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International Review

Social revolts in North Africa and the Middle East. Nuclear catastrophe in Japan, war in Libya

Only the proletarian revolution can save humanity from the disaster of capitalism

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Contribution to a history of the workers' movement in Africa

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

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Social revolts in North Africa and the Middle East.
Nuclear catastrophe in Japan, war in Libya

Only the proletarian revolution can save humanity from the disaster of capitalism

The last few months have been rich in historic events. Although the revolts in North Africa and the Middle East are not directly linked to the tsunami which ravaged Japan and the nuclear crisis which ensued, all these events highlight the alternative which, more than ever, is facing humanity: socialism or barbarism. While the echo of the uprisings is still ringing in numerous countries, capitalist society is proving lamentably unable to deal with nuclear power. On the other hand, the heroism of the Japanese workers who are putting their lives at risk at the Fukushima nuclear power plant is a striking contrast to the disgusting hypocrisy of the imperialist powers in Libya.

The mobilisation of the masses brings down governments

For several months, protest movements, unprecedented in their geographic spread,¹ have been shaking a whole series of countries. The initial revolts in the Mahgreb were rapidly emulated over the next few weeks, with demonstrations in Jordan, Yemen, Bahrain, Iran, Sub-Saharan Africa etc. It is impossible to make a strict identity between all these movements, both in terms of their class content and of the response of the bourgeoisie, but a common factor is the economic crisis, which since 2008 has plunged whole populations into an increasingly unbearable poverty and made the corrupt and repressive regimes in the region more and more resented.

The working class has not yet presented itself in these events as an autonomous force capable of assuming the leadership of the movements, which have often taken the form of revolts by the whole non-exploiting population, from ruined peasants to middle strata on the road to proletarianisation. But, on the one hand, the influence of the working class on the consciousness expressed in these movements has been tangible, both in the slogans and the forms of organisation they have thrown up. A tendency towards self-organisation, for example, appeared in the neighbourhood protection committees set up in Egypt and Tunisia to face up to police repression and

the bands of thugs cynically released from prison to sow chaos. Above all, many of these revolts openly sought to widen the movement through mass demonstrations, assemblies and attempts to coordinate and centralise decision-making. At the same time, the working class sometimes played a decisive role in the way events unfolded. It was in Egypt, where the working class is the most concentrated and experienced in the region, that workers' strikes were the most massive. Their rapid extension and the rejection of control by the official unions played a major role in pushing the military leaders, under pressure from the USA, to get rid of Hosni Mubarak.

Mobilisations are continuing and the wind of revolt is blowing through other countries; the bourgeoisie is having a difficult time putting a stop to it all. Above all in Egypt and Tunisia, where the "peoples' spring" is supposed to have triumphed, there are still strikes and confrontations with the "democratic" state. All of these revolts constitute a formidable bank of experience on the road that leads to revolutionary consciousness. Nevertheless, while the wave of revolts, for the first time in a long while, has explicitly linked political issues to the economic question, the response to this question has come up against the illusions which still weigh on the working class, in particular the democratic and nationalist mirage. These weaknesses have often allowed the democratic pseudo-opposition to present itself as an alternative to the corrupt cliques in power. In fact, these "new governments" are often still so stuffed with members of the old teams that it's a

joke. In Tunisia, the population has even forced part of the government to resign when it appeared too obviously as an exact re-edition of the Ben Ali regime. In Egypt, the army, Mubarak's historic power-base now holds all the command posts of the state and is already manoeuvring to ensure its position in the new arrangement. In Libya, the "Interim National Council" is led by... Gaddafi's former interior minister, Abdel Fattah Younes, and a gang of former high officials who, having organised repression for their master and having benefited from his pecuniary generosity, have suddenly discovered a taste for human rights and democracy.

In Libya, imperialist war rages on the ruins of a popular revolt

On the basis of these weaknesses, the situation in Libya has evolved in a particular way, given that what at the beginning made its appearance as an uprising of the population against the Gaddafi regime has been transformed into a war between several bourgeois factions, which has now seen the intervention of the great imperialist powers, making it even more of a bloody and surreal cacophony. The displacement of the struggle onto the terrain of bourgeois interests, into a battle for control of the Libyan state by one or another of the contending factions, was made all the easier by the fact that the working class in Libya is very weak. Local industry is notably backward and is more or less reduced to the production of oil, directly piloted by the Gaddafi clique which has never succeeded in placing the national interest above its own particular interests. The working class in Libya is largely made up of foreign workers, some of whom may have been involved in the events at the beginning but ended up fleeing the massacres, not least because of the difficulty of recognising itself in a "revolution" with a nationalist accent. Libya provides a negative and tragic illustration of the necessity for the working class to occupy a central position within popular revolts;

1. In fact, not since 1848 or 1917-19 have we seen such an extensive wave of simultaneous revolts. See the next article in this issue: "What is happening in the Middle East".

its effacement to a great extent explains the evolution of the situation.

Since 19th March, after several weeks of massacres, under the pretext of a humanitarian intervention “to save the martyred Libyan people”, a rather uneasy coalition, made up of Canada, the USA, Italy, France, Britain and others has directly engaged its military forces in support of the Interim National Council. Every day, missiles are launched and planes take off to lay a carpet of bombs in all the regions inhabited by the armed forces loyal to the Gaddafi regime. In short, it's war. What strikes you right away is the incredible hypocrisy of the great powers, which on the one hand brandish the rather worn flag of humanitarianism and, at the same time, do nothing about the slaughter of the masses in revolt in Bahrain, Yemen, Syria etc. Where was this coalition when Gaddafi massacred 1000 prisoners in the Abu Salim prison in Tripoli in 1996? In truth, this regime has been imprisoning, torturing, terrorising, executing, and making opponents disappear for the past 40 years with complete impunity. Yesterday, where was this coalition when Ben Ali in Tunisia, Mubarak in Egypt or Bouteflika in Algeria were shooting at crowds during the January and February uprisings? Behind this ignoble rhetoric, the dead continue to pile up in the morgues. And NATO is already envisaging prolonging operations for several weeks in order to ensure the triumph of peace and democracy.

In reality, each power is intervening in Libya for its own reasons. The cacophony of the coalition, which hasn't even been able to set up a chain of command, illustrates the degree to which these countries have joined this adventure in dispersed order with the aim of strengthening their own position in the region, like vultures picking over a corpse. From the USA's point of view, Libya does not represent a major strategic interest because it already has powerful allies in the region, notably Egypt and Saudi Arabia. This explains their initial confusion during the negotiations at the UN. Nonetheless the USA, with its historic support for Israel, has a disastrous image in the Arab world, one which has hardly been improved by the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq. On top of this the revolts have begun to give rise to governments which are more amenable to anti-American opinion; and if the US is to ensure its presence in the region, it has to polish up its image in the eyes of these new cliques. And above all the US government can't give a free hand to Britain and France. The latter also need to improve their image, especially Britain, given its involvement in the invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq. The French government, despite its numerous gaffes, does have a certain popularity in the Arab

countries, acquired under De Gaulle and reinforced by its refusal to take part in the Iraq war in 2003. An intervention against Gaddafi, who is much too uncontrollable and unpredictable for his neighbours' taste, is bound to be appreciated by the latter and will make it possible for France to increase its influence. Behind their fine phrases and broad smiles, each bourgeois faction is intervening for its own interests and, along with Gaddafi, they are all taking up their positions in this sinister *danse macabre*.

In Japan as everywhere else, nature produces phenomena, capitalism produces catastrophes

Several thousand miles from Libya, in the world's third-ranking economic power, capitalism also sows death and demonstrates that nowhere, even at the heart of the industrialised countries, is humanity protected from the irresponsibility and negligence of the bourgeoisie. Its tame media have, as ever, presented the earthquake and tsunami which ravaged Japan as a product of fate that no one could do anything about. It is of course impossible to prevent nature from unleashing its powers, but installing populations in danger zones in wooden houses has nothing to do with fate, and neither has the use of ageing nuclear power stations in the middle of this whole environment.

The bourgeoisie is directly responsible for the murderous scale of this catastrophe. For the needs of production, capitalism has concentrated populations and industries to a delirious degree. Japan is a caricature of this historical phenomenon: tens of millions of people massed together in a thin strip of land which is particularly subject to earthquakes and thus to tsunamis. Obviously, earthquake resistant structures have been erected for the rich and as office buildings: concrete would have sufficed to hold back the wave for many, but the working class has to live in wooden rabbit-hutches in the most dangerous areas. At the very least the population could have been installed further away from the coast, but Japan is an exporting country and, to maximise profit, it is better to build factories near the ports. Some factories were also swept away by the waters, adding industrial catastrophe to the nuclear disaster. In this context, a humanitarian crisis is threatening one of the centres of world capitalism and this will increase the scale of the hecatomb. With much infrastructure and equipment out of commission, tens of thousands of people have been abandoned to their lot, without food and water.

But the bourgeoisie's irresponsibility doesn't end there: it has built 17 nuclear plants in the area, all of dubious safety. The situation round the Fukushima plant, which has been so severely damaged, remains uncertain, but the confused communications issued by the authorities makes us fear the worst. It already seems to be true that a nuclear disaster on the same level as the 1986 Chernobyl explosion is unfolding before the eyes of a powerless government, reduced to the equivalent of using sticking plaster and sacrificing many workers. The construction of these plants on risky coastlines doesn't seem to be the most brilliant idea, especially when they have been in service for several decades and have had a minimum level of maintenance. It is incredible to note that the Fukushima plant has already been the victim of several hundred incidents linked to poor safety levels, which has resulted in the resignations of a number of scandalised officers.

It's not nature that is responsible for these catastrophes; the laws of capitalism, which have become an absurdity, are responsible from start to finish, in the poorest countries and in the most powerful ones. The situation in Libya and the events in Japan clearly show that the only future the bourgeoisie can offer us is growing and permanent chaos. But the revolts in the Arab countries, for all their weaknesses, do show us a different way ahead – the struggle of the exploited against the capitalist state, the only way out of the generalised catastrophe threatening humanity.

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What is happening in the Middle East?

The current events in the Middle East and North Africa are of major historic importance, the consequences of which are difficult to discern. Nevertheless, it is important to develop a discussion about them that will enable revolutionaries to elaborate a coherent framework of analysis. The points that follow are neither that framework in itself, still less a detailed description of what has been taking place, but simply some basic reference points aimed at stimulating the debate.¹

1. Not since 1848 or 1917-19 have we seen such a widespread, simultaneous tide of revolt. While the epicentre of the movement has been in North Africa (Tunisia, Egypt and Libya, but also Algeria and Morocco), protests against the existing regimes have broken out in Gaza, Jordan, Iraq, Iran, Yemen, Bahrain and Saudi Arabia, while a number of other repressive Arab states, notably Syria, have been on high alert. The same goes for the Stalinist regime in China. There are also clear echoes of the protests in the rest of Africa: Sudan, Tanzania, Zimbabwe, Swaziland.... We can also see the direct impact of the revolts in the demonstrations against government corruption and the effects of the economic crisis in Croatia, in the banners and slogans of student demonstrations in the UK and workers' struggles in Wisconsin, and no doubt in many other countries as well. This is not to say that all these movements in the Arab world are identical, either in their class content, their demands, or in the response of the ruling class, but there are evidently a number of common features which make it possible to talk about the phenomenon as a whole.

2. The historical context in which these events are unfolding is the following:

- a profound economic crisis, the most severe in the history of capitalism, which has hit the weaker economies of the Arab world with particular force, and which is already plunging millions into abject poverty, with the prospect of even worse conditions ahead. The youth, which, in contrast to many of the “ageing” central countries, makes up a very large percentage of the total population, has been hit especially hard, with unemployment

and the lack of any visible future the lot of educated and uneducated young people alike. In every case, it has been the young people who have been in the forefront of these movements;

- the unbearably corrupt and repressive nature of all the regimes in the region. While for a long time the ruthless activity of the secret police or the armed forces has kept the population in a state of atomisation and fear, these very weapons of the state have now served to generalise the will to gather together and resist. This was very clear in Egypt, for example, when Mubarak dispatched his army of thugs and policemen in civilian clothes to terrorise the masses holding Tahrir Square: these provocations merely strengthened the latter's resolve to defend themselves and drew thousands more into the protests. Similarly, the outrageous corruption and greed of the ruling cliques, who have amassed huge private fortunes while the vast majority struggled to survive from day to day, further fuelled the flames of rebellion once populations had begun to overcome their fears;
- this sudden loss of fear, commented on by many of the participants, is a product not only of changes at the local and regional level, but also of a climate of growing discontent and overt class struggle at the international level. Everywhere, faced with the economic crisis, the exploited and the oppressed have been increasingly unwilling to make the sacrifices demanded of them. Here again, the role played by the new generation has been essential, and in this sense the youth rebellion in Greece two years ago, the student struggles in the UK and Italy, the fight against pension reforms in France have also had their impact in the “Arab” world, especially in the age of Facebook and Twitter when it is much harder for the bourgeoisie

to maintain a consistent black-out of struggles against the status quo.

3. The class nature of these movements is not uniform and varies from country to country and according to different phases. On the whole, however, we can characterise them as movements of the non-exploiting classes, social revolts against the state. The working class has, in general, not been in the leadership of these rebellions but it has certainly had a significant presence and influence which can be discerned both in the methods and forms of organisation thrown up by the movement and, in certain cases, by the specific development of workers' struggles, such as the strikes in Algeria and above all the major wave of strikes in Egypt which were a key factor in the decision to dump Mubarak (and which we have written about in these pages). In the majority of these countries, the proletariat is not the only oppressed class. The peasantry, and other strata deriving from even older modes of production, although largely fragmented and ruined by decades of capitalist decline, still have a weight in the rural areas, while in the cities, where the revolts have always been centred, the working class exists alongside a large middle class which is on the road towards proletarianisation but still has its specific features, and a mass of slum dwellers who are made up partly of proletarians and partly of small traders and more lumpenised elements. Even in Egypt, which has the most concentrated and experienced working class, eyewitnesses in Tahrir Square emphasised that the protests had mobilised “all classes”, with the exception of the upper echelons of the regime. In other countries the weight of the non-proletarian strata has been much stronger than it has been in the majority of struggles in the central countries.

4. In trying to understand the class nature of these rebellions, we therefore have to avoid two symmetrical errors: on the one hand, a blanket identification of all the masses in movement with the proletariat (a position most characteristic of the Groupe Communiste Internationaliste), and on the other hand a rejection of anything positive in revolts which are not explicitly working class. The question posed here takes us back to previous events, such as those in Iran at the end of the 1970s, where again

1. This document was written on 11 March, i.e. more than a week before the intervention of the “coalition” in Libya. This is why it doesn't refer to it, although it does foresee it.

we saw a popular revolt in which, for a while, the working class was able to assume a leading role, though this in the end was not sufficient to prevent the recuperation of the movement by the Islamists. At a more historical level, the problem of the relationship between the working class and more general social revolts is also the problem of the state in the period of transition, which emerges from the movement of all the non-exploiting classes but in the face of which the working class needs to maintain its class autonomy.

5. In the Russian revolution, the soviet form was engendered by the working class but it also provided a model of organisation for all the oppressed. Without losing a sense of proportion – because we are still a long way from a revolutionary situation in which the working class is able to provide clear political leadership to the other strata – we can see that working class methods of struggle have had an impact on the social revolts in the Arab world:

- in tendencies towards self-organisation, which appeared most clearly in the neighbourhood protection committees that emerged as a response to the Egyptian regime's tactic of unleashing criminal gangs against the population, in the "delegate" structure of some of the massive meetings in Tahrir Square, in the whole process of collective discussion and decision making;
- in the seizing of spaces normally controlled by the state to provide a central focus for assembling and organising on a massive scale;
- in a conscious assumption of the necessity for massive self-defence against the thugs and police dispatched by the regimes, but at the same time a rejection of gratuitous violence, of destruction and looting for their own sake;
- in deliberate efforts to overcome sectarian and other divisions which have been cynically manipulated by the regimes: divisions between Christian and Muslim, Shia and Sunni, religious and secular, men and women;
- in the numerous attempts to fraternise with the rank and file soldiers.

It is no accident that these tendencies developed most strongly in Egypt where the working class has a long tradition of struggle and which, at a crucial stage in the movement, emerged as a distinct force, engaging in a wave of struggles which, like those in 2006-7, can be seen as "germs" of the future mass strike, containing a certain number of its most important characteristics: the spontaneous extension of strikes and demands from one sector to another, the

intransigent rejection of state trade unions, and certain tendencies towards self-organisation, the raising of both economic and political demands. Here we see, in outline, the capacity of the working class to come forward as the tribune of all the oppressed and exploited and offer the perspective of a new society.

6. All these experiences are important stepping stones towards the development of a genuinely revolutionary consciousness. But the road in that direction is still a long one, and is obstructed by many and obvious illusions and ideological weaknesses:

- illusions, above all, in democracy, which are extremely strong in countries which have been governed by a combination of military tyrants and corrupt monarchies, where the secret police is omnipresent and the arrest, torture and execution of dissidents is commonplace. These illusions provide an opening for the democratic "opposition" to come forward as an alternative team for managing the state: El Baradei and the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, the Transition Government in Tunisia, the National Council in Libya... In Egypt, illusions in the army as being "with the people" are particularly strong, although recent repressive actions by the army against demonstrators in Tahrir Square will certainly lead to reflection on the part of a minority. An important aspect of the democratic myth in Egypt is the demand for independent trade unions, which no doubt involves many of the most militant workers who have quite rightly called for the dissolution of the discredited official unions;
- illusions in nationalism and patriotism, exhibited in the very widespread adoption of the national flag as the symbol of the "revolutions" in Egypt and Tunisia, or, as in Libya, of the old monarchist flag as an emblem of all those opposed to Gaddafi's rule. Again, the branding of Mubarak as an agent of Zionism on a number of banners in Egypt shows that the question of Israel/Palestine remains as a potential lever for diverting class conflict towards imperialist conflict. That said, there was little interest in raising the Palestinian question, given the fact that the ruling class has so long used the sufferings of the Palestinians as a way of diverting attention from the sufferings they imposed on their own populations; and there was surely an element of internationalism in the waving of the flags of other countries as an expression of solidarity with their rebellions. The sheer extent of the revolts across the "Arab" world and beyond is a demonstration of the material reality of

internationalism, but patriotic ideology is very adaptable and in these events we are seeing how it can morph into more popular and democratic forms;

- illusions in religion, with the frequent use of public prayers and the use of the Mosque as an organising centre for rebellion. In Libya, there is evidence that more specifically Islamist groups (home-grown rather than linked to al Qaida as Gaddafi claims) played a significant role in the revolt from the beginning. This, together with the role of tribal loyalties, is a reflection of the relative weakness of the Libyan working class and the backwardness of the country and its state structures. However, given the extent to which radical Islamism of the Bin Laden variety has posed itself as the answer to the misery of the masses in the "Muslim lands", the revolts in Tunisia and Egypt, and even in Libya and the Gulf states like Yemen and Bahrain have shown that the Jihadi groups, with their practice of small terrorist cells and their noxious sectarian ideologies, have been almost entirely marginalised by the massive character of the movements and their genuine efforts to overcome sectarian divisions.

7. The current situation in North Africa and the Middle East is still in a state of constant flux. At the time of writing there are expectations of protests in Riyadh, even though the Saudi regime has already decreed that all demonstrations are contrary to sharia law. In Egypt and Tunisia, where the "revolution" has supposedly triumphed already, there are continuous clashes between protestors and the now "democratic" state, which is administered by more or less the same forces that ran the show before the "dictators" departed. The strike wave in Egypt, which quickly won many of its demands, seems to have abated. But neither the workers' struggle nor the wider social movement have suffered any set-back in those countries, and there are signs of a widespread discussion and reflection going on, certainly in Egypt. However, events in Libya have taken a very different turn. What appears to have begun as a genuine revolt from below, with unarmed civilians courageously storming military barracks and torching the HQ of the so-called Peoples' Committees, especially in the east of the country, has been rapidly transformed into a full-scale and very bloody "civil war" between bourgeois fractions, with the imperialist powers hovering like vultures over the carnage. In marxist terms, in fact, this is an instance of the transformation of an incipient civil war – in its real sense of a direct and violent confrontation between the classes – into an imperialist war. The historical example of Spain – despite con-

siderable differences in the global balance of class forces, and in the fact that the initial revolt against Franco's coup was unmistakably proletarian in nature – shows how the national and international bourgeoisie can indeed intervene in such situations to both pursue its factional, national and imperialist rivalries and to crush all possibility of social revolt.

