



Belgique - België
PB
2600 Berchem 1-2
BC 9925

International Communist Current

International Review

Summer/Autumn 2014

Editorial

The wars of summer 2014 illustrate the advancing disintegration of the system

A century since the first world war

1914: how German social democracy came to betray the workers

Internationalisme n° 38, October 1948

On the nature and the function of the political party of the proletariat

Communism is on the agenda of history

The war in Spain exposes anarchism's fatal flaws. Part 1: Programme and practice

£2.50 \$3 \$6Can \$7Aus 20Rupees 3Euros 650Yen 50.00PHP 12Rand

153

périodique trimestriel
Supplement à INTERNATIONALISME.FR
Bureau de Depot: B-2600 Berchem 1-2
N° d'agrégation P408982

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Written at the time we went to press, this editorial shows how the sharpening imperialist conflicts of summer 2014 are a graphic expression of the advanced decomposition of capitalist society.

1914: how German social democracy came to betray the workers (page 2)

The war of 1914-18 would not have been possible without the political defeat of the proletariat which was dragged into the trenches to slaughter fellow workers instead of struggling as a class against the bourgeoisie. And this defeat was prepared and accomplished by the betrayal of most of the workers' parties of that time, above all of the biggest and internationally most exemplary party: the Social Democratic Party of Germany. This long and comprehensive article, centred on the organisational question, is a historical analysis of the process by which the German social democracy degenerated to the point of treason and stepping over to the bourgeois camp. How was this possible? What can we learn today from the degradation of the SPD's organisational tissue, from the censoring and silencing of the left wing, from the avoidance of debate and the moral decay of a party that had been the "pride of every socialist"? This article provides us with concrete historical material which remains relevant for revolutionaries to this day, and which we hope will encourage further reflection and discussion.

On the nature and the function of the political party of the proletariat (page 15)

This article presents its objectives as follows: *"Its goal is above all to stimulate discussion and criticism and not to provide definitive solutions. It's a work of research which aims less at acceptance or rejection pure and simple and more at stimulating other works of this kind."* The contribution was written after the Second World War by a comrade of the tiny revolutionary group Gauche Communiste de France, the political ancestor of our Current. The text takes as its starting point the recognition that the task for revolutionaries in non-revolutionary times is above all a theoretical one, the elaboration of clear perspectives with a view to the general interests of the class – and to the future of the species. As comrade Marco wrote in 1948, the surviving small groups of revolutionary militants *"concentrate within themselves the past experience of the class struggle, providing a link between the party of yesterday and that of tomorrow, between the culminating point of the struggle and the maturation of class consciousness in a period of past upsurge and its re-emergence on a higher level in a new period of upsurge in the future. In these groups the ideological life of the class carries on, the self-criticism of its struggles, the critical re-examination of its past ideas, the elaboration of its programme, the maturation of its consciousness and the formation of new cadres, new militants for the next stage of the revolutionary assault."* (Thesis 20)

The war in Spain exposes anarchism's fatal flaws. Part 1: Programme and practice (page 22)

This is a critical examination of anarchism's historical experience, including that of its most consistent proletarian tendencies before and during the Spanish War. The text is the first part of a further article in the series *Communism is on the agenda of history*. In response to the congenital theoretical weaknesses of anarchism, above all on the question of the state and of anti-fascism, the article recalls the stand taken by the Italian Communist Left in the 1930s, which was founded on the necessity, at certain key moments, of saying NO – No to participation in the capitalist state, no to (anti-fascist) alliances and fronts with bourgeois parties – even at the cost of being forced into political exclusion and isolation.

The wars of summer 2014 illustrate the advancing disintegration of the system

In the summer of 2014, while the ruling class regales us with its noisy “commemorations” of the outbreak of World War One, the intensification of military conflicts has yet again confirmed what revolutionaries already understood in 1914: that capitalist civilisation has become an obstacle to progress, a threat to the very survival of humanity. In her *Junius Pamphlet*, written from jail in 1915, Rosa Luxemburg warned that if the working class did not overthrow this system it would of necessity plunge mankind into an increasingly destructive spiral of imperialist wars. The history of the 20th and 21st centuries has tragically verified this prediction, and today, after a whole century of capitalist decline, war is becoming more omnipresent, more chaotic, and more irrational than ever. We have reached an advanced stage in the decay of the system, a phase that can be described as the *decomposition* of capitalism.

All the major conflicts of the summer demonstrate the characteristics of this phase:

- The “civil war” in Syria has reduced large parts of the country to ruins, destroying economic life and the accumulated labour of past cultures, while the opposition to the Assad regime has increasingly been dominated by the jihadis of “Islamic State”, whose brutal sectarianism beggars the imagination, even compared to that of al-Qaida;
- Initially supported by the Americans against the Russian-backed Assad re-

gime, IS has now clearly escaped the control of its former backers, with the result that the war in Syria has spread to Iraq, threatening the country with disintegration and obliging the US to intervene with air strikes against the advancing IS forces, and to arm the Kurds even though this in turn bears the risk of creating a new Kurdish entity which would be a further factor of destabilisation throughout the region;

- In Israel/Palestine, a new and even more deadly campaign of Israeli bombing has left 2,000 dead, the majority of them civilians, without any real prospect of silencing the rockets launched by Hamas and Islamic Jihad;
- In Ukraine the death toll has also been rising following the shelling of residential areas by the Kiev government, while Russia is increasingly drawn into the conflict with its barely-disguised support for the pro-Russian “rebels”. In turn this conflict has visibly sharpened tensions between Russia and the western powers.

These wars all express capitalism’s drive towards destruction and will not be the basis for any new world order or post-war prosperity. They are, as Rosa wrote about the First World War, the most concrete expression of barbarism. At the same time they exact a terrible price from the exploited class, the one force that can halt the slide into barbarism and affirm the only possible alternative: communism. The

Junius Pamphlet again: “War is methodical, organized, gigantic murder. But in normal human beings this systematic murder is possible only when a state of intoxication has been previously created. This has always been the tried and proven method of those who make war. Bestiality of action must find a commensurate bestiality of thought and senses; the latter must prepare and accompany the former”.

In Israel where the cry of “death to the Arabs” is chanted against peace protestors, in Paris where “anti-Zionist” demonstrations echo “death to the Jews”, in Ukraine where both pro- and anti-government forces are motivated by the most rabid nationalism, in Iraq where the jihadis threaten Christians and Yazidis with conversion to Islam or death – this war intoxication, this pogrom atmosphere, is an attack on the consciousness of the proletariat and ties its hands and feet to its exploiters and their war mobilizations.

These elements, these dangers to the unity and moral health of our class, require a profound reflection and we will come back to this in future articles in this *Review* that look in more depth at the current imperialist conflicts and the state of the class struggle. In the meantime we refer readers to a number of articles on the current imperialist confrontations on our website and our territorial press.

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rejection of the mobilisation for war by the SPD leadership. But the vote for war credits by the German SPD had triggered off an avalanche of submission to nationalism in other European countries. With the betrayal of the SPD the 2nd International signed its death warrant and disintegrated.

The rise of the opportunistic and revisionist current, which had appeared most clearly in the biggest Party of the 2nd International, and which abandoned the goal of the overthrow of capitalist so-

ciety, meant that proletarian life, fighting spirit and moral indignation disappeared within the SPD, or at least in the ranks of its leadership and its bureaucracy. At the same time this process was inseparably linked to the SPD’s programmatic degeneration, visible in its refusal to adopt the new weapons of the class struggle, the mass strike and workers’ self-organisation, and the gradual abandonment of internationalism. The process of degeneration of German Social-Democracy, which was not an isolated phenomenon in the 2nd International, led to its betrayal in 1914.

For the first time a political organisation of the workers had not only betrayed the interests of the working class, it became one of the most effective weapons in the hands of the capitalist class. The ruling class in Germany could now count on the SPD’s authority, and the loyalty it inspired in the working class, to unleash war and then to crush the workers’ revolt against war. The lessons of the degeneration of Social Democracy thus remain crucially important for revolutionaries today.

Heinrich / Jens

A century since the first world war

1914: how German social democracy came to betray the workers

Of all the parties federated in the 2nd International, the *Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands* (SPD) was by far the most powerful. In 1914, the SPD had more than one million members, and had won more than four million votes in the 1912 parliamentary elections:¹ it was, in fact, the only mass party in Germany and the biggest single party in the Reichstag – although under the autocratic imperial regime of Kaiser Wilhelm II it had no chance of actually forming a government.

For the other parties of the 2nd International, the SPD was the party of reference. Karl Kautsky,² editor of the Party's theoretical journal *Neue Zeit*, was the acknowledged "pope of marxism", the International's leading theoretician; at the 1900 Congress of the International, Kautsky had drawn up the resolution condemning the participation of the French socialist Millerand in a bourgeois government, and the SPD's Dresden Congress of 1903, under the leadership of its chairman August Bebel,³ had roundly condemned the revisionist theories of Eduard Bernstein and reasserted the SPD's revolutionary goals; Lenin had praised the SPD's "party spirit" and its immunity to the petty personal animosities that had led the Mensheviks to split the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party (RSDLP) after its 1903 congress.⁴

1. With 38.5% of the votes cast, the SPD had 110 seats in the Reichstag.

2. Karl Kautsky was born in Prague in 1854; his father was a set designer and his mother an actress and writer. The family moved to Vienna when Kautsky was aged 7. He studied at Vienna University and joined the Austrian Socialist Party (SPÖ) in 1875. In 1880 he was in Zürich, helping to smuggle socialist literature into Germany.

3. August Bebel was born in 1840, in what is now a suburb of Cologne. Orphaned at 13, he was apprenticed to a carpenter and as a young man travelled extensively in Germany. He met Wilhelm Liebknecht in 1865, and was immediately impressed by Liebknecht's international experience; in his autobiography, Bebel remembers exclaiming "That is a man you can learn something from" ("Donnerwetter, von dem kann man das lernen", Bebel, *Aus Meinen Leben*, Berlin 1946, cited in James Joll, *The Second International*). Together with Liebknecht, Bebel became one of German Social-Democracy's outstanding leaders in its early years.

4. This is clearly visible in Lenin's *One step forward, two steps back*, concerning the crisis in the RSDLP in 1903. Speaking of the future Mensheviks he writes:

To cap it all, the SPD's theoretical and organisational supremacy was clearly crowned by success on the ground: no other party of the International could claim anything close to the SPD's electoral success, and when it came to trade union organisation only the British could rival the Germans in the numbers and discipline of their members.

"In the Second International the German 'decisive force' played the determining role. At the [international] congresses, in the meetings of the international socialist bureaux, all awaited the opinion of the Germans. Especially in the questions of the struggle against militarism and war, German Social Democracy always took the lead. 'For us Germans that is unacceptable' regularly sufficed to decide the orientation of the Second International, which blindly bestowed its confidence upon the admired leadership of the mighty German Social Democracy: the pride of every socialist and the terror of the ruling classes everywhere".⁵

It was obvious therefore, as the storm clouds of war began to gather in the month of July 1914, that the attitude of the German Social Democracy would be critical in deciding the outcome. The German workers – the great masses organised in the Party and the unions, which the workers had fought so hard to build – were placed in a position where they alone could tip the scales: towards resistance, the fighting defence of proletarian internationalism, or to-

"Their narrow circle mentality and astonishing immaturity as Party members, which cannot stand the fresh breeze of open controversy in the presence of all, is here clearly revealed [...] Can you imagine such an absurdity, such a squabble, such a complaint about 'false accusations of opportunism' in the German party? There, proletarian organisation and discipline weaned them from such intellectualist flabbiness long ago [...] Only the most hidebound circle mentality, with its logic of 'either coats off, or let's have your hand', could give rise to hysterics, squabbles, and a Party split because of a 'false accusation of opportunism' against the majority of the Emancipation of Labour group" <http://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1904/onestep/j.htm>, chapter J, 'Innocent victims of a false accusation of opportunism'

5. Rosa Luxemburg, *The crisis in the German Social Democracy* (better known as the Junius pamphlet), chapter 1. Luxemburg's pamphlet is required reading for anyone trying to understand the underlying causes of the First World War.

wards class collaboration and betrayal, and years of the bloodiest slaughter humanity had ever witnessed.

"And what did we in Germany experience when the great historical test came? The most precipitous fall, the most violent collapse. Nowhere has the organization of the proletariat been yoked so completely to the service of imperialism. Nowhere is the state of siege borne so docilely. Nowhere is the press so hobbled, public opinion so stifled, the economic and political class struggle of the working class so totally surrendered as in Germany."⁶

The betrayal of German Social Democracy came as such a shock to revolutionaries that when Lenin read in *Vorwärts*⁷ that the SPD parliamentary fraction had voted in favour of war credits, he at first took the issue for a fake, black propaganda put out by the Imperial government. How was such a disaster possible? How, in a matter of days, could the proud and powerful SPD renege on its most solemn promises, transforming itself overnight from the jewel in the crown of the workers' International to the most powerful weapon in the armoury of the war-mongering ruling class?

As we try, in this article, to answer this question, it might seem paradoxical to concentrate in large part on the writings and actions of a relatively small number of individuals: the SPD and the unions were after all mass organisations, capable of mobilising hundreds of thousands of workers. It is justified however, because individuals like Karl Kautsky or Rosa Luxemburg represented, and were seen at the time to represent, definite tendencies within the Party; in this sense, their writings gave voice to political tendencies with which masses of militants and workers – who remain anonymous to history – identified. It is also necessary to take account of these leading figures' political biographies if we are to understand the weight they had in the Party. August Bebel, chairman of the SPD from 1892 until his death in 1913, was one of the Party's founders and had

6. Luxemburg, *ibid*.

7. The SPD central press organ.

been imprisoned, along with his fellow Reichstag deputy Wilhelm Liebknecht, for their refusal to support Prussia's war against France in 1870. Kautsky and Bernstein had both been forced into exile in London by Bismarck's anti-socialist laws, where they had worked under Engels' direction. The prestige, and the moral authority, that this gave them in the Party was immense. Even Georg von Vollmar, one of the leaders of South German reformism, first came to prominence as a left-winger and a vigorous and talented underground organiser, suffering repeated prison sentences as a result.

This then was a generation that had come to political activity through the years of the Franco-Prussian war and the Paris Commune, through the years of clandestine propaganda and agitation in the teeth of Bismarck's anti-socialist laws (1878-1890). Of a very different stamp were men like Gustav Noske, Friedrich Ebert, or Philipp Scheidemann, all members of the right wing in the parliamentary fraction of the SPD who voted for war credits in 1914 and played a key role in the suppression of the 1919 German Revolution – and in the murder of Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht by the *Freikorps*. Rather like Stalin, these were men of the machine, working behind the scenes rather than actively participating in public debate, the representatives of a Party which, as it grew, tended more and more to resemble and identify with the German state whose downfall was still its official goal.

The revolutionary left ranged against the growing tendency within the Party to make concessions to “practical politics” and was, strikingly, in large part both foreign and young (one notable exception being the old Franz Mehring). Apart from the Dutchman Anton Pannekoek, and Wilhelm Liebknecht's son Karl, men like Parvus, Radek, Jogiches, Marchlewski, all came from the Russian empire and were forged as militants under the harsh conditions of Tsarist oppression. And of course, the outstanding figure on the left was Rosa Luxemburg, an outsider in the German Party in every possible way: young, female, Polish, and Jewish, and – perhaps worst of all from the point of view of some of the German leadership – standing intellectually and theoretically head and shoulders above the rest of the Party.

The foundation of the SPD

The *Sozialistische Arbeiterpartei* (SAP – German Workers' Party), later to become the SPD, was founded in 1875 in Gotha, by the merger of two socialist parties: the *Sozialdemokratische Arbeiterpartei*

(SDAP),⁸ led by Wilhelm Liebknecht and August Bebel, and the *Allgemeiner Deutscher Arbeiterverein* (ADAV), originally established by Ferdinand Lassalle in 1863.

The new organisation thus sprang from two very different sources. The SDAP had only been in existence for six years; through Marx and Engels' longstanding relationship with Liebknecht – although Liebknecht was no theoretician he played an important role in introducing men like Bebel and Kautsky to Marx's ideas – they had played an important part in the SDAP's development. In 1870, the SDAP adopted a resolutely internationalist line against Prussia's war of aggression on France: at Chemnitz, a meeting of delegates, representing 50,000 Saxon workmen, adopted unanimously a resolution to this effect: “*In the name of German Democracy, and especially of the workmen forming the Democratic Socialist Party, we declare the present war to be exclusively dynastic... We are happy to grasp the fraternal hand stretched out to us by the workmen of France... Mindful of the watchword of the International Working Men's Association: Proletarians of all countries, unite, we shall never forget that the workmen of all countries are our friends and the despots of all countries our enemies.*”⁹

The ADAV, by contrast, had remained faithful to its founder Lassalle's opposition to strike action, and his belief that the workers' cause could be advanced by an alliance with the Bismarckian state, and more generally through the recipes of “state socialism”.¹⁰ During the Franco-Prussian war, the ADAV remained pro-German, its then President, Mende, even pushing for French war reparations to be used to set up state workshops for German workers.¹¹

Marx and Engels were deeply critical of the merger, although Marx's marginal notes on the programme were not made public until much later,¹² Marx considering that “*Every step of real movement is more important than a dozen programmes*”.¹³ Although they refrained from open criticism of the new Party, they made their views clear to its leading members, and in writing to Bebel, Engels highlighted two

weaknesses which, untreated, were to sow the seeds of the 1914 betrayal:

- “*the principle that the workers' movement is an international one is, to all intents and purposes, utterly denied in respect of the present, and this by men who, for the space of five years and under the most difficult conditions, upheld that principle in the most laudable manner. The German workers' position in the van of the European movement rests essentially on their genuinely international attitude during the war; no other proletariat would have behaved so well. And now this principle is to be denied by them at a moment when, everywhere abroad, workers are stressing it all the more by reason of the efforts made by governments to suppress every attempt at its practical application in an organisation! [...]*
- “*as its one and only social demand, the programme puts forward — Lassallean state aid in its starkest form, as stolen by Lassalle from Buchez. And this, after Bracke has so ably demonstrated the sheer futility of that demand; after almost all if not all, of our party speakers have, in their struggle against the Lassalleans, been compelled to make a stand against this “state aid”! Our party could hardly demean itself further. Internationalism sunk to the level of Amand Goegg, socialism to that of the bourgeois republican Buchez, who confronted the socialists with this demand in order to supplant them!*”¹⁴

These fault-lines in practical politics were hardly surprising given the new Party's eclectic theoretical underpinnings. When Kautsky founded the *Neue Zeit* in 1883, he intended it to be “*published as a Marxist organ which had set itself the task of raising the low level of theory in German social democracy, destroying eclectic socialism, and achieving victory for the Marxist programme*”; he wrote to Engels: “*I may be successful in my attempts to make the Neue Zeit the rallying point of the Marxist school. I am winning the collaboration of many Marxist forces, as I am getting rid of eclecticism and Rodbertussianism*”.¹⁵

From the outset, including during its underground existence, the SAP was thus a battleground of conflicting theoretical tendencies – as is normal in any healthy proletarian organisation. But as Lenin once remarked “*Without revolutionary theory, no revolutionary practice*”, and these different tendencies, or visions, of the organisation

8. Also known as the Eisenacher party, from the city of its foundation.

9. Marx, First Address of the IWA General Council on the Civil War in France.

10. A similar tendency survived in French socialism out of nostalgia for the “national workshops” programme that had followed the revolutionary movement of 1848.

11. Cf Toni Offerman, in *Between reform and revolution: German socialism and communism from 1840 to 1990*, Berghahn Books, 1998, p96.

12. It is known today under the title *Critique of the Gotha Programme*.

13. Marx to Bracke, 5th May 1875.

14. Engels to Bebel, March 1875.

15. Quoted in Georges Haupt, *Aspects of international socialism 1871-1914*, Cambridge University Press & Editions de la Maison des Sciences de l'Homme.

and of society, were to have very practical consequences.

By the mid 1870s the SAP had some 32,000 members in more than 250 districts, and in 1878 the Chancellor Bismarck imposed an “anti-socialist” law with a view to hamstringing the Party’s activity. Scores of papers, meetings and organisations were banned, and thousands of militants were sent to jail or fined. But the socialists’ determination remained unbroken by the anti-socialist law. Indeed, the SAP’s activity thrived under the conditions of semi-illegality. Being outlawed compelled the party and its members to organise themselves outside the channels of bourgeois democracy – even the limited democracy of Bismarckian Germany – and to develop a strong solidarity against police repression and permanent state surveillance. Despite constant police harassment, the party managed to maintain its press and expand its circulation, to the point where the satirical paper *Der wahre Jacob* (founded in 1884) alone had 100,000 subscribers.

Despite the anti-socialist laws, one public activity remained open to the SAP: it was still possible for SAP candidates to compete in elections to the Reichstag as unaffiliated independents. Hence a large part of the Party’s propaganda centred around electoral campaigns at national and local levels, and this may account both for the principle that the parliamentary fraction should remain strictly subordinated to the Party Congresses and the Party’s central organ (the *Vorstand*),¹⁶ and for the increasing weight of the parliamentary fraction with the Party as its electoral success grew.

