 1917 postponed it time and again, contradicting what they themselves claimed to be their ultimate goal. The Bolsheviks – not without internal divisions and contradictions themselves – had during this period been its principal supporters, while acknowledging it was inconsistent with the slogan "All power to the soviets!"

Thus dawned a paradox: three weeks after the soviets seized power, they fulfilled their promise by calling elections to the Constituent Assembly. These elections gave the Right Socialist-Revolutionaries a majority (299 seats), with the Bolsheviks a distant second (168), followed by the Left Socialist-Revolutionaries (39) and other smaller groups.

How is it possible for the election result to hand a victory to the losers of October?

Several factors explain it, but in Russia at this precise time the most obvious was that voting put on an equal footing "citizens" whose conditions are radically opposed: workers, bosses, bureaucrats, farmers, etc., which always favours the exploiting minority and the status quo. More generally, there is another factor that affects the revolutionary class: the vote is an act in which the atomised individual allows himself to be led by multiple considerations, specific influences and interests, based on the illusion of being a hypothetically free "citizen", and therefore expresses nothing of the active power of a collective mass. The "individual citizen" worker who votes in the polling booth and the worker who participates in an assembly are like two different people.

6. Oskar Anweiler, *The soviets: Russian workers, peasants and soldiers councils, 1905-1921*, p.208, Chapter 5, "The Constituent Assembly or Soviet Republic".

The Constituent Assembly was more-or-less completely ineffective. It was discredited. It took some grandiloquent decisions that had no effect and its meetings were limited to a mere succession of boring speeches. The Bolshevik agitation, supported by the anarchists and Left Socialist-Revolutionaries, clearly posed the dilemma of Soviets or Assembly and thus contributed to a clarification of consciousness. After multiple metamorphoses, the Constituent Assembly was quietly disbanded in January 1918 by the sailors assigned to stand guard over it.

Exclusive power passed to the soviets through which the mass of workers reasserted their political existence. During the first months of the revolution and at least until the summer of 1918, the permanent self activity of the masses that we had already witnessed in February 1917, not only continued but spread and grew stronger. The workers, the women and the youth all lived within a dynamic of assemblies, factory and neighbourhood councils, local soviets, conferences, meetings, etc. *“The first phase of the soviet regime was that of almost unlimited autonomy of its local institutions. Fuelled by an intense life and a more and more numerous one, the grass roots soviets were protective of their authority.”*⁷ The main discussions in the local soviets were about matters affecting the whole of Russia but they also discussed the international situation, particularly revolutionary developments.⁸

The Council of People's Commissars created by the Second Congress of Soviets was not conceived as a de facto government, that is to say as an independent power monopolising affairs, but rather as the animator and the engine of mass action. Anweiler refers to the campaign of agitation Lenin conducted: *“On 18 November, Lenin appealed to the workers to take over all government affairs: The soviets were now all powerful and would decide everything.”*⁹ It was not rhetoric. The Council of People's Commissars, unlike bourgeois governments, did not comprise a constellation of impressive advisers, career civil servants, bodyguards, collaborators, etc. As Victor Serge recounts,¹⁰ this body had a head of department and two assistants. Its meetings consisted in examining each matter with the delegations of workers, the members of the Executive Committee of Soviets or the Soviets of Petrograd and Moscow. *Secret deliberations by the Council of Ministers*

7. Marcel Liebman, *op. cit.*, French edition, p.31.

8. A large number of discussions took place around events in Germany, including news of strikes and mutinies.

9. Oskar Anweiler, *op. cit.*, p.219, Chapter 5, part 2 *“The Bolshevik Social System”* part (a).

10. Victor Serge, *op. cit.*, p.95, Chapter 3, subheading: *“The initiative of the masses”*.

were abolished.

In 1918, four All-Russia Congresses of Soviets were held: the Third in January, the Fourth in March, the Fifth in July and the Sixth in November. It shows the vitality and global vision that inspired the soviets. These general congresses, which required a tremendous effort of mobilisation – the transport system was paralysed and civil war made the movement of the delegates very complicated – expressed the global unity of the soviets and implemented their decisions.

The congresses were animated by lively debates in which it was not only Bolsheviks who participated but also internationalist Mensheviks, Left Socialist-Revolutionaries, anarchists, etc. Indeed Bolsheviks expressed their own differences. The atmosphere had a profound critical spirit as Victor Serge observed: *“If the revolution is to be well served...it must be constantly on guard against its own abuses, excesses, crimes and reactionary elements. It therefore has a vital need for criticism, opposition and civic courage on the part of those who carry it out.”*¹¹

In the Third and Fourth Congresses, there was a stormy debate on the signing of a peace treaty with Germany – Brest Litovsk¹² – that focused on two questions: how to retain soviet power while waiting for the world revolution? And what contribution could it actually make? The Fourth Congress was the scene of a bitter confrontation between the Bolsheviks and Left Socialist Revolutionaries. The Sixth Congress focused on the revolution in Germany and adopted measures to support it, including sending trains containing large quantities of wheat; an expression of the tremendous solidarity and commitment of the Russian workers who were then rationed to only 50 grams of bread per day!

The initiatives of the masses affected all aspects of social life. We aren't able to provide a detailed analysis of this here and we will simply highlight that courts of justice were established in working class neighbourhoods and were seen as genuine assemblies where the causes of crimes were discussed and sentences were passed with the aim of changing the conduct of criminals and not as punishment or revenge. *“According to Lenin's wife, several male*

11. Marcel Liebman, *op. cit.*, p.270.

12. This treaty was signed between the soviet power and the German state in March 1918. By granting major concessions, the soviet power achieved a truce which allowed it to survive and sent a clear signal to the international proletariat of its desire to end the war. See our articles: *“October 17: Start of the proletarian revolution”*, part 2, *International Review* n°13, 1978 and *“Communism, not a nice idea but a material necessity”*, part VIII: *“Understanding the defeat of the Russian Revolution”*, *International Review* n° 99, 1999.

*as well as female workers took the floor and their interventions were sometimes extremely vociferous. The embarrassed 'lawyer' did not stop mopping the perspiration from his brow, after the accused, his face bathed in tears, promised to refrain from beating his son. Actually, it was not so much a court as a public meeting to control the conduct of its citizens. Under our eyes, the proletarian ethic was taking shape.”*¹³

From April to December 1918: the crisis and decline of soviet power

However, this powerful momentum weakened and the soviets changed, distancing themselves from the majority of the workers. In May 1918, criticisms of soviet policy were already circulating among the working class in Moscow and Petrograd. As in July-September 1917, a series of attempts were made to revive the soviets;¹⁴ in both cities independent conferences were held which, although focussed on economic demands, took up the renewal of the soviets as their main objective. The Mensheviks held the majority there, and this led the Bolsheviks to reject the conferences and to accuse them of being counter-revolutionary. The unions were mobilised to break them up and they quickly disappeared.

This measure contributed in undermining the very basis of the soviets' existence. In the previous article in this series, we showed that the soviets did not exist in a vacuum but were the figurehead of a great proletarian movement formed by countless soviet organisations, factory committees, neighbourhood councils, conferences and mass assemblies, etc. By mid 1918, these organisations began to decline and gradually disappeared. The factory committees (which we will speak of again) disappeared first, then the neighbourhood soviets in turn entered a death agony that lasted from the summer of 1918 until their total disappearance in late 1919.

The two vital ingredients of the soviets' existence were the massive network of grass roots soviet organisations and their constant renewal. The disappearance of the first was accompanied by the gradual elimination of the second. The appearance of the soviets didn't change; they evolved little by little into a rigid bureaucracy.

The Bolshevik Party unwittingly contributed to this process. To combat the counter-revolutionary agitation of the Mensheviks and other parties inside the

13. Marcel Liebman, *op. cit.*, French edition, p.176.

14. See the series in *International Review* n° 142, *“The Revolution of 1917...”*, subheading *“September 1917, the total renewal of the soviets”*.

soviets, they resorted to administrative measures of exclusion, which contributed in creating an overwhelming atmosphere of passivity, a fear of debate, the gradual submission to the diktat of the Party.¹⁵

This repression was episodic in its early stages but eventually became widespread in the early months of 1919, when the central organs of the Party openly demanded the complete subordination of the soviets to their own local committees and the exclusion of the other parties.

The lack of life and debate, the bureaucratisation, subordination to the Party etc., became more and more oppressive. At the Seventh Congress of the Soviets, Kamenev recognised that “*The soviet plenary sessions as political organisations often waste away, the people busy themselves with purely mechanical chores.... General soviet sessions are seldom called, and when the deputies meet, it is only to accept a report, listen to a speech, and the like.*”¹⁶ This Congress, held in December 1919, had the rebirth of the soviets as its main topic of discussion and there were contributions not only from the Bolsheviks, seen for the last time expressing differences amongst themselves, but also internationalist Mensheviks, their leader Martov taking a very active part.

There was an effort to implement the resolutions of the Congress. In January 1920 elections were held that sought to re-establish the soviets under conditions of total freedom. “*Martov acknowledged at the beginning of 1920 that, except in Petrograd, ‘where ‘Zinovievite’ elections were held in the old manner,’ the return to more democratic methods was general, and often worked to the advantage of the candidates of his party.*”¹⁷

Many soviets reappeared and the Bolshevik Party tried to correct the errors of bureaucratic concentration that it had itself progressively helped to create. “*The Soviet Government announced its intention of giving up some of the prerogatives*

15. We should make clear that these measures were not accompanied by restricting the freedom of the press. In his book cited above, Victor Serge affirms that “*The proletarian dictatorship hesitated a long time before suppressing the enemy press. (...) it was only in July 1918 that the last organs of the bourgeoisie and petty-bourgeoisie were closed down. The legal press of the Mensheviks only disappeared in 1919; the press of the anarchists hostile to the regime, and the Maximalists appeared down to 1921; that of the Left Socialist-Revolutionaries later still.* (Footnote on p.103, Chapter 3, subheading: “Proletarian realism and ‘revolutionary’ rhetoric”.

16. Oskar Anweiler, *op. cit.*, p.235, Chapter 5, part 2, “The Bolshevik Social System” part (b).

17. Marcel Liebman, *op. cit.*, p.231. Zinoviev, a leading Bolshevik, had great qualities and played a large part in the creation of the Communist International. He was however renowned for his craftiness and manoeuvring.

it had usurped and restoring the rights of the Central Executive Committee [of the soviets, elected by Congress], which under the constitution of 1918 was supposed to supervise the activities of the People’s Commissars.”¹⁸

These hopes were quickly dashed, however. The intensification of the civil war, Wrangel’s offensive and the invasion of Poland, the worsening famine, the catastrophic economic situation, the peasant revolts, cut these intentions off at root, “*with...the ruined state of the economy, the demoralisation of the people, the increasing isolation of a devastated country and an exhausted nation, the very basis for a revival of the soviets was no longer present.*”¹⁹

The Kronstadt uprising in March 1921, with its demand for completely renewed soviets effectively exercising power, was the final death agony; its suppression by the Bolshevik Party signalled the almost certain death of the soviets as workers’ organs.²⁰

The Civil War and the creation of the Red Army

Why was it that in contrast with September 1917 the soviets were now fighting an uphill battle they couldn’t win? Though only the development of world revolution could have provided the oxygen needed for the movement to survive, we will nonetheless examine the other “internal” factors that played a part. In brief, there are two key, strongly interconnected factors: the civil war and famine on the one hand and the economic chaos on the other.

Let’s begin with the civil war.²¹ The war was organised by the major imperialist powers: Britain, France, the United States, Japan, etc., who united their troops into a heterogeneous body of armed forces, “the Whites”, allied with the defeated Russian bourgeoisie. This war devastated the country until 1921 and caused more than 6 million deaths and incalculable destruction. The Whites carried out unprecedented sadistic and cruel reprisals. “*the White Terror was partly responsible for this, of course, since victories by the counter-revolutionary forces were usually*

18. *Ibid.*, p.230-1

19. *Ibid.* p.231.

20. We aren’t able to give a detailed analysis of the Kronstadt events here, or their meaning and the lessons we draw. See *International Review* n° 3, 1975, “The lessons of Kronstadt” and *International Review* n° 104, 2001, “Understanding Kronstadt”, http://en.internationalism.org/specialtexts/IR003_kron.htm and http://en.internationalism.org/ir/104_kronstadt.html.

21. See Victor Serge, *op. cit.*, for an account of the civil war in 1918.

accompanied not only by the massacring of large numbers of Communists but also by extermination of the most active members of the soviets, and in any case, by suppression of the latter.”²²

Here we see the first reason why the soviets were undermined. The White Army suppressed the soviets and indiscriminately murdered all their members.