8. The background to this turn of events in Libya is the extreme backwardness of Libyan capitalism, which has been ruled for over 40 years by the Gaddafi clique predominantly through the terror apparatus directly under his command. This structure mitigated against the development of the army as a force capable of putting the national interest above the interest of a particular leader or faction, as we saw in Tunisia and Egypt. At the same time, the country is torn by regional and tribal divisions and these have played a key role in determining support or opposition to Gaddafi. A “national” form of Islamism also seems to have been a factor in the revolt from the beginning, although the rebellion was originally more general and social rather than being merely tribal or Islamic. The principal industry in Libya is oil and the turmoil there has had a very severe effect on world oil prices. But a large part of the workforce employed in the oil industry are immigrants from Europe, the rest of the Middle East, Asia, and Africa; and although there were early reports of strikes in this sector, the massive exodus of “foreign” workers is a clear sign that they see little to identify with in a “revolution” bearing aloft the national flag. In fact there have been reports of persecution of black workers at the hands of “rebel” forces, since there were widespread rumours that some of the mercenaries hired by the regime to crush the protests were recruited in black African states, thereby casting suspicion on all black immigrants. The weakness of the working class in Libya is thus a crucial element in the negative development of the situation there.

9. Clear evidence that the “rebellion” has become a war between bourgeois camps is provided by the very hasty desertion of the Gaddafi regime by numerous high-ranking officials, including foreign ambassadors, army and police officers and civil servants. The military commanders in particular have come to the fore in the “regularisation” of the anti-Gaddafi armed forces. But perhaps the most striking sign of this change is the decision of most of the “international community” to rally to the side of the “rebels”. The Transitional National Council, based in Benghazi, has already been recognised by France as the voice of the new Libya, and a small scale military intervention has already taken shape in the sending of

“advisers” to aid the anti-Gaddafi forces. Having already intervened diplomatically to accelerate the departure of Ben Ali and Mubarak, the US, Britain and others were emboldened by the wobbling of the Gaddafi regime at the beginning: William Hague, for example, prematurely announced that Gaddafi was on his way to Venezuela. As Gaddafi's forces started to regain the upper hand, talk grew louder of imposing a No Fly zone or using other forms of direct military intervention. At the time of writing, however, there seem to be deep divisions within the EU and NATO, with Britain and France most strongly in favour of military action and the US and Germany most reluctant. The Obama administration is not opposed to military intervention on principle, of course, but it will not relish exposing itself to the danger of being drawn into yet another intractable mess in the Arab world. It may also be the case that some parts of the world bourgeoisie are wondering whether Gaddafi's “cure” of mass terror may be a way of discouraging further unrest throughout the region. One thing is certain however: the Libyan events, and indeed the whole development of the situation in the region, have revealed the grotesque hypocrisy of the world bourgeoisie. Having for years vilified Gaddafi's Libya as a hotbed of international terrorism (which it was, of course), Gaddafi's recent change of heart and decision to jettison his weapons of mass destruction in 2006 warmed the hearts of the leaders of countries like the US and Britain which were struggling to justify their stance over Saddam Hussein's alleged WMDs. Tony Blair in particular showed indecent haste in embracing yesterday's “mad terrorist leader”. Only a few years later, Gaddafi is again a mad terrorist leader and those who supported him have to scramble no less hastily to distance themselves from him. And this is only one version of the same story: nearly all the recent or current “Arab dictators” have enjoyed the loyal backing of the US and other powers, who have up till now shown very little interest in the “democratic aspirations” of the people of Tunisia, Egypt, Bahrain or Saudi Arabia. The outbreak of street protests, provoked by price rises and shortages of basic necessities and in some cases violently repressed, against the US-imposed government of Iraq, including the current rulers of Iraqi Kurdistan, further exposes the empty promises manufactured by the “democratic west”.

10. Certain internationalist anarchists in Croatia (at least before they began to take part in the protests going on in Zagreb and elsewhere) intervened on libcom.org to argue that the events in the Arab world looked to them like a rerun of the events in eastern Europe in 1989, in which all

aspirations for change were side-tracked into the terminus of “democracy”, and which brought absolutely nothing for the working class. A very legitimate concern, given the evident strength of democratic mystifications within this new movement, but missing the essential difference between the two historic moments, above all at the level of the configuration of class forces on a world scale. At the time of the collapse of the eastern bloc, the working class in the west was reaching the limits of a period of struggles which had not been able to develop at the political level; the collapse of the bloc, with its attendant campaigns about the death of communism and the end of class struggle, and the inability of the working class of the east to respond on its own class terrain, thus helped to plunge the working class internationally into a long retreat. At the same time, although the Stalinist regimes were in reality victims of the world economic crisis, this was far from obvious at the time, and there was still enough room for manoeuvre in the western economies to fuel the illusion that a bright new dawn for global capitalism was opening up. The situation today is very different. The truly global nature of the capitalist crisis has never been more apparent, making it much easier for proletarians everywhere to understand that, in essence, they are all faced with same problems: unemployment, rising prices, a lack of any future under the system. And over the past seven or eight years we have been seeing a slow but genuine revival of workers' struggles across the world, struggles usually led by a new generation of proletarians which is less scarred by the set-backs of the 80s and 90s, and which is giving rise to a growing minority of politicised elements, again on a global scale. Given these profound differences, there is a real possibility that the events in the Arab world, far from having a negative impact on the class struggle in the central countries, will feed into its future development:

- by reaffirming the power of massive and illegal action on the streets, its capacity to shake the composure of the rulers of the earth;
- by destroying bourgeois propaganda about “the Arabs” as a uniform mass of unthinking fanatics and showing the capacity of the masses in these regions to discuss, reflect, and organise themselves;
- by further undermining the credibility of the leaders of the central countries whose venality and lack of scruple has been highlighted by their twists and turns towards the Arab world. These and other elements will initially be much more

evident to the politicised minority than the majority of workers in the central countries, but in the long run they will contribute to the real unification of the class struggle across national and continental boundaries. None of this, however, lessens the responsibility of the working class in the advanced countries, who have had years of experience of the delights of “democracy” and “independent trade unionism”, whose historic political traditions are deeply if not yet widely entrenched, and who are concentrated at the heart of the world imperialist system. The capacity of the working class in North Africa and the Middle East to break with democratic illusions and provide a distinct way forward for the disinherited mass of the population is still fundamentally conditioned by the ability of workers in the central countries to provide them with a clear example of self-organised and politicised proletarian struggle.

ICC, 11th March 2011

Contribution to a history of the workers' movement in Africa

For many generations Africa has been synonymous with catastrophes, wars and permanent massacres, famine, incurable sicknesses, corrupt governments; in brief, endless absolute misery. At best, when its history is talked about (outside of folklore or "exotic" aspects), it is to point out its "worthy" Senegalese or Maghrebi sharpshooters, the celebrated auxiliaries of the French colonial army during the two world wars and the time of the maintenance of order in the old colonies. But never are the words "working class" used and still less are questions raised concerning its struggle, quite simply because it has never really entered the heads of the masses at the world or African level.

However, the world proletariat is very much present in Africa and has already shown by its struggles that it is part of a working class that bears a historic mission. However its history has been deliberately obscured by the old colonial bourgeoisie and then smothered by the new African bourgeoisie after "decolonisation".

Consequently, the main aim of this contribution is to provide some elements to attest to the very real living history of the workers' movement in Africa through its combats against the exploiting class. Admittedly, this is the history of a working class contained within a historically underdeveloped continent.

But how and why has the history of the proletariat in Africa been concealed?

"Has Africa a history? Not so long ago, this question would have been answered in the negative. In a now famous passage written in 1965, the English historian Hugh Trevor-Roper compared the history of Europe to that of Africa and basically concluded that the latter didn't exist. The African past, he wrote, presented no interest outside 'the tribulations of barbaric tribes in a certainly picturesque part of the globe, but without the least importance'. To be sure Trevor-Roper could be termed as a conservative, but at the same time the Hungarian Marxist, Endre Sik, more or less defended the same point of view. In 1966 he wrote: 'Before making contact with Europeans, the majority of Africans still led a barbaric and primitive existence and a number among them hadn't even gone beyond the most primitive stage of barbarity.[...] Is it also pointless to talk of their "history" – in the scientific meaning of the word – before the arrival of the European invaders?'

*"These are particularly blunt remarks but they were shared up to a point by a majority of historians."*¹

This is how, through their racist contempt, the thinkers of the colonial European bourgeoisie decreed the non-existence of the history of the black continent and, consequently, why the working class here had

no history in the eyes of the world.

But above all, what is still striking reading these remarks, is to see the unity in the a-historical prejudices regarding Africa from these "renowned thinkers" of the two ex-imperialist blocs; the "democratic" bloc of the west and the "socialist" bloc of the east. In fact the one described as a "marxist", Endre Sik, is nothing other than a dyed-in-the-wool stalinist whose arguments are no less fallacious than those of his rival (or colleague), the Englishman Trevor-Roper. Through their denial of the history of Africa (and of its class struggle), these gentlemen, representatives of the dominant class, express a yet more barbaric vision than that of the "barbarity of the tribulations of the African tribes". In reality, these authors are part and parcel of the group of "scholars" who gave their "scientific benediction" to the overtly racist theses of the colonising countries. This isn't the case with the author Henri Wesseling who criticises their words and distinguishes himself from his "historian" colleagues in these terms:

"[...] The truth is quite different. A certain number of Africans, such as the Khedive of Egypt, the Sultan of Morocco, the Zulu King Cetshwayo, the King of the Matabeles, the Almami Samori and King Makoko of the Batekes, had considerable influence over the course of things."

Certainly by his reaction, Henri Wesseling gains some distinction in re-establishing the real history faced with

well-intentioned falsification. Nevertheless, other "scientists" who, having admitted to the reality of the history of Africa and that of the working class, persist with a very ideological vision of history and in particular of the class struggle. In fact they exclude any possibility of a proletarian revolution on the continent with arguments no less dubious than those used by the racist historians.²

"[...] Obstinate, the African workers are the same with proletarianisation: the fact of their permanent resistance to full wage labour [...] expresses the fragility of the imported theory of a working class bearing a historic mission. Africa is not a terrain for proletarian revolutions and the somewhat catastrophic copies of this model have all been, more or less, a violent affront to the living, social dimension of the 'proletariat,'"

Let's say immediately that the authors of this quote are university sociologists comprising Anglophone and Francophone researchers. Moreover, the title of their work, *The working classes of black Africa*, says a lot about their fundamental preoccupations. On the other hand, it's clear that they don't deny the history of the African continent as do their historian colleagues, their approach comes from the same ideology which takes its point of view from "scientific proof" without it confronting real history. Already, by talking about "catastrophic copies of this model", they (involuntarily?) confuse the proletarian revolution of 1917 in Russia with coup d'états of the stalinist type or with the "national liberation" struggles that appeared throughout the world following the second imperialist world butchery under the labels "socialist" or "progressive". It's these same models that violently confronted the working class which put up a resistance to them; whether in China, Cuba, in the old countries of the Soviet bloc or in the "Third World" in general and Africa in particular. But above all, these sociologists squarely turn to the counter-revolution when they warn against an "imported theory of a working class bearing a historic mission", their logical conclusion from which is that Africa is not a terrain for proletarian revolutions. Thereby, these groups of "scholars", in

1. Henri Wesseling, *The division of Africa*, 1991, Denoel Editions, 1996 for the French translation.

2. M. Agier, J. Copans and A. Morice, *Working Classes of Black Africa*, Karthala-ORSTOM, 1987.

denying any possibility of revolutionary struggle on the African continent, seem to exclude the extension of any other revolution ("exported") in Africa. Straightaway they close the door to any perspective of emerging from the capitalist barbarity of which the exploited classes and the African populations in general are victims. Finally, they shed no light on the real history of the working class.

What concerns us, with all due deference to "our" sociologists, is that the working class remains the only class bearing a historic mission faced with the bankruptcy of capitalism which worsens every day, including in Africa as the historian Iba Der Thiam³ attests when he gives an account of workers' struggles from the beginning of the 19th century to the start of the 1930s:

"In the union domain, the period 1790-1929 was, as we've seen, a decisive stage. A period of rousing and awakening, and then affirmation, it was a new occasion for the working class to demonstrate its determination and its spirit of struggle and self-sacrifice.

"From the appearance of a pre-union consciousness, up to the eve of the world economic crisis, we've followed all the phases, from a development of consciousness whose speed of progress compared to the long road of the French working class in the same domain, appears quite exceptional.

"The idea of the strike, that's to say a means of struggle, a form of expression consistent with refusing to work and provisionally interrupting the normal run of economic life in order to assert one's rights, forcing the bosses to be concerned over wage claims for example, or to accept negotiations with the strikers or their representatives, made, over some fifteen years, considerable progress, even acquiring rights of freedom, notwithstanding the dispositions of a restrictive legislation and was recognised, if not as a legal practice, then at least a legitimate one.

"[...] The bosses' resistance, apart from some exceptions, only rarely showed an extreme intransigence. From the base of a lucid realism, the owners of the means of production did not, in general, show any reticence in advocating and seeking dialogue with the strikers, but even managed to push the Governor to speed up the procedures for mediation, and were quite ready, when their interests were seriously threatened, to make common cause with the workers, in the conflicts which opposed them to the railways for example, where it is true, the role of the state in the capital

was considerable."

Not only is this exposé sufficiently full enough to characterise a working class bearing hope, but it has a history in Africa that it shares moreover with the bourgeoisie through the historic confrontations of classes, just as happened throughout the world since the proletariat was constituted as a class under the capitalist regime.

Before pursuing the history of the African workers' movement, we draw the attention of readers to the fact that we are going to come up against difficulties linked to the denial of the history of Africa by historians and other scholars of the old colonial powers. In fact, this was shown, for example, by the colonial administrators with their policy of systematic censure of the most important events and movements of the working class. Due to this, we are reduced to basing ourselves on rare sources of more or less famous authors whose rigour of work seems to us globally proven and convincing. On the other hand, if we largely recognise the seriousness of the researchers who provide these reference sources, we do not necessarily share some of their interpretations of historic events.

Some elements of context

Senegal was the oldest of the French colonies in Africa, France having been established there from 1659 to 1960.

A historian has located the beginning of the African workers' movement at the end of the 18th century, hence the title of his work *History of the African union movement 1790-1929*.

The first professional workers (artisans, carpenters, joiners, masons, etc.) were Europeans settling in Saint-Louis Senegal (the old capital of the African colonies).

Before the Second World War, the working population of the Francophone colony of French Western Africa (FWA) was essentially based in Senegal, between Saint-Louis and Dakar which were respectively the capital of FWA and the capital of the federation which brought together FWA, French Equatorial Africa (FEA), Cameroon and Togo. Dakar was the "economic lungs" of the FWA colony, with the port, the railway and the greatest number of state workers and service employees.

At the numerical level, the working class has always been historically weak in Africa generally, evidently due to the weak economic development of the continent, which is explained in its turn through the weak investment made by the colonising countries. In 1927, the Governor of the

colony estimated the number of workers to be 60,000. Certainly, some say that half the numbers of workers were excluded from this figure, not least the day-workers and other apprentices.

Since the first struggles up to the 1960s, the proletariat has always systematically confronted the French bourgeoisie which holds the means of production alongside the colonial administration. That means that the Senegalese bourgeoisie was born and evolved in the shadow of its "big French sister" (at least up to the 1960s).

3. *History of the African union movement 1790-1929*, Editions L'Harmattan, 1991.

Class struggle in Senegal

*“The history of the African union movement has yet to be totally written [...] The fundamental reason for this failure seems to us to lie, on one hand, in the lack of research into the different segments of the African working class in a perspective which is both synchronic and diachronic; and on the other hand, in the absence of a systematic study of the different social conflicts which have been recorded, social conflicts each one of which shows the layers of information on the preoccupations of the workers, their forms of expression, the reactions of the colonial administration and the bosses, those of the political class, all the consequences that these events have had on the domestic history of the colonies at the four levels of the economic, social, political and cultural [...]”*⁴

As Iba Der Thiam emphasises, several factors explain the difficulties of writing a history of the workers’ movement in Africa. Otherwise, the major obstacle which researchers have come up against is undoubtedly linked to the fact that the real holders of the information on the working class, that is the French colonial authorities, have for a long time been cautious of opening up the state archives. And for good reason: they have an interest in hiding things.

In fact, with the partial release of the colonial archives of FWA (following the fall of the Berlin Wall), we learnt that not only had the working class existed in Africa since the 19th century but, quite naturally, it had undertaken often victorious combats against its class enemy. 1855 marked the first expression of a workers’ organisation where, at Saint-Louis Senegal, a group of 140 African workers (carpenters and masons) decided to fight against the demands of their European masters who were imposing unacceptable working conditions on them. Similarly, one can read in the archives of the existence of a (clandestine) union of “Carpenters of the Haut-Fleuve” in 1885. Above all a number of important strikes and tough confrontations took place between the working class and the colonial French bourgeoisie, like the general strike accompanied by riots in 1914 at Dakar where, for 5 days, economic and social life was totally paralysed and the Federal Governor of FWA, William Ponti, recognised (in his secret notes) that *“The strike was perfectly organised and was a*

4. Ibid.

total success”. There were also numerous other successful strikes, notably that of April 1919 and 1938 by railworkers (European and African united) but also where the state had recourse to police repression before being forced to meet the demands of the strikers. And we can add the example of the six month-long general strike (October 1947 to March 1948) by the railworkers of the whole of FWA, where the strikers were fired on by the PS (SFIO) government before ending up winning the fight.

Finally, there is also the famous worldwide “May ‘68” which spread in Africa and to Senegal, abruptly breaking the patriotic or “national consensus” which had reigned since the “independence” of the 60s. And where, through their struggles on a proletarian terrain, workers and young schoolchildren violently confronted the pro-French regime of Senghor demanding an amelioration of their conditions of life and study. After this the workers’ movement again took the road of struggle that it had known since the beginning of the 20th century but which had been blocked by the triumphant perspective of “national independence”.

These are some examples to illustrate the real existence of a combative working class that is often conscious of its own class interests, while certainly meeting immense difficulties of all sorts since its birth.

Birth of the African proletariat

We should straightaway make clear that this is a proletariat emerging under a colonial capitalist regime and that, without having accomplished its own revolution against feudalism, the African bourgeoisie also owes its existence to the presence of European colonialism on its soil.

In other words, what we are seeing is the birth of the proletariat, the motor of the development of the productive forces under the reign of capitalism triumphant over the feudal regime, the old, dominant system, the residues of which are still quite visible today in many areas of the black continent.

“During the course of the centuries preceding the arrival of the colonisers onto their continent, African societies, as all the other human societies, used labour and manpower in conditions that were

peculiar to them [...]”

“The economy was essentially agricultural; predominately made up of provisions and supply, because in using rudimentary techniques there was only rarely any great surplus to be made. Equally an economy based on hunting, fishing and gathering, to which we could add in some cases exchange activities of a relative breadth unfolded, because of the weakness and want of the means of communications, inside the group, the region, and more rarely the kingdom, in the markets at regular intervals.

“In such a context, the methods of production were often handed down and rarely secreted sufficiently vigorous and conflictual antagonisms in order to determine the existence of real social classes in the marxist sense of the term.

“[...] As much as possessions in pre-colonial Senegalese-Gambian societies were different from the European notion, so that of work was even more so. In fact, if in modern societies based on industrial development and wage labour, labour is negotiated as economic wealth, and as such, greatly submits to the ineluctable laws of the market where the relations between supply and demand determine the price of services, in pre-colonial negro-African societies, work appears to us not to have an autonomous function, independent of the person. It is a sort of community activity logically unfolding from the laws of collective life, an activity imposed by social regulation and economic necessities [...]”