Bismarck’s policy was a classic “carrot and stick”. While the workers were prevented from organising themselves, the Imperial state tried to cut the ground from under the feet of the socialists by introducing social insurance payments, in the case of unemployment, sickness or retirement, from 1883 onwards – a full twenty years before the French law on workers’ and peasants’ pensions (1910) and the British National Insurance Act (1911). By the end of the 1880s some 4.7 million workers received payments from the social security.

Neither the anti-socialist laws nor the introduction of social security achieved the desired effect of reducing support for Social Democracy. On the contrary, between 1881 and 1890 the SAP’s electoral score rose from 312,000 to 1,427,000 votes, making the SAP the biggest party in Germany. By 1890 its membership had risen to 75,000

and some 300,000 workers had joined trade unions. In 1890 Bismarck was dropped from the government by the new Kaiser Wilhelm II, and the anti-socialist laws were allowed to lapse.

Emerging from clandestinity, the SAP was refounded as a legal organisation, the *Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands* (SPD – German Social-Democratic Party), at its Erfurt Congress in 1891. The Congress adopted a new programme, and although Engels considered the Erfurt programme an improvement on its Gotha predecessor he nonetheless felt it necessary to attack the tendency towards opportunism: “*somehow or other, [absolutism] has to be attacked. How necessary this is is shown precisely at the present time by opportunism, which is gaining ground in a large section of the Social Democratic press. Fearing a renewal of the Anti-Socialist Law, or recalling all manner of over-hasty pronouncements made during the reign of that law, they now want the party to find the present legal order in Germany adequate for putting through all party demands by peaceful means [...] In the long run such a policy can only lead one’s own party astray. They push general, abstract political questions into the foreground, thereby concealing the immediate concrete questions, which at the moment of the first great events, the first political crisis automatically pose themselves. What can result from this except that at the decisive moment the party suddenly proves helpless and that uncertainty and discord on the most decisive issues reign in it because these issues have never been discussed? [...] This forgetting of the great, the principal considerations for the momentary interests of the day, this struggling and striving for the success of the moment regardless of later consequences, this sacrifice of the future of the movement for its present, may be ‘honestly’ meant, but it is and remains opportunism, and ‘honest’ opportunism is perhaps the most dangerous of all!*”¹⁷

Engels was remarkably prescient here: public declarations of revolutionary intent were to prove impotent without any concrete plan of action to back them up. In 1914, the party did indeed find itself “suddenly helpless”.

Nonetheless, the SPD’s official slogan remained “*Not a man nor a penny for this system*”, and its Reichstag deputies systematically refused all support for government budgets, especially for military spending. Such principled opposition to any class compromise remained a possibility within the parliamentary system

because the Reichstag had no real power. The government of the Wilhelmine German Empire was autocratic, not unlike that of Tsarist Russia,¹⁸ and the SPD’s systematic opposition therefore had no immediate practical consequences.

In South Germany, things were different. Here, the local SPD under the leadership of men like Vollmar, claimed that “special conditions” applied, and that unless the SPD was able to vote meaningfully in the *Länder* legislatures, and unless it had an agrarian policy able to appeal to the small peasantry, then it would be doomed to impotence and irrelevance. This tendency appeared as soon as the Party was legalised, at the 1891 Erfurt Congress, and as early as 1891 the SPD deputies in the provincial parliaments of Württemberg, Bavaria and Baden were voting in favour of government budgets.¹⁹

The Party’s reaction to this direct attack on its policy, as expressed in repeated Congress resolutions, was to sweep it under the carpet. An attempt by Vollmar to put forward a special agrarian programme was voted down by the 1894 Frankfurt Congress, yet the same congress also rejected a resolution banning any vote by any SPD deputy in favour of any government budget. As long as reformist policy could be limited to south German “exceptionalism” it could be tolerated.²⁰

Legality saps the SPD’s fighting spirit

Soon, the experience of the working class with a dozen years of semi-illegality began to be undermined by the poison of democracy. By its very nature bourgeois democracy and individualism, which go hand in hand, undermine any attempt by the proletariat to develop a vision of itself as a historical class with its own perspective antagonistic to that of capitalist society. Democratic ideology constantly drives a

18. Though it should not be forgotten that Russian autocracy was more extreme: the Russian equivalent to the Reichstag, the State Duma, was only called under pressure from the revolutionary movement of 1905.

19. Cf JP Nettl’s remarkable biography of Rosa Luxemburg, p81 (Schocken Paperback edition of the 1969 Oxford University Press abridged edition, with an introductory essay by Hannah Arendt). Throughout this article, we have quoted both from the abridged and the unabridged editions.

20. It is significant that while the Party tolerated right-wing reformism, the “Jungen” (“Youth”) circle, who violently criticised the shift towards parliamentarism, were expelled from the Party at the Erfurt Congress. It is true that this group was essentially an intellectual and literary opposition with anarchist tendencies (a number of its members drifted into anarchism after leaving the SPD). It is nonetheless characteristic that the Party reacted much more harshly towards a criticism from the left than towards out and out opportunist practice on the right.

16. The parliamentary vote for war credits in 1914 was thus in clear violation of the SPD’s statutes and Congress decisions, as Rosa Luxemburg pointed out.

17. *A critique of the Draft Programme of 1891s*, Marx Engels Collected Works, Vol. 27, p.226-7. Lawrence and Wishart, London 1990.

wedge into workers' solidarity, because it splits up the working class into a mere mass of atomised citizens. At the same time, the party's electoral success, both in terms of votes and seats in parliament grew rapidly, while more and more workers organised in the Trades Unions and were able to improve their material conditions. The growing political strength of the SPD, and the industrial strength of the organised working class, gave birth to a new political current, which began to theorise the idea not only that it was possible to build socialism within capitalism, to work towards a gradual transition without the need of having to overthrow capitalism through a revolution, but also that the SPD should have a specifically German expansionist foreign policy: this current crystallised in 1897 around the *Sozialistische Monatshefte*, a review outside SPD control, in articles by Max Schippel, Wolfgang Heine, and Heinrich Peus.²¹

This uncomfortable, but bearable, state of affairs was exploded in 1898 with the publication of Eduard Bernstein's *Die Voraussetzungen des Sozialismus und die Aufgaben der Sozialdemokratie (Pre-conditions of socialism and the tasks of Social-Democracy)*. Bernstein's pamphlet explained openly what he and others had been suggesting for some time: "Practically speaking, we are no more than a radical party; we have been doing no more than the bourgeois radicals do, with this difference that we hide it under a language out of all proportion to our acts and our capacities".²² Bernstein's theoretical position attacked the very foundations of marxism in that he rejected the inevitability of capitalism's decline and final collapse. Basing himself on the booming prosperity of the 1890s, coupled with capitalism's rapid colonialist expansion across the planet, Bernstein argued that capitalism had overcome its tendency towards self-destructive crisis. In these conditions, the goal was nothing, the movement was everything, quantity was to prevail over quality, the antagonism between the State and the working class could supposedly be overcome.²³ Bernstein proclaimed openly that the basic tenet of the Communist Manifesto, according to which workers have no fatherland, was "obsolete". He called upon the German workers to give

their support to the Kaiser's colonial policy in Africa and Asia.²⁴

In reality, a whole period, that of the expansion and ascension of the capitalist system, was drawing to a close. For revolutionaries such periods of profound historical transformation always pose a major challenge since they must analyse the characteristics of the new period, and develop a theoretical framework for understanding the fundamental changes taking place, as well as adapting their programme if necessary, all the time continuing to defend the same revolutionary goal.

The rapid expansion of capitalism across the globe, its massive industrial development, the new pride of the ruling class and its imperial posture – all this made the revisionist current believe that capitalism would last forever, that socialism could be introduced from within capitalism, and that the capitalist state could be used in the interests of the working class. The illusion of a peaceful transition showed that the revisionists had in fact become prisoners of the past, unable to understand that a new historic period was on the horizon: the period of capitalism's decadence and of the violent explosion of its contradictions. Their inability to analyse the new historical situation and their theorisation of the "eternity" of the conditions of capitalism at the end of the 19th century also meant that the revisionists were unable to see that the old weapons of the struggle, parliamentarism and the trade union struggle, no longer worked. The fixation on parliamentary work as the axis of their activities, the orientation on struggling for reforms within the system, the illusion of a "crisis-free capitalism" and the possibility of introducing socialism peacefully within capitalism, meant that in effect large parts of the SPD leadership had identified with the system. The openly opportunist current in the party expressed a loss of confidence in the historical struggle of the proletariat. After years of defensive struggles for the "minimum" programme, bourgeois democratic ideology had penetrated the workers' movement. This meant that the existence and the characteristics of social classes were put into question, an individualistic

24. "the colonial question [...] is a question of the spread of culture and, as long as there are big cultural differences, it is a question of the spread, or rather the assertion, of the higher culture. Because sooner or later it inevitably comes to pass that higher and lower cultures collide, and with regard to this collision, this struggle for existence between cultures, the colonial policy of the cultured peoples must be rated as a historical process. The fact that it is usually pursued from other motives and with means, as well as in forms that we Social Democrats condemn, may lead us in specific cases to reject it and fight against it, but this cannot be a reason for us to change our judgment about the historical necessity of colonisation" (Bernstein, 1907, quoted in *Discovering Imperialism*, 2012, Haymarket Books, p41).

view tended to dominate and dissolve the classes in "the people". Opportunism thus threw overboard the marxist method of analysing society in terms of class struggle and class contradictions; in fact opportunism meant the lack of any method, of any principles whatever and the lack of any theory.

The left fights back

The reaction of the Party leadership to Bernstein's text was to downplay its importance (*Vorwärts* welcomed it as a "stimulating contribution to debate", declaring that all currents within the Party should be free to express their opinions), while regretting in private that such ideas should be expressed so openly. Ignaz Auer, the Party secretary, wrote to Bernstein: "My dear Ede, one does not formally make a decision to do the things you suggest, one doesn't say such things, one simply does them".²⁵

Within the SPD Bernstein was opposed in the most determined manner by those forces who had not been accustomed to the long period of legality following the end of the anti-socialist laws. It is no coincidence that the clearest and most outspoken opponents to Bernstein's current were militants of foreign origin, and specifically from the Russian Empire. The Russian born Parvus, who had moved to Germany in the 1890s and in 1898 was working as the editor of the SPD press in Dresden, the *Sächsische Arbeiterzeitung*²⁶ launched a fiery attack on Bernstein's ideas and was backed by the young revolutionary Rosa Luxemburg, who had moved to Germany in May 1898 and who had experienced repression in Poland. As soon as she settled in Germany, she started to spearhead the struggle against the revisionists with her text *Reform or revolution* written in 1898-99 (in which she exposed the method of Bernstein, refuted the idea of the establishment of socialism through social reforms, exposing the practice and theory of opportunism). In her reply to Bernstein, she underlined that the reformist trend had come into full swing since the abolition of the anti-socialist law and the possibility to

25. Cf Nettel, op.cit., p101.

26. Parvus, also known as Alexander Helphand, was a strange and controversial figure in the revolutionary movement. After some years on the left of the Social-Democracy in Germany, then in Russia during the 1905 revolution, he moved to Turkey where he set up an arms trading company, becoming wealthy on the proceeds of the Balkan Wars, and simultaneously setting up as financial and political adviser to the Young Turks nationalist movement and editing the nationalist publication *Türk Yurdu*. During the war, Parvus became an open supporter of German imperialism, much to the distress of Trotsky whose ideas on "permanent revolution" he had strongly influenced (cf Deutscher, *The prophet armed*, "War and the International").

21. Cf Jacques Droz, *Histoire générale du socialisme*, p41, Editions Quadrige/PUF, 1974.

22. Letter to Kautsky, 1896, quoted by Droz, op.cit., p42.

23. Bernstein's revisionist current was by no means an isolated exception. In France the socialist Millerand joined the government of Waldeck-Rousseau alongside General Gallifet, the hangman of the Paris Commune; a similar tendency existed in Belgium; the British Labour movement was completely dominated by reformism and a narrow-minded nationalist trade unionism.

work legally. Vollmar's state socialism, the Bavarian budget approval, south-German agrarian socialism, Heine's compensations proposals, Schippel's position on customs and militia were elements in a rising opportunist practice. She underlined the common denominator of this current: hostility towards theory. "What distinguishes [all the opportunist tendencies in the party] on the surface? The dislike of 'theory', and this is natural since our theory, i.e. the bases of scientific socialism, sets our practical activity clear tasks and limits, both in relation to the goals to be attained as much as in regard to the means to be used and finally in the method of the struggle. Naturally those who only want to chase after practical achievements soon develop a desire to liberate themselves, i.e. to separate practice from theory' to make themselves free of it."²⁷

The first task of revolutionaries was to defend the final goal: "the movement as such without any link to the final goal, the movement as a goal in itself is nothing, the final goal is what counts."²⁸

In a 1903 text, *Stagnation and progress of marxism*, Luxemburg considers the theoretical inadequacy of the Social-Democracy in these terms: "The scrupulous endeavour to keep 'within the bounds of Marxism' may at times have been just as disastrous to the integrity of the thought process as has been the other extreme – the complete repudiation of the Marxist outlook, and the determination to manifest 'independence of thought' at all hazards".

In attacking Bernstein, Luxemburg also demanded that the Party's central press organ should defend the positions decided by Party congresses. When in March 1899 *Vorwärts* replied that Luxemburg's critique of Bernstein's position (in an article *Eitle Hoffnungen* – Vain hopes), was unjustified. Luxemburg countered that *Vorwärts* "is in the fortunate situation of never being in danger of having a mistaken opinion or changing its opinion, a sin which it likes to find in others, simply because it never has or defends an opinion".²⁹

She continued in the same vein: "There are two kinds of organic creatures: those with a spine and which can walk upright, sometimes even run; and there are others who have no spine and therefore can only creep and cobble to something." To those who wanted the Party to drop any programmatic positions and political criteria, she replied at the 1899 Party conference

in Hannover: "If this is to mean that the party – in the name of freedom of critique – should not be entitled to take up position and declare through a majority vote. We do not defend such a position, therefore we have to protest against this idea, because we are not a club for discussions, but a political fighting party, which must have certain fundamental views."³⁰

The swamp wavers

Between the determined left wing around Luxemburg, and the right defending Bernstein's ideas and revisionism in principles, lay a "swamp", which Bebel described in the following terms at the 1903 Dresden Congress: "It is always the same old and eternal struggle between a left and a right, and in between the swamp. They are the elements who never know what they want or rather who never say what they want. They are the smart-alecks, who usually first listen to see who is saying what, what is being said here and there? They always sense where the majority stands and they usually join the majority. We also have this sort of people in the party [...] the man who defends his position openly, at least I know where he stands; at least I can fight with him. He is victorious or I am, but the lazy elements that always duck out of something and always avoid a clear decision, who always say 'we all agree, yes we are all brothers', they are the worst. I fight against them hardest."³¹

This swamp, unable to take a clear position, wavered between the straightforward revisionist right and the revolutionary left. Centristism is one of the faces of opportunism. Positioning itself always between the antagonistic forces, between the reactionary and radical currents, centristism tries to reconcile the two. It avoids the open clash of ideas, runs away from debate, always considers that "one side is not completely right, but the other side is not totally right either", views political debate with clear arguments and polemical tones as "exaggerated", "extremist", "trouble-making", even "violent". It thinks that the only way to maintain unity, to keep the organisation intact is to allow all political tendencies to coexist, even including those whose aims are in direct contradiction to those of the organisation. It shies away from taking responsibility and positioning itself. Centristism in the SPD tended to ally reluctantly with the left, while regretting the left's "extremism" and "violence" and effectively preventing firm measures – such

as the expulsion from the Party of the revisionists – from preserving the Party's revolutionary nature.

Luxemburg on the contrary considered that the only way to defend the unity of the Party as a revolutionary organisation was to insist on the fullest exposure and public discussion of opposing opinions:

"By covering up the contradictions by the artificial 'unification' of incompatible views, the contradictions can only come to a head, until they explode violently sooner or later through a split [...] Those who bring the divergences of view to the fore and fight against the divergent views, work towards the unity of the party. But those who cover up the divergences work towards a real split in the party."³²

The epitome of the centrist current, and its most prestigious representative, was Karl Kautsky.

When Bernstein started to develop his revisionist views, Kautsky initially stayed silent and preferred not to oppose his old friend and comrade in public. He also completely failed to appreciate the extent to which Bernstein's revisionist theories undermined the revolutionary foundations on which the Party had been built. As Luxemburg pointed out, if once you accept that capitalism can go on forever, that it is not doomed to collapse as a consequence of its own inner contradictions, then you are led inevitably to abandon the revolutionary goal.³³ Kautsky's failure here – in common with most of the Party press – was a clear sign of the decline of fighting spirit in the organisation: political debate was no longer a matter of life or death for the class struggle, it had become an academic concern of intellectual specialists.

Rosa Luxemburg's arrival in Berlin in 1898, from Zürich where she had just completed her doctoral thesis studies of Polish economic development with distinction, and her reactions to Bernstein's theories, were to play a major role in Kautsky's attitude.

When Luxemburg became aware of Bebel's and Kautsky's hesitation and unwillingness to fight Bernstein's views, she criticised this attitude in a letter to Bebel.³⁴ She asked why they did not push

27. Quoted in Nettl, op.cit., p133.

28. *Parteitag der Sozialdemokratie*, Oktober 1898 in Stuttgart, Rosa Luxemburg, Ges. Werke, Bd 1/1 p241.

29. Rosa Luxemburg, *Gesammelte Werke*, Bd 1/1, p. 565, 29.9.1899.

30. Rosa Luxemburg, 1899, *Ges. Werke* Bd 1/1, S. 578, 9.-14. Oktober.

31. August Bebel, Dresden, 13. September. 1903, quoted by Luxemburg *After the Jena Party congress*, Ges. Werke, Bd 1/1, S. 351.

32. "Unser leitendes Zentralorgan", *Leipziger Volkszeitung*, 22.9.1899, Rosa Luxemburg in Ges. Werke, Bd. 1/1, p. 558.

33. Moreover, Bernstein "began by abandoning the final aim and supposedly keeping the movement. But as there can be no socialist movement without a socialist aim he ends by renouncing the movement" (*Reform or revolution*, "Collapse").

34. "I am very grateful for the information, which helps me to understand better the orientations of the party. It was of course clear to me that Bernstein with his ideas presented so far is no more in line with our programme, but it is painful that we can no longer

for an energetic response to Bernstein, and in March 1899, after she had begun the series of articles which were later to become the pamphlet *Reform or revolution*, she reported to Jogiches: "As for Bebel in a conversation with Kautsky I complained that he won't stand up and fight. Kautsky told me that Bebel has lost his drive, he has lost his self-confidence and no longer has any energy. I scolded him again and asked him: 'Why don't you [Kautsky] inspire him, give him encouragement and energy?' Kautsky replied: 'You should do this, go and talk to Bebel, you should encourage him...'" When Luxemburg asked Kautsky why he did not react, he replied: "How can I get involved in rallies and meetings now, while I am fully engaged in the parliamentary struggle, this only means there will be clashes, where would this lead to? I do not have any time and no energy for this."³⁵

In 1899, in *Bernstein und das sozialdemokratische Programm. Eine Antikritik (Bernstein and the Social-Democratic programme – an anti-critique)* Kautsky at last spoke up against Bernstein's ideas on Marxist philosophy and political economy and his views on the development of capitalism. But he nevertheless welcomed Bernstein's book as a valuable contribution to the movement, opposed a motion to expel him from the party and avoided saying that Bernstein was betraying the Marxist programme. In short, as Luxemburg concluded, Kautsky wanted to avoid any challenge to the rather comfortable routine of Party life, and the necessity of criticising his old friend in public. As Kautsky himself admitted privately to Bernstein: "Parvus and Luxemburg already grasped the contradiction of your views with our programmatic principles, while I did not yet want to admit this and believed firmly that all this was a misunderstanding [...] It was my mistake that I was not as farsighted as Parvus and Luxemburg, who already then scented the line of thought of your pamphlet."³⁶ In fact, in *Vorwärts* Kautsky minimised and trivialised the attack on Bernstein's new revisionist theory, saying that it was being blown out of all proportion, in a manner typical of the "absurd imagin-

count on him altogether. But if you and comrade Kautsky had this assessment, I am surprised that that you and comrade Kautsky did not use the favourable atmosphere at the congress to launch immediately an energetic debate, but that you wanted to encourage Bernstein to write a pamphlet, which will only delay the discussion much more." (Rosa Luxemburg, *Ges. Briefe*, Bd 1, p. 210, letter to Bebel, 31.10.1898.

35. Rosa Luxemburg, *Ges. Briefe*, Bd 1, p. 289, letter to Leo Jogiches, 11. März 1899.

36. Kautsky to Bernstein, 29.7.1899, IISG-Kautsky-Nachlass, C. 227, C. 230, quoted in Till Schelz-Brandenburg, *Eduard Bernstein und Karl Kautsky, Entstehung und Wandlung des sozialdemokratischen Parteimarxismus im Spiegel ihrer Korrespondenz 1879 bis 1932*, Köln, 1992.

ings" of a petty bourgeois mentality.³⁷

Loyalty to friends or to the class?