But more complex causes were attached to these massacres. In response to the war, the Council of People’s Commissars in April-May 1918 made two important decisions: the formation of the Red Army and the establishment of the Cheka, the organ responsible for rooting out counter-revolutionary conspiracies. It was the first time the Council made a decision without prior discussion with the soviets, or at least with the Executive Committee.

The creation of a Cheka as a policing organ was inevitable after the revolution. Counter-revolutionary plots followed one after the other, as much from the Right Socialist-Revolutionaries, the Mensheviks and the Cadets as from the monarchist Black Hundreds and Cossacks, encouraged by British and French agents. As soon as the war began the organisation of a Red Army was also imperative.

These two structures – the Cheka and the Red Army – were not simple tools that could be brought out as and when necessary, they were *state organs* and, as such, from the point of view of the proletariat double-edged swords; the working class would be forced to use them up until its decisive victory worldwide, but their utilisation presented serious dangers because they tended to take on an independent life vis-à-vis proletarian power.

Why then was an army created, when the proletariat had a soviet military organ that had led the insurgency, the Military Revolutionary Committee?²³

From September 1917 the Russian army openly began to disintegrate. As soon as peace was declared, the soldiers’ councils rapidly demobilised. The only thing that mattered to the majority of soldiers was returning to their villages. Paradoxical as it may seem, the soldiers’ councils – but to a lesser extent the sailors’ too – that were widespread after the seizure of power by the soviets, concentrated on disbanding the army, avoiding the unruly flight of conscripts and reprimanding bands of soldiers who were using their weapons to rob and

22. Marcel Liebman, *op. cit.*, p.229.

23. See *International Review* n° 142, “The Revolution of 1917 (from July to October), from the revival of the workers’ councils to the seizure of power”, subheading “The Military Revolutionary Committee, soviet organ of the insurrection”, <http://en.internationalism.org/ir/142/workers-councils-part-3>.

terrorise the population. In early January 1918 *the army no longer existed*. Russia was at the mercy of the German army. The peace treaty of Brest-Litovsk did however allow time for the army to be effectively reorganised to defend the revolution.

At its inception, the Red Army was an army of volunteers. Middle class and peasant youth didn't enrol and the initial core was made up of workers from the factories and the big cities. This led to a real blood-letting in the ranks of the working class, that had to sacrifice its best elements in a bloody and cruel war: "*We know that because of the war the best workers were withdrawn in large numbers from the cities, and that therefore at times it becomes difficult in one or another provincial or district capital to form a soviet and make it function.*"²⁴

Here we see the second reason for the crisis of the soviets: their best elements were absorbed by the Red Army. To get a real idea of this, in April 1918 Petrograd mobilised 25,000 volunteers, the vast majority of them militant workers, and Moscow 15,000, while the whole country had 106,000 volunteers in total.

As to the third cause of this crisis, it was none other than the Red Army itself that regarded the soviets as an obstacle. It tended to avoid their control and asked the central government to prevent them from interfering in its affairs. It also rejected offers of support from the soviets' own military units (Red Guards, guerrillas). The Council of People's Commissars conceded all the army's demands.

Why did a body created to defend the soviets turn against them? The army is a state organ whose existence and functioning necessarily have social consequences, as it imposes a blind discipline, a rigid hierarchy in its general staff, with an officer corps who only recognise the authority of the government. To alleviate this tendency a network of political commissars was established from trusted workers responsible for controlling the officers. Unfortunately the effects of this measure were very limited and even counterproductive, since this network became in turn an additional layer of bureaucracy.

Not only did the Red Army continue to evade control by the soviets, it also imposed its methods of militarisation over society as a whole, restricting even more, if it was possible, the lives of its members. In his book *The ABC of Communism*, Preobrazhensky even talks of the proletariat's military dictatorship!

The imperatives of war and the blind

24. Speech of Kamenev, quoted by Oskar Anweiler, *op. cit.*, p.235.

submission to the demands of the Red Army led the government to form a Military Revolutionary Committee in the summer of 1918, which had nothing in common with the one that led the October Revolution, as demonstrated by the fact that its first decision was to appoint local revolutionary committees to impose control on the soviets. "*A decision by the Council of People's Commissars forced the soviets to comply unconditionally with the instructions of these committees.*"²⁵

The Red Army, like the Cheka, gradually ceased to serve the cause for which they were conceived, as weapons to defend the power of the soviets, and in establishing their independence and autonomy, finally turned against the soviets. If the Cheka initially reported to the local soviets and attempted to collaborate with them, the expeditious methods for which they were renowned would quickly prevail and impose themselves on soviet society. "*On August 28th, 1918, the headquarters of the Cheka actually instructed its local agencies to refuse to submit to any interference by the soviets: on the contrary, it was these local agencies that were to impose their will upon the soviet bodies. They succeeded in doing this in the many areas that were affected by military operations.*"²⁶

The Cheka eroded the power of the soviets so much that in November 1918 a survey revealed that 96 soviets were demanding the dissolution of Cheka sections, 119 asked for them to be subordinated to the legal soviet institutions and only 19 approved of their actions. This survey was completely useless though as the Cheka continued to accumulate new powers. "*All power to the soviets' has ceased to be the principle on which the regime is based, declared a member of the People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs; it has been replaced by a new rule: 'All power to the Cheka'.*"²⁷

Famine and economic chaos

The World War bequeathed a terrible legacy. The productive apparatus of the majority of European countries was in a feeble state, the distribution network for consumer goods and food was highly dislocated when not completely paralysed. "*Food consumption had in general decreased by about thirty or forty percent. The situation for the Allies was better, thanks to American support. The winter of 1917-1918 was still a harsh one with rigorous rationing and a fuel crisis in Britain and France.*"²⁸

25. Marcel Liebman, *op. cit.*, French edition, p.33.

26. *Ibid*, page 229.

27. *Ibid*, French edition, p.164.

28. Victor Serge, *op. cit.*, p.145, Chapter 5, "The

Russia had suffered cruelly from this situation. The October Revolution had not been able to advance, especially as powerful disruptive forces were at work: systematic sabotage extensively carried out not just by business leaders who, rather than provide the proletariat with the tools needed for production, preferred to pursue a scorched earth policy, but also by entire layers of technicians, managers and even highly skilled workers hostile to soviet power. After taking power the soviets were confronted by a massive strike of public servants, telegraph and railway workers, manipulated by the Menshevik-led unions. This strike was fomented and organised through the union apparatus by "*a shadow government [which] was functioning, presided over by Mr Prokopovich, who had officially taken over the succession from Kerensky, who was said to have 'resigned'.* This clandestine Cabinet directed the strike of officials in concert with a strike committee. The large firms of industry, commerce and banking, such as the Rural Bank of Tula, the Moscow Popular Bank and the Bank of the Caucasus, continued to pay their officials who were out on strike. The former All-Russian Soviet Executive (Mensheviks and SR) used its funds, stolen from the working class, for the same purpose."²⁹

This sabotage added to the widespread economic chaos made rapidly worse by the civil war. How could the famine ravaging the cities be fought? How could supplies of basic necessities be maintained?

Here we see the disastrous consequences of what happened in 1918: the social coalition that overthrew the bourgeois government in October 1917 disintegrated. Soviet power was a "coalition" of the workers', peasants' and soldiers' soviets all practically on an equal footing. With few exceptions the soviets had almost disappeared by the end of 1917, leaving soviet power with no army. But what happened to the peasants' soviets which were key to ensuring regular supplies to the cities?

The decree on land allocation adopted by the Second Congress of Soviets was surrounded by much confusion, and countless abuses were tolerated and, even though many poor farmers did acquire a plot, the big winners were the rich and middle peasants who greatly increased their holdings. This led to their almost total domination of the peasant soviets. Self-interest typified by private ownership was encouraged. "*The peasant received in exchange for his corn only paper roubles with which he could buy nothing except an ever more*

Problem in January 1918".

29. Victor Serge, *op. cit.*, p.94, Chapter 3, "Sabotage".

restricted supply of manufactured articles, and these with a great difficulty; and so he resorted to barter: foodstuffs against goods. A whole host of small speculators operated as middlemen between him and the town."³⁰ The peasants only sold their produce to speculators who hoarded it, thus exacerbating the shortages and the inflated prices.³¹

In June 1918, a decree of the soviet government created some committees of poor peasants to combat this situation. They would be a means of bringing the peasant soviets closer to the proletariat by organising the class struggle in the countryside, but it was also an attempt to create shock troops who would requisition the cereals and foods needed to alleviate the terrible famine in the cities.

These committees were specifically assigned, "[along with] armed detachments of factory workers to confiscate grain from the wealthier peasants, to requisition livestock and tools, to distribute them among the rural poor and even to redistribute land."³² The results of this experience were largely negative. They were neither able to guarantee supplies to the starving cities nor to revive the peasants' soviets. And the irony is that in 1919 the Bolsheviks changed their policy to try to gain the support of the middle peasants and forcibly disbanded the committees of poor peasants.

Under modern capitalist production the supply of agricultural products is dependent on the existence of an extensive transport system that is highly mechanised and highly reliant on a wide range of basic industries. In this respect, feeding the starving population was hindered by the widespread collapse of the productive industrial apparatus due to the war and exacerbated by economic sabotage and the outbreak of civil war in April 1918.

The factory councils could have had a decisive role. As we saw in the previous article in this series, they played a very important vanguard role for the soviet system. They could have also helped in fighting the sabotage of the capitalists and preventing shortages and paralysis.

Moreover they did try to collaborate in setting up a central organ to control production and to fight against sabotage and paralysis of the transport system: "After the October Revolution the central councils of factory committees from various cities attempted to form their own national

30. *Ibid.*, p.94, Chapter 6, "The Problem".

31. *Ibid.* Victor Serge underlines that one of the policies of the unions consisted in creating cooperatives which were devoted to speculating on food to the great benefit of their members.

32. Oskar Anweiler, *op. cit.*, p.237, "The Bolshevik Social System" part (b).

organisation to secure actual economic dictatorship",³³ but Bolshevik policy was opposed to it. It concentrated the management of the enterprises in the hands of a body of officials subordinated to executive power, and for the first time accompanied it with measures to restore piecemeal, which resulted in a brutal militarisation which reached its highest levels in 1919-20. It also strengthened the unions. This body of officials, fiercely opposed to the factory councils, led an intense campaign that saw factory councils disappear in late 1918. Anweiler says that "The unions prevented the convocation of an all-Russian congress of factory committees and instead absorbed the factory committees at the lowest level."³⁴

Bolshevik policy attempted to fight the tendency of some factory councils, particularly in the provinces, to see themselves as new owners and as independent and autonomous units. This tendency partly arose from "the difficulty establishing regular channels of distribution and exchange, which left many factories and production centres isolated. So factories appeared very like "anarchist communes", very inward-looking."³⁵

The tendency towards decomposition in the Russian working class

Clearly these developments encouraged divisions in the working class. But the course of events could have been fought through **debates inside the factory councils** themselves where, as we have seen, a global vision was present. Relying on the unions contributed to destroying these organisations that were the cornerstone of proletarian power and broadly favoured the exacerbation of a fundamental political problem in the early years of soviet power, which was obscured by the enthusiasm of those initial months: "the progressive weakening of the Russian working class, a loss of strength and substance that was to end in its almost complete de-classing and, in a certain sense, its temporary disappearance from the scene."³⁶

In April 1918, 265 of the 799 main industrial businesses based in Petrograd had disappeared, half of workers in this city had no work; its population in June 1918 was one and a half million, down from two and a half million one year earlier. Moscow lost half a million people in this short period.

33. Oskar Anweiler, *op. cit.*, p.221, Chapter 5, part 2 "The Bolshevik Social System" part (a).

34. *Ibid.*

35. Marcel Liebman, *op. cit.*, French edition, p.189.

36. *Ibid.*, p.223.

The working class was suffering from hunger and the most terrifying diseases. Jacques Sadoul, a Bolshevik sympathiser, described the situation in Moscow in the spring of 1918: "in the districts away from the centre, frightful poverty prevails. There are epidemics of typhus, smallpox, children's diseases. Babies are dying en-masse. Those one sees are weak, fleshless, pitiful creatures. In the working-class quarters one too often passes poor; pale, thin mothers, sadly bearing in their arms, in a little coffin of silver-painted wood, looking like a cradle, the tiny lifeless body that a small quantity of bread or milk would have kept alive."³⁷

Many workers fled to the countryside to devote themselves to precarious farm work. The terrifying pressure of famine, disease, rationing and queues meant that workers were forced to spend the whole day trying to survive. As a Petrograd worker in April 1918 testified, "Here is another crowd of workers who have been fired. Although we are thousands, we do not hear a word about the policy; nobody talks about revolution, of German imperialism, or any other current issue. For all these men and all these women who can barely stand, all these issues seem terribly remote."³⁸

The unfolding crisis of the Russian working class was so alarming that in October 1921 Lenin approved the NEP,³⁹ saying that "The capitalists will gain from our policy and will create an industrial proletariat, which in our country, owing to the war and to the desperate poverty and ruin, has become declassed, i.e., dislodged from its class groove, and has ceased to exist as a proletariat."⁴⁰

We have presented a whole range of general conditions which, added to the inevitable errors, weakened the soviets and contributed to their disappearance as workers' organs. In the next article in this series, we will discuss the political problems that contributed to making the situation worse.