*“The colonial conquest, essentially based on the spirit of power, the quest for the accumulation of profit through the exploitation of human, material and mineral resources, largely had recourse to indigenous labour and did not hesitate to call on the means put at its disposition of the exercise of state power in order to use the work of local populations, first of all free before introducing wages and thus creating the conditions and new relations as much for work as for the worker.”*⁵

On the whole, the author’s account is sufficiently clear and relevant in its theoretical approach and in describing the historic context of the birth of the proletariat in Africa. Indeed, it is convincing in its argument to demonstrate that labour in pre-colonial negro-African or Senegalese-

5. Ibid.

Gambian societies did not have the same meaning as in modern western societies. Similarly, in relation to wage labour, we can actually say that the notion of wage labour was without doubt introduced into Senegal by the French colonial system the day it decided to “wage” the men it exploited in order to assure its profits and spread its domination over the conquered territory. Thus it started up the first agricultural and industrial depots, mines, railways, waterways, roads, factories, print works, etc. In other words, this is how French colonial capitalism introduced new relations of production in its first African colony creating accordingly the conditions for the birth of the working class. But it was first of all under the regime of obligatory work (the monstrous “*corvée* system”) that the workers were exploited. That is to say at this time they were not able to negotiate the sale of their labour, as this quote shows:

*“Regarding civil works, Blanchot for example required the Mayor of the corvée of the workers to be responsible for assuring the construction of the quays from January 1st 1790, then the landing-stage at Saint-Louis. The numbers needed were originally composed of ‘20 persons with food and a resident who will be responsible for mustering them, taking them to work and making sure that they stay there.’ First of all it was an obligatory requisition which no-one could escape from, once designated, under pain of sanction. Then the work was almost free. The workers were chosen, summoned, used and supervised without any condition of price, wage or any sort of discussion on the modalities of their utilisation, even of challenging the circumstances of the choice of which they’d been the object. This dependence of the worker on his employer was attested to by Order number 1 of December 18 1789 instituting the corvée assigned to the construction of the quays and the landing-stage, which set no time limit and could, consequently, last as long as necessary. Further, allusion was made to a ‘gratuity’ of two bottles of spirits and, to clearly show that there was no question of a wage attached to the remuneration or simply compensation for the work furnished, the text makes it clear that it is a simple favour due to the good will of the authorities to the exclusion of any obligation moral or otherwise and which could be denied when the work was late through negligence.”*⁶

Obligatory requisition with no negotiation, on price or on conditions of work, in brief a total dependence of the employee on the employer who, mostly, offered his exploited, as “food”, a gratuity in the form

6. Ibid

of bottles of spirits. Such were the rules and conditions in which the proletariat, future wage labour, emerged under French colonial capitalism in Senegal.

Four years later, in 1794, the same Blanchot (now the commanding officer of Senegal) decided on a new “gratuity” by giving the order to furnish the requisitioned workers with “*couscous and the lash*”. Certainly we can see “some amelioration” of the gratuity going from two bottles of spirits to couscous, but it still wasn’t a question of “compensation” and still less a proper wage to speak of. It was necessary to wait until 1804 for remuneration as compensation for work done to officially exist. That was the year when the economy underwent a serious crisis due to the war effort then sustained by the colonial system for the conquest of the empire of Fouta (the neighbouring region of Saint-Louis). In effect, the war meant the provisional halt of river commerce, which led to shortages of products and price speculation on basic necessities, which in turn caused a rise in the cost of living, and with it, strong social tensions.

1804: the establishment of the proletariat and the first expression of class antagonisms

To deal with the deterioration of the social climate, the commanding officer of the town of Saint-Louis issued the following order:

“[...] as a consequence of the decree of the Council of the Colony on complaints regarding the high price of the workers who have successively provided their days of work at exorbitant and intolerable prices for a long time [...]. The foremen, workers, carpenters or masons must henceforth be paid a salary of one bar of iron per day or 4 francs 16 sols; the mates, three-quarters of a bar or 3 francs 12 sols, the labourers, a quarter of a bar or 1 franc 4 sols.”

*“In this document, which is one of the oldest written that we possess on wage labour, we learn that the town of Saint-Louis had at this time, that’s to say in 1804, ‘workers, carpenters, caulkers and masons’ employed by private individuals, according to the norms and in circumstances which are unfortunately not indicated, aside from the growth of salaries paid to these personnel.”*⁷

To avoid arbitrating conflict between employers and employees, the state decided to regulate their relations by fixing the total amount of wages according to categories and level of qualification. Let’s note moreover that this act of the colonial

7. Ibid.

state was first of all directed against the employees because it responded to the grievances lodged with the Chief of the colony by the employers who complained about the “exorbitant price” of a day’s work by the workers.

In fact, to cope with the effects of the crisis, the workers had decided to raise the price of their work to preserve their reduced purchasing power resulting from the increased cost of living. And before this time, the establishment of working conditions was still a purely private affair, exclusively in the hands of socio-economic negotiators, that’s to say, without any formal state legislation.

Still, this open intervention of state authority was the first of its kind in a conflict between employers and employees. More generally, this time (1804) attests to the reality of the first open expression in the colony of an antagonism between the two principal historic social classes that confront one another under capitalism: the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. This date also marks the history of labour in Senegal, which was formally recognised by the establishment of wages, finally allowing the workers to sell their labour “normally” and be paid as such.

Concerning the “ethnic composition” of the (qualified) workers, they were overwhelmingly of European origin, and similarly, the employers were almost exclusively from the metropole. Among the latter figured Potin, Valantin, Pellegrin, Morel, D’Erneville, Dubois, Prevost, etc., who were the “cream of the commercial bourgeoisie” of the colony. Finally, let’s note in passing the extreme numerical weakness of the working class (some thousands) as a consequence of the low level of economic development of the country; and this a century-and-a-half after the first arrival of colonists in this zone. Furthermore, this was essentially a colonial trading post based on trade in raw materials and ebony.⁸

The manpower crisis of the colonial trading post

“The principal activity of Senegal was the slave trade and the exploitation of products such as gum, ivory, gold, yellow wax, hides drawn by the Saint-Louisian and other merchants on the river or along the west coast of Africa but as long as its economic importance remained secondary the availability of manpower was never a concern. In order to carry out the rare works of fitting out equipment or summary infrastructures, the Governor, at his own discretion, could

8. “Ebony” was a euphemism coined by the Negroes to describe the black slaves deported to the Americas (Wikipedia).

call on extra assistance from the military or civilian sectors and, in work that didn't need specialised workers could often, if not always, call on the workers in the most servile conditions.

*"But the suppression of slavery had profoundly changed the givens of the situation. The principal economic resource of the colony was henceforth threatened with drying up. France had further lost some of its agricultural colonies with the attempted European colonisation of Cape Verde having failed and the Government of the Restoration then thought it necessary to initiate the development of agriculture in Senegal by growing a certain number of local products likely to feed French industry, turning around the commercial activities of the colony and giving work to the indigenous free labour force."*⁹

It is necessary to underline straightaway that the suppression of slavery responded first and foremost to an economic need rather than any humanitarian consideration. In fact, the colonial bourgeoisie lacked a workforce due to the fact that a large proportion of the men and women of working age were slaves in the hands of their local masters. The suppression of slavery took place in two stages.

In the first stage, a law dating from April 1818 forbade only the maritime commerce of slaves and their transportation to America, but not inside the territories which remained free for the colonial merchants. However, it was quickly realised that this was still insufficient to remedy the shortage of workers. So the Chief of the colony personally asked the head of the First Battalion to provide *"men of the corvée on request who would be used for diverse purposes"*. Thanks to these measures, the colonial authorities and merchants could temporarily overcome the labour shortage. For their part, the available labourers became aware of the benefits they could derive from the scarcity of labour by becoming more demanding towards the employers. And this provoked a new confrontation over the price of labour between the workers and their bosses, resulting in a new intervention by the colonial authorities who proceeded with the "regulation" of the market in favour of the merchants.

In the second stage, in February 1821, the Minister of the Navy and the Colonies, while considering a policy of active immigration by people of European origin, ordered the end of slavery in "all its forms".

In fact, once again for the colonial authorities it was a matter of finding the necessary hands for the development of

the agricultural economy:

*"For the Governor, it was a question of the redemption of individuals kept in slavery in the regions close to the west African possessions; of their emancipation by a certifiable act on the condition that they worked for the contractor for a certain period of time. This would be [...] a sort of liberty apprenticeship, familiarising the native with European civilisation, giving him a taste of new industrial cultures while reducing the number of captives. One thus obtained [...] labour while keeping in with the plans of the abolitionists."*¹⁰

In other words, it was above all a question of "civilising" to better exploit the "emancipated" and it was in no way liberation in the name of a humanitarian vision. Moreover, as if that wasn't enough, two years later in 1823, the colonial administration set up a "regime of time-serving", that's to say a sort of contract linking the employee to the employer for a long period.

*"The time-servers were used for a period which could go up to 14 years in the public workshops, in the administration, the agricultural plantations (there were 300 out of 1500 used by Baron Roger), in hospitals where they worked as messengers, nurses or domestics, in local security, and in the army; in the regiment of Marine Infantry they numbered 72 in 1828, 115 four years later, 180 in 1842, while the numbers of those redeemed counted 1629 in 1835, 1768 in 1828, 2545 in 1839. At this time the village of Saint-Louis alone counted about 1600 time-servers among its inhabitants."*¹¹

In this regard, let's underline the beginning of the formal existence of long-term contracts (14 years) similar to a CDI (contract of indeterminate length) of today. We see here the permanent need for workers that corresponds to the rhythm of the economic development of the colony. Similarly, the regime of time-servers had been conceived with the aim of the accelerating agricultural colonisation and this policy is shown in the consequent start of the development of the productive forces and more generally of the local economy. But the balance-sheet was very contradictory because, if it allowed a real increase in commercial traffic (import/export), which went from 2 million francs in 1818 to 14 million in 1844, the policy of agricultural industrialisation on the other hand hit a brick wall. In fact the plan initiated by Baron Roger for the development of agriculture was abandoned by his successors (three years after it was launched) because of differing economic orientations within

10. Ibid.

11. Ibid

the state. Another factor weighing on the decision to cancel the plan for the development of agriculture was the refusal of a great number of the previous farmers, who had become paid employees, to return to the land. However, the two aspects of this policy, i.e. the redemption of slaves and the "regime of time-servers", were maintained up to 1848, the time of the decree for their total suppression.

*"Such was the situation towards the middle of the 19th century, a situation characterised by the now established wage labour, the attribute of a defenceless proletariat with almost no rights, which, if it was aware of any unity or combination, if it thus had a pre-union consciousness, had never yet dared to assert itself in a conflict with its employers who were backed up by an authoritarian government."*¹²

Thus was constituted the basis of a waged proletariat, evolving under the regime of modern capitalism, the precursor of the African working class and which, henceforth, would make its apprenticeship in the class struggle at the beginning of the second half of the 19th century.

Embryonic forms of class struggle in 1855

The emergence of the working class

According to available sources,¹³ 1855 saw the appearance of the first professional organisation aiming to defend the specific interests of the proletariat. Its constitution followed a movement launched by a native carpenter (a habitant of Saint-Louis) who led 140 workers to draw up a petition against the European master craftsmen who were imposing unacceptable conditions of work. In fact:

*"The first artisans who undertook the great colonial works were European or military engineers who were assisted by auxiliaries and indigenous workers. These were carpenters, joiners, masons, blacksmiths and shoemakers. These were the technically more qualified personnel benefitting, in a certain number of cases, from a more or less elementary training. They prevailed in the existing corporations of which they made up the leading elite; it was without doubt these who decided the markets, fixed the prices, allocated the tasks, chose the workers that they hired and paid a tariff largely inferior to that they claimed back from the employers."*¹⁴

In this clash we see that the first expression of the "class struggle" in the colony op-

12. Ibid

13. Mar Fall, *The State and the Union Question in Senegal* L'Hartmann, Paris, 1989.

14. Thiam, op. cit.

9. Thiam, op. cit.

posed two fractions of the same (working) class and not the bourgeoisie and proletariat directly; in other words, a so-called base fraction of workers (dominated), in struggle against another so-called “ruling elite” (dominant) fraction of workers. Another feature of this context is the fact that the exploiting class was derived exclusively from the colonial bourgeoisie, due to the absence of a “native bourgeoisie”. In brief, we have a working class constituting itself under a developing colonial capitalism. Therefore it is understandable why the first expression of working class struggle could not avoid being marked by a triple connotation, “corporatist”, “ethnic” and “hierarchical”. This is illustrated in the case of the leader of this group of indigenous workers, himself a master carpenter, and as such a trainer of numerous young apprentice workers under him, while at the same time working under the European master joiners who decided everything (cf. the preceding quote).

In this context, the decision of the native leader to join with the rank and file African workers (less qualified than him) in order to face up to the arrogant attitude of the western master artisans is understandable and can be interpreted as a healthy reaction in defence of proletarian interests.

Moreover, according to archive sources, this same indigenous master craftsman was later involved in the constitution in 1885 of the first African union, even though the 1884 law of Jules Ferry authorising the creation of unions had excluded their establishment in the colonies. For this reason the union of native workers had to exist and function in clandestinity, leading to a lack of information on its history, as the following passage shows:

*“The K30 series of the Archives of the Republic of Senegal include an unpublished manuscript which hasn't previously been quoted by any source and which was filed in a folder on which someone had written: union of the carpenters of the Haut-Fleuve. Unfortunately, this extremely important piece of the archives on the history of the union movement in Senegal is unaccompanied by any other document likely to throw some light or understanding on the question.”*¹⁵

So, despite the ban on any form of proletarian expression and despite the systematic censure of the real history of the workers' movement in the colonies, this record could show the existence of the first embryonic organisations of class struggle of a union type. Admittedly, this was a “corporatist union”, of carpenters, but in any case the capitalist state at this time forbade any sort

of inter-professional association.

This is what investigations into the writings related to this theme and period allow us to understand today about the expressions of working class struggle in this period from 1855 to 1885.

Immigrant Senegalese struggles in the Belgian Congo in 1890/1892

“Let's recall first of all that when the suppression of the regime of time-servers was enacted in 1848, this system, which was far from having completely disappeared, tried to adapt to the new situation by progressively transforming itself. But this solution in no way resolved the thorny issue of labour.

*“The colonial economic milieu could thus not buy slaves that they could work into the ground and the plantations risked being abandoned because of the lack of hands, pushing the administrative leadership and the political authorities to authorise the immigration of recently liberated African workers towards regions where their services would be appreciated, on a salary and with conditions discussed in agreement with the bosses. In order to effect this request, the Governor published the decree of March 27 1852, reorganising the emigration of workers in the colonies; thus on July 3 1854, a ship named 'Le cinq freres' chartered to ensure the transport of 3000 workers destined for the plantations of Guyana, cast anchor at Dakar and made contacts with the aim of hiring 300 Senegalese. The conditions stated were the following: “an expatriation of six years against a gift to the value of 30 to 50 francs, a wage of 15 francs per month, lodgings, food, medical care, the pleasure of a small garden and free repatriation at the end of their stay in the Americas.”*¹⁶

We see here, with the case of the 300 Senegalese destined for the plantations of Guyana, that the working class really existed, to the point of constituting “a reserve of labour”, a part of which the bourgeoisie could export.

Indeed, having demonstrated their competence and efficiency, for example in undertaking (in 1885) the hard work of constructing the Dakar/Saint-Louis railway, the workers of this French colony aroused a particular interest among the colonial economic milieux, either as exploitable labour on site, or as a labour force to be exported to foreign competitors.

In this same context and in similar conditions, a great number of Senegalese workers were recruited and sent to the

Belgian Congo to work in various sites and depots, notably on the Congolese railway of Matadi.

But, from their arrival, the immigrant workers came up against harsh conditions of work and existence and immediately saw that the Belgian colonial authorities had no intention of honouring their contracts. In fact, as they noted themselves in a letter of protest addressed to the Governor of Senegal, they were “badly fed, inadequately lodged, underpaid, sick and badly looked after”, they died like flies and they thought that cholera was striking them because “we are burying 4 or 5 people a day”. A petition of February 1892, addressed to the French and Belgian colonial authorities, firmly demanded their collective repatriation to Senegal, concluding: “Now none amongst us wants to stay in Matadi”.

The workers were thus victims of a particularly odious form of exploitation by colonial capitalism which imposed such barbarous conditions upon them that, during this time, the two colonial states passed the buck, or shut their eyes firmly to the fate of the immigrant workers:

*“Encouraged by impunity, the Belgian authorities did nothing to ameliorate the condition of the unfortunate protesters. The distance between the Belgian Congo and Senegal, arguments over precedence which prevented the representative of the French government in the region interceding on their behalf, the complicity which benefitted the railway company of the Lower Congo at the rue Oudinot (cf. Ministry of the Colonies), the cynicism of some of the colonial milieu that found the bad luck of the poor Senegalese amusing, exposed the Senegalese workers to almost total abandonment and more or less disarmed without any means of defence, taxable and forced, they were at their mercy.”*¹⁷

Through their combativity, by refusing to work in the conditions imposed on them and by firmly demanding their evacuation from the Congo, the immigrants from the French colony obtained some satisfaction. Also, on their return to the country, they were able to count on the support of the population and their comrade workers by thus obliging the Governor to engage in new reforms aiming to protect the workers, beginning with the establishment of new emigration rules. In fact, the drama the immigrants suffered in the Congo gave rise to debates and developments of consciousness in relation to workers' conditions. It was in this context, between 1892 and 1912, that a whole series of measures was taken on behalf of employees, for example a weekly break, workers' pensions, medical

15. Ibid

16. Ibid

17. Ibid.

assistance, in short real reforms.

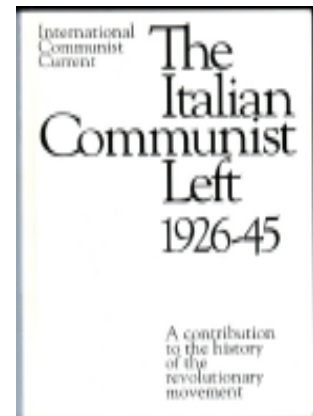
Furthermore, based on their "Congolese experience", the old immigrants were particularly conspicuous during a new recruitment drive for new railway yards in Senegal by being very demanding over working conditions. In this sense, in 1907 they decided to create a professional association called the "Workers' Association of Kayes" with the aim of better defending their working and living conditions faced with the appetites of the capitalist vultures. And the colonial authority, taking account of the balance of power at that time which was about to escape their control, agreed to legalise the railworkers' association.

In fact, the birth of this association among the railworkers is hardly surprising when one considers that, since the opening of the network in 1885, this sector had become one of the most important industrial complexes of the colony, both in its turnover and the number of employees. Similarly, we shall see later that the railworkers are in all the battles of the working class in French Western Africa.

More generally, the period following the return of immigrants to the country (between 1892 and 1913) was marked by strong social unrest, notably in the public sector where clerks and workers of the post and telephone service protested against deteriorating working conditions and low wages. In this context, civil servants and those close to them decided to create their own associations to defend themselves by "all means at their disposal", soon followed by commercial employees who took the opportunity to demand that the law on a weekly rest period apply to their sector. In short, there was a seething combativity among workers in both the private and public sectors, which increasingly worried the colonial authorities. Indeed, not only could these burning social problems not be settled by the end of 1913, but they reached their climax in the context of the crisis resulting from the First World War.

Lassou (to be continued).

ICC Publication



This history of the Italian Left is not neutral, looking down on the social battlefield. In today's world of decomposing capitalism, the alternative posed more than sixty years ago by the Communist Left is more valid than ever: "communist revolution or the destruction of humanity".

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.

The aim of this brief history of the struggle of the Italian Communist Left is to help all those who have thrown in their lot with the revolutionary working class to bridge the gap between their past and their present.

What are workers councils? (v)

1917 – 1921: The soviets and the question of the state

In the previous article in this series (*International Review* n° 143), we saw how the soviets, having seized power in October 1917, gradually lost it to the point where it was no more than a facade, kept alive artificially to hide the triumph of the capitalist counter-revolution that had taken place in Russia. The aim of this article is to understand what caused this to happen and to draw lessons that will be indispensable for revolutionaries in the future.