Out of loyalty to his old friend, Kautsky felt he had to apologize to Bernstein in private, writing: "It would have been cowardice to stay silent. I do not believe that I caused you any harm now that I have spoken. If I had not told August Bebel that I would answer your declaration, he would have done it himself. You can imagine what he would have said, knowing his temper and his callousness".³⁸ This meant he preferred to stay silent and blind towards his old friend. He reacted unwillingly, and only after being forced into it by the left. Later he admitted that it had been a "sin" to allow his friendship with Bernstein to dominate his political judgment. "In my life I only sinned once out of friendship, and I still regret this sin to this day. If I had not hesitated so much towards Bernstein, and if I had confronted him right from the start with the necessary sharpness, I would have spared the party many unpleasant problems."³⁹ However, such a "confession" is of no value unless it goes to the root of the problem. Despite confessing his "sin" Kautsky never gave a more profound political explanation why such an attitude, based on personal affinity rather than political principle, is a danger for a political organisation. In reality, this attitude led him to grant the revisionists unlimited "freedom of opinion" within the party. As Kautsky said on the eve of the Hannover Party Congress: "In general we have to leave it up to every Party member to decide whether he still shares the principles of the Party or not. By excluding someone we only act against those who damage the Party; nobody has yet been excluded from the Party because of reasonable criticism, because our Party has always highly valued freedom of discussion. Even if Bernstein had not deserved so much esteem for his part in our struggle, and the fact that he had to go into exile because of his Party activities, we would not consider expelling him".⁴⁰

Luxemburg's answer was clear-cut. "However great our need for self-criticism, and however broadly we set its limits, there must nonetheless remain a minimum of principles which make up our essence, indeed our existence, which found our

37. Rosa Luxemburg, "Parteifragen im Vorwärts", *Gesammelte Werke* Bd 1/1, p. 564, 29.9.1899.

38. Laschitzka, *Im Lebensrausch, Trotz Alledem*, p.104, 27.Okt. 1898, Kautsky-Nachlass C 209: Kautsky an Bernstein.

39. Karl Kautsky to Victor Adler, 20.7.1905, in Victor Adler *Briefwechsel*, a.a.O. S. 463, quoted by Till Schelz-Brandenburg, p. 338).

40. Rosa Luxemburg – *Ges. Werke*, Bd 1/1, p. 528, quoting "Kautsky zum Parteitag in Hannover", *Neue Zeit* 18, Stuttgart 1899-1900, I. Bd. S. 12).

cooperation as members of a Party. Within our ranks, 'freedom of criticism' cannot apply to these principles, which are few and very general, precisely because they are the precondition for all activity and therefore also any criticism directed at this activity. We have no reason to block our ears when these principles are criticised by somebody outside the Party. But as long as we consider them to be the basis of our existence as a Party, we must remain attached to them and not allow our members to call them into question. Here, we can only allow one freedom: to belong to our Party or not. We force no-one to march with us, but as long as he does so voluntarily, we must suppose that he has accepted our principles".⁴¹

The logical conclusion of Kautsky's "lack of position" was that everyone could stay in the Party and defend what he liked, the programme is watered down, the Party becomes a "melting pot" of different opinions, not a spearhead for a determined struggle. Kautsky's attitude showed he preferred loyalty to a friend to the defence of class positions. At the same time, he wanted to adopt the pose of a theoretical "expert". It is true that he had written some very important and valuable books (see below), and that he had enjoyed the esteem of Engels. But, as Luxemburg noted in a letter to Jogiches: "Karl Kautsky limits himself to theory".⁴² Preferring to refrain from any participation in the struggle for the defence of the organisation and its programme, Kautsky gradually started to lose any fighting attitude, and this meant that he placed what he saw as his obligations to his friends above any moral obligations to his organisation and its principles. This led to a detachment of theory from practical, concrete action: for example, Kautsky's valuable work on ethics, including in particular a chapter on internationalism, was not welded to an unwavering defence of internationalism in action.

There is a striking contrast between Kautsky's attitude towards Bernstein, and Rosa Luxemburg's attitude towards Kautsky. On her arrival in Berlin, Luxemburg enjoyed close relations with Kautsky and his family. But she quickly came to feel, that the great regard the Kautsky family showed towards her was becoming a burden. Already in 1899 she had complained to Jogiches: "I am beginning to flee their honeyed words. The Kautskys consider me to be part of their family."⁴³ "All these tokens of affection (he is very

41. Translated from the French version, *Freedom of criticism and science*.

42. Rosa Luxemburg, *Ges. Briefe*, p. 279, Letter to Leo Jogiches, 3. 3. 1899.

43. Rosa Luxemburg, Letter to Leo Jorgiches, 12.11.1899.

well meaning towards me, I can see this), feel like a terrible burden, instead of being a pleasure to me. In fact, any friendship established in adult age, and more over such a 'party'-based one, is a burden: It imposes on you certain obligations, is a constraint etc. And precisely this side of the friendship is a handicap for me. After the writing of each article I wonder: Will he not be disappointed, will the friendship not cool down?"⁴⁴ She was aware of the dangers of an attitude based on affinities, where considerations of personal obligation, friendship, or common tastes, obscure the militant's political judgment, but also what we may call his moral judgment as to whether a particular line of action is in conformity with the organisation's principles.⁴⁵ Luxemburg nonetheless dared to confront him openly: "I had a fundamental row with Kautsky about the whole way of looking at things. He told me in conclusion, that I would be thinking like him in twenty odd years, to which I replied that if so I would be a zombie in 20 years."⁴⁶

At the Lübeck party congress of 1901 Luxemburg was accused of distorting the positions of other comrades, an accusation she considered slanderous and demanded to have cleared up in public. She submitted a statement for publication in *Vorwärts* with this in mind.⁴⁷ But Kautsky on behalf of *Neue Zeit* urged her to withdraw her demand for publication of her Statement. She replied to Kautsky: "Of course I am willing to refrain from publishing my declaration in the *Neue Zeit* but allow me to add a few words of explanation. If I were one of those people, who without consideration for anyone, safeguarded their own rights and interests – and such people are legion throughout our Party – or rather that is the way they all are – I would naturally insist upon publication, for you yourself have admitted that you as editor had certain obligations towards me in this matter. But while admitting this obligation, you at the same time placed a revolver of friendly admonition and request at my breast [to prevent me] from making use of this obligation and thus getting my rights. Well I am sickened at the thought of having to insist upon rights if these are only to be granted amid sighs and gnashing of teeth, and when people not only grab me by the arm and thus expect me to 'defend' myself

but try in addition to beat me to a pulp, in the hope that I may thus be persuaded to renounce my rights. You have gained what you are after – you are free of all obligations towards me in this case.

"But it would seem that you labour under the delusion that you acted solely out of friendship and in my best interests. Permit me to destroy this illusion. As a friend you ought to have said: 'Advise you unconditionally and at any cost to defend your honour as a writer, for greater writers [...] like Marx and Engels wrote whole pamphlets, conducted endless ink-wars, when anybody dared to accuse them of such a thing as forgery. All the more you, a young writer with many enemies, must try to obtain complete satisfaction...' That surely is what you should have advised me as a friend.

"The friend, however, was soon pushed into the background by the editor of the *Neue Zeit*, and the latter has only one wish since the Party congress [at Lübeck]; he wants peace, he wants to show that the *Neue Zeit* has learned manners since the whipping it got, has learned to keep its mouth shut.⁴⁸ And for such reasons the essential rights of an associate editor and regular contributor... must be sacrificed. Let a collaborator of *Neue Zeit* and one at that who by no means does the worst of the work – swallow even a public accusation of forgery as long as peace and quiet is maintained! That is how things are, my friend! And now with best greetings, your Rosa."⁴⁹

Here we see a young, determined revolutionary, and a woman to boot, insisting that the "old", "orthodox", experienced, authority should take personal responsibility. Kautsky replied to Luxemburg: "you see, we should not antagonise the people of the parliamentary fraction, we should not leave the impression that we are patronising them. If you want to make them a suggestion, it is better to send them a private letter, which will be much more effective."⁵⁰ But Rosa Luxemburg tried to "revive" the fighting spirit in him "You must thoroughly hit out with guts and joy, and not as though it was a boring interlude; the public always feels the spirit of the combatants and the joy of battle gives resonance to controversy, and ensures moral superiority."⁵¹ This attitude of not wanting to disturb the normal

running of party life, not taking up position in the debate, not pushing for clarification of divergences, running away from debate and tolerating the revisionists, more and more alienated Luxemburg and it brought to the fore how much the fighting spirit, the loss of morality, the loss of conviction, of determination, had become the overriding trait of Kautsky's attitude. "I now read his [article], Nationalism and Internationalism, and it was a horror and nauseating. Soon I shall no longer be able to read any of his writings. I feel as if a nauseating spider web is covering my head..."⁵² "Kautsky is becoming more and more brackish. He is more and more fossilising inside, he no longer feels any human concern about anybody except his family. I really feel uncomfortable with him."⁵³

Kautsky's attitude can also be contrasted to that of Luxemburg and Leo Jogiches. After the break-up of her relationship with Leo Jogiches in 1906 (which caused her immense pain and stress, as well as great disappointment in him as a partner) the two remained the closest comrades until the day of her assassination. Despite deep personal grudges, disappointment and jealousies, these profound emotional feelings over the break-up of the relationship never prevented them from standing side by side in the political struggle.

One might object that in the case of Kautsky this reflected the lack of personality and character of Kautsky, but it would be more correct to say that he epitomised the moral rot within the Social Democracy as a whole.

Luxemburg was forced early on to confront the resistance of the "old guard". When she criticised revisionist policy at the 1898 Stuttgart Congress, "Vollmar reproached me bitterly that I as youngster of the movement want to give lessons to the old veterans [...] But if Vollmar replies to my factual explanations with 'you greenhorn, I could be your grandfather', I only see this as proof that he has run out of arguments."⁵⁴ As regards the weakening fighting spirit of the more centrist veterans, in an article written after the 1898 congress she declared that: "We would have preferred it if the veterans had taken up the struggle from the very beginning of the debate [...] If the debate did get off the ground this did not happen because of but despite of the behaviour of the Party leaders [...] Abandoning the debate to its fate, watching passively for two days

44. Rosa Luxemburg, *Ges. Briefe*, Bd 1, p. 426, Letter to Leo Jogiches, 21.12.1899.

45. Luxemburg made it a point of honour to give her entire support as an agitator (she was much in demand as a public speaker) even to those Party members she criticised most sharply, for example during the electoral campaign of the revisionist Max Schippel.

46. Rosa Luxemburg, *Ges. Briefe*, Bd. 1, p. 491, Letter to Leo Jogiches, 7.7.1890.

47. Rosa Luxemburg, *Erklärung*, *Ges. Werke* Bd 1/2, p. 146, 1.10.1901.

48. At the Lübeck party congress the *Neue Zeit* and Kautsky as its editor had been heavily attacked by the opportunists because of the controversy over revisionism.

49. JP Nettel, *Rosa Luxemburg*, Vol. 1, p. 192 (the quote here is taken from the unabridged edition), Rosa Luxemburg, letter to Kautsky, 3.10.1901.

50. Rosa Luxemburg, *Ges. Briefe*, Bd 1, P. 565, Letter to Jogiches, 12.1.1902.

51. Quoted in Nettel, op.cit., p.127.

52. Rosa Luxemburg, *Ges. Briefe* Bd 3, p. 358, Letter to Kostja Zetkin, 27. June 1908.

53. Rosa Luxemburg, *Ges. Briefe* Bd 3, p. 57, Letter to Kostja Zetkin, 1. August 1909.

54. Rosa Luxemburg, *Ges. Werke*, 1/1, p. 239, p. 245, - *Parteitag der Sozialdemokratie 1898 in Stuttgart, Oktober 1898*.

to see how the wind is blowing and only intervening when the mouthpieces of opportunism have been forced to come out in the open, then making snide remarks about the 'sharp tone' of those whose point of view you then defend, is a tactic which does not cast a good light on the Party leaders. And Kautsky's explanation as to why he has not made a public statement so far about Bernstein's theory, because he wanted to reserve his right to say the final word in a possible debate, does not really look a good excuse. In February he published Bernstein's article without any editorial comment in *Neue Zeit*, then he stays silent for 4 months, in June he opens the discussions with some compliments to the 'new' point of view of Bernstein, this new poor copy of the lecture-room socialist [a term used by Engels in his *Anti-Dühring*], then he stays silent again for 4 months, lets the Party congress begin then declares during the course of the debate that he would like to make the concluding remarks. We would prefer that the theoretician ex officio should always intervene in the debates and not just make the conclusion in such crucial matters, and that he should not give the wrong and misleading impression of not having known for a long time what he should have said."⁵⁵

Thus many of the old guard, who had fought under conditions of the anti-Socialist law, had been disarmed by the weight of democratism and reformism. They had become unable to understand the new period and started to theorise instead the abandonment of the socialist goal. Instead of passing on the lessons of the struggle under the conditions of the anti-Socialist law to a new generation, they had lost their fighting spirit. And the centrist current, which was hiding and avoiding the combat, by running away from an open battle with the opportunists, paved the way for the rise of the right.

While the centrists were avoiding the struggle, the left wing around Luxemburg showed its combative spirit and was ready to take over responsibility. Seeing that in reality "*Bebel himself has already become senile, and lets things slide; he feels relieved if others struggle, but he himself has neither the energy nor the drive to take the initiative. K [Kautsky] restricts himself to theory, nobody takes on any responsibility.*"⁵⁶ "*This means the party is in a bad way [...] Nobody leads it, nobody takes on responsibility.*" The left wing aimed at gaining more influence and was convinced of the need to act as the

spearhead. Luxemburg wrote to Jogiches: "*Only one year of perseverant, positive work, and my position will be great. At the moment I cannot restrict the sharpness in my speeches, because we have to defend the most extreme position.*"⁵⁷ This influence, however, was not to be achieved at the price of a watering down of positions.

Convinced of the need for a determined leadership, and recognising that she would be facing the resistance of the hesitant, she wanted to push the party. "*A person, moreover who does not belong to the ruling clique [Sippschaft], who won't rely on anyone's support but uses nothing but her own elbows, a person feared for the future not only by obvious opponents like Auer and Co. but even by allies (Bebel, Kautsky, Singer), a person best kept at arm's length because she may grow several heads too tall? [...] I have no intention of limiting myself to criticism. On the contrary, I have every intention and urge to 'push' positively, not individuals but the movement as a whole... point out new ways, fighting, acting as a gadfly – in a word, a chronic incentive for the whole movement.*"⁵⁸ In October 1905 Luxemburg was offered the opportunity to participate in the editorial board of *Vorwärts*. She was intransigent on a possible censorship of her positions. "*If because of my articles there is a conflict with the leadership or with the editorial board, then I should not be the only one to leave the editorial board, but the whole left would show solidarity and leave Vorwärts, then the editorial board would be blown up.*" For a short spell the left gained some influence.

The decline of proletarian life in the SPD

The process of degeneration of the Party was not only marked by open attempts to abandon its programmatic positions, and by the lack of fighting spirit in broad sections of the Party. Beneath the surface lay a constant under-current of petty spite and personal denigration directed at those who defended most intransigently the organisation's principles and disturbed the façade of unity. Kautsky's attitude towards Luxemburg's criticism of Bernstein, for example, was ambivalent. Despite his friendly relations with Luxemburg he could nonetheless write to Bernstein: "*That spiteful creature Luxemburg is unhappy with the truce until the publication of your pamphlet, every day she presents another pinprick on 'tactics'*"⁵⁹

At times, as we will see, this under-current would break through the surface in slanderous accusations and personal attacks.

It was above all the right which reacted by personalising and scapegoating the "enemy" within the party. When a clarification of the profound divergences through an open confrontation was needed, the right – instead of coming forward with arguments in a debate, shied away and instead began slandering the most prominent members of the left.

Showing a clear feeling of inferiority on a theoretical level, they spread slanderous innuendo about Luxemburg in particular, making male chauvinist comments and insinuations about her "unhappy" emotional life and social relations (her relationship with Leo Jogiches was not known to the party): "*this clever spiteful old maid will also come to Hanover. I respect her and consider her to be stronger than Parvus. But she hates me from the bottom of her heart.*"⁶⁰

The right wing party secretary Ignaz Auer admitted to Bernstein: "*Even if we are not equal to our opponents, because not everyone is able to play a big role, we stand our ground against the rhetoric and the rude remarks. But if there was a 'clean' divorce, which nobody by the way considers seriously, Clara [Zetkin] and Rosa would be left on their own. Not even their [lovers] would take their defence, neither their former nor their present ones.*"⁶¹

The same Auer did not hesitate to use xenophobic tones, saying that the "*main attacks against Bernstein and his supporters and against Schippel were not by German comrades, and did not come out of the German movement. The activities of these people, in particular of Mrs. Rosa Luxemburg were disloyal, and not nice amongst comrades.*"⁶² These kinds of xenophobic tones – especially against Luxemburg, who was of Jewish origin – became a permanent feature in the right's campaign, which was to become increasingly vicious in the years leading up to World War I.⁶³

55. Rosa Luxemburg, *Ges. Werke* BDI 1/1, S. 255, *Nachbetrachtungen zum Parteitag 12-14. Oktober 1898*, *Sächsische Arbeiter-Zeitung* Dresden.

56. Rosa Luxemburg, *Ges. Briefe*, Bd 1, p. 279, Letter to Leo Jogiches, 3.3.1899.

57. Rosa Luxemburg, *Ges. Briefe* Bd 1, p. 384, Letter to Leo Jogiches, 24.9.1899.

58. Rosa Luxemburg, *Ges. Briefe*, Bd 1, p. 322, Letter to Jogiches, 1.5.1899.

59. Kautsky to Bernstein, 29.10.1898, IISG,

Amsterdam, Kautsky-Nicholas, C 210.

60. Laschitzka, *ibid.*, p. 129, (Ignatz Auer in a letter to Bernstein). In his *Histoire générale du socialisme*, Jacques Droz describes Auer as follows: "*He was a 'practical', a 'reformist' in practice who gloried in knowing nothing about theory, but nationalist to the point of praising the annexation of Alsace-Lorraine before socialist audiences and opposing the reconstitution of Poland, cynical to the point of rejecting the authority of the International; in reality he gave cover to the line of the Sozialistische Monatshefte and actively encouraged the development of reformism*" (p41).

61. Laschitzka, *ibid.*, p. 130.

62. Laschitzka, *ibid.*, p. 136, in *Sächsische Arbeiterzeitung*, 29.11.1899.

63. Rosa Luxemburg was aware of the hostility

The right wing of the party even wrote satirical comments or texts on Luxemburg.⁶⁴ Luxemburg and other figures on the left had already been targeted in a particularly vile manner in Poland. Paul Frölich reports in his biography of Luxemburg, that many slanders were levelled against left figures such as Warski and Luxemburg. Luxemburg was accused of being paid by the Warsaw police officer Markgrafski, when she published an article on the question of national autonomy; she was also accused of being a paid agent of the Okhrana, the Russian secret police.⁶⁵

Rosa Luxemburg started to feel sickened by the atmosphere in the party. "Each closer contact with the gang of the Party creates such a feeling of unease, that each time I am determined to say: three sea miles away from the lowest point of low-tide! After having been together with them I smell so much dirt, I sense so much weakness of character, so much shabbiness, that I rush back to my mouse hole."⁶⁶

This was in 1899, but 10 years later, her opinion of the behaviour of some of the party's leading figures had not improved:

towards her at a very early stage. At the Hanover party congress in 1899 the leadership had not wanted to let her speak on the question of customs. She described their attitude in a letter to Jogiches: "We had better have this sorted out in the Party, i.e. in the clan. This is the way things work with them: If the house is burning, they need a scapegoat (a Jew), if the fire has been extinguished, the Jew gets kicked out". (Rosa Luxemburg, *Ges. Briefe*, Bd 1, p. 317, Letter to Leo Jogiches, 27.4.1899). Victor Adler wrote to Bebel in 1910 that he had "sufficiently low instincts to get a certain amount of pleasure from what Karl was suffering at the hands of his friends. But it really is too bad – the poisonous bitch will yet do a lot of damage, all the more because she is as clever as a monkey [blitzgescheit] while on the other hand her sense of responsibility is totally lacking and her only motive is an almost perverse desire for self-justification". (Nettl, 1, p. 432, unabridged version, Victor Adler to August Bebel, 5.8.1910).

64. The satirical weekly *Simplicissimus* published a nasty poem directed at Luxemburg:

"Nur eines gibt es was ich wirklich hasse:
Das ist der Volksversammlungsdinerin.
Der Zielbewussten, tintenfrohen Klasse.
Ich bin der Ansicht, dass sie alle spinnen.
Sie taugen nichts im Hause, nichts im Bette.
Mag Fräulein Luxemburg die Nase rümpfen,
Auch sie hat sicherlich – was gilt die Wette? –
Mehr als ein Loch in ihren woll'nen Strümpfen."