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37. *Ibid.*

38. *Ibid.*, French edition, p.23.

39. NEP, New Economic Policy, introduced in March 1921 after the events around Kronstadt, made large concessions to the peasantry and to national and foreign capital. See *International Review* n° 101, in the series "Communism is not a just a nice idea", the article entitled "1922-23, the Communist fractions against the rise of counter-revolution".

40. Lenin, Collected Works, 2nd English Edition, Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1965, Vol.33, pp.60-79.

The age of catastrophes

Even though revolutionaries today are far from all sharing the analysis that capitalism entered into its phase of decline with the outbreak of the First World War, this was not the case for those who had to respond to this war and who participated in the revolutionary uprisings that followed. On the contrary, as shown in this article, the majority of marxists shared this point of view. Similarly, for them, understanding the new historic period was indispensable for reinvigorating the communist programme and the tactics that flowed from it.

In the previous article in this series, we saw that Rosa Luxemburg's analysis of the fundamental processes underlying imperialist expansion predicted the return of the calamities visited on the pre-capitalist regions of the globe to the very heart of the system, to bourgeois Europe. And as Luxemburg points out in her *Junius Pamphlet* (original title, "The crisis in German social democracy"), written from prison in 1915, the outbreak of the imperialist world war in 1914 was not only a catastrophe because of the destruction and the misery it rained on the working class in both belligerent camps, but also because it had been made possible by the greatest act of treason in the history of the workers' movement: the decision of the majority of the social democratic parties, allegedly beacons of internationalism schooled in the marxist world view, to support the war effort of their respective ruling classes, to sanction the mutual massacre of the European proletariat in spite of all the ringing declarations of opposition to war passed at numerous meetings of the Second International and its constituent parties in the years leading up to 1914.

This was the death of the International, which now fragmented into its different national parties, large segments of which, most often the leading bodies, signed up as press-gang officers for their own bourgeoisie: these were known as the "social chauvinists" or "social patriots", who also led the majority of trade unions in the same direction. In this terrible debacle, another major segment, the "centrists", wallowed in all kinds of confusion, unable to break decisively with the social patriots, promulgating absurd illusions in

the possibility of peace settlements and, as in the case of Kautsky the former "Pope of Marxism", frequently turning away from the class struggle on the grounds that the International could only be an instrument of peace, not of war. In these traumatic times, only a minority stood firm on the principles which the entire International had adopted on paper on the eve of war – above all, the refusal to suspend the class struggle lest it endanger the war effort of your own bourgeoisie, and, by extension, the will to use the social crisis brought on by war as a means of hastening the downfall of the capitalist system. But faced with the mood of nationalist hysteria in the opening phase of the war, the "pogrom atmosphere" described in Luxemburg's pamphlet, even the best militants of the revolutionary left also struggled with doubts and difficulties: Lenin, shown the edition of *Vorwärts*, the SPD newspaper, that announced the party's vote for war credits in the Reichstag, believed at first that this was a fake cobble together by the political police. The anti-militarist Liebknecht, in the German parliament, initially voted for war credits out of party discipline, and the following extract from a letter by Rosa Luxemburg shows the degree to which she felt that the left opposition within social democracy had been reduced to a small collection of inchoate individuals:

"I want to undertake the sharpest possible action against the activities of the (Reichstag) delegates. Unfortunately I get little co-operation from my (collection of) incoherent personalities...Karl (Liebknecht) can't ever be got hold of, since he dashes about like a cloud in the sky; Franz (Mehring) has little sympathy for any but

*literary campaigns. Clara (Zetkin's) reaction is hysteria and the blackest despair. But in spite of all this I intend to try to see what can be achieved".*¹

Among the anarchists, there was also confusion and outright betrayal. The venerable anarchist Kropotkin called for the defence of French civilisation against German militarism. Those that followed his line became known as the anarcho-trenchists, and the lure of patriotism proved particularly strong in the case of the syndicalist CGT in France. But anarchism, precisely because of its heterogeneous character, was not shaken to the roots in the same way as the "marxist party". Numerous anarchist militants and groups continued to defend the same internationalist positions as they had before.²

Imperialism: capitalism in decay

Patently, a work of reorganisation and re-groupment faced the groups of the former social democratic left, in order to carry on the basic work of propaganda and agitation in the teeth of nationalist frenzy and state repression. But what was required above all was a theoretical reassessment, a rigorous effort to understand how the war had swept away so many long-held assumptions of the movement. Not least because it was necessary to tear away the "socialist" wrapping in which the traitors disguised their patriotism, using the words of Marx and Engels, carefully selected and above all taken out of their historical context, to justify the position of national defence – above all in Germany, where there had been a long tradition of the marxist current supporting national movements against the reactionary threat posed by Russian Tsarism.

The necessity for a thorough-going theoretical inquiry was symbolised by Lenin quietly spending his time reading

1. Letter to Konstantin Zetkin, end of 1914, cited in Peter Nettle, *Rosa Luxemburg*, OUP, 1969.

2. It would however be of interest to inquire further into possible contemporary attempts, within the anarchist movement, to analyse the historical significance of the war.

Hegel in the Zurich library at the start of the war. In an article recently published in *The Commune*, Kevin Anderson from the Marxist-Humanist Committee in the US argues that his studies of Hegel led Lenin to conclude that the majority of marxists in the Second International, including his mentor Plekhanov (and by extension himself) had not broken from vulgar materialism, and that their ignorance of Hegel meant that they had little grasp of the real dialectic of history.³ And of course one of Hegel's underlying dialectical principles is that what is rational in one epoch becomes irrational in another. Certainly, this is the method Lenin used to answer the social chauvinists – Plekhanov in particular – who tried to justify their support for the war by referring to the writings of Marx and Engels:

*“The Russian social-chauvinists (headed by Plekhanov), make references to Marx's tactics in the war of 1870; the German (of the type of Lensch, David and Co.) to Engels' statement in 1891 that in the event of war against Russia and France combined, it would be the duty of the German Socialists to defend their fatherland...All these references are outrageous distortions of the views of Marx and Engels in the interest of the bourgeoisie and the opportunists...Anyone who today refers to Marx's attitude towards the wars of the epoch of the progressive bourgeoisie and forgets Marx's statement that 'the workingmen have no country', a statement that applies precisely to the period of the reactionary and outmoded bourgeoisie, to the epoch of the socialist revolution, is shamelessly distorting Marx, and is substituting the bourgeois point of view for the socialist.”*⁴

Here was the key: capitalism had become a reactionary system, as Marx had predicted it would. The war had proved it and this meant a complete reappraisal of all the old tactics of the movement, a clear understanding of the characteristics of capitalism in its crisis of old age, and thus of the new conditions confronting the class struggle. Among the left fractions, this basic analysis of the evolution of capitalism was universal. Luxemburg's *Junius Pamphlet*, on the basis of the profound investigation into the phenomenon of imperialism in the period leading up to the war, took up Engels' announcement that humanity would be faced by the choice between socialism and barbarism and declared that this was no longer a prospect for the future but an

immediate reality: as she put it, *“this war is barbarism”*. In the same work, Luxemburg argued that in an epoch of unbridled imperialist war, the old strategy of support for certain national movements had lost all progressive content: *“In the era of the unleashing of this imperialism, national wars are no longer possible. 'National interests' serve only as the pretext for putting the labouring masses of the people under the domination of their mortal class enemy, imperialism.”*

Trotsky, writing in *Nashe Slovo*, was moving in a parallel direction, arguing that the war was a sign that the nation state itself had become a barrier to further human progress: *“The nation state has outgrown itself – as a framework for the development of the productive forces, as a basis for class struggle, and especially as the state form of the dictatorship of the proletariat.”*⁵

In a more famous work, *Imperialism: the Highest Stage of Capitalism*, Lenin, like Luxemburg, recognised that the bloody conflict between the world's great powers expressed the fact that these powers had now divided up the entire globe between them, and that henceforth the imperialist cake could only be re-divided through the violent settling of scores between imperialist ogres: *“the characteristic feature of the period under review is the final partitioning of the globe—final, not in the sense that repartition is impossible; on the contrary, repartitions are possible and inevitable – but in the sense that the colonial policy of the capitalist countries has completed the seizure of the unoccupied territories on our planet. For the first time the world is completely divided up, so that in the future only re-division is possible, i.e., territories can only pass from one 'owner' to another, instead of passing as ownerless territory to an owner.”*⁶

In the same work, Lenin characterises the “highest stage” of capitalism as one of “parasitism and decay”, or as “moribund capitalism”. Parasitic, because – particularly in the case of Britain – he saw a tendency for the productive contribution to global wealth by the industrialised nations to be replaced by a growing reliance on finance capital and super-profits sucked out of the colonies (a vision that can certainly be criticised, but did contain an element of intuition, as witness today's blossoming of financial speculation and the advancing de-industrialisation of some of the most powerful nations). Decay (by which Lenin did not mean an absolute stagnation in

growth) because capitalism's tendency to do away with free competition in favour of monopoly signified the increasing need for bourgeois society to cede its place to a higher mode of production.

Lenin's *Imperialism* suffers from a number of weaknesses. Its definition of imperialism is more a description of some its outward manifestations (the “five defining characteristics” so often cited by leftists to prove that such and such a nation or bloc of nations is not imperialist) than an attempt to go to the roots of the phenomenon in the accumulation process as Luxemburg had done. Its vision of an advanced capitalist centre living parasitically off the super-profits from the colonies (and thus bribing a fringe of the working class, the “labour aristocracy”, to support its imperialist projects), left a large gap for the penetration of nationalist ideology in the form of support for the “national liberation” movements in the colonies. Furthermore the monopoly phase (in the sense of giant private combines) had already, above all during the course of the war, ceded to an even “higher” expression of capitalist decay: the enormous growth of state capitalism.

On this last point, the most the important contribution was surely made by Bukharin, who was one of the first to show that in the era of the “imperialist state” the entirety of social, economic and political life was being swallowed up by the state apparatus, above all for the purpose of waging war with rival imperialisms:

“In total contrast to the state in the epoch of industrial capitalism, the imperialist state is characterised by an extraordinary increase in the complexity of its functions and by an impetuous incursion into the economic life of society. It reveals a tendency to take over the whole productive sphere and the whole sphere of commodity circulation. Intermediate types of mixed enterprises will be replaced by pure state regulation, for in this way the centralisation process can advance further. All the members of the ruling classes (or, more accurately, of the ruling class, for finance capitalism gradually eliminates the different subgroups of the ruling classes, uniting them in a single finance-capitalist clique) become shareholders, or partners in a gigantic state-enterprise. From being the preserver and defender of exploitation, the state is transformed into a single, centralised, exploiting organisation that is confronted directly by the proletariat, the object of exploitation. In the same way as market prices are determined by the state, the workers are assigned a ration sufficient for the preservation of labour power. A hierarchically constructed bureaucracy

3. “Lenin's Encounter with Hegel after Eighty Years: A Critical Assessment”, <http://thecomune.wordpress.com/ideas/lenins-encounter-with-hegel-after-eighty-years-a-critical-assessment/>

4. Lenin, *Socialism and War*, 1915. Collected Works, Vol. 21.

5. *Nashe Slovo*, 4 February 1916.

6. Lenin, *Imperialism, The Highest Stage of Capitalism*, VI, “Division of the world among the great powers”. Collected Works, Vol.22.)

fulfils the organising functions in complete accord with the military authorities, whose significance and power steadily grow. The national economy is absorbed into the state, which is constructed in a military fashion and has at its disposal an enormous, disciplined army and navy. In their struggle the workers must confront all the might of this monstrous apparatus, for their every advance will be aimed directly against the state: the economic and the political struggle cease to be two categories, and the revolt against exploitation will signify a direct revolt against the state organisation of the bourgeoisie.”⁷

Totalitarian state capitalism and the war economy were certainly to prove fundamental characteristics of the ensuing century. Given the omnipresence of this capitalist monster, Bukharin rightly concludes that henceforward every significant workers’ struggle has no choice but to confront the state and that the only way forward for the proletariat was to “explode” this entire apparatus – to destroy the bourgeois state and replace it with its own organs of power. This signified the definitive rejection of all presuppositions about peacefully conquering the existing state, which Marx and Engels had not entirely rejected, even after the experience of the Commune, and which had increasingly become the orthodox position of the Second International. Pannekoek had initially take up this position in 1912, and when Bukharin reiterated it, to begin with Lenin angrily accused Bukharin of lapsing into anarchism; but in the very process of elaborating his reply, and driven by the necessity to understand the unfolding revolution in Russia, Lenin was again gripped by the ever-evolving dialectic and came to the conclusion that Pannekoek and Bukharin had been right – a conclusion formulated in *The State and Revolution*, written on the eve of the October insurrection.