The nature of the state born out of revolution

Marx and Engels, analysing the Paris Commune of 1871, drew some lessons on the question of the state that we can summarise here:

- 1) It is necessary to destroy the bourgeois state apparatus from top to bottom;
- 2) The state will re-emerge after the revolution and there are two main reasons for this:
 - a) the bourgeoisie has not yet been completely defeated and eradicated;
 - b) non-exploiting classes (petty bourgeoisie, peasantry, those on the fringes of society...) whose interests do not coincide with those of the proletariat, will still remain in the transitional society.

This article does not aim to analyse the nature of the new state;¹ however to illustrate the subject we are dealing with, we must show that while the new state is not identical to those that preceded it in history, it still retains characteristics that constitute an obstacle to the development of the revolution; which is why, as Engels had already pointed out and as Lenin had made clear in *State and Revolution*, the proletariat must on the very day of the revolution begin the process of eliminating the new state.

After taking power, the main obstacle that the soviets would run into in Russia was the newly emerged state, which “*despite the appearance of its greater material power [...] was a thousand times more vulnerable to the enemy than other working class*

1. See for example: “The Period of Transition”, *International Review* n° 1, “The State and the dictatorship of the proletariat”, *International Review* n° 11. See also the articles of our series on communism: *International Review* n°s 77-78, 91, 95-96, 99, 127-130, 132, 134 and 135.

organs. Indeed, the state owes its greater physical power to objective factors which correspond perfectly with the interests of the exploiting classes but can have no association with the revolutionary role of the proletariat”²; “*The terrible threat of a return to capitalism will come mainly in the state sector. This, all the more so as capitalism is found here in its impersonal, so to speak, ethereal form. Statification can help to conceal a long-term process opposed to socialism.*”³

In the previous article, we described the factors that contributed to the weakening of the soviets: civil war, famine, the general chaos in the whole economy, the exhaustion and the gradual decomposition of the working class, etc. The “silent conspiracy” of the soviet state, which would also contribute in weakening the soviets, operated in three ways:

- 1) the growing weight of the state institutions par excellence: the army, the Cheka (political police) and the unions;
- 2) the “inter-classism” of the soviets and the growing bureaucratisation that it gave rise to, and
- 3) the gradual absorption of the Bolshevik Party into the state. We dealt with the first point in the previous article; this article will focus on the last two.

2. *Bilan*, n°. 18, organ of the Italian Fraction of the Communist Left, p.612. *Bilan* continued the work of Marx, Engels and Lenin on the question of the state and more particularly its role in the transition from capitalism to communism. Adopting Engels’ formulation, it defined the state as a “*scourge which the proletariat inherits; in this regard, we will maintain an almost instinctive distrust of it.*” (*Bilan* n° 26 p.874).

3. *Internationalisme*, n° 10, organ of the Communist Left of France (GCF), 1945-1952. The Communist Left of France continued the work of *Bilan* and is the precursor of our organisation.

The relentless strengthening of the state

The soviet state excluded the bourgeoisie but was not exclusively the state of the proletariat. It included non-exploiting classes such as the peasantry, the petty bourgeoisie and the various middle strata. These classes tended to defend their own narrow interests, which inevitably placed obstacles on the road to communism. This unavoidable “interclassism” was a key factor driving the new state, a process which would be denounced by the Workers’ Opposition in 1921: it meant that the “*the Soviet policy had different goals and had a distorted relationship with the working class*”⁴ and it became the breeding ground of the state bureaucracy.

Shortly after October, former Tsarist officials began occupying positions in the soviet institutions, especially when quick decisions were needed to deal with urgent problems. Thus, for example, faced with the impossibility of organising the supply of essential goods in February 1918, the People’s Commissariat had to resort to using commissions that had been established

4. The Workers’ Opposition was a left tendency that emerged inside the Bolshevik Party in 1920-21. This article does not set out to analyse the different left fractions that arose inside the Bolshevik Party in response to its degeneration. We refer the reader to the many articles we’ve already published on this question. These include “The Communist Left in Russia”, *International Review* n°s 8-9; “Manifesto of the Workers’ Group of the Russian Communist Party”, *International Review* n°s 142, 143, 144 and 145. The quote, translated by us, is taken from the book *Workers’ Democracy or Party Dictatorship?*, the chapter entitled “What is the Workers’ Opposition” on page 179 of the Spanish edition. It should be noted that if the Workers’ Opposition had the insight to see the problems the revolution faced, the solution it proposed could only make things worse. It thought that the unions should have even more power. Based on the correct idea that “*the Soviet apparatus is made up from different social strata*” (p.177 op. cit.), it concludes with the need for “*the reins of the dictatorship of the proletariat in the field of economic construction [to] be given to organs which by their composition, are class organs, united by their vital links to production in a direct way, that is to say, the unions*” (ibid.). This approach restricts the activity of the proletariat to the narrow domain of “economic construction” and at the same time gives organs that are bureaucratic and destructive of the capacities of the proletariat, the trade unions, the utopian mission of developing the autonomous activity of the masses.

by the former Provisional Government. The members agreed on condition that they did not have to rely on the Bolsheviks, which the latter accepted. Similarly, in reorganising the education system in 1918-19, former Tsarist officials had to be called on, and they would gradually amend the proposed school curriculum.

In addition, the best proletarian elements were gradually converted into bureaucrats remote from the masses. The imperatives of the war drew many leading workers into playing the role of political commissars, inspectors or military leaders. The most able workers took the leading role in the economic administration. The former imperial bureaucrats and those newly arriving from the proletariat formed a bureaucratic layer that identified with the state. But this organ had its own logic, and its siren song managed to seduce such experienced revolutionaries as Lenin and Trotsky.

The former officials from the bourgeois elite were imbued with this logic, and they penetrated the soviet fortress through the door that the new state opened to them: "But thousands of those who, through custom and culture, were more or less closely attached to the expropriated bourgeoisie were very soon offered the opportunity to re-enter the 'revolutionary stronghold' - by the back door as it were - and to resume their role as managers of the labour process in the 'Workers' State'.... Many were soon to be appointed (from above) to leading positions in the economy. Merging with the new political-administrative 'elite', of which the Party itself formed the nucleus, the more 'enlightened' and technologically skilled sections of the 'expropriated class' soon resumed dominant positions in the relations of production."⁵ As the Soviet historian Kritsman points out, "in their administrative work the representatives of the old intelligentsia showed off-handedness and hostility towards the public."⁶

But the main danger came from the state machine itself, with its increasing but imperceptible weight of inertia. As a consequence of this, even the most dedicated public servants tended to become detached from, and were distrusted by, the masses, adopting expedient methods, imposing unwanted measures, and carrying out duties affecting thousands of people as nothing more than administrative tasks, ruling by decrees. "The party, turning from the task of destruction to that of administration, discovers the virtues of law and order and of submission to the rightful authority of

the revolutionary power."⁷

The bureaucratic logic of the state suited the bourgeoisie perfectly; as an exploitative class, it can safely delegate power to a specialised body of professional politicians and officials. But it is fatal for the proletariat to put its trust in specialists at any time; it must learn directly from its mistakes and by taking decisions and putting them into practice itself it will begin to transform itself in the process. The logic of proletarian power is not in delegating power, but in direct involvement in exercising it.

The revolution in Russia was faced with a dilemma in April 1918: the world revolution had not advanced and the imperialist invasion threatened to crush the soviet bastion. The whole country had descended into chaos, "the administrative and economic organisation was running down at an alarming rate. The danger to the revolution came not from organised resistance, but from a breakdown of all authority. The appeal in *State and Revolution* to 'smash the bourgeois state machine' now seemed singularly out of date; that part of the revolutionary programme had succeeded beyond all expectations."⁸

The soviet state was faced with taking some drastic decisions: to quickly get the Red Army on its feet, to organise transport, to boost production, to guarantee food supplies to the hungry cities, to organise social life. All this had to be sorted out against the total sabotage by the entrepreneurs and managers that would lead to the widespread confiscation of industries, banks, shops, etc. It presented the soviet power with an additional challenge. A heated debate unfolded inside the party and the soviets. Everyone was in favour of military and economic resistance up until the proletarian revolution broke out in the other countries, principally Germany. The disagreement was about how to organise resistance: was it by strengthening the state machinery or by improving the organisation and capabilities of the working masses? Lenin led those who defended the first solution while some tendencies on the left of the Bolshevik Party defended the second.

In his pamphlet *The Immediate Tasks of Soviet Power*, Lenin argues that "the primary task facing the revolution [...] was the task of... rebuilding a shattered economy, of imposing labour discipline and raising productivity, of ensuring strict accounting and control over production and distribution, eliminating corruption and waste and, perhaps above all, of struggling

against the ubiquitous petty-bourgeois mentality [...] He did not hesitate to make use of what he himself termed bourgeois methods, including the use of bourgeois technical specialists [...] the recourse to piece work; the adoption of the 'Taylor system' [...] He therefore called for 'one-man management.'"⁹

Why did Lenin favour this approach? The first reason was inexperience: soviet power was confronted in effect with huge and urgent tasks without being able to draw on any experience, and without this it was not possible to carry out any theoretical reflection on these matters. The second reason was the desperate and intolerable situation we have described. But we must also consider Lenin in turn to be a victim of the statist and bureaucratic logic, emerging bit by bit as its spokesman. This logic led him to put his trust in the old technicians, administrators and officials trained under capitalism and, moreover, in the unions who were responsible for disciplining workers, stifling independent initiatives and demonstrations by workers, imposing the capitalist division of labour and the narrow corporatist mentality that goes with it.

The oppositionists on the left denounced the idea that "The form of state control of enterprises must develop in the direction of bureaucratic centralisation, of rule by various commissars, of deprivation of independence from local Soviets and of rejection in practice of the type of 'Commune-State' ruled from below [...] The introduction of labour discipline in connection with the restoration of capitalist leadership in production cannot essentially increase the productivity of labour, but it will lower the class autonomy, activity and degree of organisation of the proletariat".¹⁰

The Workers' Opposition complained that: "given the disastrous state of our economy that still relies on the capitalist system (paid wages, different rates, labour categories, etc.), the elites in our party distrust the creative capacity of the workers, and are seeking salvation from the economic chaos with the heirs of the old capitalists, businessmen and technicians whose creative ability is corrupted in economic affairs by routine, habit and methods and management of the capitalist mode of production."¹¹

Far from withering away, the state power grew alarmingly: "A 'white' professor who reached Omsk in the autumn of 1919 from Moscow reported that 'at the head of

5. See M. Brinton, *The Bolsheviks and Workers' Control*, Introduction. Available from: <http://libcom.org/library/bolsheviks-workers-control-solidarity-introduction>.

6. Cited by Marcel Liebman, *Leninism under Lenin*, London 1975, p.320.

7. E. H. Carr, *The Bolshevik Revolution*, Ch. VIII, "The ascendancy of the party," p.192 of 1973 Penguin edition.

8. Ibid., note A, "Lenin's Theory of the State", p.251.

9. See *International Review* 99, "Understanding the defeat of the Russian Revolution" (Part 1), p.17.

10. Ibid., quote from Ossinski, a member of one of the first left tendencies in the Party.

11. *Workers' Democracy or Party Dictatorship?*, p.181 of the Spanish edition, translated by us.

many of the centres and glavki sit former employers and responsible officials and managers of business. The unprepared visitor to the centres who is personally acquainted with the former commercial and industrial world would be surprised to see the former owners of big leather factories sitting in Glavkoz, big manufacturers in the Central textile organisations, etc.”¹² In March 1919, during a debate of the Petrograd Soviet, Lenin admitted: “We threw out the old bureaucrats, but they have come back, they call themselves ‘commonists’ when they can’t bear to say the word Communist, and they wear a red ribbon in their buttonholes and creep into warm places.”¹³

The growth of the soviet bureaucracy finally overpowered the soviets. There were 114,259 employees in June 1918, 529,841 one year later, and 5.82 million in December 1920! “State interest” was relentlessly enforced over the revolutionary struggle for communism, “the general concerns of the state began to override the interests of the working class.”¹⁴

The absorption of the Bolshevik Party into the state

The strengthening of the state led to the absorption of the Bolshevik Party. It had not *a priori* anticipated this conversion into a state party. According to figures from February 1918, the Central Committee of the Bolsheviks only had six administrative employees against 65 for the Council of Commissars, while the soviets of Petrograd and Moscow had more than 200. “The Bolshevik organisations were financially dependent on the help given them by the local Soviet institutions: generally speaking, such dependence was complete. It was even possible for prominent Bolsheviks, such as Preobrazhensky, to suggest that the Party should dissolve itself completely in the Soviet apparatus.” The anarchist Leonard Schapiro acknowledged that “the best of the Party cadres had been integrated in the apparatus, both central and local, of the soviets”. Many Bolsheviks felt that “local committees of the Bolshevik party were nothing more than propaganda sections of the local Soviets”¹⁵. The Bolsheviks even had doubts about their ability to exercise power at the head of the soviets. “In the

aftermath of the October insurrection, when the Soviet government was being formed, Lenin had a momentary hesitation before accepting his post of chairman of the Soviet of People’s Commissars. His political intuition told him that this would put a brake on his capacity to act in the vanguard of the vanguard – to be on the left of the revolutionary party, as he had been so clearly between April and October 1917”¹⁶. Lenin feared, not without reason, that if the party and its leading members were involved in the daily running of the Soviet government, they would find themselves trapped by the system and lose sight of the global goals of the proletarian movement that cannot be linked to the daily management of state affairs.¹⁷

The Bolsheviks didn’t want to monopolise power and shared the first Council of People’s Commissars with the Left Socialist Revolutionaries. Some of the sessions of this Council were even open to delegates from the Menshevik Internationalists and the anarchists.

The government only became definitively Bolshevik in July 1918, the date of the uprising of the Socialist Revolutionaries against the creation of poor peasants’ committees: “On July 6, two young Chekist members of the Left Socialist Revolutionary party, and major players in the conspiracy, A. Andreyev and G. Blumkin, appeared at the German Embassy and provided official documents attesting to their status and their mission. Admitted into the office of Ambassador, Count von Mirbach, they shot him and fled. In the aftermath, a detachment of Chekists commanded by a Left Socialist Revolutionary, Popov, would make a series of surprise arrests, including those of the leaders of the Cheka, Dzerzhinsky and Latsis, the chairman of the Moscow Soviet, Smidovitch, and People’s Commissar for the Post, Podbielsky. He also seized the headquarters of the Cheka and the Central Post Office Building.”¹⁸

16. *International Review* n° 99, op. cit.

17. This concern was echoed by the communist left, which “expressed, in 1919, the desire to draw a clearer distinction between state and party. It seemed to them that the one more than the other was focused on internationalism in line with their own concerns. The party must somehow play the role of the conscience of the government and the State” (Marcel Liebman, op cit.). Bilan insisted on this danger of the party being absorbed by the state, of the working class losing its avant-garde and its main source of support, the soviets: “The confusion between these two notions of party and state is particularly damaging as there is no possibility of reconciling these two organs, when there is an irresolvable opposition in the nature, the function and the goals of the state and the party. The adjective ‘proletarian’ does not change the nature of the state which remains an organ of economic or political coercion, while the party is a body whose role is, par excellence, to achieve, not by coercion but political education, the emancipation of the workers” (Bilan n° 26, p.871).

18. Pierre Broué, *Trotsky*, p.255. The author relates the

As a consequence of this, the party was then invaded by all sorts of opportunists and careerists, former tsarist officials or leading Menshevik converts. Nogin, an old Bolshevik, “spoke of horrifying facts about the drunkenness, debauchery, corruption, robbery and irresponsible behaviour of many party workers, so that one’s hair simply stands on end.”¹⁹ In March 1918, before the Party Congress, Zinoviev told the story of the militant who welcomed a new member and told him to come back the next day to collect his membership card; to this he replied “No, comrade, I need it now to get an office job.”

As Marcel Liebman noted, “If so many men who were communists in name only tried to enter the ranks of the party, it was because it was now the central power, the most influential institution in social and political life, one that united the new elite, appointed the managers and leaders and was the instrument and channel of upward social mobility and success” and he added that “the privileges of the middle and junior management raised protests in the party ranks”²⁰, when all this is quite normal and commonplace in a bourgeois party.

The party then attempted to fight this influx by carrying out numerous purges. But this would prove to be ineffectual because the measures did not address the root of the problem as the merger of the party with the state was being strengthened inexorably. This danger was also contained in a similar way in the identification of the party with the Russian nation. The proletarian party is indeed international and its section in one or more countries where the proletariat is in control of an isolated bastion can in no way identify with the nation, but only and exclusively with the world revolution.

The transformation of Bolshevism into a party-state was eventually theorised by the argument that the party exercises power on behalf of the class, that the dictatorship of the proletariat is the dictatorship of the party,²¹ which theoretically and politically

story of the anarchist author Leonard Schapiro.

19. E. H. Carr, *The Bolshevik Revolution*, Ch. VIII, “The Ascendancy of the party,” Pelican Books, p.212.

20. Ibid.

21. This theory was rooted in the confusions that all the revolutionaries had about the party, its relationship with the class and the question of power, as we noted in an article in our series on communism, *International Review* n° 91 (p.16): “the revolutionaries of the day, despite their commitment to the soviet system of delegation which had made the old system of parliamentary representation obsolete, were still held back by parliamentary ideology to the extent that they saw the party which had a majority in the central soviets then formed the government and administered the state.” In reality, the old confusions were reinforced and pushed to the extreme by the theorisation of the mounting evidence of the transformation of the Bolshevik party into the Party-State.

12. Brinton, op. cit., chapter on 1920. The Glavki were state organs for the management of the economy.

13. Lenin, March 1919, “Session of the Petrograd Soviet”, *Collected Works*, Vol. 29, p.32-3, Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1965. This quotation differs slightly from that in the French version of this article.

14. *Workers’ Democracy or Party Dictatorship?*, p.213 of the Spanish edition, translated by us.

15. Quotes taken from Marcel Liebman, *Leninism under Lenin*, p 279.

disarmed it, completing its surrender into the arms of the state. In one of its resolutions, the 8th Party Congress (March 1919) agreed that the party must “win individual political sway in the soviets and effective control over all their activities.”²² The resolution was implemented in the following months with the formation of party cells in all the soviets to control them. Kamenev declared that “the Communist Party is the government of Russia. The country is ruled by the 600,000 party members.”²³ The icing on the cake was provided by Zinoviev at the 2nd Congress of the Communist International (1920) when he declared that “every conscious worker must realise that the dictatorship of the working class can be realised only through the dictatorship of its vanguard, that is, through the Communist Party”²⁴ and by Trotsky at the Tenth Party Congress (1921), who stated in a reply to the Workers’ Opposition: “They have come out with dangerous slogans. They have made a fetish of democratic principles. They have placed the workers’ right to elect representatives above the Party. As if the Party were not entitled to assert its dictatorship even if that dictatorship temporarily clashed with the passing moods of the workers’ democracy!” Trotsky spoke of the “revolutionary historical birthright of the Party”. “The Party is obliged to maintain its dictatorship ... regardless of temporary vacillations even in the working class... The dictatorship does not base itself at every given moment on the formal principle of a workers’ democracy...”²⁵

The proletariat had lost the Bolshevik Party as its vanguard. No longer was the state made to serve the proletariat; the state used the party as its battering ram against the proletariat. This is how the Platform of Fifteen, an opposition group that emerged within the Bolshevik Party in the late 1920s, denounced it: “The bureaucratisation of the party, the degeneration of its leading elements, the merger of the party apparatus with the bureaucratic apparatus of government, the loss of influence of the proletarian part of the party, the intervention of government in the internal struggles of the party - all this shows that the central committee has already exceeded the limitations of the policy of silencing the party and started to liquidate it - and is transforming it into an auxiliary arm of the state. Carrying out this

22. Marcel Liebman, op. cit., p.280.

23. Ibid.

24. Ibid.

25. Quoted in Brinton’s pamphlet, chapter on 1921. Trotsky was right in saying that the class can go through moments of confusion and hesitation and that the party, by contrast, armed with a rigorous theoretical and programmatic framework, is the bearer of the historic interests of the class and has to pass them down to it. But it can’t do this by way of a dictatorship over the proletariat, which only weakens it, further increasing its hesitations.

policy of liquidation will mean the end of the proletarian dictatorship in the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. The party is the avant-garde and a vital weapon in the struggle of the working class. Without it, neither victory nor the retention of the proletarian dictatorship is possible.”²⁶

The necessity for the proletariat to organise autonomously from the transitional state

How could the proletariat in Russia have overturned the balance of forces, revitalised the soviets, held back the growth of the post-revolutionary state, opening the door to its real withering away and taking forward the world wide revolutionary movement towards communism?