Laschitzka, 136, *Simplicissimus*, 4. Jahrgang, Nr. 33, 1899/1900, S. 263).

Roughly translated this goes:

There is only one thing I really hate
That is the popular assembly spokeswoman
The determined ink-glad class
My opinion is that they are all mad
They are not suited to anything in the house, nor
in bed

Miss Luxemburg may wrinkle her nose
Also she surely has - what is the bet? -
More than one hole in her woollen stockings.

65. Frölich, Paul, "Gedanke und Tat", *Rosa Luxemburg*, Dietz-Verlag Berlin, 1990, p. 62.

66. Rosa Luxemburg, *Ges. Briefe* Bd. 1, S. 316, Letter to Leo Jogiches, 27. April 1899.

"After all, try to remain calm and do not forget that apart from the Party leadership and the scoundrels [canaille] of the Zietz type. there are still many beautiful and pure things. Apart from the immediate inhumanity he [Zietz] appears as a painful symptom of general wretchedness, into which our 'leadership' has sunk, a symptom of a frightening terribly poor mental state. Some other time this rotting seaweed will hopefully be swept away by a foaming wave".⁶⁷ And she frequently expressed her indignation at the stifling bureaucratic atmosphere in the Party: "I sometimes feel really miserable here and I feel like running away from Germany. In any Siberian village you care to name there is more humanity than in the whole of German Social Democracy."⁶⁸ This attitude of scapegoating and trying to destroy the reputation of the left was sowing the seeds for her later physical assassination by the Freikorps, who killed Luxemburg in January 1919 under the orders of the SPD. The tone employed against her within the Party prepared the pogrom atmosphere against revolutionaries in the revolutionary wave of 1918-1923. The character assassination which gradually seeped into the Party, and the lack of indignation about it, in particular from the centre, contributed to disarming the party morally.

Censuring and silencing the opposition

In addition to the scapegoating, personalisation and xenophobic attacks the different authorities of the party under the influence of the right began to censor the articles of the left, and of Luxemburg in particular. Above all after 1905, when the question of mass action was on the agenda (see below), the Party increasingly tried to muzzle her and prevent her articles on the question of the mass strike and the Russian experience from being published. Although the left had strongholds in some cities,⁶⁹ the whole right wing of the party apparatus was trying to prevent her from spreading her positions in the Party's central organ *Vorwärts*: "We have regretfully to decline

67. Rosa Luxemburg, *Ges. Briefe*, Bd 3 S. 89, Letter to Clara Zetkin, 29.9.1909.

68. Rosa Luxemburg, *Ges. Briefe*, Bd. 3, p. 268, Letter to Kostja Zetkin, 30.11.1910. These lines were provoked by the philistine reaction within the Party leadership to an article she had written on Tolstoy, which was considered both irrelevant (artistic subjects were not important), and undesirable in the Party press because it praised an artist who was both a Russian and a mystic.

69. Since the Party had a large number of papers, most of which were not under the direct control of the Berlin leadership, it often depended on the attitude of the local editorial board whether articles of the left current were published. The left wing had the biggest audience in Leipzig, Stuttgart, Bremen and Dortmund.

your article since, in accordance with an agreement between the Party executive, the executive commission of the Prussian provincial organization [of the SPD], and the editor, the question of the mass strike is not to be dealt with in *Vorwärts* for the time being."⁷⁰

As we shall see the consequences of the moral decline and the decline in solidarity within the Party were to have a noxious effect when imperialist tensions sharpened and the left insisted on the need to respond with mass action.

Franz Mehring, a well-known and respected figure of the left, was also often attacked. But unlike Rosa Luxemburg he was easily offended, and tended to retire from the struggle when he felt he had been unjustly attacked. For example, before the Party congress in Dresden 1903, Mehring criticised Social Democrats writing in the bourgeois press as being incompatible with Party membership. The opportunists launched a campaign of slander against him. Mehring asked for a Party tribunal, which met and adopted a "mild judgement" against the opportunists. But more and more, as he came under increasing pressure from the right, Mehring tended to withdraw from the Party press. Luxemburg insisted that he should stand up to the pressure from the right and to their slanders: "You will surely feel that we are increasingly approaching times when the masses in the Party will need energetic, ruthless and generous leadership, and that without you our powers-that-be – executive, central organ, Reichstag caucus, and the 'scientific paper', will become continually more wretched, small-minded and cowardly. Clearly we shall have to face up to this attractive future, and we must occupy and hold all those positions which make it possible to spike the official leadership's guns by exercising the right to criticise. [...] This makes it our duty to stick it out and not do the official Party bosses the favour of packing up. We have to accept continual struggles and friction, particularly when anyone attacks that holy of holies, parliamentary cretinism, as strongly as you have done. But in spite of all – not to give an inch seems to be the right slogan. Neue Zeit must not be handed over entirely to senility and officialdom."⁷¹

The watershed of 1905

As the new century opened, the foundation on which revisionists and reformists alike had built their theory and practice began to crumble.

Superficially, and despite occasional

70. Nettl 1 p. 421 (unabridged edition).

71. Nettl, 1, p. 464 (unabridged edition).

setbacks, the capitalist economy still appeared to be in robust health, continuing its unstoppable expansion across the last regions still unoccupied by the imperialist powers, notably Africa and China. The expansion of capitalism across the globe had reached a stage where the imperialist powers could only expand their influence at the cost of their rivals. All the great powers were increasingly involved in an unprecedented arms race, with Germany in particular engaged in a massive programme of naval expansion. Though few realised at the time, the year 1905 marked a watershed: a dispute between two great powers led to large-scale war, and the war in turn led to the first massive revolutionary upsurge of the working class.

The war, begun in 1904, was fought between Russia and Japan for control of the Korean peninsula. Russia suffered a humiliating defeat, and the strikes of January 1905 were a direct reaction against the effects of the war. For the first time in history, a gigantic wave of mass strikes shook an entire country. The phenomenon was not confined to Russia. Although not as massively and with a different background and different demands, similar strike movements broke out in a series of other European countries: 1902 in Belgium, 1903 in the Netherlands, 1905 in the Ruhr area in Germany. A number of massive wildcat strikes also took place in the United States between 1900 and 1906 (notably in the Pennsylvania coal mines). In Germany, Rosa Luxemburg – both as a revolutionary agitator and journalist for the German Party, and as a member of the SDKPiL's Central Committee⁷² – had been following attentively the struggles in Russia and Poland.⁷³ In December 1905, she felt that she could no longer remain in Germany as a mere observer, and left for Poland to participate directly in the movement. Closely involved in the day-to-day

72. Social-Democracy of the Kingdom of Poland and Lithuania (*Socjaldemokracja Królestwa Polskiego i Litwy* – SDKPiL). The Party was formed in 1893 as the Social Democracy of the Kingdom of Poland (SDKP), its best-known leading members being Rosa Luxemburg, Leo Jogiches, Julian Marchlewski, and Adolf Warszawski. It became the SDKPiL following the merger with the Union of Workers in Lithuania led by Feliks Dzierzhinsky among others. One of the SDKPiL's most important distinguishing characteristics was its steadfast internationalism and its conviction that Polish national independence was not in the workers' interests, and that the Polish workers' movement should on the contrary ally itself closely with the Russian Social-Democracy and the Bolsheviks in particular. This set it permanently at odds with the Polish Socialist Party (*Polska Partia Socjalistyczna* – PPS) which adopted a more and more nationalist orientation under the leadership of Josef Pilsudski, later (not unlike Mussolini) to become dictator of Poland.

73. Poland, it should be remembered, did not exist as a separate country. The major part of historic Poland was part of the Tsarist empire, while other parts had been absorbed by Germany and Austria-Hungary.

process of class struggle and revolutionary agitation, she witnessed at first hand the newly unfolding dynamic of the mass strikes.⁷⁴ Together with other revolutionary forces she began to draw the lessons. At the same time as Trotsky wrote his famous book on 1905 where he highlighted the role of the workers' councils, Luxemburg in her text *Mass Strike, Party and Trade Unions*⁷⁵ underlined the historical significance of the "birth of the mass strike" and its consequences for the working class internationally. Her text on the mass strike was a first programmatic text of the left currents in the 2nd International, aimed at drawing the broader lessons and highlighting the importance of autonomous, massive action of the working class.⁷⁶

Luxemburg's theory of the mass strike went completely against the vision of class struggle generally accepted by the Party and the trade unions. For the latter, class struggle was almost like a military campaign, in which confrontation should only be sought once the army had built up an overwhelming strength, while the Party and union leaderships were to act as a general staff with the masses of workers manoeuvring according to orders. This was a long way from Luxemburg's insistence on the creative self-activity of the masses, and any idea that the workers themselves might act independently of the leadership was anathema to the union bosses, who in 1905 were faced for the first time with the prospect of being overrun by just such a massive wave of autonomous struggles. The reaction of the right wing of the SPD and the union leadership was simply to ban any discussion of the issue. At the unions' May 1905 Congress in Köln they rejected any discussion on the mass strike as "reprehensible"⁷⁷ (*verwerflich*) and went on to say that "The TU congress recommends all organised workers to energetically oppose this [propagation of the mass strike]". This heralded the cooperation between the ruling class and the SPD and unions in fighting revolution.

The German bourgeoisie had also followed the movement attentively, and wanted above all to prevent German workers from "copying the Russian example". Because of her speech on the mass strike

74. She was arrested in March 1906, together with Leo Jogiches who had also returned to Poland. There were serious fears for her safety, with the SDKPiL making it known that they would take physical reprisals against government agents should any harm befall her. A mixture of subterfuge and help from her family managed to extricate her from the Tsarist gaols, whence she returned to Germany. Jogiches was sentenced to eight years hard labour, but succeeded in escaping from prison.

75. The full text can be found on marxists.org.

76. See the series of articles on 1905 in the *International Review* n's 120, 122, 123, 125.

77. Rosa Luxemburg, *Ges. Werke*, Bd 2, p. 347.

at the SPD's 1905 Congress in Jena, Rosa Luxemburg was accused of "incitation to violence" (*Aufreizung zu Gewalttätigkeit*) and was sentenced to two months in prison. Kautsky meanwhile tried to play down the significance of the mass strikes, insisting they were above all a product of primitive Russian conditions, which could not be applied to an advanced country like Germany. He used "the term 'Russian method' as a symbol for lack of organisation, primitiveness, chaos, wildness".⁷⁸ In his 1909 book *The Road to Power*, Kautsky claimed that "mass action is an obsolete strategy of overthrowing the enemy" and contrasted it with his proposed "strategy of attrition" (*Ermattungsstrategie*).⁷⁹

The mass party against the mass strike

Refusing to consider the mass strike as a perspective for the working class across the world, Kautsky attacked Luxemburg's position as if it were merely a personal whim. Kautsky wrote to Luxemburg: "I do not have the time to explain to you the reasons which Marx and Engels, Bebel and Liebknecht accepted as substantive. Briefly, what you want is a totally new kind of agitation, which we have always rejected so far. But this new agitation is of such a kind that it is not advisable to debate this in public. If we publish the article you would act on your own account, as an individual person, and proclaim a totally new agitation and action, which the Party has always rejected. A single person, no matter how high her standing may be, cannot act on her own account and make a fait accompli, which would have unpredictable consequences for the Party."⁸⁰

Luxemburg rejected the attempt to present the analysis and importance of the mass strike as a "personal policy".⁸¹ Even though revolutionaries must acknowledge the existence of different conditions in different countries, they must above all grasp the global dynamic of the changing conditions of the class struggle, in particular those tendencies which herald the future. Kautsky opposed the "Russian experience" as an expression of Russia's backwardness, indirectly refusing international solidarity and spreading a viewpoint imbued with

78. Rosa Luxemburg, "Das Offiziösentum der Theorie", *Ges. Werke* Bd. 3, p. 307, article published in *Neue Zeit*, 1912.

79. The debate between Kautsky, Luxemburg and Pannekoek has been published in French under the title *Socialisme, la voie occidentale*, Presses Universitaires de France.

80. Rosa Luxemburg, *Ges. Werke*, Bd. 2, S. 380, "Theorie und die Praxis", published in *Neue Zeit*, 28. Jg. 1909/1910, in reply to Kautsky's article "Was nun?".

81. Rosa Luxemburg, "Die Theorie und Praxis", *Ges. Werke*, Bd 2, S. 398.

national prejudice, pretending that the workers in Germany with their powerful trade unions were more advanced and their methods “superior” ... i.e. at a time when the trade union leadership was already blocking the mass strike and autonomous action! And when Luxemburg was sent to jail for propagating the mass strike, Kautsky and his followers showed no sign of outrage and did not protest.

Luxemburg, who could not be silenced by such attempts at censorship, reproached the party leadership for focussing their entire attention on preparing the elections. “*All questions of tactics should be drowned out by the delirium of joy over our present and future electoral successes? Does Vorwärts really believe that the political deepening and reflection of large layers of the Party could be fostered with this permanent atmosphere of hailing future electoral success a year, possibly a year and a half, before the elections and by silencing any self-critique in the Party?*”⁸²

Apart from Rosa Luxemburg, Anton Pannekoek was the most vocal critic of Kautsky’s “strategy of attrition”. In his book *Tactical differences in the workers’ movement*⁸³ Pannekoek undertook a systematic and fundamental critique of the “old tools” of parliamentarism and the trade union struggle. Pannekoek was also to be the victim of censorship and repression within the Social Democratic and trade union apparatus, and lost his job at the Party school as a result. Increasingly, both Luxemburg’s and Pannekoek’s articles were censored by the Party press. In November 1911 Kautsky for the first time refused to publish an article by Pannekoek in *Neue Zeit*.⁸⁴

Thus the mass strikes of 1905 forced the SPD leadership to show its real face and oppose any mobilisation of the working class that tried to take up the “Russian experience”. Already, years before the unleashing of the war, the trade union leadership had become a bulwark for capitalism. Under the pretext of taking different conditions of the

82. Rosa Luxemburg, *Ges. Werke*, Bd. 3, S. 441 “Die totgeschwiegene Wahlrechtsdebatte” (“The concealed debate about electoral rights”) 17.8.1910.

83. Published in English under the title *Marxist theory and revolutionary tactics*.

84. At the time another major voice of the left in Holland, Herman Gorter, wrote to Kautsky. “*Tactical divergences often entail an estrangement between friends. In my case as far as my relationship with you is concerned, this is not true; as you have noticed. Although you often criticised Pannekoek and Rosa, with whom I agree in general (and you thus also criticised me) I have always maintained the same kind of relationship with you.*” (Gorter, Letter to Kautsky, Dec. 1914, Kautsky Archive IISG, DXI 283, quote in *Herman Gorter*, Herman de Liagre Böhl, Nijmegen, 1973, p. 105). “*Out of old love and admiration in the Tribune we always abstained as much as possible from fighting against you*” (ibid). (*De Tribune* was the publication of the left at that time).

class struggle into account, in reality this was used to reject international solidarity, with the right wing forces within Social Democracy trying to provoke fears and even whip up national resentment about “Russian radicalism”. This was going to be an important ideological weapon in the war which started a few years later. Thus after 1905 the centre, which had been wavering until then, gradually became more and more pulled over towards the right. The inability and unwillingness of the centre to support the struggle of the left in the Party meant that the left became more and more isolated within the Party.

As Luxemburg pointed out, “*The practical effect of comrade Kautsky’s intervention is reduced to this: he has provided a theoretical cover to those in the Party and the unions who observe the impetuous growth of the mass movement with growing unease, and would like to bring it to a halt as soon as possible and return the struggle to well-worn and comfortable old rut of union and parliamentary activity. Kautsky has provided them with a remedy to their scruples of conscience, under the aegis of Marx and Engels; at the same time he has offered them a means to break the back of a movement of demonstrations that he supposedly wanted to make ‘ever more powerful’.*”⁸⁵

The threat of war and the International

The 2nd International’s 1907 Stuttgart Congress tried to draw the lessons of the Russo-Japanese war and to throw the weight of the organised working class into the balance against the growing menace of war. Some 60,000 people took part in a demonstration – with speakers from more than a dozen countries warning of the danger of war. August Bebel proposed a resolution against the danger of war, which avoided the question of militarism as an integral part of the capitalist system and made no mention of the struggle of the workers in Russia against war. The German Party intended to avoid being tied by any prescriptions as to its action in the event of war, in the form of a general strike above all. Lenin, Luxemburg and Martov together proposed a more robust amendment to the resolution: “*Should war break out in spite of all this, it is [the Socialist Parties’] duty to intercede for its speedy end, and to strive with all their power to make use of the violent economic and political crisis brought about by the war to rouse the people, and thereby to hasten the abolition of capitalist class rule.*”⁸⁶ The Stuttgart congress voted

85. In *Socialisme, la voie occidentale*, p123.

86. Netti, I, p. 401 (unabridged edition).

unanimously for this resolution, but afterwards the majority of the 2nd International failed to strengthen their opposition to the increasing war preparations. The Stuttgart Congress entered into history as an example of verbal declarations without action by most of the attending parties.⁸⁷ But it was an important moment of cooperation amongst the left wing currents, who despite their differences on many other questions took up a common stand against the question of war.

In February 1907 Karl Liebknecht published his book *Militarism and Antimilitarism with special attention to the international youth movement*, in which he denounced in particular the role of German militarism. In October 1907 he was sentenced to 18 months of imprisonment for high treason. Yet in the same year, the leading right wing figure in the SPD, Noske, declared in a speech in the Reichstag, that in case of a “war of defence” Social Democracy would support the government and “*defend the fatherland with great passion... Our attitude towards the military is determined by our view on the national question. We demand the autonomy of each nation. But this means that we also insist on the preservation of the autonomy of the German people. We are fully aware that it is our duty and obligation to make sure that the German people are not pushed against the wall by some other people.*”⁸⁸ This was the same Noske who in 1918 was to become, in his own words, “the bloodhound” of SPD-led repression against the workers.

Selling internationalism for electoral success

In 1911 Germany’s despatch of the destroyer *Panther* to Agadir provoked the second Moroccan Crisis with France. The SPD leadership renounced any anti-militarist action in order to avoid putting at risk its electoral success in the upcoming 1912 election. When Luxemburg denounced this attitude, the SPD leadership accused her of betraying Party secrets. In August 1911 after much hesitation and attempts

87. One major weakness of the more militant declarations was the idea of simultaneous action. Thus the Belgian socialist youth guard adopted a resolution: “*it is the duty of the socialist parties and trade unions of all countries to oppose war. The most effective means of this opposition are the general strike and insubordination in response to the war mobilisation.*” (*The danger of war and the Second International*, J. Jemnitz, p. 17). But these means were to be made use of only if they were adopted simultaneously in all countries, in other words intransigent internationalism and antimilitaristic action were made conditional on everyone sharing the same position.

88. Fricke, Dieter, *Handbuch zur Geschichte der deutschen Arbeiterbewegung*, 1869 bis 1917; Dietz-Verlag, Berlin, 1987, p. 120.

to avoid the question, the Party leadership distributed a leaflet which was meant to be a protest against the Morocco policy of German imperialism. The leaflet was strongly criticised by Luxemburg in her article "Our leaflet on Morocco",⁸⁹ unaware as she wrote that Kautsky was the author. Kautsky replied with a very personalised attack. Luxemburg fought back: Kautsky, she said, had presented her critique as "a malicious, back-stabbing, perfidious attack against [Kautsky] as a person. [...] Comrade Kautsky will hardly be able to doubt my courage to face someone in an open manner; to criticise or fight against someone directly. I have never attacked a person from ambush and I strongly reject the suggestion of comrade Kautsky that I knew who had written the leaflet and that I had – without naming him – targeted him. [...] but I would have taken care not to begin an unnecessary polemic with a comrade who overreacts with such a flood of personal vituperation, bitterness and suspicion against a strictly factual, although strong critique, and who suspects a personal, nasty, bitchy intention behind each word of critique."⁹⁰ At the Jena Party congress in September 1911, the Party leadership circulated a special pamphlet against Rosa Luxemburg, full of attacks against her, accusing her of breaching confidentiality and of having informed the International Socialist Bureau of the 2nd International of the SPD's internal correspondence.

Kautsky deserts the struggle against war

Although in his 1909 book on *The Road to Power* Kautsky warned that "the world war is coming dangerously close", in 1911 he predicted, that "everyone will become a patriot" once war breaks out. And that if Social Democracy decided to swim against the current, it would be torn apart by the enraged mob. He placed his hopes for peace on the "countries representing European civilisation" forming a United States of Europe. At the same time he began to develop his theory of "super-imperialism"; underlying this theory was the idea that imperialist conflict was not an inevitable consequence of capitalist expansion but merely a "policy" which enlightened capitalist states could choose to reject. Kautsky already thought that the war would relegate class contradictions to the background and the proletariat's mass action would be doomed to failure, that – as he would say when war broke out – the International was only good for peace time. This attitude of being aware

89. Rosa Luxemburg, *Ges. Werke*, Bd. 3, S. 34, published in *Leipziger Volkszeitung*, 26.8.1911.
90. Rosa Luxemburg, *Ges. Werke*, Bd. 3, S. 43, published in *Leipziger Volkszeitung*, 30.8.1911.

of the danger of war but bowing to the dominant nationalist pressure and shying away from a determined struggle disarmed the working class and paved the way for the betrayal of the interests of the proletariat. Thus on the one hand Kautsky minimised the real explosiveness of imperialist tensions in his theory of "super-imperialism" and so completely failed to perceive the ruling classes' determination to prepare for war; while on the other he pandered to the nationalist ideology of the government (and increasingly of the right wing in the SPD also) rather than confronting it, out of fear for the SPD's electoral success. His backbone, his fighting spirit, had disappeared.