In Bukharin’s *Imperialism and World Economy* (1917) there is also an attempt to locate the drive towards imperialist expansion in the economic contradictions identified by Marx, emphasising the pressure exerted by the fall in the rate of profit but also recognising the need for the constant extension of the market. Like Luxemburg and Lenin, Bukharin’s aim is to demonstrate that, precisely because the process of imperialist “globalisation” had created a unified world economy, capitalism had fulfilled its historic mission and could henceforward only go into decline. This was entirely consistent with the perspective outlined by Marx when he wrote that “*the proper task of bourgeois society is the creation of the world market, at least in outline, and of the production based on*”⁷. “Toward a theory of the imperialist state”, 1915.

that market.”⁸

Thus, against the social chauvinists and the centrists who wanted to go back to the status quo ante bellum, who distorted marxism to justify support for one or other of the belligerent camps, the genuine marxists unanimously affirmed that there was no more progressive capitalism and that therefore its revolutionary overthrow was now on the historical agenda.

The epoch of proletarian revolution

The same fundamental question of the historic period was posed again in Russia in 1917, the culminating point of a mounting international wave of proletarian resistance to the war. As the Russian working class, organised in soviets, increasingly discovered that getting rid of the Tsar had solved none of their fundamental problems, the right wing and centrist fractions of the social democracy campaigned with all their resources against the Bolshevik call for proletarian revolution and for the soviet counter-power to settle scores not just with the old Tsarist elements but also with the entire Russian bourgeoisie, which claimed February as its legitimate revolution. In this they were supported theoretically by the Mensheviks who trotted out Marx’s writings to show that socialism could only be constructed on the basis of a fully developed capitalist system: since Russia was far too backward for that, it obviously could not go beyond the phase of a democratic, bourgeois revolution, and the Bolsheviks were just a band of adventurists seeking to play historical leap-frog. The answer provided by Lenin in the *April Theses* was once again consistent with his reading of Hegel, who had always stressed the necessity to see the movement of history as a totality; at the same time it reflected his deep commitment to internationalism. It is certainly true, of course, that the conditions for revolution have to mature historically, but the advent of a new historical epoch cannot be judged on the basis of examining this or that country alone. Capitalism, as the theory of imperialism showed, was a global system, and therefore its decline and the necessity for its overthrow also ripened on a global scale: the outbreak of world imperialist war was ample proof of this. There was no Russian revolution in isolation: a proletarian insurrection in Russia could only be the first step towards an international revolution, or as Lenin put it in his bombshell of a speech to the workers and soldiers who had come to greet him at the Finland Station in Petrograd upon his return from exile: “*Dear comrades,*

soldiers, sailors and workers. I am happy to greet in you the victorious Russian revolution, to greet you as the advance guard of the international proletarian army... The hour is not far when, at the summons of our comrade Karl Liebknecht, the people will turn their weapons against their capitalist exploiters... The Russian revolution achieved by you has opened a new epoch. Long live the worldwide socialist revolution!”⁹

This understanding that capitalism had, at one and the same moment, fulfilled the necessary historic conditions for the advent of socialism and entered into a historic crisis of senility – since these are only two sides of the same coin – was encapsulated in the well-known phrase from the platform of the Communist International, drawn up at its First Congress in March 1919: “*A new epoch is born! The epoch of the break-up of capitalism, of its internal collapse. The epoch of the communist revolution of the proletariat!*”

When the revolutionary, internationalist left came together at the CI’s First Congress, the revolutionary tumult unleashed by October was at its highpoint. Although the “Spartacist” uprising in Berlin in January had been crushed and Luxemburg and Liebknecht had been cruelly murdered, the Hungarian soviet republic had just been formed; Europe and parts of the US and South America were being gripped by mass strikes. The revolutionary enthusiasm of the hour was expressed in the basic texts adopted by the Congress. In line with Rosa’s speech to the founding congress of the KPD, the dawn of the new epoch meant that the old separation between minimum and maximum programme was no longer valid; consequently, the work of organising inside capitalism through trade union activity and participation in parliament to fight for meaningful reforms had lost its underlying *raison d’être*. The historic crisis of the world capitalist system, expressed not only by the imperialist war but also by the economic and social chaos left in its wake, meant that the direct struggle for power, organised in soviets, was now realistically and indeed urgently on the agenda; and this programme of action was valid in all countries, including the colonies and semi-colonies. Moreover, the adoption of this new, maximum programme could only come about via a complete break with the organisations which had “represented” the working class during the previous epoch but which had betrayed its interests as soon as the test of history was applied – the test of war and revolution in 1914-17. The social

9. Cited in Trotsky’s *History of the Russian Revolution*, Volume one, “The Overthrow of Tzarism”, Chapter XV, “The Bolsheviks and Lenin”, p. 296. Pathfinder 1980.

8. Marx to Engels, 8 October 1858, Collected Works, Vol. 40, p.347, Lawrence and Wishart.

democratic reformists, the trade union bureaucracy, were now defined as servants of capital, not the right wing of the workers' movement. The debates at the First Congress show that the early International was open to the most daring conclusions drawn from the direct experience of revolutionary combat. Although the experience in Russia had followed a somewhat different path, the Bolsheviks listened seriously to the testimony of delegates from Germany, Switzerland, Finland, the US, UK and elsewhere, arguing that the trade unions were no longer merely useless but had become a direct and counter-revolutionary obstacle – cogs in the state apparatus, and that workers were increasingly organising outside and against them through the council form of organisation in the factories and the streets. And since the class struggle was precisely focused in the workplaces and on the streets, these living centres of class struggle and class consciousness appeared, in the official documents of the CI, starkly contrasted with the empty shell of parliament, an instrument which, again, was not simply irrelevant in the struggle for proletarian revolution but also a direct weapon of the ruling class, used to sabotage the power of the workers' councils, as had been clearly demonstrated both in Russia in 1917 and in Germany in 1918. Similarly, the Manifesto of the CI came very near to echoing Luxemburg's view that national struggles had had their day and the newly arising nations had become mere pawns of competing imperialist interests. At this point these "extreme" revolutionary conclusions seemed to the majority to flow logically from the dawning of the new epoch.¹⁰

The debates at the Third Congress

When history accelerates, as was the case from 1914, a year or two can see the most dramatic changes. By the time the CI came together for its Third Congress in June/July 1921, the hope of an immediate extension to the revolution, so vigorous at the First Congress, had suffered the most severe blows. Russia had been through three years of exhausting civil war, and although the Red forces had defeated the Whites militarily, the political price was deadly: decimation of a large part of the most class conscious workers, increasing bureaucratisation of the "revolutionary" state to the point that the soviets had effectively lost control of it. The rigours of "War Communism" and the destructive excesses of the Red Terror had finally provoked open revolt in the working

class: in March massive strikes broke out in Petrograd, followed by the armed uprising of the Kronstadt sailors and workers, who called for the renaissance of the soviets and an end to the militarisation of labour and the repressive actions of the Cheka. But the Bolshevik leadership, incarcerated in the state, could only see this movement as an expression of the White counter-revolution and suppressed it ruthlessly and bloodily. All this was an expression of the growing isolation of the Russian bastion. Defeat had followed defeat: the Hungarian and Bavarian soviet republics, the general strikes in Winnipeg and Seattle, Red Clydeside, the Italian factory occupations, the Ruhr uprising in Germany and many other mass movements.

Increasingly aware of their isolation, the party clinging to power in Russia, and other Communist parties outside it, began to resort to desperate measures to spread the revolution, such as the Red Army advance into Poland, and the March Action in Germany in March 1921 – both of them failed attempts to force the pace of the revolution without the massive development of class consciousness and organisation needed for a real assumption of working class power. Meanwhile the capitalist system, though bled white by the war and still exhibiting the symptoms of a deep economic crisis, succeeded in stabilising itself economically and socially, partly the result of the new role being played by the USA as the world's industrial powerhouse and creditor.

Within the Communist International, the Second Congress in 1920 had already reflected the impact of these preceding defeats. This was symbolised by the publication of Lenin's *Left wing communism, an infantile disorder*, which was distributed at the Congress.¹¹ Instead of opening out to the living experience of the world proletariat, the Bolshevik experience – or a particular version of it – was now presented as a universal model. The Bolsheviks had achieved a certain degree of success in the Duma after 1905, hence the tactic of "revolutionary parliamentarism" was valid everywhere; the trade unions in Russia had been recently formed and had not lost all signs of proletarian life... hence communists in all countries were to do whatever was necessary to stay in the reactionary trade unions and fight to conquer them from the corrupt bureaucrats. Along with the codification of these trade union and parliamentary tactics, put forward in firm opposition to the left communist currents who rejected them, came the call to build up the Communist parties as mass parties, largely through incorporating bodies like

the USPD in Germany and the Socialist Party in Italy (PSI).

1921 saw a further evidence of a slide towards opportunism, the sacrificing of principles and long-term goals in favour of short-term success and numerical growth. Instead of the clear denunciation of the social democratic parties as agents of the bourgeoisie, we now had the sophism of the "open letter" addressed to these parties, aimed at "forcing the leaders to fight" or, failing that, at exposing them to their working class membership. In short, the adoption of a politics of manoeuvring in which the masses are somehow to be tricked into becoming class conscious. These tactics were shortly to be followed by the proclamation of the "United Front" tactic and the even more unprincipled slogan of the "Workers' Government", a kind of parliamentary coalition between the social democrats and the Communists. Behind all this search for influence at any cost lay the need for the "Soviet" state to hold out in a hostile capitalist world, to find a modus vivendi with world capitalism, even if it meant returning to the practice of secret diplomacy so roundly condemned by the Soviet power in 1917 (in 1922, the "Soviet" state signed a secret agreement with Germany, even supplying it with weapons that would be used to shoot down Communist workers a year later). All this indicated an accelerating trajectory away from the struggle for revolution and towards incorporation into the capitalist status quo – not yet definitive, but indicating the path of degeneration that was to culminate in the victory of the Stalinist counter-revolution.

This didn't mean that all clarity and all serious debate about the historical period disappeared. On the contrary, the reaction by the "left wing communists" to this opportunist course was to base their arguments even more solidly on the view that capitalism had entered a new period: the KAPD programme of 1920 thus begins with the proclamation that capitalism was experiencing its historic crisis, confronting the proletariat with the choice between socialism and barbarism;¹² in the same

10. For further elaboration of these discussions at the First Congress see the article in *International Review* n° 123 "The theory of decadence at the heart of historical materialism, part v" (http://en.internationalism.org/ir/123_decadence).

11. We should note that this text did not go without responses or critiques, particularly from Gorter in his *Open Letter to Comrade Lenin*.

12. "The world economic crisis, born from the world war, with its monstrous social and economic effects which produce the thunderstruck impression of a field of ruins of colossal dimensions, can only signify one thing: the Twilight of the Gods of the bourgeois-capitalist world order is nigh. Today, it is not a question of the periodic economic crises which were once a part of the capitalist mode of production; it is the crisis of capitalism itself; we are witnessing convulsive spasms of the whole of the social organism, formidable outbursts of class antagonisms of an unprecedented pitch, general misery for wide layers of populations: all this is a fateful warning to bourgeois society. It appears more and more clearly that the ever-growing antagonism between exploiters and exploited, that the contradiction between capital and labour, the consciousness of which is becoming more widespread even among those

year the Italian left's arguments against parliamentarism depart from the premise that while campaigning in parliamentary elections had been valid in the previous era, the advent of a revolutionary epoch invalidated the old practice. But even from the "official" voices of the CI there was still a genuine attempt to understand the characteristics and consequences of the new era.

The report and theses on the world situation, delivered by Trotsky at the Third Congress in June/July 1921, offered a very lucid analysis of the mechanisms resorted to by a profoundly ailing capitalism to ensure its survival in the new period – not least, the flight into credit and fictitious capital. Analysing the first signs of a post-war recovery, Trotsky's "Report on the World Economic Crisis and the New Tasks of the Communist International" posed the question as follows:

"How explain these facts and the boom itself? In the first place, by economic causes: after the war international connections were resumed, even though in an extremely abridged form, and there was a universal demand for every type of merchandise. Secondly, by political-financial causes: the European governments were in mortal fear of the crisis that had to follow the war and they resorted to any and all measures to sustain during the period of demobilisation the artificial boom created by the war. The governments continued to put in circulation great quantities of paper currency, floated new loans, regulated profits, wages and bread prices, thus subsidising the earnings of demobilised workers by dipping into the basic national funds, and thus creating an artificial economic revival in the country. Thus, throughout this interval, fictitious capital continued to distend, especially in those countries where industry continued to slump."