This question could only have been solved by the development of the world revolution. “In Russia, the problem could only be posed.”²⁷ “...in Europe it will be immeasurably more difficult to start, whereas it was immeasurably more easy for us to start; but it will be more difficult for us to continue the revolution than it will be over there”.²⁸

In the context of the struggle for the world revolution, there were two concrete tasks in Russia: saving the party for the proletariat by tearing it away from the talons of the state, and organising itself in workers’ councils capable of regenerating the soviet structure. Here we are only dealing with the latter point.

The proletariat has to organise itself independently from the transitional state and impose its own dictatorship over it. This may seem stupid to those who stick to facile formulae and syllogisms, which say that because the proletariat is the ruling class the state has to be its most faithful organ. In *State and Revolution*, going back over Marx’s *Critique of the Gotha Programme*, written in 1875, Lenin wrote:

“In its first phase, or first stage, communism cannot as yet be fully mature economically and entirely free from traditions or vestiges of capitalism. Hence the interesting phenomenon that communism in its first phase retains ‘the narrow horizon of bourgeois law.’ Of course, bourgeois law

26. The Platform of the Group of Fifteen was first published outside Russia by the branch of the Italian Left, which published the journal *Reveil Communist* in the late 1920s. It appeared in German and French under the title *On the eve of Thermidor, revolution and counter-revolution in Soviet Russia - Platform of the Left Opposition in the Bolshevik party* (Sapranov, Smirnov, Obhorin, Kalin, etc.) at the beginning of 1928. An English translation appears in the ICC’s book *The Russian Communist Left*.

27. Rosa Luxemburg, *The Russian Revolution*.

28. Lenin, “Political Report of the Central Committee” to the VIIth Party Congress, 7 March 1918.

in regard to the distribution of consumer goods inevitably presupposes the existence of the bourgeois state, for law is nothing without an apparatus capable of enforcing the observance of the rules of law.

“It follows that under communism there remains for a time not only bourgeois law, but even the bourgeois state, without the bourgeoisie!”²⁹

The state in the period of transition³⁰ is a “bourgeois state without the bourgeoisie”,³¹ or, to put it more precisely, a state which conserves the deepest traits of a class society, a society of exploitation: in this phase, bourgeois right,³² the law of value, the moral and spiritual influence of capitalism still exist. The transitional society still maintains many aspects of the old society, but it has gone through a profound change which is precisely what needs to be kept alive because it is the only thing that can lead to communism: the massive, conscious and organised activity of the great majority of the working class, its organisation into a politically dominant class, the dictatorship of the proletariat.

The tragic experience of the Russian revolution shows that the organisation of the proletariat into the ruling class cannot take place through the transitional state (the soviet state).

“The working class itself, as a class, considered as a unity and not as a diffuse social element, with unified class needs, with unified tasks and a consistent policy formulated in a clear manner, plays a less and less important political role in the Soviet republic.”³³

29. Chapter V, “The first phase of communist society.”

30. Like Marx, Lenin made improper use of the term “the lower stage of communism”, when in reality, once the bourgeois state has been destroyed, we are still living under a form of capitalism with a defeated bourgeoisie, and we think it is more precise to talk about a “period of transition from capitalism to communism”.

31. In *The Revolution Betrayed*, Trotsky took up the same idea when he talked about the “dual” character of the state, “socialist” on one side but “bourgeois without a bourgeoisie” on the other. See our article from the series on communism in *International Review* n° 105.

32. As Marx said in the *Critique of the Gotha Programme*, there is nothing socialist about the principle of “equal work for equal wages”.

33. Alexandra Kollontai, in an intervention to the Xth Congress of the Party. 1921, translated from *Workers’ Democracy or Party Dictatorship*, p.171 of the Spanish edition. Anton Ciliga, in his book *The Russian Enigma*, went in a similar direction: “What separated the opposition from Trotskyism was not only in the way of judging the regime and of understanding the present problems; it was, before all, the way in which the part played in the revolution by the proletariat was being considered. To the Trotskyists it was the party, to the extreme left wing it was the working class which was the mover of the revolution. The struggle between Stalin and Trotsky concerned party politics and the directing personnel

The soviets made up the Commune-State, which Engels spoke about as the political association of the popular classes. This Commune-State plays an indispensable role in the repression of the bourgeoisie in the defensive war against imperialism and in maintaining a minimum of social cohesion, but cannot carry through the struggle for communism itself. Marx had already foreseen this in his draft of *The Civil War in France*: “the Commune is not the social movement of the working class and therefore of a general regeneration of mankind, but the organised means of action. The Commune does not do away with the class struggles, through which the working classes strive to the abolition of all classes and therefore of all class rule ... but it affords the rational medium in which that class struggle can run through its different phases in the most rational and humane way.”³⁴ Furthermore, Lissagaray’s *History of the Paris Commune* in particular “contains a good deal of criticism of the hesitations, confusions, and, in some cases, empty posturings of some of the Commune Council delegates, many of whom indeed embodied an obsolete petty bourgeois radicalism that was frequently outflanked by the more proletarian neighbourhood assemblies. At least one of the local revolutionary clubs declared the Commune to be dissolved because it was not revolutionary enough!”³⁵

“...the state is in our hands: but has it operated the New Economic Policy in the way we wanted in the past year? No. But we refuse to admit that it did not operate in the way we wanted. How did it operate? The machine refused to obey the hand that guided it. It was like a car that was going not in the direction the driver desired but in the direction someone else desired; as if it were being driven by some mysterious, lawless hand...”³⁶

To resolve this problem, the Bolshevik Party pushed through a series of measures. On the one hand the Soviet Constitution adopted in 1918 declared that “*The All-Russian Congress of Soviets consists of representatives of local Soviets, the towns being represented by one deputy for every 25,000 inhabitants and the country areas*

of the party; to the one as to the other the proletariat was but a passive object. The groups of the extreme left wing communists, on the other hand, were above all interested in the actual conditions of the working class and the part played by it, in what it actually was in Soviet society and what it should be in a society which sincerely set itself the task of building socialism” (Ciliga, p.271 of the 1979 edition).

34. Quoted in *International Review* n° 77: “1871, the first proletarian revolution.”

35. *Ibid.*

36. Lenin, “Political report of the Central Committee of the RCP(B)”, March 27th 1922. Eleventh Congress of the RCP(B). *Collected Works*, vol. 33, p.279. Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1965.

by one deputy for every 125,000. This article formalises the dominance of the proletariat over the peasantry”³⁷ while, at the same time, the programme of the Bolshevik Party, adopted in 1919, stated: “*every member of a Soviet must, without fail, do a certain job of state administration; secondly, these jobs must be consistently changed so that they embrace all aspects of government, all its branches; and, thirdly, literally all the working population must be drawn into independent participation in state administration.*”³⁸

These measures were inspired by the lessons of the Paris Commune. They were aimed at limiting the privileges and prerogatives of the state functionaries, but to be effective and efficient, only the proletariat organised autonomously in workers’ councils independent from the state³⁹ was in a position to carry this through.

Marxism is a living theory, which needs to deepen and rectify its conceptions on the basis of historical experience. Drawing the lessons on the Paris Commune that Marx and Engels bequeathed to them, the Bolsheviks understood that the Commune-State, which had to head towards extinction, was the expression of the soviets. But at the same time they erroneously identified it as a proletarian state,⁴⁰ believing that

37. Victor Serge, *Year One of the Russian Revolution*, 1972 US edition, p.270.

38. Rough Draft of the Programme of the RCP, “The basic tasks of the dictatorship of the proletariat in Russia”.

39. In his letter to the Republic of Workers’ Councils in Bavaria – which only lasted three weeks before being crushed by the troops of the social democratic government in May 1919 – Lenin seems to be oriented towards the independent organisation of workers’ councils: “The most urgent and most extensive implementation of these and similar measures, coupled with the initiative of workers’, farm labourers’ and – acting apart from them – small peasants’ councils, should strengthen your position.” “Message of greetings to the Bavarian Soviet Republic”, 27th April 1919. *Collected Works*, Vol. 29, p.325-6. Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1965.

40. Lenin did seem to have doubts about this, since on a number of occasions he called the state “a workers’ and peasants’ state with bureaucratic deformations”; and during the debate on the trade unions in 1921, he argued that the proletariat had to be organised in unions and have the right to strike to defend itself from “its” state: “Comrade Trotsky falls into error himself. He seems to say that in a workers’ state it is not the business of the trade unions to stand up for the material and spiritual interests of the working class. That is a mistake. Comrade Trotsky speaks of a “workers’ state”. May I say that this is an abstraction. It was natural for us to write about a workers’ state in 1917; but it is now a patent error to say: “Since this is a workers’ state without any bourgeoisie, against whom then is the working class to be protected, and for what purpose?” The whole point is that it is not quite a workers’ state. That is where Comrade Trotsky makes one of his main mistakes. We have got down from general principles to practical discussion and decrees, and here we are being dragged back and prevented from tackling the business at hand. This will not do. For one thing, ours is not actually a workers’ state but a workers’ and peasants’ state. And a lot depends on that. (Bukharin: “What kind

this process would come about by itself, from within the state.⁴¹ The experience of the Russian revolution shows that it is impossible for the state to wither away by itself and this makes it necessary to distinguish the workers’ councils from the general Soviets, the first being the place where the proletariat organises itself and exerts its dictatorship over the transitional Commune-State represented by the general soviets.

After the seizure of power by the soviets, the proletariat will have to maintain and develop its own organisations which will act in an independent manner in the soviets: the red guards, the factory committees, the neighbourhood committees, the workers’ sections of the soviets, the general assemblies.

The factory committees at the heart of working class organisation

We have already seen that the factory committees played a decisive role during the crisis of the soviets in July,⁴² and how they prised them from the grip of the bourgeoisie, enabling them to play their role of organs of insurrection in October.⁴³

of state? A workers’ and peasants’ state?”) Comrade Bukharin back there may well shout “What kind of state? A workers’ and peasants’ state?” I shall not stop to answer him. Anyone who has a mind to should recall the recent Congress of Soviets, and that will be answer enough.

“But that is not all. Our Party Programme—a document which the author of the **ABC of Communism** knows very well—shows that ours is a workers’ state with a bureaucratic twist to it. We have had to mark it with this dismal, shall I say, tag. There you have the reality of the transition. Well, is it right to say that in a state that has taken this shape in practice the trade unions have nothing to protect, or that we can do without them in protecting the material and spiritual interests of the massively organised proletariat? No, this reasoning is theoretically quite wrong. It takes us into the sphere of abstraction or an ideal we shall achieve in 15 or 20 years’ time, and I am not so sure that we shall have achieved it even by then. What we actually have before us is a reality of which we have a good deal of knowledge, provided, that is, we keep our heads, and do not let ourselves be carried away by intellectualist talk or abstract reasoning, or by what may appear to be “theory” but is in fact error and misapprehension of the peculiarities of transition. We now have a state under which it is the business of the massively organised proletariat to protect itself, while we, for our part, must use these workers’ organisations to protect the workers from their state, and to get them to protect our state”. “The trade unions, the present situation, and Trotsky’s mistakes”, 30 December 1920, *Collected Works*, Vol. 32, p.24-5. Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1965.

41. Lenin pushed for a Workers’ and Peasants’ Inspection (1922) which rapidly failed in its mission of control and was converted into a supplementary bureaucratic commission.

42. See *International Review* n° 141, “What are workers’ councils (II): the resurgence and crisis of workers’ councils in 1917.”

43. See *International Review* n° 143, “What are workers’ councils (III): The revolution of 1917 (July

In May 1917, the Conference of Factory Committees in Jarkov (Ukraine) called on the soviets to “*convert themselves into organs of revolution dedicated to consolidating its victories.*”⁴⁴ Between 7th and 12th October, a Conference of Factory Committees in Petrograd decided to create a Central Council of Factory Committees which took the name of the Workers’ Section of the Petrograd Soviet. It immediately began coordinating all the base soviet organisations and intervened actively in the politics of the Soviet, radicalising it more and more. In his work *The Soviet Trade Unions* Deutscher recognised that “*the Factory Committee, the organ on the spot, rather than the trade union was the most potent and deadly instrument of upheaval.*”⁴⁵

Along with other base organisations that emanated directly and organically from the working class, the factory committees expressed, much more naturally and authentically than the soviets, the thoughts, tendencies, and advances of the working class, maintaining a deep symbiosis with the class.

During the period of transition towards communism, the proletariat will in no way acquire the status of a ruling class at the economic level. This is why, in contrast to the bourgeoisie, it cannot delegate power to an institutionalised structure, to a state. Furthermore, despite its peculiarities, the Commune-State does not express the specific interests of the working class, determined by the need for the revolutionary transformation of the world, but the needs of all the non-exploiting classes. Finally, the ineluctably bureaucratic tendencies of the state mean that this organ will always be pushed towards becoming autonomous from the masses and towards imposing its rule on them. This is why the dictatorship of the proletariat cannot come from a state organ but from a force for permanent struggle, debate and mobilisation, from an organ which ensures the class autonomy of the proletariat, reflects the needs of the working masses and allows them to transform themselves through discussion and action.

We saw in the fourth article in this series how, after the seizure of power, the soviet base organisations and the workers’ organs of struggle progressively disappeared. This was a tragic episode which weakened the proletariat and accelerated a whole process of social decomposition.

The Red Guard, which made a short-lived appearance in 1905, emerged in February at the initiative of the factory

44. Brinton, op. cit., chapter on 1917.

45. Cited by Brinton, ibid.

committees and under their control, succeeding in mobilising 100,000 workers. It remained active until the middle of 1918, but the civil war plunged it into a grave crisis. The enormously superior force of the imperialist armies highlighted the inability of the Red Guard to face up to them. Units in the south of Russia, under the command of Antonov Osveenko, put up a heroic resistance but were swept aside and defeated. Victims of the fear of centralisation, the units which tried to remain operational lacked the most basic equipment, such as bullets. It was above all an urban militia, with limited arms and training, without organisational experience, and could function mainly in the form of emergency units or as an auxiliary to an organised army, but it was incapable of waging a full scale war. The necessities of the moment made it imperative to set up a Red Army with the required rigid military structure.⁴⁶ The latter absorbed many units of the Red Guard which were dissolved as such. There were attempts to reconstitute the Red Guard up until 1919; certain soviets proposed that their units collaborate with the Red Army but the latter rejected these offers systematically when it didn’t dissolve the units by force.

The disappearance of the Red Guard restored to the soviet state one of the classic prerogatives of the state, the monopoly of arms, depriving the proletariat of one of its main means of defence since it no longer possessed its own military force.

The neighbourhood councils disappeared at the end of 1919. They had integrated workers from small enterprises and shops, the unemployed, the young, the retired, families who were part of the working class as a whole. They were also an essential means for disseminating proletarian thought and action among the marginal urban strata, such as the artisans, to the small peasants and so on.

The disappearance of the factory committees was a decisive blow. As we saw in the fourth article in this series, it took place rapidly and they had ceased to exist

46. Without entering into a discussion about the need or not for a Red Army during this part of the period of transition, which we can call the world civil war (i.e. as long as the proletariat has not taken power on a world scale), one thing came out clearly during the Russian experience: the formation of the Red Army, its rapid bureaucratisation and affirmation as a state organ, the total absence of a proletarian counterweight within it; all this reflected a balance of forces with the bourgeoisie which was highly unfavourable to the proletariat on a world scale. As we remarked in an article from the series on communism in *International Review* n° 96, “*the more the revolution spreads worldwide, the more it will be led directly by the workers’ councils and their militias, the more the political aspects of the struggle will predominate over the military, the less there will be a need for a ‘red army’ to lead the struggle.*”

by the end of 1918. The trade unions played a decisive role in their destruction.

The conflict came out into the open at a tumultuous Pan-Russian Conference of Factory Committees on the eve of the October revolution. During the debates the idea was affirmed that ... “*At the moment when the Factory Committees were formed, the trade unions actually did not yet exist. The Factory Committees filled the vacuum*”. An anarchist delegate declared that “*the trade unions wish to devour the Factory Committees. There is no popular discontent with the Factory Committees, but there is discontent with the trade unions. To the worker the trade union is a form of organisation imposed from without. The Factory Committee is closer to them*”. One of the resolutions adopted by the conference stated that... “*‘workers’ control - within the limits assigned to it by the Conference - was only possible under the political and economic rule of the working class’. It warned against ‘isolated’ and ‘disorganised’ activities and pointed out that ‘the seizure of factories by the workers and their operation for personal profit was incompatible with the aims of the proletariat.*”⁴⁷

The Bolsheviks continued to defend dogmatically the idea that the trade unions are the economic organs of the proletariat, and they took their side in the conflict between them and the factory committees. At the same conference, a Bolshevik delegate argued that “*the factory committees have to exercise their functions of control for the benefit of the trade unions and, what’s more, should be financially dependent on them*”⁴⁸

On 3 November 1917, the Council of Peoples’ Commissars passed a decree on workers’ control, stipulating that the decisions of the factory committees could be “*annulled by trade unions and congresses...*”⁴⁹ This decision provoked animated protests by the factory committees and by members of the party. The decree was in the end modified: of the 21 delegates who formed the Council of Workers’ Control, 10 represented the trade unions and only 5 the factory committees! This imbalance not only put the latter in a position of weakness, but also imprisoned them in the logic of the management of production,

47. Cited by Brinton, chapter on 1917. Enthusiastic about the result of the Conference, Lenin declared that “*we must shift the centre of gravity to the Factory Committees. The Factory Committees must become the organs of insurrection. We must change our slogan and instead of saying ‘All Power to the Soviets’ we must say ‘All Power to the Factory Committees’*” (ibid).

48. Ibid. We have not been able to find this quotation in the original English version of the pamphlet so have translated it from the Spanish version.

49. Ibid.

making them all the more vulnerable to the trade unions.

Although the Soviet of Factory Committees remained active for several months, even trying to organise a general congress (see the fourth article in this series), the trade unions finally succeeded in dissolving the factory committees. The IInd Trade Union Congress, held between the 25th and 27th of January 1919, passed a resolution “demanding that ‘official status be granted to the administrative prerogatives of the unions’. It spoke of ‘statisation’ (ogosud arstvenie) of the trade unions, ‘as their function broadened and merged with the governmental machinery of industrial administration and control’.”⁵⁰

With the disappearance of the factory committees, “In the ‘Soviet’ Russia of 1920 the industrial workers were ‘subjected again to managerial authority, labour discipline wage incentives, scientific management - to the familiar forms of capitalist industrial organisation with the same bourgeois managers, qualified only by the State’s holding the title to the property.’”⁵¹ The workers again found themselves completely atomised, lacking their own unifying organisations because the soviets were becoming assimilated with the classic electoralism of bourgeois democracy, no more than parliamentary chambers.

After the revolution, abundance does not yet exist and the working class continues to be subjected to the conditions of the realm of necessity, which includes exploitation for a whole period in which the world bourgeoisie has not yet been defeated. Even after this, as long as the integration of other social strata into associated labour has not been completed, the effort of producing the essential wealth of society will be borne mainly by the proletariat. The march towards communism will therefore contain a constant struggle to diminish exploitation to the point where it has disappeared⁵² “In order to maintain its collective political rule, the working class needs to have secured at least the

basic material necessities of life and in particular to have the time and energy to engage in political life”⁵³. Marx wrote that “by cowardly giving way in their everyday conflict with capital, they would certainly disqualify themselves for the initiating of any larger movement”⁵⁴. If the proletariat, after seizing power, accepts a continuous augmentation of its exploitation, it will be incapable of carrying on the fight for communism.