When a determined denunciation of the war preparations was needed, and while the left wing did its best to organise anti-war public meetings which attracted participants in their thousands, the SPD leadership was mobilising to the hilt for the upcoming 1912 parliamentary elections. Luxemburg denounced the self-imposed silence on the danger of war as an opportunistic attempt to score more parliamentary seats, sacrificing internationalism in order to gain more votes.

In 1912 the threat to peace posed by the Second Balkan War led the ISB to organise an emergency special Congress held in November in Basel, Switzerland, with the specific aim of mobilising the international working class against the imminent danger of war. Luxemburg criticised the fact that the German Party had merely tail-ended the German unions who had organised a few low-key protests, arguing that the Party as a political organ of the working class had done no more than pay lip-service to the denunciation of war. Whereas a few parties in other countries had reacted more vigorously, the SPD, the biggest workers' party in the world, had essentially withdrawn from the agitation and abstained from mobilising further protests. The Basel congress, which once again ended with a big demonstration and appeals for peace, in fact masked the rottenness and future betrayal of many of its member parties.

On June 3rd 1913, the SPD parliamentary fraction voted in favour of a special military tax: 37 SPD deputies who opposed the vote in favour were reduced to silence by the principle of the discipline of the parliamentary fraction. The open breach with the previous motto of "not a single man, not a single penny" for the system prepared the parliamentary fraction's vote for war credits in August 1914.⁹¹ The moral decline of the party was also revealed through Bebel's reaction. In 1870/71 August Bebel – together with Wilhelm Liebknecht (Karl

91. Luxemburg, *Ges. Werke*, Bd 3, S. 11.

Liebknecht's father) – distinguished himself by his determined opposition to the Franco-Prussian war. Now, four decades later, Bebel failed to take up a resolute stand against the danger of war.⁹²

It was becoming increasingly clear that not only was the right going to betray openly, but also that the wavering centrists had lost all fighting spirit and would fail to oppose the preparation for war in a determined manner. The attitude defended by the most famous representative of the "centre", Kautsky, according to which the Party should adapt its position on the question of war following the reactions of the population (passive submission if the majority of the country assented to nationalism or a more resolute stand if there was increasing opposition to war), was justified by the danger of "isolating oneself from the bulk of the Party". When after 1910 the current around Kautsky claimed to be the "Marxist centre" in contrast to the (extremist, radical, unmarxist) left, Luxemburg labelled this "centre" as representatives of cowardice, cautiousness and conservatism.

Their desertion from the struggle, their inability to oppose the right and to follow the left in their determined struggle, helped to disarm the workers. Thus the betrayal of August 1914 by the Party leadership came as no surprise; it was prepared little by little in a piecemeal process. The support for German imperialism became tangible in several votes in parliament to support war credits, in the efforts to curb any protests against the war, in the whole attitude of taking sides with German imperialism and chaining the working class to nationalism and patriotism. The process of muzzling the left wing was crucial in the abandonment of internationalism and prepared the repression of revolutionaries in 1919.

Blinded by numbers and gradually integrated into the state

While the SPD leadership had been focussing its activities on parliamentary elections, the Party itself was blinded by electoral success and lost sight of the final goal of the workers' movement. The Party hailed the apparently uninterrupted growth in voters, in the number of deputies and in the readership of the Party press. The growth was indeed impressive: in 1907 the SPD had 530,000 members; by 1913 the figure had doubled to almost 1.1 million. The SPD in reality was the only mass party of the 2nd

92. "I am in an absolutely preposterous situation – I have to take responsibility thus condemning myself to silence though if I followed my own wishes, I would turn against the leadership myself." (Jemnitz, p. 73, Letter from Bebel to Kautsky). Bebel died of a heart-attack while in a Swiss sanatorium, on 13th August.

International and the biggest single party in any European parliament. This numerical growth gave the illusion of great strength. Even Lenin was remarkably uncritical about the “impressive figures” of members, voters and the impact of the party.⁹³

Although it is impossible to establish a mechanical relationship between political intransigence and electoral scores, the 1907 elections, when the SPD still condemned the barbaric repression of German imperialism against the Herero risings in South-West Africa, led to an electoral “set-back”, as the SPD lost 38 parliamentary seats and was left with 43 seats ‘only’. Despite the fact that the SPD’s share of the overall vote had actually risen, in the eyes of the Party leadership this electoral set-back meant that the Party had been punished by the voters, and above all by the voters of the petty bourgeoisie, because of its denunciation of German imperialism. The conclusion they drew was that the SPD should avoid opposing imperialism and nationalism too strongly, as this would cost votes. Instead the Party would have to focus all its forces on campaigning for the next elections, even if this meant censoring its discussions and avoiding anything which might put its electoral score at risk. In the 1912 elections the party scored 4.2 million votes (38.5% of the votes cast) and won 110 seats. It had become the biggest single parliamentary group, but only by burying internationalism and the principles of the working class. In the local parliaments it had more than 11,000 deputies. The SPD boasted 91 newspapers and 1.5 million subscribers. In the 1912 elections, the SPD’s integration into the game of parliamentary politics went one step further when it withdrew candidates in several constituencies to the benefit of the *Fortschrittliche Volkspartei* (Progressive People’s Party), even though this party supported unconditionally the policy of German imperialism. Meanwhile the *Sozialistische Monatshefte* (in principle a non-Party publication, but in effect the revisionists’ theoretical organ) openly supported Germany’s colonial policy and

93. In an article “Partei und breite Schicht” he wrote: “There are about a million Party members in Germany today. The Social Democrats there receive about 4,250,000 votes and there are about 15,000,000 proletarians. (...) One million – that is the party, one million in the party organisations; 4,250,000 is the ‘broad section’”. He stressed that “In Germany, for example, about one-fifteenth of the class is organised in the Party; in France about a hundred-and-fortieth part. In Germany there are four or five Social Democrats of the ‘broad section’ to every Party member; in France there are fourteen”. Lenin added: “The party is the politically conscious, advanced section of the class, it is its vanguard. The strength of that vanguard is ten times, a hundred times, more than a hundred times, greater than its numbers... Organisation increases its strength tenfold” (September 1913, in “How Vera Sassulitch demolishes liquidationism”. Lenin, *Collected Works*, vol. 19).

the claims of German imperialism for a redistribution of colonies.

In fact the full mobilisation of the party for parliamentary elections went hand in hand with its gradual integration into the state apparatus. The indirect vote for the budget in July 1910,⁹⁴ the increasing cooperation with bourgeois parties (which had up to then been taboo), such as abstaining from nominating candidates in some constituencies in order to make possible the election of MPs of the bourgeois *Fortschrittliche Volkspartei*, the nomination of a candidate for the mayoral elections in Stuttgart – these were some of the steps on the road to the SPD’s direct participation in running the state administration.

This whole trend towards a growing interconnection between the SPD’s parliamentary activities and its identification with the state was castigated by the left, in particular by Anton Pannekoek and Luxemburg. Pannekoek dedicated a whole book to the *Tactical differences within the workers’ movement*. Luxemburg, who was extremely alert to the suffocating effect of parliamentarism, pressed for initiative and action from the rank and file: “the most ideal party executive would be able to achieve nothing, would involuntarily sink into bureaucratic inefficiency, if the natural source of its energy, the will of the Party, does not make itself felt, if critical thought, the initiative of the mass of the Party’s membership is sleeping. In fact it is more than this. If its own energy, the independent intellectual life of the mass of the Party, is not active enough, then the central authorities have the quite natural tendency to not only bureaucratically rust but also to get a totally wrong idea of their own official authority and position of power with respect to the Party. The most recent so-called ‘secret decree’ of our Party executive to the Party editorial staffs can serve as fresh proof, an attempt to make decisions for the Party press, which cannot be sharply enough rejected. However, here also it is necessary to make it clear: against both inefficiency and excessive illusions of power of the central authorities of the labour movement there is no other way except one’s own initiative, one’s own thought, and the fresh, pulsating political life of the broad mass of the Party.”⁹⁵

Indeed, Luxemburg constantly insisted on the need for the mass of the Party members to “wake up” and take up their responsibility against the degenerating Party leadership. “The big masses [of the Party] have to activate themselves in

their own way, must be able to develop their own mass energy, their own drive, they have to become active as a mass, act, show and develop passion, courage and determination.”⁹⁶

“Every step forward in the struggle for emancipation of the working class must at the same time mean a growing intellectual independence of its mass, its growing self-activity, self-determination and initiative [...] It is vitally important for the normal development of the political life in the Party, to keep the political thought and the will of the mass of the Party awake and active... We have, of course, the yearly Party conference as the highest instance which regularly fixes the will of the whole party. However, it is obvious that the Party conferences can only give general outlines of the tactics for the Social Democratic struggle. The application of these guidelines in practice requires untiring thought, quick-wittedness and initiative [...] To want to make a Party executive responsible for the whole enormous task of daily political vigilance and initiative, on whose command a Party organisation of almost a million passively waits, is the most incorrect thing there is from the standpoint of the proletarian class struggle. This is without doubt that reprehensible ‘blind obedience’ which our opportunists definitely want to see in the self-evident subordination of all to the decisions of the whole party.”⁹⁷

“Fraction discipline” strangles individual responsibility

On 4th August 1914, the SPD parliamentary fraction voted unanimously for war credits. The Party leadership and parliamentary fraction had demanded “fraction discipline”. The censorship (state censorship or self-censorship?) and false unity of the Party followed their own logic, the very opposite of personal responsibility. The process of degeneration meant that the capacity for critical thinking and opposition to the false unity of the Party had been eliminated. The moral values of the Party were sacrificed on the altar of capital. In the name of Party discipline the Party demanded the abandoning of proletarian internationalism. Karl Liebknecht, whose father had dared to reject the support for the war credits in 1870, now bowed to Party pressure. It was only a few weeks later, following a first regrouping of comrades who had remained loyal to internationalism, that he dared to express openly his

96. Rosa Luxemburg, *Ges. Werke*, Bd. 3, S. 253, “Taktische Fragen”, June 1913.

97. “Again on the masses and the leaders”, op.cit.

94. Rosa Luxemburg, *Ges. Werke*, Bd 2, p. 378.

95. Rosa Luxemburg, “Again on the masses and the leaders”, August 1911, originally published in the *Leipziger Volkszeitung*.

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On the nature and the function of the political party of the proletariat

ICC introduction

The document we are publishing below first appeared in 1947 in the pages of *Internationalisme*, the press of the small group Gauche Communiste de France (Communist Left of France), to which (amongst others) the ICC has traced its origins since its foundation in 1975. It was reprinted at the beginning of the 1970s in the *Bulletin d'études et de discussion* published by the French group Révolution Internationale, later to become the section in France of the newly formed International Communist Current. The *Bulletin* was itself the precursor of the ICC's theoretical organ, the *International Review*, and its aim was to give the young group – and its very young militants – a more solid anchorage, through theoretical reflection and a better knowledge of the workers' movement, including the history of the movement's confrontation with new theoretical questions posed by history.¹

The text's main object is to examine the historical conditions which determine the formation and the activity of revolutionary organisations. The very idea of such determination is fundamental. Although the creation and survival of a revolutionary organisation is the fruit of a militant will, aiming to be an active factor in history, the form that this will take does

1. Today we share all the key ideas presented in this text and in most cases can support them to the letter. This is especially true for its insistence on the fundamental and irreplaceable role of the political party of the proletariat for the victory of the revolution. However, the following expression in the text does not provide the best way of understanding the dynamic of the development of the class struggle and the relations between party and class: "*Left to their own internal development, the workers' struggles against the conditions of capitalist exploitation can lead at most to the explosion of revolts*". In fact, historical experience has shown the revolutionary capacities of the class, in particular the fact that the combination of the economic with the political dimensions of the struggle can mutually dynamise each other. To be more precise about the role of revolutionaries, it is not to bring consciousness to the workers but to accelerate, to extend and deepen, the development of consciousness within the class. For more elements relating to our position on this subject, we refer readers to the following articles: 'The mass strike opens the door to the proletarian revolution', *International Review* n° 90 (part of the series on communism): <http://en.internationalism.org/internationalreview/199711/5365/1905-mass-strike-opens-door-proletarian-revolution> and 'Questions of organisation: have we become 'Leninists'?' in *IR* n° 96 and 97. <http://en.internationalism.org/ir/96/leninists>; <http://en.internationalism.org/ir/97/leninists2>

Internationalisme introduction

Our group has taken on the task of re-examining the major problems posed by the need to re-constitute a new revolutionary workers' movement. It has had to consider the evolution of capitalist society towards state capitalism, and of the old workers' movement which for some time has served to support the capitalist class and help drag the proletariat behind the latter; it has also had to look at what, in this old workers' movement, provided material which the capitalist class could use to this end, and

how. Then we have been led to reconsider what, within the workers' movement, remains given and what has become outdated since the Communist Manifesto.

Finally, it was quite normal for us to have studied the problems posed by the revolution and socialism. It was with this in mind that we presented a study on the state after the revolution,¹ and that we are now presenting for discussion a study of the

1. Republished, with a new introduction, here: <http://en.internationalism.org/internationalreview/201403/9523/aftermath-world-war-two-debates-how-workers-will-hold-power-after-re>

not come out of the blue, independently of social reality and independently above all of the consciousness and fighting spirit present in the broad masses of the working class. The conception that the creation of a class party depended only on the "will" of the militants has been characteristic of Trotskyism since the 1930s, but also – at the end of World War II – of the newly formed Partito Comunista Internazionalista, the precursor of the various Bordigist groups and of today's International Communist Tendency (ex-IBRP). *Internationalisme's* article insists, rightly in our view, that we have here two fundamentally different conceptions of political organisation: the one, voluntarist and idealist; the other, materialist and marxist. At best, the voluntarist conception could only engender congenital opportunism – as was the case for the PCInt and its descendants; at worst, as with the Trotskyists, it led to conciliation with the bourgeoisie and going over to the enemy camp.

For the young post-'68 generation, the importance of historical and theoretical reflection on this issue is obvious. It was to preserve the ICC (though it did not immunise us, far from it) from the worst effects of the frenzied activism and impatience which were typical of this period, and were to lead so many groups and militants to abandon political activity.

We are deeply convinced that this text remains wholly relevant to this day for a new generation of militants, and especially in its insistence that the working class is not just a sociological category, but a class with a specific role to play in history: to overthrow capitalism and build a communist society². The role of revolutionaries is equally dependent on the historical period: when the situation of the working class means that it is impossible to influence the course of events, the role of revolutionaries is not to ignore reality and pretend that their immediate intervention can change things, but to get down to an apparently much less spectacular task: preparing the theoretical and political conditions for an intervention which will be determinant for the class struggle of the future.

2. The same theoretical reflection underlies another article, 'The tasks of the hour', published in *Internationalisme* in 1946 and re-published in *IR* n° 32: <http://en.internationalism.org/node/3124>.

problem of the revolutionary party of the proletariat. We should remember that this is one of the most important questions in the revolutionary workers' movement. This question opposed Marx and the marxists to the anarchists, to certain social democratic tendencies and, finally to the revolutionary syndicalist tendencies. It was at the centre of Marx's concerns, and he always retained a critical attitude towards the different organisms which called themselves "workers" or "socialist" parties, Internationals and so on. Although at given moments he participated actively in the life of certain of these organs, Marx always saw them as

political groups within which, following the expression of the Communist Manifesto, communists could express themselves as the “vanguard of the proletariat”. The goal of the communists was to push forward the activity of these organisations while maintaining the capacity for autonomous criticism and activity. Then came the split within the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party between the Menshevik tendency and the Bolsheviks around the ideas developed by Lenin in *What is to be done?* Amongst the marxist groups which had broken from Social-Democracy to form the Communist International, the same problem was at the basis of the opposition between the council communists and the KAPD, and the Third International. It was also in this order of thinking that you have the divergence between the Bordiga group and Lenin around the subject of the “United front” advocated by Lenin and Trotsky and adopted by the Communist International. The same problem remains one of the major disagreements among the different oppositional groups: between “Trotskyists” and “Bordigists”, and indeed it was a subject of discussion among all the groups of the time.

Today, we must critically re-examine all these expressions of the revolutionary workers’ movement. We hope to draw out of this process – i.e. in the expression of different currents of thought on this question – a current which, in our view, will best express the revolutionary standpoint, and thus try to pose the problem for the future revolutionary workers’ movement.

We also need to reconsider critically the points of view which have been brought to bear on this problem, to determine what remains constant in the revolutionary expression of the proletariat, but also what has become obsolete and what new problems have been posed.

It is evident that such work can only bear fruit if it is the object of discussion between and within the groups that aim to reconstitute a new revolutionary workers’ movement.

The study presented here is thus a means to participate in this discussion; it has no other pretension, even though it is presented in the form of theses. Its goal is above all to stimulate discussion and criticism and not to provide definitive solutions. It is a work of research which aims less at acceptance or rejection pure and simple than at stimulating other works of this kind.

The essential focus of this study is the expression of revolutionary consciousness in the proletariat. But there are a number of programmatic questions related to the party which are only touched on here;

organisational problems, problems of the relationship between the party and organisations like the workers’ councils, problems relating to the attitude of revolutionaries faced with the formation of several groups claiming to be THE revolutionary party and trying to build it, the problems posed by the pre- and post-revolutionary tasks, etc.

Therefore militants who understand that the task of the hour is to examine these various problems should intervene actively in this discussion, either through their own papers or bulletins, or in this bulletin, for those who for the time being don’t have such a possibility of expressing themselves.

Socialism and consciousness

1. The idea of the necessity for a political organism acting inside the proletariat for the social revolution seemed to be a given in the socialist workers’ movement.

It is true that the anarchists have always protested against the term “political” which is given to this organism. But this anarchist protest comes from the fact that they understand the term political action in a very narrow sense, since it is synonymous for them with action for legislative reforms: participation in elections and bourgeois parliaments, etc... But neither the anarchists nor any other current in the workers’ movement deny the necessity for the regroupment of revolutionary socialists in associations which, through action and propaganda, take on the task of intervening in and orienting workers’ struggles. And any grouping which gives itself the task of orientating social struggles in a certain direction is a political regroupment.

In this sense, the struggle of ideas around the political or non-political character given to these organisations is only a debate about words, hiding at root, under general phrases, concrete divergences on the orientation and on the aims and the means to achieve them. In other words, precise political divergences.

If new tendencies are emerging today that call into question the necessity for a political organisation of the proletariat, this is a consequence of the degeneration of the parties which were once organisations of the proletariat and of their passage into the service of capitalism: the socialist and communist parties. Political terms and political parties are today suffering from discredit, even within the bourgeois milieu. However, what has led to these resounding weaknesses is not politics but SPECIFIC KINDS of politics. Politics is nothing other than the orientation that men adopt in the organisation of social life; to turn away

from this action means renouncing any determination to give a direction to social life and, consequently, to transform it. It means accepting and submitting to society as it stands.

2. The idea of class is essentially historical-political, not merely an economic classification. Economically, all humans are part of one and the same system of production in a given historical period. The division based upon the distinct positions that men occupy in the same system of production and distribution, and which doesn’t go beyond the framework of this system, cannot become the basis of the historic necessity for overcoming it. Division into economic categories is thus only a moment in the constant internal contradictions that develop with the system but remain circumscribed by its own limitations. Historic opposition is, so to speak, external, in the sense that it is opposed to all of the system taken as a whole, and this opposition is manifested in the destruction of the existing social system and its replacement by another based on a new mode of production. Class is the personification of this historic opposition at the same time as being the social-human force for its realisation.

The proletariat exists as a class in the full sense of the term only in the orientation that it gives to its struggles, not with a view to improving its conditions of life within the capitalist system but in its opposition to the existing social order. The passage from category to class, from the economic struggle to the political, is not an evolutionary process, a continual and inherent development, so that a historic class opposition emerges automatically and naturally after being contained for a long time in the economic position of the workers. There is a dialectical leap one to the other. It consists in the coming to consciousness of the historical necessity for the disappearance of the capitalist system. This historic necessity coincides with the aspiration of the proletariat for liberation from its condition of exploitation and is contained within it.

3. All social transformations in history have, as a fundamentally determining condition, the fact that the development of the productive forces has become incompatible with the restricted structures of the old society. Capitalism’s demise, and the reason for its collapse, lies in its inability to dominate any longer the productive forces that it has developed. This is also the historic justification of its transcendence by socialism.