Capitalism's whole life since that time has only confirmed this diagnosis of a system which can only keep itself afloat by violating its own economic laws. These texts also sought to deepen the understanding that, without a proletarian revolution, capitalism would certainly unleash new and even more destructive wars (even if its deduction of an impending clash between the old power of Britain and the rising power of the USA was wide of the mark, though not altogether without foundation). But the most important clarification contained in these and other documents was

previously apathetic layers of the proletariat, cannot be resolved. Capitalism is experiencing its definitive failure, it has plunged itself into the abyss in a war of imperialist robbery; it has created a chaos whose unbearable prolongation places the proletariat in front of the historic alternative: relapse into barbarism or construction of a socialist world."

the conclusion that the advent of the new period did **not** mean that decline, open economic crisis and revolution were all simultaneous, an ambiguity that could be seen in the original "a new epoch is born" formulation of 1919, which could be interpreted to mean that capitalism had simultaneously entered a "final" economic crisis and an uninterrupted phase of revolutionary conflicts. This advance in understanding is perhaps most clearly expressed in Trotsky's text "The Main Lesson of the Third Congress", written in June 1921. It began as follows:

"Classes are rooted in production. Classes remain viable so long they can fulfil a necessary role in the process of social organisation of labour. Classes begin losing the ground under their feet when the conditions necessary for their further existence come into contradiction with the growth of productive forces, i.e., with the further development of economy. Such is the situation in which the bourgeoisie finds itself at the present time."

"But this does not at all mean that a class, which has lost its living roots and has become parasitic, is by this very reason doomed to instantaneous death. While economy constitutes the foundation of class rule, the respective classes maintain themselves in power by means of the state – political apparatuses and organs, namely: army, police, party, courts, press, etc., etc. With the aid of these organs, which in relation to the economic foundation represent a 'superstructure', the ruling class may perpetuate itself in power for years and decades after it has become a direct brake upon the social development. If such a situation endures too long, an outlived ruling class can drag down with it those countries and peoples over whom it rules..."

*"A purely mechanical conception of the proletarian revolution – which proceeds from the fact that capitalist economy continues to decay – has led certain groups of comrades to construe theories which are false to the core: the false theory of an initiating minority which by its heroism shatters 'the wall of universal passivity' of the proletariat. The false theory of uninterrupted offensives conducted by the proletarian vanguard, as a 'new method' of struggle; the false theory of partial battles which are waged by applying the methods of armed insurrection. And so forth and so on. The clearest exponent of this tendency is the Vienna journal **Communism**. It is absolutely self-evident that tactical theories of this sort have nothing in common with Marxism."*

Thus the onset of decline did not preclude recoveries at the economic level, or

retreats by the proletariat. Of course, no one could see how decisive the defeats of 1919-21 had already been, but there was a burning need to clarify what to do now, faced with an **epoch** but not an immediate **moment** of revolution. A separate text, the "Theses on Tactics" adopted by the Congress, quite correctly put forward the need for the communist parties to take part in defensive struggles in order to build up the confidence and self-awareness of the working class; and this, together with the recognition that decline and revolution were by no means synonymous, was a necessary rebuttal of the "theory of the offensive" which had largely justified the semi-putschist approach of the March Action. This theory – that, given the ripeness of the objective conditions, the communist party had to wage a more or less permanent, insurrectionary offensive to push the masses into action – was held mainly by the left inside the German KPD, by Bela Kun and others – and not, as is often wrongly claimed, by the Communist Left properly speaking, even if the KAPD and those around it were not always clear on this point.¹³

In this respect the interventions of the KAPD delegations at the Third Congress are extremely instructive. Belying the label of "sectarian" in the Theses on Tactics, the KAPD's attitude at the Congress was a model of how a responsible minority should behave in a proletarian organisation. Despite being frustratingly restricted in the times accorded to its interventions, and despite having to put up with interruptions and sarcasms from supporters of the official line, the KAPD saw itself as fully part of the proceedings and its delegates were very willing to recognise points of agreement where they did exist; they were not at all interested in stressing differences for their own sake, which is the essence of the sectarian attitude.¹⁴ For example, in the

13. For example: the opening paragraph of the KAPD programme, quoted in a previous footnote, could easily be interpreted as describing a final and definitive crisis of capitalism; and with regard to the danger of putschism, some of the KAPD's activities during the March Action certainly fall into this category, as for example in its uncritical alliance with the VKPD, in the use of its unemployed members to try to literally bludgeon workers to join the general strike, and in its ambiguous relationship to the "independent" armed forces led by Max Hoelz and others. See also Hempel's intervention at the 3rd Congress (*La Gauche Allemande*, p.41), which recognises that the March Action could not have overthrown capitalism but also insists that it was necessary to raise the slogan of the overthrow of the government – a position which seems to lack consistency, since for the KAPD there was no question of advocating any kind of hybrid "Workers' Government" short of the proletarian dictatorship. (Note: An English translation of the KAPD's interventions at the Congress has been published on www.libcom.org: "Interventions by the KAPD at the 3rd Congress of the Communist International (1921), parts 1-5".)

14. Hempel's attitude towards the anarchists and

discussion on the world situation, a number of the KAPD delegates agreed with many points of Trotsky's analysis, notably the notion that capitalism was now reconstructing economically and regaining control at the social level: thus Seeman stressed the capacity of the international bourgeoisie to temporarily set aside its inter-imperialist rivalries in order to deal with the proletarian danger, especially in Germany.

The implication here – especially given that Trotsky's report and theses on the world situation were to a large extent framed as a rebuttal to the partisans of the "theory of the offensive" – is that the KAPD was neither arguing that there could be no further stabilisation of capital, nor that the struggle now had to be an offensive one at any moment. And indeed this point of view was expressed in an explicit manner in a number of interventions.

Sachs, in his reply to Trotsky's presentation on the world economic situation, put it thus: "*We certainly saw yesterday in detail how comrade Trotsky – and everyone here will, I think, be in agreement with him – presented the relationship between on the one hand the small crises and short periods of cyclical and momentary revivals, and, on the other hand, the problem of the rise and decline of capitalism seen in great historical periods. We all agree that the large curve which was formerly going upwards is now irresistibly heading downwards, and that within this broad curve, there will still be oscillations within this general descent.*"¹⁵

Thus, whatever ambiguities may have existed in the KAPD's view of the "mortal crisis", it did not consider that the onset of decadence meant a sudden and definitive collapse of capitalism's economic life.

By the same token, Hempel's intervention on the tactics of the International clearly refuted the charge that the "sectarian" KAPD rejected defensive struggles and demanded the offensive at every moment: "*We now come to the question of partial actions. We say that we do not reject any partial action. We say: each action, each combat, because that's what an action is, has to be pushed forward. We cannot say: we reject this combat here or there. The combat is born from the economic needs of the working class; and it has to be pushed forward by all possible means. Precisely in countries like Germany and Britain, all the countries of bourgeois democracy which have been subjected to bourgeois democracy and all its effects*

for 40 or 50 years, the working class has to become used to struggles. The slogans have to correspond to the partial actions. Let's take an example: in an enterprise, or different enterprises, a strike breaks out, it is limited to a particular area. The slogan cannot be: struggle for the dictatorship of the proletariat. That would be absurd. The slogans have to be adapted to the balance of forces, to what can be expected in a given situation".¹⁶

But behind many of these interventions was the KAPD's insistence that the CI was not going deep enough in its understanding that a new period in the life of capitalism and thus in the class struggle had opened up. Sachs, for example, having agreed with Trotsky on the possibility of temporary recoveries, argued that "*what was not expressed in these theses was precisely the fundamentally different character of this epoch of decline compared to the previous epoch of rising capitalism seen as a totality*"¹⁷ and that this had implications for the way that capitalism would survive henceforth: "*Capital is reconstructing its power by destroying the economy*"¹⁸ a prescient vision of how capitalism would continue as a system in the ensuing century. Hempel, in the discussion on tactics, draws out the implications of the new period with regard to the political positions that communists had to put forward, particularly on the trade union and parliamentary questions on tactics. In contrast to the anarchists, with whom the KAPD has often been assimilated, Hempel insists that the use of parliament and trade unions had been correct in the previous period: "*if we recall the tasks of the old workers' movement, or more precisely, the workers' movement prior to the epoch of the eruption of the revolution, its task, on the one hand, thanks to the political organisations of the working class, the parties, was to send delegates to parliament and the institutions which the bourgeoisie and the bureaucracy had left open to representatives of the working class. This was one of its tasks. This led to advantages at the time and it was correct. For their part the economic organisations of the working class had the task of improving the situation of the proletariat within capitalism, to push for the struggle and to negotiate when the struggle ended... such were the tasks of workers' organisations before the war. But the revolution arrived, and other tasks came to light. Workers' organisations could no longer be limited to the struggle for wage increases or pose as their main aim representing the working class in parliament in order to extract*

improvements there"¹⁹ and furthermore, "*we have constantly had the experience that the all the workers' organisations which stayed on this path, despite their revolutionary speeches, unmasked themselves in the decisive struggles*"²⁰ and this is why the working class needed to create new organisations, capable of expressing the necessity for proletarian self-organisation and the direct confrontation with the state and capital; this was true both for small defensive strikes and wider mass struggles. Elsewhere, Bergmann defines unions as part of the state and hence it was illusory to try to conquer them: "*we are fundamentally of the opinion that we have to break out of the old unions. Not because we have a thirst for destruction, but because we see that these organisations have really become, in the worst sense of the term, organs of the capitalist state to repress the revolution.*"²¹ In similar vein, Sachs criticised both the regression towards the notion of the mass party and the tactic of the open letter to the social democratic parties – these were regressions either towards outmoded social democratic practices and forms of organisation, or worse still, towards the social democratic parties themselves which had passed to the enemy.

History is generally written by the winners, or at least by those who appear to be the winners. In the years that followed the Third Congress, the official Communist Parties remained as large organisations that could command the loyalty of millions of workers; the KAPD soon fragmented into a number of components, few of which maintained the clarity expressed by its representatives in Moscow in 1921. Now genuinely sectarian errors came to the fore, particularly in the hasty decision of the KAPD's Essen tendency around Gorter to set up a "Fourth International" (the KAI or Communist Workers' International), when what was needed in a phase of retreat in the revolution was the development of an international fraction to fight against the degeneration of the Third. This premature writing-off of the Communist International was logically accompanied by an about-turn on the proletarian nature of the October revolution, increasingly rejected as bourgeois. Equally sectarian was the view of the Schröder tendency in the KAI that in the epoch of the "death crisis", wage struggles were opportunist; other currents began to question the very possibility of a proletarian political party, giving birth to what became known as "councilism". But these manifestations of a more general weakening and fragmentation of the revolutionary

syndicalists was also devoid of the sectarian spirit, emphasising the need to work with the genuinely revolutionary expressions of this current (see *La Gauche Allemande*, pp.44-45).

15. *La Gauche Allemande*, Invariance, 1973, p.21.

16. *La Gauche Allemande*, p.40.

17. *Ibid*, p.21

18. *Ibid*, p.22.

19. *Ibid*, p.33.

20. *Ibid*, p.34.

21. *Ibid*, p.56.

avant-garde were products of the mounting defeat and counter-revolution; at the same time, the maintenance, in this period, of the CPs as influential mass organisations was also a product of the bourgeois counter-revolution, but with the terrible peculiarity that these parties had put themselves in its vanguard along with the fascist and democratic butchers. On the other hand, the clearest positions of the KAPD and Italian left, products of the highest moment of the revolution and solidly anchored in the theory of capitalism's decline, did not disappear, largely thanks to the patient work of small and often painfully isolated groups of revolutionaries; when the mists of the counter-revolution cleared, these positions found new life in the emergence of a new generation of revolutionaries, and they remain as fundamental acquisitions on which the next party of the revolution must be built.

Gerrard

ICC publications

History of the working class



The Dutch communist left is one of the major components of the revolutionary current which broke away from the degenerating Communist International in the 1920s. Well before Trotsky's Left Opposition, and in a more profound way, the communist left had been able to expose the opportunist dangers which threatened the International and its parties and which eventually led to their demise. In the struggle for the intransigent defence of revolutionary principles, this current, represented in particular by the KAPD in Germany, the KAPN in Holland, and the left of the Communist Party of Italy animated by Bordiga, came out against the International's policies on questions like participation in elections and trade unions, the formation of 'united fronts' with social democracy, and support for national liberation struggles. It was against the positions of the communist left that Lenin wrote his pamphlet *Left Wing Communism, An Infantile Disorder*; and this text drew a response in *Reply to Lenin*, written by one of the main figures of the Dutch left, Herman Gorter.