This is what happened in revolutionary Russia. The exploitation of the working class increased to extreme limits the more the working class lost its autonomy and self-organisation. This process became irreversible when it was clear that the extension of the revolution had failed. The *Workers’ Truth*⁵⁵ group expressed the situation clearly: “the revolution has ended in a defeat for the working class. The bureaucracy and the NEPmen have become a new bourgeoisie which lives from the exploitation of the workers and profits from their disorganisation. With the trade unions in the hands of the bureaucracy, the workers are more disinherited than ever. After being converted into a leading party, into a party of leaders and organisers of the state organisation and economic organisation of a capitalist type, the Communist Party has irrevocably lost any links with and descent from the proletariat.”

C. Mir 28.12.10

50. Ibid, chapter on 1919. The Russian experience shows conclusively the reactionary nature of the trade unions, their irreversible tendency to convert themselves into state structures and their radical antagonism to the new organisational forms which, since 1905, the proletariat had been developing in the context of the new conditions of decadent capitalism and faced with the necessity for revolution.

51. Brinton, chapter on 1920, quoting from R V Daniels, *The Conscience of the Revolution*, p.107.

52. “A policy of proletarian management, therefore, can only...have a socialist content if it follows a way which is diametrically opposed to capitalism - if it aims at a constant and progressive elevation of the living conditions of the masses, and not at holding them down or lowering them” (Bilan n° 28, “Problems of the period of transition”, cited in *International Review* n° 128).

53. cf *International Review* n° 95, “The programme of the dictatorship of the proletariat.”

54. Marx, *Value, Prices and Profits*.

55. Formed in 1922, it was one of the last left fractions secreted by the Bolshevik Party in the struggle for its regeneration, its recuperation by the working class. See the ICC’s book *The Russian Communist Left*.

The Comintern and the virus of “Luxemburgism” in 1924

The previous article in this series showed how rapidly the hopes for an immediate revolutionary victory, kindled by the proletarian uprisings of 1917-19 had, a mere two years later, in 1921, given way to a more sober reflection among revolutionaries about the overall course of capitalism’s historical crisis. At the Third Congress of the Communist International, a key question for debate was this: the capitalist system has certainly entered an epoch of decline, but what happens if the proletariat does not immediately respond to the new period by overthrowing the system? And what is the task of communist organisations in a phase when the class struggle and the proletariat’s subjective understanding of its situation are in retreat, even when the objective historical conditions for revolution are still present?

This acceleration of history, which gave rise to different and often sharply conflicting responses from the revolutionary organisations, continued in the years that followed, as the degeneration of the revolution in Russia, its increasing isolation, opened the way to the triumph of an unprecedented form of counter-revolution. The year 1921 was a fateful turning point: faced with widespread proletarian discontent in Petrograd and Kronstadt, as well as a wave of peasant revolts, the Bolsheviks took the catastrophic step of using massive repression against the working class, while simultaneously banning fractions inside the party. The New Economic Policy, introduced immediately after the Kronstadt rebellion, conceded to some of its demands on the economic front, but not at all at the political level: there was to be no relaxation in the domination of the soviets by the party-state machinery. And yet a year later Lenin began to complain that the state was escaping the control of the proletarian party itself, dragging it in a direction it could not foresee. In the same year, at Rapallo, the “Soviet” state concluded a secret deal with German imperialism at a time when Germany was still in a state of social ferment: this was a clear sign that the Russian state was beginning to place its national interests above the needs of the international class struggle. In 1923, in Russia, there were more workers’ strikes and the formation of illegal left communist groupings like Miasnikov’s Workers’ Group, as well as a “legal” left opposition within the party, regrouping not only old dissidents like Ossinski but Trotsky himself.

Lenin died in January 1924 and in December of the same year Stalin tentatively raised the slogan of “socialism in

one country”. By 1925/26, it had become official policy in the Russian party. The new line symbolised a decisive break with internationalism.

Bolshevisation versus “Luxemburgism”

Virtually all of the communists who came together to form the new International in 1919 were agreed that capitalism had proved to be a system in historic decline, even if they differed on the political implications of the new period and the means needed to develop the revolutionary struggle – for example, whether bourgeois parliaments should be used as a “tribune” for revolutionary propaganda, or should be boycotted in favour of action on the streets and in the workplace. Regarding the theoretical underpinnings of the new epoch, there had been little time for sustained debate. The only really coherent analysis of the “economics of decadence” had been provided by Rosa Luxemburg just before the outbreak of the world war. As we have seen,¹ her theory of capitalist breakdown provoked many criticisms from reformists and revolutionaries alike, but the criticisms were largely negative – there was little sign of an alternative framework for understanding the fundamental contradictions that had impelled capitalism to enter its epoch of decay. In any case, disagreements on this point were rightly not considered fundamental. The essential thing was to accept that the system had reached the stage where revolution had become both possible and necessary.

In 1924, however, within the Communist

1. “Rosa Luxemburg and the limits to capitalist expansion”, *International Review* n° 142.

International, there was a revival of the controversy over Luxemburg’s economic analysis. Luxemburg’s views had always had a considerable influence in the German communist movement, both in the official KPD and the left communist KAPD. But now, given the growing pressure to more firmly tie the communist parties outside Russia to the needs of the Russian state, a process of “Bolshevisation” was launched throughout the Comintern, with the aim of chasing away unwanted divergences in theory and tactics. At a certain moment in the Bolshevisation campaign, the persistence of “Luxemburgism” in the German party was identified as being the fountainhead of a multitude of deviations – in particular, “errors” on the national and colonial question, and a spontaneous approach to the role of the party. At the most abstract “theoretical” level, this drive against Luxemburgism gave rise to Bukharin’s *Imperialism and the Accumulation of Capital*, written in 1924.

We last encountered Bukharin as a spokesman for the left of the Bolshevik party during the war – his almost prophetic analysis of state capitalism and his recognition of the need to return to Marx’s call for the revolutionary destruction of the capitalist state placed him in the real vanguard of the international movement; he was also very close to Luxemburg in his rejection of the slogan of “national self-determination”, much to Lenin’s anger. In Russia in 1918 he had been a leading member of the Left Communist group which had opposed the Treaty of Brest Litovsk and, more significantly, opposed the early bureaucratisation of the Soviet state. However, once the controversy over the peace treaty had faded, Bukharin’s critical faculties were overtaken by his admiration for the methods of War Communism, which he began to theorise as a genuine form of the transition to communism.² The man who had criticised the leviathan state created by imperialism now saw no difficulty in the “proletarian state” becoming increasingly all-powerful during the transitional period. In the 1921 trade union debate, Bukharin sided with Trotsky in calling for the direct subordination of

2. See “1920; Bukharin and the period of transition”, *International Review* n° 96.

the trade unions to the apparatus of this state. However, with the introduction of the NEP, Bukharin shifted his position again. He repudiated the methods of extreme coercion favoured by War Communism, especially with regard to the peasantry, and now began to see the NEP, with its mixture of state ownership and individual property, and the reliance on market forces instead of direct state decree, as the “normal” model for the transition to communism. But this transitional phase – just as in the period when he had been enamoured of War Communism – was increasingly seen by Bukharin in national terms, in contrast with his views during the war, when he had stressed the globally inter-dependent nature of the world economy. In fact, Bukharin can in some ways be seen as the “originator” of the thesis of socialism in one country, which Stalin then took on and ultimately used to rid himself of Bukharin, first politically, then physically.³

Bukharin’s *Imperialism and the Accumulation of Capital* was clearly intended as a theoretical justification for exposing the “weaknesses” of the KPD on the national, colonial and peasant questions – this is boldly asserted at the end of the work, although with no link in the argument between the attack on Luxemburg’s economics and their alleged political consequences. However, Bukharin’s all-out assault on Luxemburg on the theoretical question of capitalist accumulation has been taken up by some revolutionaries as though they are essentially independent from the dubious political aims of the document.

We think this is a mistake for a number of reasons. The political aim of Bukharin’s text cannot be separated either from its aggressive tone, or its theoretical content.

The tone of the text certainly indicates that its aim was to do a hatchet job on Luxemburg, to discredit her. As Rosdolsky points out: “*The present-day reader may find Bukharin’s aggressive and often frivolous tone somewhat unpleasant, when one remembers that Rosa Luxemburg had fallen victim to fascist murderers only a few years previously. That his tone was dictated more by political than scientific interests provides some explanation. Bukharin saw his task as that of breaking the still very strong influence of ‘Luxemburgism’ within the German Communist Party (KPD) and any means seemed justified.*”⁴ You have to

3. In his biography of Bukharin, *Bukharin and the Bolshevik Revolution*, London 1974, Stephen Cohen traces Bukharin’s initial version of the theory to as early as 1922. See pp.147-148.

4. Roman Rosdolsky, *The Making of Marx’s Capital*, Pluto Press 1989 edition, vol. 2 p.458n). As we noted in a previous article (“Rosa Luxemburg and the limits to the expansion of capitalism”, *International Review* n° 142), Rosdolsky has his own criticisms of Luxemburg, but he does not dismiss the problems

wade through pages of pages of sarcasms and patronising asides before, at the very end of the book, Bukharin grudgingly admits that Rosa has provided us with an excellent historical survey of the way that capitalism has dealt with the other social systems that constitute its milieu. There is no attempt whatever to begin the “polemic” by relating to the very real issues that Rosa Luxemburg was addressing in her work – the abandonment of the perspective of capitalism’s breakdown by the revisionists and the necessity to understand the tendency towards collapse inherent in the capitalist accumulation process. On the contrary, a number of Bukharin’s arguments give the impression that he is just striking out with whatever comes to hand, even if it means profoundly distorting Luxemburg’s thesis.

For example, what are we to make of the charge that Luxemburg provides us with a theory of imperialism which has it living harmoniously with the pre-capitalist world through a peaceful round of exchange of equivalents which, in Bukharin’s phrase means that “*Both sides are quite content now. The wolves have eaten, the sheep are unhurt.*”⁵ We have just mentioned that Bukharin himself admits elsewhere that a major strength of her book is the way it chronicles and denounces the way in which capitalism “integrates” the non-capitalist milieu – through plunder, exploitation, and destruction. This is the very opposite of the sheep and the wolves living in harmony. The sheep are either eaten or, through their own economic growth, they too become capitalist wolves and their competition further reduces the food supply...

Equally crude is the argument that, in Luxemburg’s definition of imperialism, only struggles for particular non-capitalist markets count as imperialist conflicts, and that “*a fight for territories that have already become capitalist is not imperialism, which*

she poses; with regard to Bukharin’s treatment of the reproduction schemas, he argues that while Luxemburg herself made mathematical errors, so did Bukharin; and more importantly, took Marx’s formulation of the problem of expanded reproduction for its actual solution: “*Bukharin completely forgot that the extended reproduction of the total social capital must not only lead to the growth of c and v but also to that of a , i.e. to the growth of the individual consumption of the capitalists. Nevertheless, this elementary mistake remained unobserved for almost two decades, and Bukharin was generally regarded as the most authoritative defender of Marxist ‘orthodoxy’ against Rosa Luxemburg’s attacks ‘on those parts of Marx’s analysis, which the incomparable master has handed down to us the completed product of his genius’* (*Imperialism*, p.158 of the London 1972 edition). *Nevertheless, Bukharin’s general formula for equilibrium is very useful although he too (like most critics of Rosa Luxemburg) mistook the mere formulation of the problem for its solution*” (*The Making of Marx’s Capital*, p.450)

5. *Imperialism and Accumulation of Capital*, p.248, Monthly Review Press, New York, 1972.

is utterly wrong”.⁶ In reality Luxemburg’s argument that “*Imperialism is the political expression of the accumulation of capital in its competitive struggle for what remains of the non-capitalist environment*”⁷ is aimed at describing an entire era, a general context in which imperialist conflicts take place. The return of imperialist conflict to the heart of the system, the shift towards direct military rivalry between the developed capitalist powers, is already registered in the *Accumulation* and is developed at considerable length in *The Junius Pamphlet*.

Still on the subject of imperialism, we have Bukharin’s argument that, since there are still plenty of areas of non-capitalist production left in the world, capitalism would seem to have a bright future. “*It is a fact that imperialism means catastrophe, that we have entered into the period of the collapse of capitalism, no less. But it is also a fact that the overwhelming majority of the world’s population belongs to the ‘third persons’...it is not the industrial and agricultural workers who form the majority of today’s world population.... Even if Rosa Luxemburg’s theory were even approximately correct, the cause of revolution would be in a very poor position*”.⁸

Paul Frölich (one of the “Luxemburgists” in the KPD who remained in the party after the exclusion of the elements who were to found the KAPD) answers this very well in his biography of Luxemburg, first published in 1939:

“*Various critics, and in particular Bukharin, believed that they were playing an effective trump card against Rosa Luxemburg when they pointed to the tremendous possibilities of capitalist expansion into non-capitalist areas. But the originator of the accumulation theory had already removed the sting from this argument by emphasising repeatedly that the death throes of capitalism would inevitably set in long before the inherent tendency to extend its markets had run into its objective limits. Expansionist possibilities are not a geographical conception: it is not the number of square miles which is decisive. Nor are they a demographical conception: it is not the statistical comparison of capitalist and non-capitalist populations which indicates the ripeness of the historical process. A socio-economic problem is involved, and a whole complex of contradictory interests, forces and phenomena has to be taken into account.*”⁹ In sum, Bukharin has patently confused geography and demography with

6. Ibid, Chapter 4, p.253.

7. Rosa Luxemburg, *The Accumulation of Capital*, Chapter XXXI, “Protective Tariffs and Accumulation”, p. 446, Monthly Review Press, New York, 1968.

8. Bukharin, op.cit, p. 260.

9. Frölich, *Rosa Luxemburg*, p.162, Pluto Press 1972.

the real capacity of the remaining non-capitalist systems to generate exchange value and thus constitute an effective market for capitalist production.

Capitalist contradictions

If we now look at Bukharin's treatment of the central issue in Luxemburg's theory, the problem raised by Marx's reproduction schemas, we find again that Bukharin's approach is not at all unconnected to his political outlook. In a two-part critique published in 1982 (*International Review* n° 29 and n° 30, "To go beyond capitalism: abolish the wages system"), it is quite rightly argued that Bukharin's criticisms of Luxemburg reveal profound divergences regarding the very content of communism.

Central to Luxemburg's theory is the argument that Marx's schemas of expanded reproduction in *Capital* Volume 2, which assume for the sake of argument a society composed exclusively of capitalists and workers, should be taken precisely as abstract schemas and not as a demonstration of the real possibility of harmonious capitalist accumulation in a closed system. In real life, capitalism has been constantly driven to expand beyond the borders of its own social relations. For Luxemburg, following Marx's argumentation in other areas of *Capital*, the problem of realisation is posed to capital as a whole even if for individual workers and capitalists other workers and other capitalists can perfectly well constitute a market for all their surplus value. Bukharin accepts of course that for expanded reproduction to take place, there will be a need for a constant source of additional demand. But he insists that this additional demand is provided by the workers; perhaps not the workers who absorb the variable capital advanced by the capitalists at the beginning of the accumulation cycle, but by additional workers: "The employment of additional workers produces an additional demand, which realises precisely that part of the surplus value which is to be accumulated, to be exact, that part which must of necessity convert itself into functioning, additional variable capital".¹⁰ To which our article replies: "Applying Bukharin's analysis to reality comes down to this: what should capitalists do to avoid laying off workers when their businesses can no longer find any outlets? Simple! – take on 'extra workers'! It only needed someone to think of it. The trouble is that a capitalist who followed this advice would go rapidly bankrupt."¹¹

This argumentation is on a similar level

10. Bukharin op.cit. p. 166-167.

11. *International Review* n° 29.

to Otto Bauer's response to Luxemburg, which she tears to pieces in her *Anticritique*: for Bauer, the simple growth in the population constitutes the new markets needed for accumulation. Capitalism would certainly be flourishing today if population growth solved the problem of realising surplus value. But, strangely enough, in the last few decades population growth has been a constant factor while the crisis of the system has also "grown" at dizzying rates. As Frölich pointed out, the problem of realising surplus value is not a question of demographics but of *effective* demand, demand backed by the ability to pay. And since workers' demand can absorb no more than the original variable capital advanced by the capitalists, taking on new workers is revealed as a non-solution the moment you consider capitalism as a totality.

There is however, another side to Bukharin's argument, since he also argues that the capitalists themselves also constitute the additional market needed for further accumulation because they invest in the production of means of production. "The capitalists themselves buy the additional means of production, the additional workers, who receive money from the capitalists ... buy the additional means of consumption".¹² This side of the argument is much more favoured by those who also consider, along with Bukharin, that Luxemburg had raised a problem that does not exist: producing and selling additional means of production solves the problem of accumulation. Luxemburg had already criticised the essentials of this argument in her critique of Tugan-Baranowski's efforts to prove that capitalism faced no insuperable barriers in the accumulation process; she supported her argument by referring to Marx himself: "Besides, as we have seen (vol 2, part 3), continuous circulation takes place between constant capital and constant capital (even regardless of accelerated accumulation). It is at first independent of individual consumption because it never enters the latter. But this consumption definitely limits it nevertheless, since constant capital is never produced for its own sake, but solely because more of it is needed in spheres of production go into individual consumption."¹³ For Luxemburg, a literal interpretation of the reproduction schemas such as Tugan-Baranowski's would result "not in capital accumulation, but growing production of the means of production with no aim at all."¹⁴

Bukharin is aware that the production of producer goods is indeed not a solution to the problem, because he brings in the

12. Bukharin, op. cit. p.177.

13. *Capital* Vol III, chapter 18, p 304-5, cited by Luxemburg op. Cit., XXV, p.346.

14. Luxemburg, op. cit., p.335.

"extra workers" to buy up the increasing mass of commodities produced by the additional means of production. In fact he takes Tugan-Baranowski to task for not grasping that "the chain of production must always end with the production of means of consumption...which enter into the process of personal consumption".¹⁵ But he only puts forward this argument in order to accuse Luxemburg of mixing up Tugan-Baranowski with Marx. And in the end he answers Luxemburg, as have many others after him, by quoting Marx in a misleading manner which once again seems to imply that capitalism can be perfectly content in basing its expansion on an endless production of producer goods: "Accumulation for accumulation's sake, production for production's sake: by this formula classical economy expressed the historical mission of the bourgeoisie."¹⁶ These are certainly Marx's words but Bukharin's reference to them is misleading: Marx's language here is polemical rather than exact: capital indeed bases itself on **accumulation** for its own sake, i.e. the accumulation of wealth in its historically dominant form of value; but it cannot achieve this merely by **production** for its own sake. This is because it only produces commodities and a commodity realises no profit for the capitalists if it is not sold. It does not produce for its own sake, merely to fill the warehouses or throw what it produces into the sea (even if these are often the unfortunate results of its inability to find a market for its goods).

Bukharin's state capitalist solutions

Bukharin's biographer Stephen Cohen, who cited the above critical comments by Bukharin on Tugan-Baranowski, notes another basic contradiction in Bukharin's approach.

"At first glance, his inflexible approach to Tugan-Baranowski's arguments seem curious. Bukharin himself, after all, had frequently emphasised the regulatory powers of state capitalist systems, later even theorising that under 'pure' state capitalism (without a free market) production could continue crisis free while consumption lagged behind"¹⁷

15. *Imperialism and the Accumulation of Capital*, cited by Cohen, op. cit, p.174.

16. *Capital* Vol. I, p.595.

17. Cohen, p.174. Cohen uses the term "at first sight" because he goes on to argue that what Bukharin actually had in mind here was less the old controversy with Tugan than the new controversy in the Russian party, between the "super-industrialisers" (initially Preobrazhinski and the left opposition, later Stalin) who tended to focus on the forced accumulation of the means of production in the state sector, and his own view which (ironically, considering his dismissal of Luxemburg's estimation of the important of non-capitalist demand) continually stressed the need to

Cohen has put his finger on a key element of Bukharin's analysis. He is referring to the following passage in *Imperialism and the Accumulation of Capital*:

"Let us imagine three socio-economic formations: the collective-capitalist social order (state capitalism), in which the capitalist class is united in a unified trust and we are dealing with an organized, though at the same time, from the standpoint of the classes, antagonistic economy; then, the 'classical' capitalist society, which Marx analyses; and finally socialist society. Let us follow (1) the manner of the course of expanded reproduction; thus, the factors which make an 'accumulation' possible (we give the word 'accumulation' quotation marks, because the designation 'accumulation' by its very nature presupposes only capitalist relations); (2) how, where and when crises can arise.