Apart from this condition, however, the differences between previous revolutions (including the bourgeois revolution) and the socialist revolution remain decisive

and demand a profound study on the part of the revolutionary class.

For the bourgeois revolution for example, the condition for the development of productive forces incompatible with those of feudalism still lay within a system based on the property of a possessing class. As a result, capitalism developed its economic foundation slowly and over a long period inside the feudal world. The political revolution followed the economic fact and consecrated it. Also as a result, the bourgeoisie has no imperious necessity to acquire an awareness of economic and social movement. Its actions are directly propelled by the pressures of the laws of economic development which act upon it as blind forces of nature and determine its will. Its consciousness remains a secondary factor. It comes after the fact. It records events rather than giving direction to them. The bourgeois revolution is situated in this prehistory of humanity where the still undeveloped productive forces dominate man.

Socialism, on the contrary, is based upon the development of productive forces which are incompatible with all individual or social property of a class. From this, socialism cannot be based upon the economic foundations within capitalist society. The political revolution is the condition of a socialist orientation of the economy and of society. And from this, socialism can only be realised through the consciousness of the movement's final goals, the consciousness of the means for realising them and the conscious will for action. Socialist consciousness **precedes and conditions** revolutionary class action. The socialist revolution is the beginning of history where man is called upon to dominate the productive forces which have already been strongly developed, and this domination is precisely the purpose adopted by the socialist revolution.

4. For this reason, all attempts to establish socialism on realisations achieved within capitalist society are by their very nature destined to fail. Socialism demands, in terms of time, an advanced development of the productive forces, and in terms of space, the entire earth: its precondition is the conscious will of men. In the best of cases, the experimental demonstration of socialism within capitalist society cannot go beyond the level of a utopia. And persisting along this route leads to a position of conservation and the strengthening of capitalism.² Socialism within a capitalist

2. This is what happened to all the currents of utopian socialism which, having become schools, lost their revolutionary aspect and were transformed into actively conservative forces. Consider the examples of Proudhonism, Fourierism, the co-operatives, reformism and state socialism.

regime can only be a theoretical demonstration, its materialisation can only take the form of an ideological force, and its realisation can only take place by the revolutionary struggle of the proletariat against the existing social order.

And since the existence of socialism can only find expression first of all in socialist consciousness, the class which bears it and personifies it has a historic existence only through this consciousness. The formation of the proletariat as a historic class is nothing other than the formation of its socialist consciousness. These are the two aspects of the same historic process, inconceivable separately because one cannot exist without the other.

Socialist consciousness does not flow from the economic position of the workers, it is not a reflection of their condition as wage-earners. For this reason, socialist consciousness is not simply and spontaneously formed in the head of every worker or in the heads of workers alone. Socialism as an ideology appears separately from and in parallel with the economic struggles of the workers. They do not engender each other although they influence each other, and the development of each conditions that of the other; both are rooted in the historic development of capitalist society.

The formation of the class party in history

5. If the workers only become "a class in itself and for itself" (according to the expression of Marx and Engels) through socialist consciousness, one can say that the process of the constitution of the class is identified with the process of the formation of groups of revolutionary socialist militants. The party of the proletariat is not a selection or a "delegation" of the class, it is the mode of existence and life of the class itself. No more than one can understand matter apart from its movement, one cannot understand the class apart from its tendency to constitute itself into political organisms: "*The organisation of the proletariat into a class and thus into a political party*" (Communist Manifesto) is no chance formula, but expresses the profound thought of Marx and Engels. A century of experience has masterfully confirmed the validity of this way of seeing the notion of class.

6. Socialist consciousness is not **produced** by spontaneous generation but is constantly **reproduced**; once it has appeared it becomes, in its opposition to the existing capitalist world, the active principle determining and accelerating its own development in and through action. However this development is conditioned

and limited by the development of the contradictions of capitalism. In this sense, Lenin's thesis of "socialist consciousness injected into the workers by the Party" is certainly more precise than Rosa's thesis of the "spontaneity" of the development of consciousness, engendered during the course of a movement that starts with the economic struggle and culminates in a revolutionary socialist struggle. The thesis of "spontaneity", despite its democratic appearances, reveals at root a mechanistic tendency, a rigorous economic determinism. It is based on a cause and effect relationship, with consciousness as merely an effect, the result of an initial movement, i.e., the economic struggle of the workers which gives rise to it. In this view, consciousness is seen as fundamentally passive in relation to the economic struggles which are the active factor. Lenin's conception restores to socialist consciousness and the party which materialises it the character of an essentially active factor and principle. It does not detach itself from life and the movement but is included within it.

7. The fundamental difficulty of the socialist revolution lies in this complex and contradictory situation: on the one hand the revolution can only be made through the **conscious** action of the **great majority** of the working class; on the other hand the development of this consciousness comes up against the conditions to which all workers in capitalist society are subjected, and which endlessly hinder and destroy the workers' consciousness of their revolutionary historic mission. This difficulty can absolutely not be overcome solely through theoretical propaganda independent of the historic conjuncture. But still less than through pure propaganda, will the solution be found in the economic struggles of the workers. Left to their own internal development, the workers' struggles against the conditions of capitalist exploitation can lead at most to the explosion of revolts, in other words negative reactions which are absolutely insufficient for the positive action of social transformation; the latter is made possible only through a consciousness of the aims of the movement. This factor can only be this political element of the class which draws its theoretical substance, not from the contingencies and particularities of the economic position of the workers, but from the unfolding of historic possibilities and necessities. Only the intervention of this factor will make it possible for the class to rise from the level of purely negative reaction to that of positive action, from revolt to revolution.

8. But it would be entirely wrong to want to substitute these organisms, which are expressions of the consciousness and

existence of the class, for the class itself and to consider the class as merely a shapeless mass destined to serve as material for these political organisms. That would be to substitute a militarist conception for a revolutionary one in relations between being and consciousness and between the party and the class. The historic function of the party is not to be a General Staff leading the action of a class which is seen as an army ignorant both of the final aim and the immediate objective of operations. That would be to see its movement as a sum total of manoeuvres.

The socialist revolution is not at all comparable to military action. Its realisation is conditioned by the workers' consciousness that dictates their decisions and actions.

The party does not, then, act in place of the class. It does not demand "confidence" in the bourgeois sense of the word, in other words to have delegated to it the fate and destiny of society. Its sole historic function is to act with a view to allowing the class itself to acquire the consciousness of its mission, of its aims and of the means which are the foundations of its revolutionary action.

9. Just as we must combat this conception of the party as General Staff, acting on behalf of the working class, we must with equal vigour reject the other conception which, on the basis that "*the emancipation of the workers is the work of the workers themselves*" (Inaugural Address of the First International) denies any role to the militant and the revolutionary party. Under the very praiseworthy pretext of not imposing their will on the workers, these militants shirk their tasks, run from their responsibility and leave revolutionaries tailing the workers' movement.

The former puts itself outside the class by denying it and substituting for it, the latter similarly puts itself outside the class by denying the specific function of the class organisation, i.e., the party, by denying their own existence as a factor of revolution and excluding themselves by forbidding themselves any action of their own.

10. A correct understanding of the conditions of the socialist revolution must start from and embody the following elements:

- a) Socialism is a necessity only because the development reached by the productive forces is no longer compatible with a society divided into classes.
- b) This necessity can only become a reality through the will and conscious action of the oppressed class whose social liberation is tied up with the liberation of humanity from its alienation from

the forces of production, to which it has hitherto been subjected.

- c) Socialism, being both an objective necessity and a subjective will, can only be expressed in revolutionary action that is conscious of its aims.
- d) Revolutionary action is inconceivable without a revolutionary programme. Similarly, the elaboration of the programme is inseparable from action. It is because the revolutionary party is a "*body of doctrine and a will to action*" (Bordiga) that it is the most thorough concretisation of socialist consciousness and the fundamental element for its realisation.

11. The tendency towards the constitution of the party of the proletariat appears right from the birth of capitalist society. But as long as the historic conditions for socialism are not sufficiently developed, the ideology of the proletariat regarding the construction of the party can only remain at an embryonic stage. It is only with the "Communist League" that this accomplished form of the political organisation of the proletariat appears for the first time.

When one looks closely at the development of the formation of class parties, it is immediately obvious that the organisation into parties does not follow a constant progression, but on the contrary happens in periods of major development, alternating with others during which the party disappears. Thus the organic existence of the party does not appear to depend solely on the will of the individuals who compose it. Objective conditions determine its existence. The party, being essentially an instrument of revolutionary class action, can only exist in situations where the action of the class comes to the surface. In the absence of the conditions for workers' class action (such as in periods of the economic and political stability of capitalism or following decisive defeats of the workers' struggles) the party cannot continue to exist. Organically it breaks up or else if it wants to exist, in other words to continue to exercise an influence, then it must adapt to the new conditions which deny revolutionary action; inevitably, the party takes on a new content. It becomes conformist, that is to say it ceases to be a party of the revolution.

Marx understood the conditions of the existence of the party better than most. Twice he undertook the dissolution of a great organisation: first in 1851, following the defeat of the revolution and the triumph of the reaction in Europe, and secondly in 1873 after the defeat of the Paris Commune, he was quite openly for the dissolution of the party. The first time it was the Com-

munist League, and the second, the First International.

The task of the hour for revolutionary militants

12. The experience of the Second International confirms the impossibility of maintaining the party of the proletariat during a prolonged period marked by a non-revolutionary situation. The participation of the parties of the Second International in the imperialist war of 1914 only revealed the long corruption of the organisation. The permeability and penetrability of the political organisation of the proletariat to the ideology of the reigning capitalist class, which is always possible, can in long periods of stagnation and reflux of the class struggle assume such an extent that the ideology of the bourgeoisie ends up substituting itself for that of the proletariat, so that inevitably the party is emptied of all its original class content and becomes instead an instrument of the enemy class.

The history of the Communist Parties of the Third International has again shown the impossibility of safeguarding the party in a period of revolutionary reflux and its inevitable degeneration during such a period.

13. For these reasons, the formation of parties, such as the Trotskyist International from 1935, or more recently an Internationalist Communist Party in Italy, is not merely artificial, these can only be enterprises of confusion and opportunism. Instead of being moments in the constitution of the future class party, these formations are obstacles and discredit it by the caricature that they present. Far from expressing a maturation of consciousness and an advance on the old programme that they have transformed into dogmas, they only reproduce the old programme and are imprisoned by these dogmas. Nothing surprising about the fact that these formations take up out of date and backward positions of the old party and worsen them still further, as with the tactics of parliamentarism, trade unionism, etc...

14. But the break in the party's organisational existence does not mean a break in the development of class ideology. In the first place the revolutionary reflux signifies the immaturity of the revolutionary programme. Defeat is a signal for the necessity to critically re-examine previous programmatic positions and the obligation to go beyond them on the basis of the living experience of the struggle.

This positive critical work of programmatic elaboration is pursued through the organisms coming from the old party.

They constitute, in the period of retreat, the active element for the constitution of the future party in a new period of revolutionary upsurge. These organisms are the left groups or fractions coming out of the party after its organisational dissolution or its ideological alienation. Such were: the fraction of Marx in the period between the dissolution of the League and the formation of the First International; the left currents in the Second International (during the First World War) which gave birth to the new Parties and International in 1919; also the Left Fractions and groups who have continued their revolutionary work following the degeneration of the Third International. Their existence and their development is the condition which has enriched the programme of the revolution and the reconstruction of the party of tomorrow.

15. The old party, once it has been seized by and passed into the service of the enemy class, definitively ceases being a milieu in which revolutionary thought can be elaborated and in which militants of the proletariat can be formed. Expecting currents coming from social democracy or Stalinism to serve as material for the construction of a new class party thus means ignoring the very foundation of the idea of the party. The Trotskyists' adherence to the parties of the Second International, or their pursuit of the hypocritical practice of burrowing within these parties with the idea of cultivating, inside this anti-proletarian milieu, "revolutionary" currents with whom they could set up the new party of the proletariat, merely demonstrates that they themselves are a dead current, an expression of the past movement and not that of the future.

Just as the new party of the revolution cannot be set up on the basis of a programme which has been overtaken by events, neither can it be built with elements who remain organically attached to organisms which have forever ceased to be working class.

16. The history of the workers' movement has never known a period which is more sombre and more marked by such a profound retreat in revolutionary consciousness than the present. If the economic exploitation of the workers appears as an absolutely insufficient condition for assuming a consciousness of their historic mission, it turns out that the development of this consciousness is infinitely more difficult than revolutionary militants had previously thought. Perhaps, for the proletariat to recover, humanity will have to undergo the nightmare of a Third World War with the horror of a world in chaos, and the proletariat will have to face a very tangible dilemma: die or save yourself by

revolution before it can find the conditions for recovering both itself and its consciousness.

17. It is not for us here in the framework of this thesis to look for the precise conditions that will allow the re-emergence of proletarian consciousness, nor what will be the conditions for the formation of the unitary organisation that the proletariat will adopt for its revolutionary combat. What we can say categorically, based on the experience of the last thirty years, is that neither economic demands, nor the whole range of so-called "democratic" demands, (parliament, rights of people to self-determination, etc...) can be of use to the historic action of the proletariat. Concerning forms of organisation, it appears as still more evident that it cannot be the unions with their vertical and professional, corporatist structures. All these forms of organisation belong to a past workers' movement and will have to be relegated to the museum of history. But they will have to be abandoned and overtaken in practice. The new organisations will have to be unitary, that is to say inclusive of the great majority of the workers, and go beyond the particular divisions of professional interests. Their basis will be on the social level, their structure the locality. Workers' councils, like those that appeared in 1917 in Russia and 1918 in Germany, were a new type of unitary organisation of the class. It is in these types of workers' councils, and not in the rejuvenation of the unions, that the workers will find the most appropriate form of their organisation.

But whatever the new unitary forms of organisation of the class it changes nothing regarding the problem of the necessity for the political organism which is the party, nor regarding the decisive role that it has to play. The party remains the conscious factor in the action of the class. It is the ideologically vital motor force of the proletariat's revolutionary action. In social action it plays a role similar to that of energy in production. The reconstruction of this organism of the class is conditioned by the appearance of a tendency within the class to break with capitalist ideology as it engages in practice the struggle against the existing regime, while at the same time this reconstruction is a condition for the acceleration and deepening of this struggle and the decisive condition for its triumph.

18. The absence of the conditions required for the construction of the party should not lead to the conclusion that any immediate activity by revolutionary militants is useless or impossible. The militant has not to choose between the hollow "activism" of the party builders and individual isolation, between adventurism and an impotent

pessimism: both must be fought, as being equally foreign to the revolutionary spirit and harmful to the cause of the revolution. We must reject both the voluntarist idea of militant action presented as the sole factor determining the movement of the class, and the mechanical conception of the party as a mere passive reflection of the movement. Militants must consider their action as one of the factors which, in interaction with others, conditions and determines the action of the class. This conception provides the foundation for the necessity and value of the militant's activity, while at the same time setting the limits of its possibilities and impact. Adapting one's activity to the conditions of the present conjuncture is the only means of making this activity efficient and fruitful.

19. The attempt to construct the new class party in all haste and at any cost, despite unfavourable objective conditions springs from both an infantile and adventurist voluntarism and a false appreciation of the situation and its immediate perspectives, as well as, moreover, a totally wrong appreciation of the idea of the party and the relationship between party and class. Thus all such attempts are fatally destined to fail and only manage, in the best of cases, to create opportunist groupings trailing in the wake of the big parties of the Second and Third Internationals. Their existence is henceforth justified solely by the development within them of the spirit of the chapel and the sect.

Thus all these organisations are not only caught up, in their positivity, in the cogs of opportunism through their immediate "activism", they also, in their negativity, produce a narrow spirit typical of the sect, a parochial patriotism, as well as a fearful and superstitious attachment to "leaders", a caricature of the bigger organisations, a deification of organisational rules and submission to a "freely consented" discipline that becomes all the more tyrannical and intolerable in inverse proportion to the numbers involved in them.

In this dual outcome, the artificial and premature construction of the party leads to the negation of the construction of the political organism of the class, to the destruction of cadres and the more or less rapid, but still inevitable, loss of militants, used up, exhausted, in the void, and completely demoralised.

20. The disappearance of the party, either through its contraction and its organisational dislocation as was the case in the First International, or, through its passage into the service of capitalism, as was the case for the parties of the Second and Third Internationals, expresses in both cases the

end of a period of the revolutionary struggle of the proletariat. The disappearance of the party is thus inevitable and no voluntarism nor the presence of a more or less brilliant leader is able to prevent it.

Marx and Engels twice saw the organisation of the proletariat in whose life they both played a major part, break up and die. Lenin and Luxemburg looked on powerlessly at the betrayal of the great parties of social democracy. Trotsky and Bordiga could do nothing to alter the degeneration of the communist parties and their transformation into the monstrous capitalist machines that we have been faced with ever since.

These examples tell us not that the party is futile, as a fatalist and superficial analysis would have it, but only that the necessary party of the class has no existence along a uniformly continuous and rising line, that its very existence is not always possible, that its existence and development are in correspondence with and closely linked to the class struggle of the proletariat which gives birth to it and which it expresses. That's why the struggle of revolutionary militants within the party during the course of its degeneration and before its death as a workers' party has a revolutionary meaning, but not the vulgar meaning given to it by various Trotskyist oppositions. For the latter, it is a matter of setting the party right, and to this end it is above all necessary that the organisation and its unity is not put in peril. For them it is a question of maintaining the organisation in its past splendour, when in fact this is impossible precisely because of the objective conditions, so that the organisation's original splendour could only be maintained at the price of a constant and growing alteration of its revolutionary and class nature. They look to organisational measures and remedies in order to save the organisation without understanding that organisational collapse is always the reflection of a period of revolutionary reflux and is often a far better solution than its survival; and in any case what revolutionaries have to save is not the organisation but its class ideology which is at risk of going down with the organisation.

Without understanding the objective causes of the inevitable loss of the old party, one cannot understand the task of militants in this period. Some came to the conclusion that, because they had failed to preserve the old party of the class, it was necessary to construct a new one straight away. This incomprehension can only result in adventurism, the whole being based on a voluntarist conception of the party.

A correct study of reality makes clear that the death of the old party clearly implies the immediate impossibility of construct-

ing a new one; it means that the necessary conditions for the existence of any party, old or new, do not exist in the present.

In such a period only small revolutionary groups can survive, assuring a continuity which is less organisational than ideological. These groups concentrate within themselves the past experience of the class struggle, providing a link between the party of yesterday and that of tomorrow, between the culminating point of the struggle and the maturation of class consciousness in a period of past upsurge and its re-emergence on a higher level in a new period of upsurge in the future. In these groups the ideological life of the class carries on, the self-criticism of its struggles, the critical re-examination of its past ideas, the elaboration of its programme, the maturation of its consciousness and the formation of new cadres, new militants for the next stage of the revolutionary assault.

21. The present period that we are living in is on the one hand the product of the defeat of the first great revolutionary wave of the international proletariat which put an end to the First World War and which reached its high point in the October 1917 revolution in Russia and in the Spartacist movement of 1918-19 and, on the other, of the profound transformation that has taken place in the politico-economic structure of capitalism, which has been evolving towards its ultimate and decadent form: state capitalism. What is more, a dialectical relationship exists between this evolution of capitalism and the defeat of the revolution.

Despite their heroic fighting spirit, despite the permanent and insurmountable crisis of the capitalist system and the unprecedented aggravation of the conditions of the working class, the proletariat and its vanguard have not been able to hold out against the counter-offensive of capitalism. They were not confronted with classic capitalism and were surprised by its transformations, which have posed problems for which they were unprepared, either theoretically or politically. The proletariat and its vanguard, which had for a long time generally identified capitalism with private property of the means of production and socialism with statification, were baffled and disorientated by modern capitalism's tendencies towards the statified concentration of the economy and planning. The great majority of workers were left with the idea that this evolution presented a new transformation of society from capitalism towards socialism. They associated themselves with this idea, abandoned their historic mission and became the staunchest partisans of the conservation of capitalist society.

It is these historic reasons that give the proletariat its present physiognomy. As

long as these conditions prevail, as long as state capitalist ideology dominates the heads of workers, there can be no question of the reconstruction of the class party. Only through the course of the bloody cataclysms which mark out the phase of state capitalism will the proletariat grasp the abyss which separates socialist liberation from the present monstrous state capitalist regime, only thus will it develop a growing capacity to detach itself from this ideology which currently imprisons and annihilates it. Only then will the way again be opened for "*the organisation of the proletariat into a class and thus into a political party*". This stage will be reached all the more quickly if its revolutionary nuclei have made the theoretical effort needed to respond to the new problems posed by state capitalism and to help the proletariat recover its class solution and the means for its realisation.

22. In the present period, revolutionary militants can only survive by forming small groups undertaking a patient work of propaganda, of necessity limited in scope, at the same time as making strenuous efforts of research and theoretical clarification.