In fact, the Dutch left, like the Italian left, had been formed well before the first world war, as part of the same struggle waged by Luxemburg and Lenin against the opportunism and reformism which was gaining hold of the parties of the Second International. It was no accident that Lenin himself, before reverting to centrist positions at the head of the Communist International, had, in his book *State and Revolution*, leaned heavily on the analyses of Anton Pannekoek, who was the main theoretician of the Dutch left. This document is an indispensable complement to *The Italian Communist Left*, already published by the ICC, for all those who want to know the real history of the communist movement behind all the falsifications which Stalinism and Trotskyism have erected around it.

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The Communist Left in Russia

The *Manifesto* of the Workers' Group of the Russian Communist Party (continued)

We published the first part of the *Manifesto* in the last issue of the *International Review*. To recall, the Workers' Group of the Russian Communist Party, which produced this *Manifesto*, formed part of what is called the communist left, constituted by the left currents that appeared in response to the opportunist degeneration of the parties of the Third International and of soviet power in Russia.

The following two chapters of this document published below form a sharpened critique of the opportunist united front policy and the workers' government slogan. Placing this critique in its historical context, the *Manifesto* should be read as an attempt to understand the implications of the change in historical period; the new period had rendered null and void all policies of alliance with fractions of the bourgeoisie since from now on these were all equally reactionary. Similarly, any alliance with organisations like social democracy, which had already proved its treason, could only lead to a weakening of the proletariat. Further, the *Manifesto* is perfectly clear on the fact that, in the new period, the struggle for reforms is no longer on the agenda. However, the speed with which these considerable historical changes had taken place did not permit even the clearest revolutionaries to gain the perspective necessary to profoundly understand all the precise implications. This was also the case with the Workers' Group, which did not make a distinction between the struggle for reforms and the defensive economic struggle of the proletariat faced with the permanent encroachments of capital. While not refusing to participate in the latter, out of solidarity, it considered that only the seizure of power was able to liberate the proletariat from its chains, without taking into account the fact that the political and economic struggle form a whole.

Finally, faced with the restrictions on freedom of speech imposed on the proletariat, even after the end of the civil war, the *Manifesto* responds very firmly and lucidly when addressing itself to the leaders: "How can you solve the great task of the organisation of the social economy without the proletariat?"

The socialist united front

Before examining the essential content of this question, it is necessary to remind ourselves of the conditions in which the theses of comrade Zinoviev on the united front were debated and accepted in Russia. From the 19th to the 21st of December 1921, the 12th Conference of the RCP (Bolshevik) took place, during which the question of the united front was posed. Up until then nothing on this subject had been written in the press or discussed in the meetings of the party. However, at the conference, comrade Zinoviev unleashed some crude attacks and the conference was so surprised that it immediately gave way and approved the theses with raised hands. We recall these circumstances not to offend anyone but to first of all draw attention to the facts that: 1) the tactic of the united front was discussed in a very hasty fashion, almost "militarily"; 2) in Russia it was carried out in a quite particular fashion.

The RCP (Bolshevik) was the promoter of this tactic within the Comintern (CI).¹ It convinced foreign comrades that we Russian revolutionaries had succeeded precisely thanks to this tactic of the united front and that it had been built up in Russia on the basis of the experience of the whole pre-revolutionary epoch and particularly from the experience of the struggle of the Bolsheviks against the Mensheviks.

Comrades coming from different countries simply knew the fact that the Russian proletariat had won, and they wanted to do the same to their bourgeoisies. Now they were persuaded that the Russian proletariat had conquered thanks to the tactic of the united front. They could do no other since they did not know the history of the Russian revolution. Once comrade Lenin had very severely condemned those who trusted in simple words, but he didn't really want anyone to take him up on these

1. Editor's note: Comintern, Russian name of the Third or Communist International.

particular words.

What lesson can we thus draw from the experience of the Russian revolution?

In one epoch the Bolsheviks supported a progressive movement against autocracy:

"a) social-democrats must support the bourgeoisie in so far as it is revolutionary or even merely oppositional in its struggle against Tsardom;

b) therefore, social-democrats must welcome the awakening of political consciousness in the Russian bourgeoisie; but, on the other hand, they are obliged to unmask before the proletariat the limited and inadequate character of the bourgeois liberation movement, wherever this limitedness and inadequacy shows itself" (Resolution of the IInd Congress of the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party, 'Attitude to the liberals', August 1903).

The resolution of the IIIrd Congress, held in April 1905, reproduced these two points in recommending to comrades:

1) to explain to workers the counter-revolutionary and anti-proletarian nature of the bourgeois democratic current, regardless of its nuances, from the moderate liberals represented by the vast layers of large landowners and manufacturers to the most radical current known as the "Emancipation Union" and the varied groups of the liberal professions;

2) to fight vigorously against any attempt on the part of bourgeois democracy to recuperate the workers' movement and to speak in the name of the proletariat and its various groups. Since 1898 social democracy had been favourable to a "united front" (as they say now) with the bourgeoisie. But this united front had three phases:

- 1) in 1901, social democracy supported all "progressive movements" opposed to the existing regime;
- 2) in 1903, it recognised the need to go beyond the "limits of the movement of the bourgeoisie";
- 3) in 1905, in April, it took concrete

steps “in strongly advising comrades to denounce the counter-revolutionary and anti-proletarian nature of the bourgeois democratic current, of all shades”, and to energetically combat its influence on the proletariat.

But whatever the forms of support to the bourgeoisie, it is without doubt that during a certain period, before 1905, the Bolsheviks formed a united front with the bourgeoisie.

And what are we to think of a “revolutionary” who, based on the Russian experience, would propose a united front with the bourgeoisie today?

In September 1905, the Conference convoked specially to debate the question of the “Boulyguine Duma” defined the attitude of the latter towards the bourgeoisie in the following way: *“By this illusion of a representation of the people, the autocracy aspires to attach a large part of the bourgeoisie that has grown weary of the labour movement and desires order; in assuring its interest and support, the autocracy intends to crush the revolutionary movement of the proletariat and the peasantry.”*

The resolution the Bolsheviks proposed to the RSDLP Unification Congress (April 1906) revealed the secret of the Bolsheviks’ change of policy, from its previous support for the bourgeoisie to a struggle against it: *“As for the class of large capitalists and landowners, one can see their very swift passage from opposition to an arrangement with the autocracy to together crush the revolution”*. As *“the main task of the working class at the current time of the democratic revolution is the completion of this revolution”*, it should form a “united front” with parties who also want this. For this reason, the Bolsheviks renounced any agreement with the parties to the right of the Cadets and signed pacts with the parties to their left, the Social-Revolutionaries (SRs), Popular Socialists (NS) and the Trudoviks, therefore building “a socialist united front” in the struggle for the consistent advance of the democratic revolution.

Was the Bolsheviks’ tactic right at this time? We do not believe that among active combatants of the October revolution there are people disputing the correctness of this tactic. We therefore see that from 1906 to 1917 inclusive, the Bolsheviks advocated “a socialist united front” in the struggle for the consistent advance of the democratic revolution achieved by the formation of a Provisional Revolutionary Government which convened a Constituent Assembly.

No one ever considered, nor could consider, this revolution as proletarian or socialist; all well understood that it was bourgeois-democratic. Nevertheless,

the Bolsheviks proposed and themselves followed the tactic of a “socialist united front” by uniting in practice with the SRs, the Mensheviks, the Populists and Trudoviks.

What was the tactic of the Bolsheviks when the question posed was whether we should struggle for the democratic revolution or for the socialist revolution? Did the struggle for the power of the soviets also perhaps demand the “socialist united front”?

Revolutionary marxists still consider the party of the Social-Revolutionaries to be a “bourgeois democratic fraction” with “ambiguous socialist phraseology”; which has been confirmed in large measure by its activity throughout the revolution and up to the present. As a bourgeois democratic fraction, this party cannot take on the practical task of a struggle for the socialist revolution, for socialism; but it tries, using an “ambiguous socialist” terminology, to hold back this struggle at any price. If this is so (and it is so) the tactic which must lead the insurgent proletariat to victory cannot be that of the socialist united front, but that of bloody combat, without circumspection, against the bourgeois fractions and their confusing socialist terminology. Only this combat can bring victory and it must be done in this way. The Russian proletariat has won, not by allying itself with the Social Revolutionaries, with the Populists and the Mensheviks, but by struggling against them.

It’s true that toward October, the Bolsheviks succeeded in splitting the SRs² and the Mensheviks³ by releasing the worker masses from the captivity of their obfuscating socialist terminology, and were able to take advantage of these splits, but that can hardly be regarded as a united front with bourgeois fractions.

What does the Russian experience teach us?

1) In certain historical moments, a united front with the bourgeoisie should be formed in countries where the country or the situation is more or less similar to that which existed in Russia before 1905.

2) In countries where the situation is somewhat similar to that in Russia between 1906 and 1917, it is necessary to abandon the tactic of a united front with the bourgeoisie and follow the tactic of a

2. Editor’s note: the Left Social Revolutionaries (“Left SRs”), favourable to the soviets, separated themselves from the Social Revolutionary Party in September 1917.

3. At the Congress of the Soviets on 25th October 1917, 110 Menshevik delegates, a minority (out of 673), left the room at the moment of the ratification of the October revolution, denouncing it as a “Bolshevik coup d’etat”.

“socialist united front”.

In countries where there is a direct struggle for proletarian power, it is necessary to abandon the tactic of the “socialist united front” and warn the proletariat that “the bourgeois fractions with ambiguous socialist phraseology”—at the present time all parties of the Second International—will at the crucial moment march arms in hand for the defence of the capitalist system.

It is necessary, for the unification of all the revolutionary elements which have the aim of overthrowing world capitalist exploitation, that they align with the German Communist Workers’ Party (KAPD), the Dutch Communist Workers’ Party and other parties that adhere to the 4th International.⁴ All the authentic proletarian revolutionary elements must detach themselves from the forces that imprison them: the parties of the Second International, the Two-and-a-half International⁵ and their “ambiguous socialist phraseology”. The victory of the world revolution is impossible without a principled rupture and a relentless struggle against the bourgeois caricatures of socialism. The opportunists and social-chauvinists, as servants of the bourgeoisie, and consequently direct enemies of the proletarian class, become, more especially today, linked to the capitalists, to the armed oppressors in their own country and abroad (Cf. programme of the RCP Bolshevik). This is the truth about the tactic of the socialist united front which, as backed up by the theses of the Executive of the CI, is supposed to be based on the experience of the Russian revolution, whereas, in reality, it is an opportunist tactic. Such a tactic of collaboration with the declared enemies of the working class who carry out armed oppression against the revolutionary proletariat in their own and other countries is in open contradiction to the experience of the Russian revolution. In order to remain under the banner of the social revolution, we must make a “united front” against the bourgeoisie and its socialist servants.

As above, the tactic of the “socialist united front” retains its revolutionary value in the countries where the proletariat struggles against autocracy, supported by the bourgeoisie and for the bourgeois democratic revolution.

And where the proletariat still fights

4. Editor’s note: that is, the KAI (Communist Workers’ International), 1922-24, founded on the initiative of the KAPD, and not to be confused with the Trotskyist Fourth International.

5. Editor’s note: the International Union of Socialist parties was nicknamed the Two-and-a-half International, “because it situated itself between the Second and the Third”. See the critique made of this regroupment in Alfred Rosmer’s *Lenin’s Moscow* (Pluto Press, 1971), in the chapter ‘The delegates of the Third International in Berlin’.

autocracy which is also opposed by the bourgeoisie, it should follow the “united front” tactic with the bourgeoisie.

When the Comintern requires the communist parties of all countries to follow at all costs the tactic of the socialist united front, it is a dogmatic requirement which interferes with the resolution of practical tasks in accordance with the conditions of each country and undoubtedly harms the whole revolutionary movement of the proletariat.

Regarding the theses of the Executive of the Communist International

The theses, which were published in *Pravda*, clearly show that the “theoreticians” understood the idea of a “socialist united front” to be an expression of just two words: “united front”. Everyone knows how “popular” in Russia in 1917 were the social traitors of every country and in particular Scheidemann, Noske and co. The Bolsheviks, the rank and file elements of the party who had little experience, shouted at every corner: “You perfidious traitors of the working class, we will hang you from the telegraph poles. You bear the responsibility for the international bloodbath in which you have drowned the workers of every country. You have assassinated Rosa Luxemburg and Liebknecht. The streets of Berlin, thanks to your violent action, ran red with the blood of the workers who rose up against exploitation and capitalist oppression. You were the authors of the peace of Versailles, you have inflicted countless wounds on the international proletarian movement because you have betrayed it every time.”