"1. State capitalism. Is an accumulation possible here? Of course. The constant capital grows, because the capitalists' consumption grows. New branches of production, corresponding to new needs, are continually arising. Even though there are certain limits to it, the workers' consumption increases. Notwithstanding this 'under-consumption' of the masses, no crisis can arise, since mutual demand of all branches of production, and likewise consumer demand, that of the capitalists as well as of the workers, are given from the start. Instead of an 'anarchy of production' – a plan that is rational from the standpoint of Capital. If there is a 'miscalculation' in means of production, the surplus is stored, and a corresponding correction will be made in the following period of production. If, on the other hand, there has been a 'miscalculation' in means of consumption for the workers, this excess is used as 'fodder' by distributing it amongst the workers, or the respective portion of the product will be destroyed. Even in the case of a miscalculation in the production of luxury articles, the 'way out' is clear. Thus, no crisis of over-production can occur here. The capitalist's consumption constitutes the incentive for production and the plan of production. Hence, there is no particularly fast development of production (small number of capitalists)".¹⁸

Froelich, like Cohen, also highlights this passage and comments:

"[Bukharin's] solution turned out to be an indirect confirmation of her crucial thesis..." And this solution is "astonishing.

base the expansion of state industry on the gradual development of the peasant market rather, as the super-industrialisers shockingly insisted, on a direct exploitation of the peasants and the spoliation of their wealth.

18. Bukharin, op. cit., p.226.

*We are presented here with a 'capitalism', which is not economic anarchy, but a planned economy in which there is no competition, but rather a general world trust, and in which capitalists do not have to bother about the realisation of all their surplus value...."*¹⁹

Our article is equally scathing about the idea of throwing away the surplus product:

"Bukharin claims to solve the problem theoretically by eliminating it. The problem in capitalist crises of overproduction is the difficulty in selling what is produced. Bukharin tells us: all that needs to be done is 'give it away free'! If capitalism were able to distribute its products for nothing, it would indeed never undergo any major crises – since its main contradiction would thus be solved. But such a capitalism can only exist in the mind of a Bukharin who has run out of arguments. The 'free' distribution of production, that is to say the organisation of society in such a way that men produce directly for themselves, is indeed the only way out for humanity. But this 'solution' is not an organised form of capitalism, but communism."²⁰

When he turns to "classical" capitalist society in the ensuing paragraphs, Bukharin accepts that crises of overproduction can take place – but they are merely the result of temporary disproportions between the branches of production (a view previously expressed by the "classical" economists and criticised by Marx, as we showed in the article "The mortal contradictions of bourgeois society" in *International Review* n° 139.). Bukharin then devotes a few scant lines to socialism as such, and makes the obvious point that a society which produces only to satisfy human need would have no crises of overproduction. But what seems to interest Bukharin above all is this hyper-planned capitalism where the state irons out all problems of disproportion or miscalculation. In other words, the kind of society which, in the USSR of the middle twenties, he was already describing as socialism... Admittedly, Bukharin's science fiction state capitalism has become a world trust, a global colossus with no pre-capitalist remnants surrounding it and no conflict between national capitals. But his vision of socialism in the Soviet Union was a similar nightmarish utopia, to all intents and purposes a self-contained trust with no internal competition and only a manageable peasantry partially and temporarily outside its economic jurisdiction.

Thus, as we said earlier, the article in *International Review* n° 29 correctly concludes that Bukharin's attack on Rosa

19. Froelich, op. cit., p.160.

20. *International Review* n° 29.

Luxemburg's economic theory reveals two fundamentally opposed visions of socialism. For Luxemburg, the fundamental contradiction in capitalist accumulation derives from the contradiction between use value and exchange value, inherent in the commodity – and above all in the commodity labour power which has the unique characteristic of being able to engender an additional value which is the source of the capitalist's profit, but also the source of his problem of finding sufficient markets to realise his profit. Consequently, this contradiction and all the convulsions that result from it can only be overcome by abolishing wage labour and commodity production – the essential prerequisites of the communist mode of production.

Bukharin on the other hand criticises Luxemburg for having things too easy and "singling out one contradiction", when in fact there are many: the contradiction between branches of production, between industry and agriculture; the anarchy of the market and competition.²¹ All of which is true, but Bukharin's state capitalist solution shows that for him there is one fundamental problem with capitalism: its lack of planning. If only the state can take charge of production and distribution, then we can have crisis-free accumulation.

Whatever confusions the workers' movement prior to the Russian revolution may have had about the transition to communism, its clearest elements had always argued that communism/socialism could only be created on a world scale because each country, each capitalist nation, is inevitably dominated by the world market; and the liberation of the productive forces set in motion by the proletarian revolution could only become effective when the tyranny of global capital had been overthrown in all its major centres. In contrast to this, the Stalinist vision of socialism in one country posits accumulation in a closed system – something which had been impossible for classical capitalism and was no more possible for a totally state regulated system, even if Russia's vast size (and huge agricultural sector...) made an autarkic phase of development a temporary possibility. But if, as Luxemburg insisted, capitalism as a world order cannot operate in the confines of a closed system, this is still less the case the individual national capitals, and Stalinist autarky in the 1930s – founded on the frenzied development of a war economy – was essentially a preparation for its inevitable military-imperialist expansion, realised in the second

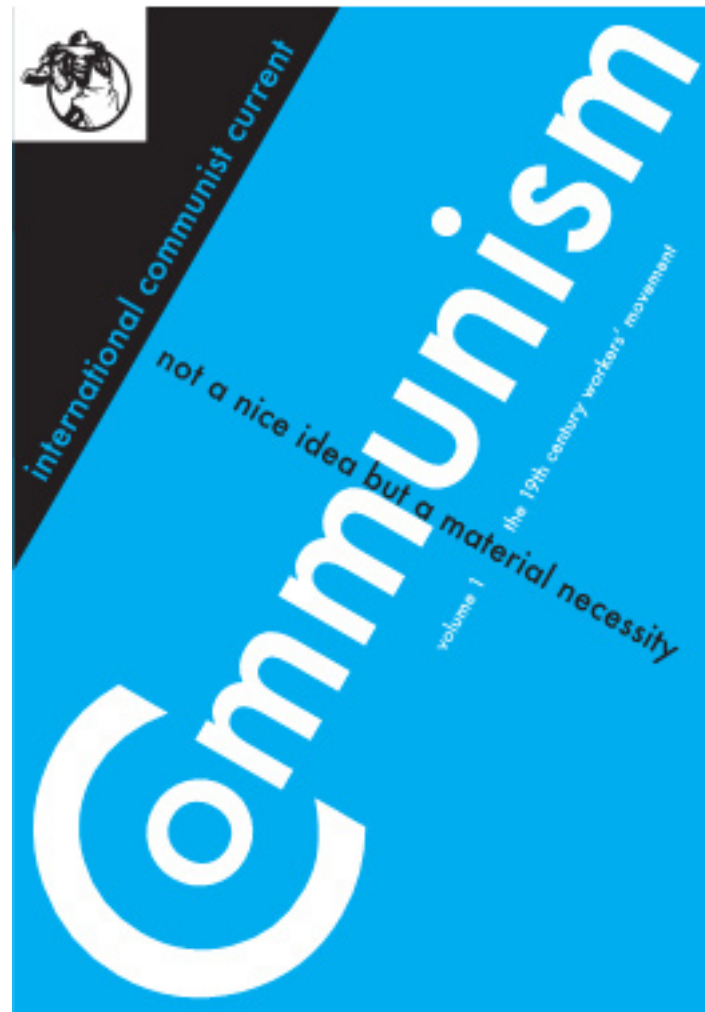
21. It is worth noting that Grossman also criticises Bukharin for talking vaguely about contradictions without locating the essential one that leads to the breakdown of the system. See Grossman, *The Law of Accumulation and Breakdown of the Capitalist System*, London 1992, p 48-9.

imperialist holocaust and the conquests which followed it.

Between 1924 when Bukharin wrote his book, and 1929, the year of the Great Crash, capitalism underwent a phase of relative stability and in some areas – above all the USA – of spectacular growth. But this was merely the lull before the storm of the greatest economic crisis capitalism had ever experienced. In the next article in this series we will look at some of the attempts made by revolutionaries to understand the origins and implications of this crisis, and above all its significance as an expression of the decline of the capitalist mode of production.

Gerrard

ICC publications



Since 1990 and the collapse of the communist bloc - in reality a form of state capitalism - the International Communist Current has been publishing a series of articles in its theoretical journal, the *International Review*, around the theme "Communism is not a nice idea, but a material necessity". The first volume of the series, which has now been published in book form, begins with "primitive" communism and goes on to explore the conception of communism in the writings of Marx, Engels and other revolutionaries during the 19th century. The second volume of the series deals with the period from the mass strikes of 1905 to the end of the first great revolutionary wave that followed the First World War. A third volume is now underway.

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The Communist Left in Russia

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

We publish here the fourth and final part of the *Manifesto* (the first three parts were published in the last three issues of the *International Review*). This addresses two particular issues: on the one hand, the organisation of workers in councils to take power and transform society; on the other, the nature of oppositional politics in the Bolshevik Party conducted by other groups formed in reaction to its degeneration.

The *Manifesto* makes a clear distinction between the proletariat organised in councils, and the other non-exploiting strata of society that it leads, "*Where were the councils born? In the factories and in the plants. [...] The workers' councils appeared in 1917 as guides of the revolution, not only in substance but also formally: soldiers, peasants, cossacks subordinate themselves to the organisational form of the proletariat*". Once the civil war against the white international reaction is won, it is still to the proletariat organised on its own foundations that the *Manifesto* assigns the role of transforming society. In this context, it attaches primary importance to the autonomous organisation of the working class which had been considerably weakened by years of civil war to the point that "*We must talk not of the improvement of the soviets, but of their reconstitution. To organise councils in all nationalised plants and factories to solve an immense new task...*"

The *Manifesto* is very critical of the activity of other groups opposed to the policy of the Bolshevik Party, particularly the *Workers' Truth* and another which can only be identified by the writings cited. The *Manifesto* denounces the false radicalism of the criticisms leveled by these groups (which it describes as "liberal") against the Bolshevik Party, to the point where, it says, the latter could use such criticisms for its own purposes as a pretext for its policy of stifling freedom of speech for the proletariat.¹

Finally, the article recalls the position of the *Manifesto* towards the Bolshevik Party, whose deficiencies threaten to transform it "*into a minority of holders of power and economic resources in the country, which means to set itself up as a bureaucratic caste*": "*to exert a decisive influence on the tactics of the RCP, conquering the sympathy of the proletarian masses, so as to compel the party to abandon the broad lines of its policy.*"

The New Economic Policy and the management of industry

In fact the New Economic Policy has shared industry between, on one side, the state (trusts, unions, etc.) and, on the other, private capital and cooperatives. Our nationalised industry has taken on the character and appearance of private capitalist industry, in the sense that it operates on the basis of market needs.

Since the Ninth Congress of the RCP(B) the organisation of the management of the

economy has been carried out without the direct participation of the working class, but with the help of purely bureaucratic appointments. The trusts are constituted following the same system adopted for the management of the economy and the merging of firms. The working class doesn't know why such and such a director has been appointed, or on what grounds a factory belongs to this trust rather than another. Thanks to the policy of the leading group of the RCP, it takes no part in these decisions.

It goes without saying that the worker views with concern what is happening. He frequently wonders how he could have got here. He often remembers the time when the council of workers' deputies appeared and developed in his factory. He asks the

question: how can it be that our soviet, the soviet that we ourselves introduced and which neither Marx, nor Engels, nor Lenin, nor anyone else had thought of, how can it be that this soviet is dead? And worried thoughts haunt him... All workers will remember the way in which the councils of workers' deputies were organised.

In 1905, when no-one in the country was even talking about workers' councils and when, in books, it was only a question of parties, associations and leagues, the Russian working class created the soviets in the factories.

How were these councils organised? At the height of the revolutionary upsurge, each workshop of the factory elected a deputy to submit its demands to the administration and government. To coordinate the demands, these workshop deputies gathered together in councils and so into the council of deputies.

Where were the councils born? In the factories and in the plants. The workers of the plants and the factories, of any gender, religion, ethnicity or belief, unified themselves in an organisation, where they forged a common will. The council of workers' deputies is therefore the organisation of the workers in all the enterprises of production.

It is in this way that the councils reappeared in 1917. They are described thus in the programme of the RCP(B): "*The electoral district and the main core of the state is the unit of production (the plant, the factory) rather than the district*". Even after taking power, the councils retained the principle that their base is the place of production, and this was their hallmark with respect to any other form of state power, their advantage, because such a state organisation approximates the state apparatus of the proletarian masses.

The councils of workers' deputies of all the plants and factories come together in general assemblies and form councils of workers' deputies of the towns led by their executive committees (ECs). The congress of councils of provinces and regions forms the executive committees of

1. For more on the groups criticised by the *Manifesto*, especially the *Workers' Truth* and *Democratic Centralism*, see the ICC's book, *The Russian Communist Left*.

provincial and regional councils. Finally, all the councils of factory deputies elect their representatives to the All-Russian Congress of Councils and form an All-Russian organisation of councils of workers' deputies, their permanent organ being the All-Russian Executive Committee of Councils of Workers' Deputies.

From the earliest days of the February Revolution, the needs of the civil war demanded the involvement in the revolutionary movement of armed force, by organising councils of soldiers' deputies. The revolutionary needs of the moment dictated them to unite, which was done. Thus were formed the councils of workers' and soldiers' deputies.

Once the councils took power, they brought with them the peasantry represented by the councils of peasants' deputies, and then the cossacks. Thus was organised the All-Russian Central Executive Committee (CEC), of the councils of workers', peasants', soldiers' and cossacks' deputies.

The workers' councils appeared in 1917 as guides of the revolution, not only in substance but also formally: soldiers, peasants, cossacks subordinated themselves to the organisational form of the proletariat.

During the seizure of power by the councils, it suddenly became clear that these councils, especially those of workers' deputies, would be forced to occupy themselves almost entirely with a political struggle against the former slaveowners who had risen up, strongly supported by *"the bourgeois factions of ambiguous socialist phraseology"*. And until the end of 1920, the councils were occupied with the crushing of the resistance of the exploiters.

During this period, the councils lost their character linked to production and already, in 1920, the Ninth Congress of the RCP(B) decreed a single management of plants and factories. For Lenin, this decision was motivated by the fact that the only thing that had been done well was the Red Army with a single leadership.

And where now are the councils of workers' deputies in the factories and plants? They no longer exist and are completely forgotten (even if we continue to talk about the power of the councils). No, there are no more and our councils today resemble many common houses or *zemstvos*² (with an inscription above the door: "It's a lion, not a dog").

Every worker knows that the councils

2. *Zemstvos*: provincial assemblies of imperial Russia, representative, prior to their abolition by the soviet authorities, of the local nobility, wealthy artisans and merchants (source Wikipedia) [ICC note]

of workers' deputies organised a political struggle for the conquest of power. After taking power, they crushed the resistance of the exploiters. The civil war that the exploiters waged against the proletariat in power, with the Socialist-Revolutionaries and Mensheviks, assumed a character so intense and bitter that it profoundly engaged the entire working class; this is why the workers were as removed from the problems of soviet power as the problems of production for which they had previously fought. They thought: we will manage production later. To reconquer production, it was first necessary to tear out the rebel exploiters. And they were right.

But in late 1920, the resistance of the exploiters was destroyed. The proletariat, covered in wounds, worn out, hungry and cold, would enjoy the fruits of its victories. It resumed production. And before it was the immense new task, namely the organisation of this production, of the country's economy. It had to produce the maximum of material goods to show the advantage of this proletarian world.

The fate of all the conquests of the proletariat is closely related to the fact of seizing and organising production.

"Production is the goal of society and that is why those who run production have governed and still govern society."

If the proletariat fails to put itself at the head of production and put under its influence the entire petty-bourgeois mass of peasants, artisans and corporate intellectuals, everything will be lost again. The rivers of tears and blood, the piles of corpses, the untold suffering of the proletariat in the revolution will serve only to fertilise the ground on which capitalism restores itself, where a new world of exploitation will arise, of oppression of man by his fellow, if the proletariat does not recover production, does not impose itself on the petty bourgeois element personified by the peasant and the artisan, does not change the material basis of production

The councils of workers' deputies who had forged the will of the proletariat in the struggle for power, triumphed on the civil war front, on the political front, but their triumph was weakened even to the point that we must talk not of the improvement of the soviets, but of their reconstitution.

We must reconstitute councils in all nationalised plants and factories to solve an immense new task, to create this world of happiness for which much blood was shed.

The proletariat is weakened. The basis of its strength (large industry) is in terrible shape, but the weaker the forces of the

proletariat, the more it must have unity, cohesion and organisation. The council of workers' deputies is a form of organisation that showed its miraculous power and not only overcame the enemies and adversaries of the proletariat in Russia, but also shook the domination of the oppressors in the whole world, the socialist revolution threatening the entire society of capitalist oppression.

These new soviets, if they take the commanding heights of production and the management of factories, will not only be capable of calling on the vast masses of proletarians and semi-proletarians to solve the problems posed to them, but will also directly employ in production the whole state apparatus, not in word, but in deed. When, following that, the proletariat will have organised, for the management of firms and industries, soviets as the basic cells of state power, it will not be able to stop there: it will go on to the organisation of trusts, unions and central directing organs, including the famous supreme soviets for the popular economy, and it will give a new content to the work of the All-Russian Central Executive Committee. The soviets will assign as members of the All-Russian Central Committee of Soviets all those who fought on the fronts of the civil war, to the work on the economic front. Naturally all the bureaucrats, all the economists who consider themselves as the saviours of the proletariat (whom they fear above all speech and judgement), similarly the people who occupy the cushy jobs in the various organisms, will scream in protest. They will support what previously meant the ruin of production, the bankruptcy of the social revolution, because many of them know that they owe their posts not to their capacities, but to the protection of their acquaintances, to "who they know", and in no way to the confidence of the proletariat, in whose name they govern. Of the rest, they have more fear of the proletariat than the specialists, the new leaders of enterprises, the new entrepreneurs and the *Slastschows*.

The All-Russian comedy with its red directors is orchestrated to push the proletariat to sanctify the bureaucratic management of the economy and praise the bureaucracy; it is a comedy as well because the strongly protected names of the directors of the trusts never appear in the press despite their ardent desire for publicity. All our attempts to unmask a provocateur who, not so long ago, received 80 roubles from the Tsarist police - the highest payment for this type of activity - and who is now found at the head of a rubber trust, have met with an insurmountable resistance. We are talking about the Tsarist provocateur *Leschawa-Murat* (the brother

of the People's Commissar for Domestic Commerce). This throws sufficient light on the character of the group which devised the campaign for the red directors.

The All-Russian Central Executive Committee of Soviets which is elected for a year and meets for periodic conferences constitutes the germ of the parliamentary rot. And it's said: comrades, if you go, for example, to a meeting where comrades Trotsky, Zinoviev, Kamenev, Bukharin, talk for a couple of hours about the economic situation, what can one do except abstain or quickly approve the resolution proposed by the speaker? Given that the All-Russian Central Committee doesn't deal with the economy, it listens to some exposés on the subject from time to time and then breaks up with each one going their own way. The same thing happened with the curious case of a project presented by the People's Commissars being approved without any previous reading of it. Why read it before approving it? Certainly, one cannot be more educated than comrade Kurski (Commissar of Justice). The All-Russian Executive Committee has been transformed into a simple chamber for recording decisions. And its president? It is, with your permission, the supreme organ; but with regard to the tasks imposed on the proletariat, it is occupied with trifles. It seems to us, on the contrary, that the All-Russian Central Executive Committee should be more than any other linked to the masses, and this supreme legislative organ should decide on the most important questions of our economy.