These groups will only be able to fulfil their tasks through looking for contact with other groups on the national and international levels on the basis of criteria demarcated by class frontiers. Only such contacts and their multiplication, with the aim of confronting positions and the clarification of problems, can allow these groups and militants to physically and politically resist the terrible pressure of capitalism in the present period and allow all these efforts to be a real contribution to the struggle for the emancipation of the proletariat.

The party of tomorrow

23. The party will not be a simple reproduction of that of yesterday. It cannot be rebuilt on an old model drawn from the past. As well as its programme, its structure and the relations it has established between itself and the whole of the class are founded on a synthesis of past experience and the new, more advanced conditions of the present stage. The party follows the evolution of the class struggle and at each stage of the latter's history corresponds to a particular form of the political organism of the proletariat.

At the dawn of modern capitalism, in the first half of the 19th century, a working class still in its phase of constitution undertook local and sporadic struggles and could only give birth to doctrinal schools, sects and leagues. The Communist League was the most advanced expression of this period, while at the same time its Manifesto with

its call “proletarians of all countries—unite” heralded the period to come.

The First International corresponded to the proletariat’s effective entry onto the stage of social and political struggle in the principal countries of Europe. It thus grouped together all the organised forces of the working class, its diverse ideological tendencies. The First International brought together both all the currents and all the contingent aspects of the workers’ struggles: economic, educational, political and theoretical. It was the highest point of the working class’ **unitary organisation** in all its diversity.

The Second International marked a stage of differentiation between the economic struggle of wage labour and the social, political struggle. In this period of the full flourishing of capitalist society, the Second International was the organisation of the struggle for reforms and of political conquests, for the political affirmation of the proletariat, and at the same time it marked a higher stage in the ideological demarcation of the proletariat by clarifying and elaborating the theoretical foundations of its historic revolutionary mission.

The First World War revealed the historic crisis of capitalism and opened the period of its decline. The socialist revolution evolved from the theoretical level to one of practical demonstration. In the heat of events the proletariat in some ways found itself forced to hastily construct its revolutionary organisation of combat. The immense programmatic contribution of the first years of the Third International nonetheless proved inadequate faced with the huge problems posed by this ultimate phase of capitalism and by the tasks of revolutionary transformation. At the same time, living experience quickly demonstrated the general ideological immaturity of the class as a whole. Faced with these two dangers and under the pressure of events, piled on in rapid succession, the Third International was left to respond through organisational measures: iron discipline of militants, etc...

The organisational aspect had to compensate for the inadequacy of the programme, and the party for the immaturity of the class. As a result, the party ended up substituting itself for the action of the class itself, with a resulting alteration of the idea of the party and its relations with the class.

24. On the basis of this experience, the future party will be founded on the re-establishment of this truth: although the revolution contains a problem of organisation, it is not however a problem of organisation. Above all, the revolution is

an ideological problem of the maturation of consciousness among the broad masses of the proletariat.

No organisation, no party can substitute for the class itself and it remains true more than ever that “*the emancipation of the workers will be the task of the workers themselves*”. The party, which is the crystallisation of class consciousness, is neither different from nor synonymous with the class. The party necessarily remains a small minority; it has no ambition to be a great numerical force. At no moment can it separate from nor replace the living action of the class. Its function remains that of ideological inspiration within the movement and action of the class.

25. During the insurrectionary period of the revolution, the role of the party is not to demand power for itself, nor to call on the masses to “have confidence” in it. It intervenes and develops its activity in favour of the self-mobilisation of the class, within which it aims for the triumph of its principles and the means for revolutionary action.

The mobilisation of the class around the party to which it “entrusts” or rather abandons leadership is a conception reflecting a state of immaturity in the class. Experience has shown that in such conditions the revolution will find it impossible to triumph and will degenerate quickly, resulting in a divorce between the class and the party. The latter finds itself forced to resort to more and more coercive methods in order to impose itself on the class, and this ends up as a serious obstacle to the forward march of the revolution.

The party is not an organisation of direction and execution; these functions belong to the unitary organisation of the class. If militants of the party take part in these functions they do so as members of the greater community of the proletariat.

26. In the post-revolutionary period, the period of the dictatorship of the proletariat, the party is not the Single Party that is the classic hallmark of totalitarian regimes. The latter are characterised by their identification and assimilation with the state power of which they hold the monopoly. On the contrary, the class party of the proletariat characterises itself by being distinguished from the state, which is its historic antithesis. The Totalitarian Single Party tends to bloat and incorporate millions of individuals, making this a physical element of its domination and oppression. The party of the proletariat, on the contrary, by its nature, remains a strict ideological selection whose militants have no advantages to gain or defend. Their privilege is only to be the clearest combatants and the most

devoted to the revolutionary cause. Thus the party doesn’t aim to incorporate large numbers, because as its ideology becomes that of greater masses, the necessity for its existence tends to disappear and the hour of its dissolution will begin to sound.

The internal regime of the party

27. The problem of the organisational rules which constitute the internal regime of the party is just as decisive as that of its programmatic content. Past experience, and most particularly that of the parties of the Third International, has shown that the conception of the party makes up a unitary whole. Organisational rules are an aspect and an expression of this conception. The question of organisation is not separate from the idea that one has of the party’s role and function and of its relationship with the class. None of these questions exist in themselves, rather they make up elements that are constitutive and expressive of the whole.

The parties of the Third International had the rules or the internal regimes they had because they were set up in a period of evident immaturity of the class which led to the substitution of party for class, organisation for consciousness, discipline for conviction.

The organisational rules of the future party will thus have to be based on a very different conception of the role of the party in a much more advanced stage of the struggle, resting on a much greater ideological maturity of the class.

28. The questions of democratic or organic centralism which occupied a major place in the Third International have lost their sharpness for the future party. When the action of the class relies on the action of the party, the question of the maximum practical efficacy came to dominate the party which, moreover, could only provide partial solutions.

The effectiveness of the party’s action does not consist in its practical action of leadership and execution, but in its ideological action. Thus the strength of the party lies not in the submission of its militants to discipline, but in their knowledge, their greater ideological development and their solid conviction.

The rules of the organisation do not come from abstract notions raised to the level of immanent or immutable principles, democratic or centralist. Such principles are empty of meaning. If the settlement of decisions taken by the (democratic) major-

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The war in Spain exposes anarchism's fatal flaws

Part one: Programme and practice

The previous article in the series took us into the work of the revolutionary movement as it emerged from the catastrophe of the Second World War. We showed how, despite this catastrophe, the best elements in the marxist movement continued to hold on to the perspective of communism. Their conviction in this perspective had not faded even though the world war had not, as many revolutionaries had predicted, provoked a new upsurge of the proletariat against capitalism, and had indeed deepened the already terrible defeat that had descended on the working class during the 1920s and 30s. We focused in particular on the work of the Gauche Communiste de France, which was probably the only organisation to understand that the tasks of the hour remained those of a fraction, of preserving and deepening the theoretical acquisitions of marxism in order to construct a bridge to future proletarian movements which would create the conditions for the reconstitution of a real communist party. This had been the project of the Italian and Belgian left fractions before the war, although a significant part of this International Communist Left had lost sight of this in the short-lived euphoria of the revival of workers' struggles in Italy in 1943 and the declaration of the Internationalist Communist Party in Italy.

As part of this effort to build on the work of the pre-war left fractions, the GCF had carried on the work of drawing

This series has always been premised on the conviction that marxism alone provides a coherent method for understanding what communism is and why it is necessary, and for mining the historical experience of the working class for evidence that it is also a real possibility and not a mere wish for a better world. This is why such a large part of this series has been taken up with the study of the advances and the errors made by the marxist wing of the workers' movement in its effort to comprehend and elaborate the communist programme. For the same reason, it is only at certain moments that it has looked at the attempts of the anarchist movement to work out its notion of the future society. In the article "Anarchism or communism" (volume one of the series, *International Review* n° 79¹) we pointed out that at the historic origins of the anarchist vision lay the resistance of petty bourgeois strata such as the artisans and small peasants to the process of proletarianisation, which was an inevitable product of the emergence and expansion of the capitalist mode of production. Although a number of anarchist currents are clearly

1. http://en.internationalism.org/ir/79_anarchism.

the lessons of the Russian revolution and of examining the problems of the transitional period: the dictatorship of the proletariat, the transitional state, the role of the party, and the elimination of the capitalist mode of production. We therefore republished and introduced the GCF's theses on the role of the state, which would serve as the basis for future debates on the period of transition within the renaissance revolutionary milieu of the early 1970s.

But before proceeding to a survey of those debates, we need to take a historical step back – to a major landmark in the history of the workers' movement: Spain 1936-37. As we shall argue, we are not among those who see these events as providing us with a model of proletarian revolution which goes far deeper than anything achieved in Russia in 1917-21. But there is no question that the war in Spain has taught us a great deal, even if most of its lessons are negative ones. In particular, it offers us a very sharp insight into the inadequacies of the anarchist vision of the revolution and a striking reaffirmation of the vision that has been preserved and developed by the authentic traditions of marxism. This is particularly important to affirm given the fact that over the last few decades these traditions are frequently derided as being out of date and unfashionable, and that, among the politicised minority of the current generation, anarchist ideas in various forms have gained an undeniable influence.

part of the workers' movement, none of them have succeeded in entirely effacing these petty bourgeois birthmarks. The article in *IR* n° 79 demonstrates how, in the period of the First International, this essentially backward-looking ideology was behind the resistance of the clan around Bakunin to the theoretical gains of marxism at three crucial levels: in its conception of the organisation of revolutionaries, which was deeply infected by the conspiratorial methods of outmoded sects; in its rejection of historical materialism in favour of a voluntarist and idealist assessment of the possibilities of revolution; and in its conception of the future society, seen as a network of autonomous communes linked by commodity exchange.

Nevertheless, with the development of the workers' movement in the latter part of the 19th century, the most important trends in anarchism tended to become more firmly integrated into the struggle of the proletariat and its perspective for a new society, and this was particularly true of the anarcho-syndicalist current (although, simultaneously, the dimension of anarchism as a manifestation of petty bourgeois rebellion

was kept alive in the "exemplary acts" of the Bonnot gang and others).² The reality of this proletarian trend was demonstrated in the capacity of certain anarchist currents to take up internationalist positions faced with the First World War (and to a lesser extent the Second), and in the will to develop a clearer programme for their movement. The period from the late 19th century to the 1930s thus saw various attempts to develop documents and platforms which could be a guide to the establishment of "libertarian communism" through social revolution. An obvious example of this was Kropotkin's *The Conquest of Bread*, which first appeared as an integral work in French in 1892 and was published over a decade later in English.³ Despite Kropotkin's abandonment of internationalism in 1914, this and other writings by him are

2. In our article in *International Review* n° 120, "Anarcho-syndicalism faces a change in epoch: the CGT up to 1914" (http://en.internationalism.org/ir/120_cgt.html) we pointed out that this orientation of certain anarchist currents towards the unions was based more on the search for a more receptive audience for their propaganda than a real understanding of the revolutionary nature of the working class.

3. <http://libcom.org/library/the-conquest-of-bread-peter-kropotkin>.

part of the classical canon of anarchism and deserve a much more developed critique than is possible in this article.

In 1926 Makhno, Arshinov and others published the Platform of the General Union of Anarchists.⁴ This is the founding document of the “platformist” current in anarchism, and it too calls for a more thorough examination, along with an analysis of the historical trajectory of platformism from the late 1920s to the present. Its principal interest lies in the conclusions it draws from the failure of the anarchist movement in the Russian revolution, notably the idea that anarchist revolutionaries need to regroup in their own political organisation, based on a clear programme for the establishment of the new society. It was this idea in particular that drew the fire of other anarchists – not least Voline and Malatesta – who saw it as expressing a kind of anarcho-Bolshevism.

In this article, however, we are most concerned with the theory and practice of the anarcho-syndicalist tendency during the 1930s. And here again there is no dearth of material. In our most recent series on the decadence of capitalism published in this *Review*, we mentioned the text by the exiled Russian anarcho-syndicalist Gregory Maximoff, *My Social Credo*. Written in the depth of the Great Depression, it showed a remarkable degree of clarity about the decadence of the capitalist system, something almost never displayed by the anarchists of today.⁵ The text also contains a section outlining Maximoff’s ideas about the organisation of the new society. During this period there were also significant debates about how to get from capitalism to libertarian communism within the anarcho-syndicalist “International” established in 1922, the International Workers’ Association. And probably most relevant of all was Isaac Puente’s pamphlet “Libertarian Communism”. Published in 1932, it was to serve as the basis for the CNT’s platform at the 1936 Zaragoza Congress, and can thus be considered as a factor influencing the policies of the CNT during the ensuing “Spanish revolution”. We will come back to this, but first we want to look at some of the debates in the IWA, which are brought to light in Vadim Damier’s very informative work *Anarcho-syndicalism in the 20th century*.⁶

4. <http://libcom.org/library/organisational-platform-libertarian-communists-dielo-trouda>.

5. <http://en.internationalism.org/ir/146/great-depression>.

6. Black Cat Press, Edmonton, 2009. Originally published in Russian in 2000. Damier is a member of the KRAS, the Russian section of the IWA. The ICC has published a number of its internationalist statements on the wars in the former USSR <http://en.internationalism.org/book/export/html/725> <http://en.internationalism.org/icconline/2008/08/>

One of the key debates – no doubt in reaction to the spectacular rise of Fordist/Taylorist mass production techniques in the 1920s – was centred on the question of whether or not this kind of capitalist rationalisation, and indeed the whole process of industrialisation, was an expression of progress, making a libertarian communist society a more tangible perspective, or merely an intensification of humanity’s enslavement by the machine. Different tendencies brought different nuances to this discussion, but broadly speaking the split was between the anarcho-communists who took the latter view and connected their stance with a call for an immediate transition to communism; this was seen as being possible even – or perhaps especially – in a predominantly agrarian society. The alternative position was more generally held by tendencies connected to the revolutionary syndicalist tradition, who took a more “realistic” view of the possibilities offered by capitalist rationalisation while at the same time arguing that there would have to be some kind of transitional economic regime in which monetary forms would continue to exist.

These divergences traversed various national sections (such as the German FAUD), but the Argentine FORA⁷ seems to have had a more unified view which they defended with some conviction, and they were at the forefront of the “anti-industrialist” outlook. They openly rejected the premises of historical materialism, at least as they saw it (for most of the anarchists “marxism” was a catch-all term defining everyone from Stalinism and Social Democracy to Trotskyism and left communism) in favour of a view of history in which ethics and ideas were no less significant than the development of the productive forces. They categorically rejected the idea that the new society could be formed on the basis of the old, which is why they criticised not only the project of building libertarian communism on the foundations of the existing industrial structure, but also the syndicalist project of organising workers in industrial unions that would, come the revolution, take over this structure and wield it on behalf of the proletariat and humanity. They envisaged a new society organised in a federation of free communes; the revolution would be a radical break with all the old forms and would proceed immediately to the stage of free association. A declaration from the 5th Congress of the FORA in 1905 – which according to Eduardo Columbo’s account was to become the basic policy for many years – outlined the FORA’s criticisms of the union form:

kras-on-war-in-georgia.

7. Federacion Obrera Regional Argentina.

*“We must not forget that a union is merely an economic by-product of the capitalist system, born from the needs of this epoch. To preserve it after the revolution would imply preserving the system which gave rise to it. The so-called doctrine of revolutionary syndicalism is a fiction. We, as anarchists, accept the unions as weapons in the struggle and we try to ensure that they should approximate as closely as possible to our revolutionary ideals... That is to say, we do not intend to be mentally dominated by the unions; we intend to dominate them. In other words, to make the unions serve the propagation, the defence, and the affirmation of our ideas among the proletariat.”*⁸

However, the differences between the “Forists” and the syndicalists on the union form remained rather obscure in many ways: on the one hand, the FORA saw itself as an organisation of *anarchist* workers rather than a union “for all workers” but at the same time it emerged and developed as a union-type formation that organised strikes and other forms of class action.

Despite the unclear nature of these divergences, they led to heated clashes at the 4th Congress of the IWA in Madrid in 1931, with the two approaches being defended mainly by the French CGT-SR⁹ on the one hand and the FORA on the other. Damier makes the following remarks about the FORA’s views:

*“The conceptions of the FORA contained a critique of the alien and destructive character of the industrial-capitalist system which was brilliant for its time – the FORA’s proposals anticipated by half a century the recommendations and prescriptions of the contemporary ecological movement. Nevertheless their critique had a point of vulnerability – a categorical refusal to elaborate more concrete notions about the future society, how to get to it and how to prepare for it. According to the thinking of the Argentine theoreticians, to do so would be to infringe on revolutionary spontaneity and the improvisations of the masses themselves. The achievement of socialism was not a matter of technical and organisational preparation, but rather the dissemination of feelings of freedom, equality and solidarity – insisted the Argentine worker-anarchists.”*¹⁰

8. “Anarchism in Argentina and Uruguay” in *Anarchism Today*, edited by David Apter and James Joll, Macmillan, 1971, p 185. Available online at <http://www.libcom.org/files/Argentina.pdf>.

9. This organisation – the SR stands for Revolutionary Syndicalist – was the result of a split in 1926 with the “official” CGT, which at the time was dominated mainly by the Socialist Party. It remained a rather small group and disappeared under the Petain regime during the Second World War. Its main spokesman at the Zaragoza Congress was Pierre Besnard.

10. Damier, op. cit. pp110-111.

The FORA's insights into the nature of capitalist social relations – like those into the trade union form – are certainly interesting, but what strikes one most about these debates is their flawed starting point, their lack of method flowing from the rejection of marxism or even any willingness to discuss with the authentic marxist currents of the day. The FORA's criticism of historical materialism looks more like a criticism of a rigidly deterministic version of marxism, typical of the Second International and the Stalinist parties. Again, they were right to attack the alienated nature of capitalist production and to repudiate the idea that capitalism was progressive in itself – above all in a period where capitalist social relations had already proved themselves to be a fundamental obstacle to human development – but their apparent rejection of industry as such was equally abstract and resulted in a backward-looking nostalgia for localised rural communes.

Perhaps more significant was the lack of any connection between these debates and the most important experiences of the class struggle in the new epoch inaugurated by the mass strikes in Russia in 1905 and the international revolutionary wave of 1917-23. These world-historic developments, which also of course included the first world imperialist war, had already demonstrated the obsolescence of the old forms of workers' organisation (mass parties and trade unions) and given rise to new ones: the soviets or workers' councils on the one hand, formed in the heat of the struggle rather than as a pre-existing structure, and the organisation of the communist minority, no longer seen as a mass party acting primarily on the terrain of the struggle for reforms, on the other. The formation of revolutionary or industrial trade unions in the last part of the 19th century and in the decades that followed was to a large extent an attempt by a radical fraction of the proletariat to attempt to adapt to the new epoch without really abandoning the old trade unionist (and even social democratic) conceptions of incrementally building up a mass workers' organisation inside capitalism, with the ultimate aim of taking control of society in a phase of acute crisis. The FORA's suspicion of the idea of building the new society in the shell of the old was justified. However, without any serious reference to the experience of the mass strike and the revolution, whose essential dynamic had been brilliantly analysed by Rosa Luxemburg in *The Mass Strike, the Political Party and the Trade Unions*, written in 1906, or to the new forms of organisation which Trotsky, for example, had recognised as a crucially important product of the 1905 revolution in Russia, the FORA fell back into a diffuse hope of a sudden and total

transformation and seemed unable to examine the real links between the defensive struggles of the proletariat and the struggle for revolution.

Isaac Puente's "Libertarian Communism" pamphlet

In the 1931 debates the majority of the Spanish CNT sided with the more traditional anarcho-syndicalists. But "communitarian" ideas persisted and the 1936 Zaragoza programme, based on Puente's pamphlet, contained elements of both.

Puente's pamphlet¹¹ clearly expresses a proletarian standpoint and its ultimate aim – "libertarian" communism – is what we would simply call communism, a society based on the principle, as Puente puts it, "from each according to his/her abilities, to each according to his/her needs". At the same time, it is a rather clear manifestation of the theoretical poverty at the heart of the anarchist world-view.

A long section at the beginning of the text is devoted to arguing against all prejudices which argue that the workers are ignorant and stupid, incapable of emancipating themselves, contemptuous of science, art and culture, that they need an intellectual elite, a "social architect", or a police power to run society on their behalf. This polemic is perfectly justified. And yet when he writes that "*what we call common sense, a quick grasp of things, intuitive ability, initiative and originality are not things that can be bought or sold in the universities*", we are reminded of the fact that revolutionary theory is **not** simple common sense, that its propositions, being dialectical, are generally seen as outrageous and nonsensical from the viewpoint of the "good old common sense" which Engels ridiculed in *Anti-Dühring*.¹² The working class does not need educators from on high to free itself of capitalism, but it does need a revolutionary theory that can go beyond mere appearance and understand the deeper processes at work in society.