We should also add that it wasn’t decided to propose to the communist workers the “socialist united front”, that’s to say a united front with Noske, Scheidemann, Vandervelde, Branting and co. Such a united front must be disguised in one way or another and that is how it went. The theses are not simply entitled “the socialist united front”, but “theses on the united front of the proletariat and on the attitude vis-à-vis the workers belonging to the Second, and the Two-and-a-half Internationals and that of Amsterdam, similarly towards workers adhering to the anarchist and syndicalist organisations”. Why such a mouthful? You see comrade Zinoviev himself, who not long ago was inviting us to collaborate in the burial of the Second International, now invites us to a wedding feast with it. That’s the reason for the long title. In reality it talks of agreement not with the workers but with the parties of the Second International and the Two-and-a-half International. Every

worker knows, even if he has never been abroad, that the parties are represented by their central committee, on which sit the likes of Vandervelde, Branting, Scheidemann, Noske and co. Thus it is with them that agreement has to be established. Who is going to Berlin for the conference of the three Internationals? To whom has the Communist International given its heartfelt trust? The Wels’s, Vandervelde’s, etc...

But have we tried to get an agreement with the KAPD, given that comrade Zinoviev agrees that the most precious proletarian elements are found there? No. And yet the KAPD fights in order to organise the conquest of power by the proletariat.

It is true that in his theses comrade Zinoviev affirms that the aim wasn’t a fusion of the Communist International with the Second International: towards the latter, he reminds us of the necessity for organisational autonomy: “absolute autonomy and total independence to explain its positions for each communist party which concludes this or that agreement with the parties of the Second International and Two-and-a-half International”. Communists impose self-discipline in action but they must conserve the right and possibility – not only before and after but if necessary also during the action – of pronouncing on the politics of workers’ organisations without exception. In supporting the slogan of “maximum unity of all workers’ organisations in all practical action against the capitalist front, the communists cannot renounce defending their positions” (see the theses of the Comintern CC for the conference of the RCP in 1921).

Prior to 1906, in the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party, there were two fractions that had as much autonomy as provided for in the theses of the Comintern cited above.

Discipline in negotiations, and autonomy of judgment in the internal life of the party, are formally recognised by the statutes of the RCP (Bolshevik). One must do what the majority has decided and you can only exercise the right of criticism. Do what you are commanded, but if you’re really too outraged and convinced that one is involved in harming the world revolution, you can, before, during and after the action freely express your rage. This is tantamount to renouncing autonomous actions (rather like Vandervelde signing the Treaty of Versailles and compromising himself).

In these same theses, the Executive proposes the slogan of workers’ government which must be substituted for the dictatorship of the proletariat. What exactly is a workers’ government? It is a government made up of a central committee boiled down

from the party; the ideal realisation of these theses occurs in Germany where President Ebert is a socialist and where governments are formed with his approval. Even if this formula is not accepted, communists must back with their votes the socialist prime ministers and presidents such as Branting in Sweden and Ebert in Germany.

Here is how we show our critical autonomy: the chairman of the Comintern, comrade Zinoviev, meets up with the CC of the Social Democratic Party and on seeing Ebert, Noske, Scheidemann, he raises his fists, shouting: “Turncoats, traitors of the working class!” They smile kindly and bow down before him. “You’ve murdered Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht, leaders of the German proletariat, we’ll hang you from the gibbet!” They smile at him even more kindly and bow down even lower.

Comrade Zinoviev offers them the united front and proposes to form a workers’ government with communist participation. Thus he exchanges the gallows for the ministerial armchair. Noske, Ebert, Scheidemann and co. will go to the workers’ assemblies and say that the CI has given them an amnesty and offered them ministerial posts in place of the gibbet. The condition is however, that the communists authorise a minister. [...] ⁶ They will say to the whole working class that the communists have recognised the possibility of realising socialism only by uniting with them and not against them. And they will add: Take a look at these people! They would have hung and buried us before; now they have come to us. So good, we forgive them because they have of course forgiven us. A mutual amnesty.

The Communist International has given the Second International a proof of its political sincerity and it has received a proof of political poverty. What’s the origin of this change in reality? How is it that comrade Zinoviev offers to Ebert, to Scheidemann and to Noske ministerial armchairs instead of the gallows? Not so long ago they sang the funeral oration of the Second International and now they give it the kiss of life. Why does he now sing its praises? Do we really see its resurrection and do we really lay claim to it?

Zinoviev’s theses effectively respond to such a question: “*the world economic crisis is becoming sharper, unemployment is growing, capital is going onto the offensive and is manoeuvring adroitly, the condition of the working class is compromised*”. Thus a class war is inevitable and from this it flows that the working class is moving more to the left. Reformist illusions are being

6. Editors’ note: Here as elsewhere in the text the symbols [...] indicate that a short passage that we have not been able to translate has been deleted.

destroyed. The greater workers' base is now beginning to appreciate the courage of the communist avant-garde... and from this fact... a united front with Scheidemann must be constituted. Diabolical! The conclusion is not coherent with the premise.

We wouldn't be objective if we didn't relate some still more fundamental considerations that comrade Zinoviev puts forward in his theses in order to defend the united front. Comrade Zinoviev makes a marvelous discovery: "*We know that the working class struggles for unity. And how does it achieve that other than through a united front with Scheidemann?*" Every conscious worker who is not foreign to the interests of his class and of the world revolution can ask: does the working class begin to struggle for unity just at the moment when the necessity of the "united front" is affirmed? Whoever has lived among the workers since the class has entered the field of political struggle, knows the doubts which assail every worker: why do the Mensheviks, the Social Revolutionaries, the Bolsheviks, the Trudoviks (populists) fight among themselves? All desire the good of the people. So for what motives are they fighting each other? Every worker has doubts, but what conclusion must we draw from it? The working class must organise itself as an independent class and oppose all the others. Our petty-bourgeois prejudices must be overcome! Such was the truth and such it remains today.

In every capitalist country where a situation favourable to the socialist revolution presents itself, we must prepare the working class for the armed struggle against the international Mensheviks and Social Revolutionaries. In this case, certainly, the experiences of the Russian revolution will have to be taken into consideration. The world working class must get into its head the idea that the socialists of the Second and the Two-and-a-half Internationals are and will be at the forefront of the counter-revolution. The propaganda for the united front with the social traitors of all nuances tends to the belief that they are also definitively fighting the bourgeoisie, for socialism and not the contrary. But only open, courageous propaganda, in favour of the civil war and the conquest of political power by the working class can interest the proletariat in the revolution.

The time when the working class could ameliorate its own material and juridical condition through strikes and parliament is definitively passed. This must be said openly. The struggle for the most immediate objectives is a struggle for power. We must show through our propaganda that, although on numerous occasions we have incited strikes, we haven't really been able

to ameliorate the condition of the workers, but you, workers, you have not yet gone beyond the old reformist illusion and are undertaking a struggle which weakens you. We can of course be in solidarity with you during strikes, but we will always come back to saying that these movements will not liberate you from slavery, from exploitation and the pangs of unabated need. The only way which will lead you to victory is the taking of power by your own calloused hands.

But this isn't all. Comrade Zinoviev has decided to solidly justify the united front tactic: we were accustomed to understanding the notion of "the era of the social revolution" as being identical with the present moment, which means that the social revolution is on the agenda; but in practice it has been shown that "*the era of the social revolution is a revolutionary process in the long term*". Zinoviev advises putting our feet on the ground and attracting the working masses. But we already attracted the masses by uniting ourselves in different ways with the Mensheviks and Social Revolutionaries (SRs) from 1903 until 1917 and, as we have seen, we ended up by triumphing; that is why, he argues, to overcome Ebert, Scheidemann and Cie, we must not fight them, but unite with them.

We will not discuss whether the era of the social revolution is a long term process or not, and if it is, how much time it will take, because it would resemble a monks' dispute on the sex of angels or a discussion aimed at finding out how many hairs you need to lose to be bald. We want to define the concept of "the era of the social revolution". What is it? It is firstly the state of the material productive forces which begin to be incompatible with the form of property. Are there the necessary material conditions for the social revolution to be inevitable? Yes. Is something missing? Subjective, personal conditions are missing: the working class of the developed capitalist countries must still realise the need for this revolution, not in the distant future, but today, tomorrow. And for this, what must be done by the advanced workers, the avant-garde which has already realised this? Sound the tocsin, call for the battle by propaganda in favour of civil war using all kinds of things, (lockouts, strikes, the imminence of war, the lowering of living standards) and by preparing, by organising the working class for an immediate struggle.

Can one say that the Russian proletariat triumphed because it was united with the Mensheviks and the SRs? This is nonsense. The Russian proletariat defeated the bourgeoisie and landowners through its fierce fight against the Mensheviks and SRs.

In one of his speeches on the need for a united front tactic, comrade Trotsky said that we have triumphed, but must analyse how we are beaten. He argues that we marched in a united front with the Mensheviks and SRs because we ourselves, the Mensheviks and SRs sat in the same councils. If the united front tactic consists of sitting in the same institution, then the head of forced labour and the convicts are also in a united front: both are in prison.

Our communist parties sit in parliaments – does that mean we can say they are in a united front with all the deputies? Comrades Trotsky and Zinoviev should tell the communists of the entire world that the Bolsheviks had reason not to participate in the "pre-parliament" summoned by the Social Revolutionary Kerensky in August 1917, or the Provisional Government led by the socialists (which was a useful lesson), instead of saying rather dubious things about a so-called united front of the Bolsheviks, the Mensheviks and the SRs.

We have already mentioned the era where the Bolsheviks had a united front with the bourgeoisie. But when was this? Prior to 1905. Yes, the Bolsheviks advocated the united front with all the socialists – but when? Before 1917. And in 1917, when they were fighting for working class power, the Bolsheviks joined forces with all revolutionary elements, from the left SRs to the anarchists of all varieties, to fight arms in hand the Mensheviks and SRs who, themselves, were in a united front with so-called "democracy", that is with the bourgeoisie and the landowners. In 1917, the Russian proletariat put itself at the forefront of "the era of the social revolution", in which the proletariat of the advanced capitalist countries had already been living. And in which the victorious tactic of the Russian proletariat in 1917 should be used, taking account of the lessons of the ensuing years: fierce resistance on the part of the bourgeoisie, SRs and Mensheviks faced with the Russian working class which had taken power. It will be this tactic which unites the working class of the developed capitalist countries, since this class is in the process of "getting rid of reformist illusions"; it will not be the united front with the Second International and Two-and-a-half International which will bring victory, but the war against them. This is the slogan of the future world social revolution.

The question of the united front in countries where the proletariat has power (workers' democracy)

All the countries where the socialist assault has already taken place, where the prole-

ariat is the ruling class, require a different approach each time. Note that one cannot develop a valid tactic for all stages of the revolutionary process in each different country, nor a policy for all countries at the same stage of the revolutionary process.

If we remember our own history (without going too far back), the history of our struggle, it will be seen that in fighting our enemies, we have used many different processes.

In 1906 and the following years, it was the “three pillars”: the 8-hour working day, land requisition and the democratic republic. These three pillars included freedom of speech and the press, freedom of association, strikes and unions, etc.

In February 1917? “Down with the autocracy, long live the Constituent Assembly!” This was the cry of the Bolsheviks.

However, in April-May, everything moves in another direction: there is freedom of association, of press and speech, but land is not requisitioned, workers are not in power. They then launch the slogan “All power to the soviets!”

At this time, any attempt by the bourgeoisie to shut our mouth was met by fierce resistance: “long live freedom of speech, press, association, strikes, unions, conscience! Seize the land! Workers’ control of production! Peace! Bread! Freedom! Long live the civil war!”

But then October and victory. Power to the working class. The old mechanism of state oppression is completely destroyed, the new mechanism of emancipation is structured in councils of workers’, soldiers’ deputies, etc.

At this time must the proletariat proclaim the slogan of freedom of the press, of speech, of association, of coalition? Could it allow these gentlemen, from monarchists to Mensheviks and SRs, to advocate civil war? More than that, could it, as a ruling class, grant freedom of speech and press to someone in this milieu who would advocate civil war? No and again no!

Any organised propaganda for civil war against the proletarian power would be a counter-revolutionary act in favour of the exploiters, the oppressors. The more “socialist” this propaganda was, the more harm it could have done. And for this reason, it was necessary to proceed with “the most severe, pitiless elimination of these propagandists of the same proletarian family”.

So there is the proletariat, capable of suppressing the resistance of the exploiters, of organising itself as the only power in the country, of building a national author-

ity recognised even by all the capitalist governments. A new task is imposed on it: to organise the country’s economy and create as many material goods as possible. And this task is as immense as the conquest of power and the suppression of the resistance of the exploiters. More than that, the conquest of power and suppression of the exploiters are not goals in themselves, but the means to socialism, to greater well-being and freedom than under capitalism, under the domination and oppression of one class by another.

To resolve this problem of the form of organisation and the means of action used to abolish the former oppressors, new approaches are needed.

In view of our scarce resources, in view of the horrible devastation caused by imperialist and civil wars, the task is imposed on us of creating material goods to demonstrate in practice to the working class and allied groups among the population the attractive force of this socialist society created by the proletariat. To show that it is good not only because there are no longer bourgeois, police and other parasites, but also because the proletariat has become master and is free, certain that all value, all goods, each blow of the hammer serves to improve life: the lives of the poor, the oppressed and the humiliated under capitalism. To show that this is not the kingdom of hunger, but one of abundance never seen anywhere else. This is a task that remains to be done by the Russian proletariat, a task that surpasses those preceding.

Yes, it surpasses these because the first two tasks, the conquest of power and the eradication of the resistance of the oppressors (taking into account the intense hatred of the proletariat and the peasantry towards the landowners and bourgeois), are certainly great, but less important than the third goal. And today all workers might ask: why was all this done? Should it do so much? Should it pay with so much blood? Should it undergo suffering without end? What will solve this problem? Who will be the architect of our fortune? What organisation will do it?

*There are no supreme saviours,
Neither God, nor Caesar, nor tribune.
Producers, let us save ourselves!
Decree the common salvation!*

To resolve this issue, we need an organisation that represents the unified will of the **whole** proletariat. We need the councils of workers’ deputies as well as industrial organisations in all enterprises taken over from the bourgeoisie (nationalised) which must spread their influence to the immense layers of fellow travellers.

But what at present are our councils? Do

they resemble even a tiny bit the councils of workers’ deputies, i.e. “nuclei of state power in the plants and factories”? Do they resemble the councils of the proletariat which express its unified will to conquer? They have been emptied of their meaning, of an industrial base.

The long civil war that mobilised the attention of the proletariat towards the goals of destruction, of resistance to the oppressors, has postponed, erased all the other tasks and – without the proletariat noticing it – changed its organisation, the councils. The councils of workers’ deputies in the factories are dead. Long live the councils of workers’ deputies!

And is it not the same thing with the proletarian democracy in general? Do we need a similar attitude to the freedom of speech and press for the proletariat as at the time of the fierce civil war, of the revolt of the slave drivers? Is the proletariat, which took power, which was able to defend itself against a thousand terrible enemies, not to be allowed to express its thoughts now, on organising itself to overcome immense difficulties in production, on directing this production and the whole country?

The bourgeois are reduced to silence, certainly, but who will dare dispute the right of free speech for a proletarian who has defended his power without sparing his blood?

What is this freedom of speech and press for us, is it a god, a fetish?

*We make for ourselves no idol
Neither on the earth, nor in the sky,
And we prostrate ourselves before
no one.*

For us, there is no real democracy, no absolute freedom as a fetish or idol, and even no real proletarian democracy.

Democracy was not and never will be a fetish for the counter-revolution, the bourgeoisie, the landowners, the priests, the SRs, and the Mensheviks of all countries of the world. For them, it is only a means to achieve their class goals.

Before 1917, freedom of speech and press for all citizens was our programmatic demand. In 1917, we conquered these freedoms and used them for propaganda and the organisation of the proletariat and its fellow travellers, including the intellectuals and the peasants. After organising a force capable of defeating the bourgeoisie, we, the proletarians, went to war and took power. In order to prevent the bourgeoisie from using freedom of speech and press to conduct the civil war against us, we denied freedom of speech and press not only to enemy classes, but also to a part of the

proletariat and its fellow travellers – until the moment when the resistance of the bourgeoisie was broken in Russia.

But with the support of the majority of workers, we have ended the resistance of the bourgeoisie; can we now allow ourselves to talk amongst ourselves, the proletarians?

Freedom of speech and press before 1917, is one thing, in 1917 another, in 1918-20 a third and in 1921-22 a fourth type of attitude by our party towards this question is needed.

But can enemies of soviet power use these freedoms to overthrow it?

Perhaps these freedoms would be useful and necessary in Germany, France, England, etc., if these countries were in the same phase of the revolutionary process, because there is a large working class and there is no huge peasantry. But here, this small proletariat which has survived wars and economic disaster is worn, hungry, cold, bled white and exhausted; is it hard to push it over the edge, to the road leading to overthrow the soviet power? In addition to the proletariat, there is also in Russia a large part of the peasantry that is far from opulence, which barely lives. What guarantees are there that freedom of speech will not be used to form a counter-revolutionary force with this peasantry? No, when we have fed the worker a little, given something to the peasant, then we will see it, but now there is no way. This is more or less the reasoning of right-minded communists.

Allow us to pose a question: how can you solve the great task of the organisation of the social economy without the proletariat? Or else do you want to solve it with a proletariat which says yes and amen each time that its Good Shepherds want it to? Do you have any need of it?

“You worker and you peasant, remain calm, don’t protest, don’t reason because we have some brave types, who are also workers and peasants to whom we have confided power and who use it in a way that you wouldn’t credit; do all this and you will suddenly enter the socialist paradise”. To talk in this way signifies faith in individuals, in heroes, not in the class, because this grey mass with its mediocre ideas (at least the leaders think so) is nothing more than a material with which our heroes, the communist functionaries, will construct the communist paradise. We don’t believe in heroes and appeal to all proletarians not to do so either. The liberation of the workers will only be the task of the workers themselves.

Yes, we proletarians, we are exhausted,

hungry, cold and we are weary. But the problems we have in front of us, no class, no group of people can solve for us. We must do it ourselves. If you can show us that the tasks which await us can be accomplished by an Intelligence, even if it is a communist Intelligence, then we would agree to confide our proletarian destiny to you. But no-one can demonstrate that. For this reason it is not at all correct to maintain that the proletariat is tired and that it has no need of knowing or deciding anything.

If the situation in Russia is different in the years 1918-20, our attitude on this question must also be different.

When you, right minded communist comrades, you want to smash the face of the bourgeoisie, that’s fine, but the problem, is that you raise your hand to the bourgeoisie and it is us, the proletarians, who have broken ribs and a mouth full of blood.

In Russia, the communist working class does not exist. There simply exists a working class in which we can find Bolsheviks, anarchists, Social Revolutionaries and others (who don’t belong to these parties but draw from their orientations). How should one relate to it? With the bourgeois “Cadets” (constitutional democrats), professors, lawyers, doctors, no negotiation; for them one remedy: the stick. But it’s quite another thing with the working class. We must not intimidate it, but influence it and guide it intellectually. For that no violence, but the clarification of our line of march, of our law.

Yes, the law is the law, but not for everyone. At the last party conference, in the discussion on the struggle against bourgeois ideology, it appeared that in Moscow and Petrograd there were 180 bourgeois publishing houses and it was intended, according to the declarations of Zinoviev, that we would combat this not with repressive measures but 90% through our openly ideological influence. But how do they want to “influence” us? Zinoviev knows how he is trying to influence some of us. If only we had less than a tenth of the freedom enjoyed by the bourgeoisie!

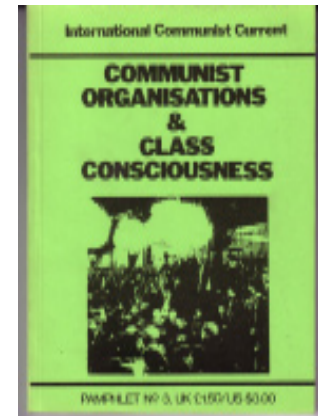
What do you think, comrade workers? It is not bad at all, is it not? Therefore, from 1906 to 1917 was one tactic, in 1917 before October another, from October 1917 until late 1920 a third and, since the beginning of 1921 a fourth. [...]

(To be continued)

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BASIC POSITIONS OF THE ICC

The **International Communist Current** defends the following political positions:

* Since the first world war, capitalism has been a decadent social system. It has twice plunged humanity into a barbaric cycle of crisis, world war, reconstruction and new crisis. In the 1980s, it entered into the final phase of this decadence, the phase of decomposition. There is only one alternative offered by this irreversible historical decline: socialism or barbarism, world communist revolution or the destruction of humanity.

* The Paris Commune of 1871 was the first attempt by the proletariat to carry out this revolution, in a period when the conditions for it were not yet ripe. Once these conditions had been provided by the onset of capitalist decadence, the October revolution of 1917 in Russia was the first step towards an authentic world communist revolution in an international revolutionary wave which put an end to the imperialist war and went on for several years after that. The failure of this revolutionary wave, particularly in Germany in 1919-23, condemned the revolution in Russia to isolation and to a rapid degeneration. Stalinism was not the product of the Russian revolution, but its gravedigger.

* The satiated regimes which arose in the USSR, eastern Europe, China, Cuba etc and were called 'socialist' or 'communist' were just a particularly brutal form of the universal tendency towards state capitalism, itself a major characteristic of the period of decadence.

* Since the beginning of the 20th century, all wars are imperialist wars, part of the deadly struggle between states large and small to conquer or retain a place in the international arena. These wars bring nothing to humanity but death and destruction on an ever-increasing scale. The working class can only respond to them through its international solidarity and by struggling against the bourgeoisie in all countries.

* All the nationalist ideologies - 'national independence', 'the right of nations to self-determination' etc - whatever their pretext, ethnic, historical or religious, are a real poison for the workers. By calling on them to take the side of one or another faction of the bourgeoisie, they divide workers and lead them to massacre each other in the interests and wars of their exploiters.

* In decadent capitalism, parliament and elections are nothing but a masquerade. Any call to participate in the parliamentary circus can only reinforce the lie that presents these elections as a real choice for the exploited. 'Democracy', a particularly hypocritical form of the domination of the bourgeoisie, does not differ at root from other forms of capitalist dictatorship, such as Stalinism and fascism.

* All factions of the bourgeoisie are equally reactionary. All the so-called 'workers', 'Socialist' and 'Communist' parties (now ex-'Communists'), the leftist organisations (Trotskyists, Maoists and ex-Maoists, official anarchists) constitute the left of capitalism's political apparatus. All the tactics of 'popular fronts', 'anti-fascist fronts' and 'united fronts', which mix up the interests of the proletariat with those of a faction of the bourgeoisie, serve only to smother and derail the struggle of the

proletariat.

* With the decadence of capitalism, the unions everywhere have been transformed into organs of capitalist order within the proletariat. The various forms of union organisation, whether 'official' or 'rank and file', serve only to discipline the working class and sabotage its struggles.

* In order to advance its combat, the working class has to unify its struggles, taking charge of their extension and organisation through sovereign general assemblies and committees of delegates elected and revocable at any time by these assemblies.

* Terrorism is in no way a method of struggle for the working class. The expression of social strata with no historic future and of the decomposition of the petty bourgeoisie, when it's not the direct expression of the permanent war between capitalist states, terrorism has always been a fertile soil for manipulation by the bourgeoisie. Advocating secret action by small minorities, it is in complete opposition to class violence, which derives from conscious and organised mass action by the proletariat.

* The working class is the only class which can carry out the communist revolution. Its revolutionary struggle will inevitably lead the working class towards a confrontation with the capitalist state. In order to destroy capitalism, the working class will have to overthrow all existing states and establish the dictatorship of the proletariat on a world scale: the international power of the workers' councils, regrouping the entire proletariat.

* The communist transformation of society by the workers' councils does not mean 'self-management' or the nationalisation of the economy. Communism requires the conscious abolition by the working class of capitalist social relations: wage labour, commodity production, national frontiers. It means the creation of a world community in which all activity is oriented towards the full satisfaction of human needs.

* The revolutionary political organisation constitutes the vanguard of the working class and is an active factor in the generalisation of class consciousness within the proletariat. Its role is neither to 'organise the working class' nor to 'take power' in its name, but to participate actively in the movement towards the unification of struggles, towards workers taking control of them for themselves, and at the same time to draw out the revolutionary political goals of the proletariat's combat.

OUR ACTIVITY

Political and theoretical clarification of the goals and methods of the proletarian struggle, of its historic and its immediate conditions.

Organised intervention, united and centralised on an international scale, in order to contribute to the process which leads to the revolutionary action of the proletariat.

The regroupment of revolutionaries with the aim of constituting a real world communist party, which is indispensable to the working class for the overthrow of capitalism and the creation of a communist society.

OUR ORIGINS

The positions and activity of revolutionary organisations are the product of the past experiences of the working class and of the lessons that its political organisations have drawn throughout its history. The ICC thus traces its origins to the successive contributions of the *Communist League* of Marx and Engels (1847-52), the three Internationals (the *International Workingmen's Association*, 1864-72, the *Socialist International*, 1889-1914, the *Communist International*, 1919-28), the left fractions which detached themselves from the degenerating Third International in the years 1920-30, in particular the *German, Dutch and Italian Lefts*.

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