11. <http://www.libcom.org/library/libertarian-communism>

12. "At first sight this mode of thinking seems to us very luminous, because it is that of so-called sound common sense. Only sound common sense, respectable fellow that he is, in the homely realm of his own four walls, has very wonderful adventures directly he ventures out into the wide world of research. And the metaphysical mode of thought, justifiable and even necessary as it is in a number of domains whose extent varies according to the nature of the particular object of investigation, sooner or later reaches a limit, beyond which it becomes one-sided, restricted, abstract, lost in insoluble contradictions. In the contemplation of individual things it forgets the connection between them; in the contemplation of their existence, it forgets the beginning and end of that existence; of their repose, it forgets their motion. It cannot see the wood for the trees". *Anti-Dühring*, Introduction

Anarchism's inadequacies at this level are revealed in all the principal theses put forward in Puente's text. Regarding the forms that the working class will use to confront and overthrow capitalism, like the debates in the IWA at the time, Puente ignores the whole dynamic of the class struggle in the epoch of revolution, brought to the surface by the mass strike and the emergence of the council form. Instead of seeing that the organisations that will carry out the communist transformation express a radical rupture with the old class organisations that have been incorporated into bourgeois society, Puente insists that "*libertarian communism is based on organisations that already exist, thanks to which economic life in the cities and villages can be carried on in the light of the particular needs of each locality. Those organisms are the union and the free municipality*". This is where Puente combines syndicalism with communitarianism: in the cities, the syndicates will take control of public life, in the countryside it will be the traditional village assemblies. The activities of these organs are envisaged mainly in local terms: they can also federate and form national structures where necessary, but Puente sees the surplus product of local economic units being exchanged with that of others. In other words, this libertarian communism can co-exist with value relations, and it is not clear whether this is a transitional measure or something that will exist in perpetuity.

Meanwhile, this transformation takes place through "direct action" and not through any engagement in the sphere of politics, which is entirely identified with the existing state. In a comparative chart between "*organisation based on politics, which is a feature common to all regimes based on the state, and organisations based on economics, in a regime which shuns the state*", Puente draws out the hierarchical and exploitative character of the state and opposes to it the democratic life of the unions and free municipalities, based on decisions reached by assemblies and on common needs. There are two fundamental problems with this approach: first of all, it fails entirely to explain that the unions – and this was even to include anarcho-syndicalist unions like the CNT – have never been models of self-organisation or democracy but are subjected to a powerful pressure to integrate themselves into capitalist society, to themselves become bureaucratic institutions that tend to merge with the state. And secondly it ignores the reality of revolution, in which the working class is necessarily faced with a nexus of problems which are unavoidably political: the organisational and theoretical autonomy of the working class from the parties and ideologies of

the bourgeoisie, the destruction of the capitalist state, and the consolidation of its own organs of power. These deep lacunae in the libertarian programme were to be brutally exposed by the reality of the war that broke out in Spain soon after the Zaragoza Congress.

But there is another and no less decisive problem: the text's failure to consider the international dimension, and indeed its narrowly national outlook. It's true that the first of many "prejudices" refuted in the text is "*the belief that the crisis is merely temporary*". Like Maximoff, the Great Depression of the 30s seems to have convinced Puente that capitalism was a system in decline, and the paragraph under this sub-heading at least has something of a global ring to it, mentioning the situation of the working class in Italy and in Russia. But there is no attempt whatever to assess the balance of class forces, a primordial task for revolutionaries after a period of a mere 20 years which had seen world war, an international revolutionary wave, and series of catastrophic defeats for the proletariat. And when it comes to examining the potential for libertarian communism in Spain, it is almost as if the outside world does not exist: there is a long section given over to estimating the economic resources of Spain, down to its oranges and potatoes, its cotton, timber, and oil. The whole aim of these calculations is to show that Spain could exist as a self-sufficient island of libertarian communism. Certainly Puente considers that "*the introduction of libertarian communism in our country, alone of the nations of Europe, will bring with it the hostility of the capitalist nations. Using the defence of its subjects' interests as a pretext, bourgeois imperialism will attempt to intervene by force of arms to crush our system at its birth*". But such intervention will be hampered by the threat that it will provoke either social revolution in the intervening power or world war against other powers. The foreign capitalists might therefore prefer to employ mercenary armies rather than their own armies, as they did in Russia: in either case the workers will have to be ready to defend their revolution arms in hand. But the other bourgeois states might also seek to impose an economic blockade, backed up by warships. And this could be a real problem because Spain lacks some crucial resources, in particular petroleum, and would normally be obliged to import it. The solution to a blockade on imports however, is not hard to find: "*it would be vital that we pour all our energies into sinking new wells in search of petroleum... petroleum may (also) be obtained by distilling soft coal and lignite, both of which we*

have in abundance in this country".

In sum: to create libertarian communism, Spain must become autarchic. It is a pure vision of anarchy in one country.¹³ This inability to begin from the standpoint of the world proletariat would become another fatal flaw when Spain became the theatre of a global imperialist conflict.

The events of '36-'37: social revolution or imperialist war?

The anarcho-syndicalist model of revolution as expounded in Puente's text and the Zaragoza programme was to be definitively exposed and refuted by the momentous historic events sparked off by Franco's military coup in July 1936.

This is certainly not the place to write a blow by blow account of these events. We can only limit ourselves to recalling their overall pattern, with the aim of reaffirming the view of the communist left at the time: that the congenital incoherence of anarchist ideology had now become a vehicle for the betrayal of the working class.

There is no better analysis of the first moments of the war in Spain than the article published in the journal of the Italian Left Fraction, *Bilan* n° 36, October-November 1936, and republished in *International Review* n° 6.¹⁴ Written almost immediately after the events, and no doubt after sifting through a mass of very confused and confusing information, it is remarkable how the comrades of *Bilan* managed to slice through the dense fog of mystifications surrounding the "Spanish revolution", whether in the version that was most publicised at the time by the powerful media controlled by democrats and Stalinists— as a kind of bourgeois democratic revolution against the feudal-fascist reaction — or the picture painted by the anarchists and Trotskyists, which, while presenting the struggle in Spain as a social revolution that had gone much further than anything achieved in Russia in 1917, also served to reinforce the dominant view of the struggle as a people's barrier against the advance of fascism in Europe.

13. Our article on the CGT cited in footnote 2 makes the same point about a book produced by two leading militants of the French anarcho-syndicalist organisation in 1909: "*The book by Pouget and Pataud, which we have already quoted (Comment nous ferons la révolution), is very instructive in this respect, since the revolution that it describes is in fact purely national. The two anarcho-syndicalist authors did not wait for Stalin to envisage the construction of "anarchism in a single country": once the revolution has been successful in France, a whole chapter of the book is devoted to describing the system of foreign trade, which is to continue commercial operations abroad while production is organised on communist principles within French borders.*"

14. http://en.internationalism.org/ir/006_bilan36_july19.html.

The *Bilan* article recognises without hesitation that, faced with the attack from the right, the working class, above all in its Barcelona stronghold, responded with its own class weapons: the spontaneous mass strike, street demonstrations, fraternisation with the soldiers, the general arming of the workers, the formation of neighbourhood based defence committees and militias, the occupation of the factories and the election of factory committees. *Bilan* also recognised that it was the militants of the CNT-FAI who had everywhere played a leading role in this movement, which, however, had embraced the majority of the working class of Barcelona.

And yet it was precisely at this moment, when the working class was on the brink of taking political power into its own hands, that anarchism's programmatic weaknesses, its theoretical inadequacy, were to prove a deadly handicap.

First and foremost, anarchism's failure to understand the problem of the state led it not only to quaver at the possibility of a proletarian dictatorship — because anarchism is "against all kinds of dictatorship" — but perhaps even more crucially, it was utterly disarmed in the face of the manoeuvres of the ruling class, which was able to reconstitute a state power with new and "radical" forms, given that its more traditional forces had been paralysed by the proletarian upsurge. Key instruments in this process were the Central Committee of the Anti-Fascist Militias and the Central Council of the Economy:

"The constitution of the Central Committee of the Militias gave the impression that a period of proletarian power had begun; while the setting up of the Central Council of the Economy gave rise to the illusion that the proletariat was now managing its own economy.

"However, far from being organs of dual power, these organs had a capitalist nature and function. Instead of constituting a base for the unification of the proletarian struggle — for posing the question of power — they were from the beginning organs of collaboration with the capitalist state.

"In Barcelona the Central Committee of the militias was a conglomeration of workers' and bourgeois parties and trade unions; not an organ of the soviet type arising spontaneously on a class basis and capable of providing a focus for the development of proletarian consciousness. The Central Committee was connected to the Generalidad and disappeared with the passing of a simple decree when the new government of Catalonia was formed in October.

"The Central Committee of the militias

represented a superb weapon of capitalism for leading the workers out of their towns and localities to fight on the territorial fronts where they are being ruthlessly massacred. It is the organ that established order in Catalonia, not in conjunction with the workers, but against the workers who had been dispersed to the fronts. It is true that the regular army was practically dissolved, but it is gradually being reconstituted within the militia columns whose general staff – Sandino, Villalba and Co. – are clearly bourgeois. The columns are made up of volunteers and this will probably remain the case until the intoxication and illusion in the ‘revolution’ is over and capitalist reality is restored. Then we will soon see the official re-establishment of a regular army and obligatory service”.

The immediate participation of the CNT and the POUM (‘Marxist Party of Workers Unification’, situated somewhere between left social democracy and Trotskyism) in these bourgeois institutions was a blow against the possibility of the class organs created in streets and the factories during the July days centralising themselves and establishing an authentic dual power. On the contrary, the latter were quickly emptied of their proletarian content and incorporated into the new structures of bourgeois power.

Secondly, a burning political question of the day was not confronted and, lacking any analysis of the historic trends at work within capitalist society, the anarchists had no method for confronting: the nature of fascism and what Bordiga called its “worst product”, anti-fascism. If the rise of fascism was one expression of a series of historic defeats for the proletarian revolution, preparing bourgeois society for a second inter-imperialist massacre, anti-fascism was no less a rallying cry for imperialist war, no less a call for workers to give up the defence of their own class interests in the name of a sacred “national unity”. It was above all this ideology of anti-fascist unity which enabled the bourgeoisie to avert the danger of proletarian revolution by diverting the class war in the cities into a military conflict at the front. The call to sacrifice everything for the struggle to defeat Franco led even the most passionate advocates of libertarian communism, such as Durruti, to accept this grand manoeuvre. The militias, by being incorporated into an organ like the CCAM, dominated by parties and unions such as the Republican and nationalist left, the Socialists and the Stalinists, which were openly opposed to the proletarian revolution, became instruments in a war between two capitalist factions, a conflict which almost immediately turned into a global inter-imperialist battlefield, a rehearsal for the next world war. Their democratic forms

– such as the election of officers – did not fundamentally alter this. It’s true that the leading forces of bourgeois order – the Stalinists and Republicans – were never comfortable with these forms and later insisted on them being fully subsumed into a traditional bourgeois army, as *Bilan* had predicted. But as *Bilan* also realised, the fatal blow had already been struck in the first weeks after the military coup.

It was the same with the most obvious example of the bankruptcy of the CNT – the decision of four of its best-known leaders, including the former radical Garcia Oliver, to become ministers in the central Madrid government, and to compound this act of treason with their infamous claim that thanks to their participation in the ministries, the Republican state “had ceased to be an oppressive force against the working class, just as the state no longer represents the organism which divide society into classes. And both will tend even less to oppress the people as a result of the intervention of the CNT.”¹⁵ This was the final step in a trajectory that had been prepared a long time in advance by the slow degeneration of the CNT. In a series of articles on the history of the CNT, we showed that the CNT, despite its proletarian origins and the deeply held revolutionary convictions of many of its militants, was unable to resist a remorseless tendency in capitalism in its epoch of state totalitarianism – the tendency for all permanent mass workers’ organisations to be integrated into the state. This had already been shown long before the July events, such as during the elections of February 1936, when the CNT abandoned its traditional abstentionism in favour of tactically supporting a vote for the Republic.¹⁶ And in the period immediately after Franco’s coup, when the central Republican government was in utter disarray, the process of anarchist participation in the bourgeois state accelerated at all levels. Thus well before the scandal of the four anarchist ministers, the CNT had already joined the regional government of Catalonia, the Generalidad, and at the local level – no doubt in line with its rather vague notion of “free municipalities” – anarchist militants became representatives and officials of the organs of local government, i.e. the base units of the capitalist state. As with the betrayal of social democracy in 1914, this was not just a matter of a few bad leaders, but the product of a gradual process of the integration of an entire organisational

apparatus into bourgeois society and its state. Certainly within the CNT-FAI, and in the wider anarchist movement inside and outside Spain, there were proletarian voices raised against this trajectory, although as we will see in the second part of this article, few managed to call into question the underlying theoretical roots of the betrayal.

Ah, but what about the collectivisations? Didn’t the most dedicated and courageous anarchists, like Durruti, insist that deepening the social revolution was the best way to defeat Franco? Wasn’t it above all the examples of self-managed factories and farms, the attempts to get rid of the wage form in numerous villages throughout Spain, which convinced many, even marxists like Grandizo Munis,¹⁷ that the social revolution in Spain reached heights never attained in Russia, with its rapid descent into state capitalism?

But *Bilan* rejected any idealisation of the factory occupations:

“When the workers went back to work in the factories where the bosses had fled or had been shot by the masses, factory councils were set up as an expression of the expropriation of these companies by the workers.

“Here the trade unions intervened very quickly, setting up a procedure that would allow proportional representation in places where the CNT and the UGT had members. Moreover, although the workers returned to work on condition that they would be getting a 36 hour week and a wage increase, the unions intervened to defend the need to work at full output for the war effort, without worrying too much about the regulation of work or about wages.

“The factory committees and the committees for the control of industries which were not expropriated (out of consideration for foreign capital or for other reasons) were thus immediately smothered; transformed into organs for stimulating production, they lost their class content. They were not organs created during an insurrectionary strike in order to overthrow the state; they were organs whose function was the organisation of the war, and this was an essential precondition for the survival and

15. Quoted in Vernon Richards, *Lessons of the Spanish Revolution*, London, Freedom press 1983 (first published in 1953) chapter VI, p 69.

16. See the series on the history of the CNT in *IRs* n° 129-133, in particular the last article, “Anti-fascism, the road to the betrayal of the CNT”, http://en.internationalism.org/ir/133/spain_cnt_1936.

17. Munis was a leading figure in the Bolshevik-Leninist group in Spain which was linked to Trotsky’s tendency. He later broke with Trotskyism over its support for the Second World War and evolved towards many of the positions of the communist left. <http://en.internationalism.org/internationalreview/200908/3077/farewell-munis-revolutionary-militant>. We have published polemics with the group later founded by Munis, Fomento Obrero Revolucionario, on its view of the Spanish war: <http://en.internationalism.org/node/3100> <http://en.internationalism.org/node/2937>.

reinforcement of the state.”¹⁸

Damier does not dwell too much on the conditions in the “worker-controlled” factories. It is significant that he gives more space to examining the democratic forms of the village collectives, their deep concern for debate and self-education through regular assemblies and elected committees, their attempts to do away with the wages system. These were indeed heroic efforts but the conditions of rural isolation made it less urgent for the capitalist state to launch a direct assault – by guile or outright force – on the village collectives. In sum these changes in the countryside did not alter the general process of bourgeois recuperation which was focused on the cities and the factories, where work discipline for a state capitalist war economy was imposed in a more ruthless and rapid manner and could not have been imposed without the fiction of “union control” via the CNT

“The most interesting fact here is this. Following the expropriation of companies in Catalonia, their co-ordination through the Council of the Economy in August, and the government decree of October laying down the norms for ‘collectivisation’, after each one of these steps came new measures for disciplining the workers in the factories – discipline they would never have put up with under the old bosses. In October the CNT issued an order forbidding defensive struggle of any kind and stating that the workers’ most sacred duty was to increase production. Apart from the fact that we have already rejected the Soviet fraud, which consists of the physical assassination of the workers in the name of “building socialism”, we declare openly that for us the struggle in the factories cannot cease for a moment as long as the domination of the capitalist state continues. Certainly the workers will have to make sacrifices after the proletarian revolution, but a revolutionary will never advocate the cessation of defensive struggles as a way of achieving socialism. Even after the revolution we will not deprive the workers of the strike weapon, and it goes without saying that when the proletariat is not in power – as is the case in Spain – the militarization of the factories is the same as the militarization of the factories in any capitalist state at war.”¹⁹

Bilan here is basing itself on the axiom that social revolution and imperialist war are diametrically opposed tendencies in capitalist society. Defeat of the working class opens the way to imperialist war – ideological in 1914, physical and ideological in the 1930s. Class war on the other hand can only be waged at the

expense of the war economy. Strikes and mutinies do not strengthen the national war effort. It was the revolutionary outbreaks of 1917 and 1918 which forced the warring imperialisms to bring their hostilities to an immediate end.

There is such a thing as revolutionary war. But it can only be waged once the working class is in power – on this Lenin and those who rallied to him in the Bolshevik party were very clear in the period February to October 1917. And even then, the demands of a revolutionary war fought on the territorial fronts do not create the best conditions for the flowering of class power and for a radical social transformation – far from it. Thus between 1917 and 1920 the Soviet state defeated the internal and external counter-revolutionary forces at the military level, but at a very high price: the erosion of political control by the working class and the autonomisation of the state apparatus.

This fundamental opposition between imperialist war and social revolution was doubly confirmed by the events of May ‘37.

Here again – this time faced with a provocation by the Stalinists and other state forces, who attempted to seize the Barcelona telephone exchange from the workers who controlled it – the Barcelona proletariat responded en masse and with its own methods of struggle: mass strike and barricades. The “revolutionary defeatism” advocated by the Italian left, castigated as insane and traitorous by virtually every political tendency from the liberals to “left communist” groups like Union Communiste – was put into practice by the workers of Barcelona. This was essentially a defensive reaction to an attack by the repressive forces of the Republican state, but it once again pitted the workers against the whole state machine, whose most brazen mouthpieces did not hesitate to denounce them as traitors, as saboteurs of the war effort. And implicitly, this was indeed a direct challenge to the anti-fascist war, no less than the Kiel mutiny of 1918 was a challenge to the war effort of German imperialism and, by extension, to the whole inter-imperialist conflict.

The open defenders of bourgeois order were to respond with brutal terror against the workers. Revolutionaries were arrested, tortured, shot. Camillo Berneri, the Italian anarchist who had openly expressed his criticisms of the CNT policy of collaboration, was among the many militants kidnapped and killed, in the majority of cases by the thugs of the “Communist” party. But the repression really only descended on the workers once they had been persuaded to lay down their arms

and go back to work by the spokespeople of the “left”, of the CNT and the POUM, who were above all terrified of a fracture in the anti-fascist front. The CNT – like the SPD in the German revolution 1918 – was indispensable in the restoration of bourgeois order.

C D Ward

In the second part of this article we will look at some of the anarchist tendencies which denounced the betrayals of the CNT during the war in Spain, in particular the Friends of Durruti and Camillo Berneri. We shall try to show that while these were healthy proletarian reactions, they rarely called into question the underlying weaknesses of the anarchist “programme”.

Continued from page 21

ity has to be maintained in the absence of a more appropriate method, that doesn’t in any way mean that by definition the majority has the monopoly on truth and correct positions. Correct positions flow from the greatest knowledge of the object, from the closest grip on reality.

Thus the organisation’s internal rules must correspond to its objectives and so to the role of the party. Whatever the importance of the efficiency of its practical immediate action, which can provide it with the basis for exercising a wider discipline, it still remains less important than the maximum flourishing of the thinking of its militants, and as a consequence is subordinate to it.

As long as the party remains the crucible where class ideology is elaborated and deepened, its guiding principle must not only be the greatest freedom of ideas and disagreement in the framework of its programmatic principles: an even more fundamental concern must be to ceaselessly maintain and facilitate the combustion of thought, by providing the means for discussion and the confrontation of ideas and of tendencies inside the organisation.

29. Looking at the conception of the party from this angle, nothing is more foreign to it than the monstrous idea of a homogeneous, monolithic and monopolist party.

The existence of tendencies and factions within the party is not just something to be tolerated, a right to be accorded and thus subject to discussion.

On the contrary, the existence of currents in the party – in the framework of acquired and verified principles – is one of the manifestations of a healthy conception of the idea of the party.

M. June 1948

18. Ibid.

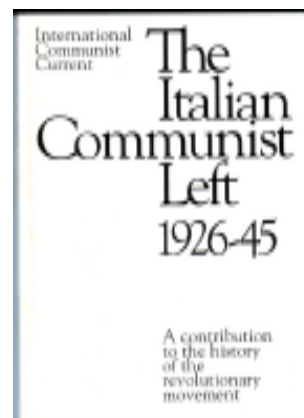
19. Ibid.

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Of course, according to the ruling classes everywhere today, communism, the revolutionary perspective of the working class, has died with the collapse of Stalinism. But this is a monstrous lie. Stalinism was the gravedigger of the 1917 October Revolution, and therefore the deadliest enemy of the communist perspective. Stalinism was the main vehicle for the greatest counter-revolution in history.

In the midst of this defeat the Italian Communist Left remained faithful to the internationalist principles of the working class, and tried to draw the lessons of a counter-revolution which terminally infected even the Trotskyist Opposition.

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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 statified 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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