Our Council of the Commissars of the People is, according to the opinion of its chief, comrade Lenin, a veritable bureaucratic apparatus. But he sees the roots of evil in the fact that the people who participate in the Workers' and Peasants' Inspection are corrupt and he simply proposes to change the people occupying the leading posts; after that everything will be better. We have here in front of us the article of comrade Lenin appearing in *Pravda*, January 15, 1923: it is a good example of "political manoeuvring". The best among leading comrades confront in reality this question as bureaucrats since they see the evil in the fact that it is Tsiouroupa (Rinz) and not Soltz (Kunz) who chairs the Workers' and Peasants' Inspection. It reminds us of the spirit of a fable: "It is not by being obliging that you become musicians". They are corrupted under the influence of the milieu; the milieu which has made them bureaucrats. Change the milieu and these people would work well.

The Council of People's Commissars is organised in the image of a council of ministers and citizens of any bourgeois

country and has all its faults. We have to stop to repair its dubious measures or to liquidate it, keeping only the Presidium of the CEC with its various departments, as we do in the provinces, districts and communes. And transform the CEC into a permanent organ with the standing committees that would deal with various issues. But so it does not become a bureaucratic institution, we must change the content of its work and this will be possible only when its base ("the main nucleus of state power"), the councils of workers' deputies will be restored in all plants and factories, where the trusts, unions, directors of factories will be reorganised on the basis of a proletarian democracy, by the congress of councils, of districts up to the CEC. So we no longer need the chatter about the struggle against bureaucracy and the bickering. Because we know that bureaucrats are the worst critics of bureaucracy.

By reorganising the directing organs, by introducing all the elements really alien to bureaucracy (and this goes without saying), we will actually resolve the question that concerns us in terms of the New Economic Policy. So it will be the working class which leads the economy and the country and not a group of bureaucrats who threaten to turn into an oligarchy.

As for the Workers' and Peasants' Inspection (the Rabkrin),³ it is better to liquidate it than try to improve its functioning by changing its officials. Unions (through their committees) will undertake a review of all production. We (the proletarian state) need not fear proletarian control and here there is no room for any real objection, if this is not the same fear that the proletariat inspires in the bureaucrats of all kinds.

So it must finally be understood that control must be independent of that which is submitted, and to get it, the unions have to play the role of our Rabkrin or former State Control.

Thus the local union nuclei in the plants and factories would be turned into organs of control.

The provincial committees brought together in councils of government trade unions would become organs of control in the provinces and the All-Russian Central Council of Trade Unions would have such a function at the centre.

The councils direct, the unions control, this is the essence of the relationship between these two organisations in the proletarian state.

In private enterprises (managed through

3. Rabkrin: the organisation that was in principle responsible for the correct operation of the state and for fighting its bureaucratisation, but became in turn a caricature of bureaucracy

a lease or concession), trade union committees play the role of state control, ensuring compliance with labour laws, payment of commitments made by the manager, the leaseholder, etc., to the proletarian state.

A few words on two groups

Two documents that we have before us, [one] signed by a clandestine group, *The central group of the Workers' Truth*, the other bearing no signature, are a striking expression of our political mistakes.

Even the innocent literary entertainments that are still allowed a liberal part of the RCP (the so-called "Democratic Centralism"), simply cannot appear in our press. Such documents, devoid of theoretical and practical foundations, of the liquidator genre like the call of the "Workers' Truth" group, would carry no weight among the workers if they were issued legally, but otherwise they may attract the sympathies not only of the proletariat, but also of communists.

The unsigned document, produced no doubt by the liberals of the RCP, rightly notes:

- 1) The bureaucratism of the council and party apparatus.
- 2) The degeneration of the party membership.
- 3) The split between the elites and masses, the working class, the militants of the party's base.
- 4) The material differentiation between members of the party.
- 5) The existence of nepotism.

How to fight all this? We must, you see:

- 1) Reflect on theoretical problems in a strictly proletarian and communist framework.
- 2) Ensure, within the same framework, an ideological unity and a class education of the healthy and advanced elements of the party.
- 3) Struggle within the party for a principal condition of its internal reorganisation, the abolition of the dictatorship and the putting into practice of freedom of discussion.
- 4) Fight within the party in favour of such conditions of development of the councils and the party, thereby facilitating the elimination of the petty bourgeois forces and influence and further consolidating the power and influence of a communist nucleus.

These are the main ideas of these liberals.

But, say then, who of the leading group of the party would object to these proposals? No one. Better yet, it has no equal for this kind of demagoguery.

The liberals have always served the leading party group precisely playing the role of "radical" opponents and thus fooling the working class and many communists who genuinely have good reasons for discontent. And their discontent is so great that to channel it, the bureaucrats of the party and councils need to invent an opposition. But they don't tire themselves because the liberals help them each time with bombast of their own, by responding to specific questions with general phrases.

Who, among the current personnel of the Central Committee, will protest against the most radical point? *"Fighting within the party in favour of such conditions of development of the councils and the party, thereby facilitating the elimination of the petty bourgeois forces and influence and further consolidating the power and influence of a communist nucleus"*.

Not only do they not protest, but they make these statements with more vigour. Look at Lenin's last article and you will see that he said "some very radical things" (from the liberals' point of view): with the exception of the Commissariat of Foreign Affairs, our state apparatus is par excellence a relic of the past which has undergone no serious changes. Then he reaches out to the liberals, promises to bring them into the CC and the expanded Central Control Commission (CCC) - and they would like nothing better. And of course, when they enter the CC, universal peace will be established everywhere. In holding forth about free discussion in the party, they forget one little detail - the proletariat. For without freedom of speech given to the proletariat, no freedom in the party will be possible. It would be strange to have freedom of opinion in the party and at the same time deprive the class whose interests this party represents. Instead of proclaiming the need for the foundations of proletarian democracy according to the party programme, they talk about freedom for the most advanced communists. And there is no doubt that the most advanced are Sapronov, Maximovski and Co and if Zinoviev, Kamenev, Stalin, Lenin consider themselves the most advanced, then they agree on the fact that they are all "the best", will increase the membership of the CC and CCC and everything will be fine.

Our liberals are incredibly...liberal, and they require no more than freedom of association. But to do what? What do they

want to tell us, explain to us? Only what you have written in two small pages? So good! But if you pretend to be an oppressed innocent, a political refugee, then you need to dupe those who are to be duped.

The conclusion of these arguments is quite "radical", even "revolutionary": you see, the authors wish that the Twelfth Party Congress sort out one or two (what audacity!) functionaries who have contributed most to the degeneration of the party membership, to the development of bureaucracy while hiding their intentions behind fine phrases (Zinoviev, Stalin, Kamenev).

It's stylish! When in the CC Stalin, Zinoviev, Kamenev give way to Maximovski, Sapronov, Obolensky, everything will be fine, really fine. We repeat that you have nothing to fear, fellow liberals, at the Twelfth Congress you will enter the CC and, which will be essential for you, neither Kamenev, Zinoviev nor Stalin will stop you. Good luck!

In their words, the "Workers' Truth" group is composed of communists.

Like all the proletarians they address, we should believe them willingly, but the problem is that these are communists of a particular type. According to them, the positive significance of the October Russian revolution is that it has opened up to Russia magnificent prospects for a rapid transformation into an advanced capitalist country. As this group argues, it is without doubt a great conquest of the October Revolution.

What does that mean? It is neither more nor less than a call to retreat, to capitalism, abandoning the socialist slogans of the October revolution. Do not consolidate the positions of socialism, of the proletariat as ruling class, but weaken them, leaving the working class only the struggle for wages.

Accordingly, the group claims that classical capitalist relations are already restored. It therefore recommends that the working class rid itself of "communist illusions" and invites it to fight the "monopoly" of the right to vote by workers, which means that they must renounce it. But, gentlemen communists, would you allow us to ask for that?

But these gentlemen are not so foolish as to say openly that they are in favour of the bourgeoisie. What confidence would the proletarians then have in them? The workers would understand immediately that this is the same old refrain of the Mensheviks, the SRs and CDs⁴, which is

4. SR: Socialist Revolutionaries. CD: Constitutional Democrats. [ICC note]

outside the group's views. Yet it did not let its secret out. Because it claims to be committed to the fight against "administrative arbitrariness" but "with reservations": "As far as possible in the absence of elected legislative bodies". The fact that the Russian workers elect their councils and EC, this is not an election, just imagine, for a real election must be conducted with the participation of the bourgeoisie and the communists of *The Workers' Truth*, and not that of workers. And all this is (tell me if it is not) "communist" and "revolutionary"! Why, dear "communists", do you stop halfway and not explain that this should be the general, equal, direct and secret right to vote, which is characteristic of normal capitalist relations? That it would be a real bourgeois democracy? Do you want to fish in troubled waters?

Gentlemen communists, do you hope to hide your reactionary and counter-revolutionary intentions by constantly repeating the word "revolution"? Over the last six years, the Russian working class has seen enough ultra-revolutionaries to understand your intention to deceive. The only thing that could make you succeed is the absence of a proletarian democracy, the silence imposed on the working class.

We leave aside other demagogic words of this group, noting only that the thinking of this "Workers' Truth" is borrowed from A. Bogdanov.

The party

There is no doubt that even now, the RCP(B) is the only party that represents the interests of the proletariat and of the Russian working people at its side. There is no other. The programme and statutes of the party are the ultimate expression of communist thinking. From the moment when the RCP organised the proletariat for the insurrection and the seizure of power, from this time it became a party of government and was, during the harsh civil war, the only force capable of confronting the remains of the absolutist and agrarian regime, the Socialist Revolutionaries and the Mensheviks. During these three years of struggle, the leading organs of the party assimilated the methods of work adapted to a terrible civil war but they now extend these to a whole new phase of the social revolution and in which the proletariat puts forward quite different demands.

From this fundamental contradiction flow all the deficiencies of the party and of the working of the soviets. These deficiencies are so serious that they threaten to cancel out all the good and useful work of the RCP. But even more, they risk destroying this party as a party of the avant-garde

of the international proletarian army; they threaten - because of the present relationships with the NEP - to transform the party into a minority of holders of power and economic resources in the country, which conspires to set itself up as a bureaucratic caste.

Only the proletariat itself can repair these defects of its party. It might well be weak and its living conditions might be difficult, but it still has enough forces to repair its wrecked ship (its party) and finally reach the promised land.

Today, one can no longer maintain that it's really necessary for the internal regime of the party to continue to apply methods valid at the time of civil war. That is why, in order to defend the aims of the party, it is necessary to strive - even if reluctantly - to utilise the methods which are not those of the party.

In the present situation, it is objectively indispensable to constitute a Communist Workers' Group, which is not organisationally linked to the RCP, but which fully recognises its programme and the statutes. Such a group is about to develop notwithstanding the obstinate opposition of the dominant party, of the soviet bureaucracy and of the unions. The task of this group will be to exert a decisive influence on the tactics of the RCP, conquering the sympathy of the proletarian masses, so as to compel the party to abandon the broad lines of its policy.

Conclusion

1. The movement of the proletariat of all countries, especially those of advanced capitalism, has reached the phase of the struggle to abolish exploitation and oppression, the class struggle for socialism.

Capitalism threatens to plunge all humanity into barbarism. The working class must fulfill its historic mission and save mankind.

2. The history of class struggle shows explicitly that, in different historical situations, the same classes have preached either civil war or civil peace. The propaganda for civil war and civil peace by the same class was either revolutionary and humane, or counter-revolutionary and strictly selfish, defending the interests of a concrete class against the interests of society, the nation, humanity.

Only the proletariat is always revolutionary and humane, whether it advocates civil war or civil peace.

3. The Russian revolution provides striking examples of how different classes were transformed from partisans of civil war in

those of civil peace and vice versa.

The history of class struggle in general and the last 20 years in Russia in particular teaches us that the current ruling classes who promote civil peace will advocate civil war, ruthless and bloody, when the proletariat takes power; we can say the same of "bourgeois fractions with an ambiguous socialist phraseology", the parties of the 2nd International and those of the 2½ International.

In all countries of advanced capitalism, the proletarian party must, with all its strength and vigour, advocate the civil war against the bourgeoisie and their accomplices - and civil peace wherever the proletariat triumphs.

4. In the current conditions, the struggle for wages and a decrease in the working day through strikes, parliament, etc., has lost its former revolutionary scope and only weakens the proletariat, diverting it from its main task, reviving illusions about the possibility of improving its conditions within capitalist society. We must support the strikers, go to parliament, not to advocate a struggle for wages, but to organise the proletarian forces for a decisive and final battle against the world of oppression.

5. The discussion of the question of a "united front" in the military sense (as we discuss all aspects in Russia) and the singular conclusion there has been on it, has failed, so far, to seriously address this problem, because [in the current context] it is quite impossible to criticise anything.

The reference to the experience of the Russian revolution is only for the ignorant and is not confirmed in any way by this same experience as it remains set down in historical documents (resolutions of congresses, conferences, etc.).

The Marxist vision and dialectic of the problems of class struggle is replaced by a dogmatic vision.

The experience of a concrete epoch with goals and tasks is automatically transported to another that has particular features of its own, which leads inevitably to the imposition, on communist parties around the world, of an opportunist tactic of the "united front". The tactic of a "united front" with the Second International and the 2½ International completely contradicts the experience of the Russian revolution and the programme of the RCP(B). It is a tactic of agreement with the open enemies of the working class.

We must form a united front with all the revolutionary organisations of the working class who are ready (today, not one day or another) to fight for the dictatorship of the

proletariat, against the bourgeoisie and its fractions.

6. The theses of the CC of the Communist International are a classic disguise for opportunist tactics in revolutionary phrases.

7. Neither the theses nor the discussions in the congresses of the Communist International have tackled the question of the united front in countries that have completed the socialist revolution and in which the working class exercises its dictatorship. This is due to the role that the Russian Communist Party took in the International and in the internal politics of Russia. The particularity of the question of the "united front" in such countries is that it is resolved in different ways during different phases of the revolutionary process: in the period of the suppression of the resistance of the exploiters and their accomplices, a certain solution is valid, another is needed on the contrary when the exploiters are already defeated and the proletariat has made progress in building the socialist order, yet with the help of the NEP and with weapons in hand.

8. The national question. Many arbitrary appointments, neglect of local experience, the imposition of tutors and exiles ("planned permutations"), all the behaviour of the leading group of the RCP(B) towards the national parties adhering to the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, has aggravated in the masses of the many small ethnic groups, chauvinistic tendencies that penetrate the communist parties.

To get rid of these trends once and for all, we must implement the principles of proletarian democracy in the organisation of the national communist parties, each headed by its CC, adhering to the IIIrd Communist International, as well as the RCP(B) and forming an autonomous section of it. To resolve common tasks, the communist parties of the countries of the USSR must convene their periodic congress which elects a standing Executive Committee of the Communist Parties of the USSR.

9. The NEP is a direct consequence of the state of the productive forces of our country. It should be used to maintain the positions of the proletariat conquered in October.

Even in the case of a revolution in one of the advanced capitalist countries, the NEP would be a phase of socialist revolution that it is impossible to pass over. If the revolution had broken out in one of the countries of advanced capitalism, this would have had an influence on the duration and development of the NEP.

But in all countries of advanced capitalism, the need for a New Economic Policy

at some stage of the proletarian revolution will depend on the degree of influence of the petty-bourgeois mode of production compared to that of socialised industry.

10. The extinction of the NEP in Russia is linked to the rapid mechanisation of the country, the victory of tractors over wooden ploughs. On these bases of development of the productive forces is instituted a new reciprocal relationship between cities and countryside. To rely on imports of foreign machinery for the needs of the agricultural economy is not right. This is politically and economically harmful insofar as it links our agricultural economy to foreign capital and weakens Russian industry.

The production of the necessary machines in Russia is possible, that will strengthen industry and bring the city and the countryside closer together in an organic way, will remove the material and ideological gap between them and will soon form the conditions that will allow us to give up the NEP.

11. The New Economic Policy contains terrible threats for the proletariat. Apart from the fact that, through it, the socialist revolution undergoes a test of its economy, besides the fact that we must demonstrate in practice the advantages of socialist forms of economic life in relation to capitalist forms - besides all this, we must stick to socialist positions without becoming an oligarchic caste that would seize all the economic and political power and be afraid of the working class more than anything else.

To prevent the New Economic Policy from turning into the "New Exploitation of the Proletariat", the proletariat must participate directly in the resolution of the enormous tasks facing it at this time, on the basis of the principles of proletarian democracy; which will give the working class the possibility of protecting its October conquests from all dangers, wherever they come from, and of radically altering the internal regime of the party and its relations with it.

12. The implementation of the principle of proletarian democracy must correspond to the fundamental tasks of the moment.

After the resolution of political-military tasks (seizure of power and suppression of the exploiters' resistance), the proletariat is led to solve the most difficult and important economic question: the transformation of the old capitalist relations into new socialist relations. Only after the completion of such a task can the proletariat consider itself victorious; if not everything will still have been in vain, and the blood and the dead will serve only to fertilise the land on which will continue to rise the edifice of exploitation and oppression of

bourgeois rule.

In order to accomplish this task it is absolutely necessary that the proletariat really participates in the management of the economy: "Whoever finds themselves at the summit of production equally finds themselves at the summit of 'society' and of the 'state'".

It is thus necessary:

- that in all the factories and firms councils of workers' delegates are constituted;
- that the congresses of the councils elect the leaders of the trusts, the unions and the central authorities;
- that the All-Russian Executive is transformed into an organ which manages agriculture and industry. The tasks which are imposed on the proletariat must be confronted with a view to turning proletarian democracy into reality. This must be expressed in an organ which works in an assiduous fashion and institutes within itself permanent sections and commissions ready to confront all problems. But the Council of Commissars of the People which apes some bourgeois ministry must be abolished and its work confided to the All-Russian Executive Committee of the Soviets.

It is necessary moreover that the influence of the proletariat is reinforced on other levels. The unions, which must be real proletarian class organs, must be constituted as organs of control having the right and the means for worker and peasant inspection. Factory and firm committees must perform a control function in factories and firms. Leading sections of the unions which are united in the central leading union must control the reins, with the union leaders joining up in an All-Russian central union - these must be the organs of control at the centre.

But today the unions are performing a function which doesn't belong in a proletarian state, which is an obstacle to their influence and contrasts with the sense of their position within the international movement.

He who is afraid of such a role for the unions shows his fear of the proletariat and loses all links with it.

13. Upon the terrain of the profound dissatisfaction of the working class, various groups are forming which propose to organise the proletariat. Two currents: the liberal platform of *Democratic Centralism* and that of "*Workers' Truth*" show, on the one hand a lack of political clarity, on the other, an effort to connect with the working class. The working class is looking for a form of expression for its dissatisfaction.

Both groups, which very probably have honest proletarian elements belonging to them, judging the present situation unsatisfactory, are leading towards erroneous conclusions (of a Menshevik type).

14. There persists in the party a regime which is harmful to the relationship of the party with the proletarian class and which, for the moment, doesn't allow the raising of questions that are, in any way, embarrassing for the leading group of the RCP(B). From this comes the necessity to constitute the Workers' Group of the RCP(B) on the basis of the programme and statutes of the RCP, so as to exercise a decisive pressure of the leading group of the party itself.

We are calling on all authentic proletarian elements (including those of "*Democratic Centralism*" and "*Workers' Truth*", of the "*Workers' Opposition*") and those who find themselves outside as well as inside the party, to unite on the basis of the *Manifesto* of the Workers' Group of the RCP(B).

The more quickly that the necessity to self-organise is recognised, the less will be the difficulties that we have to surmount.

Forward, comrades!

The emancipation of the workers is the work of the workers themselves!

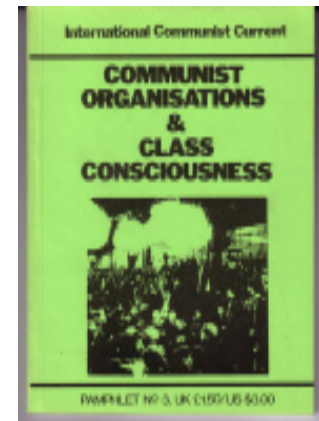
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The central provisional organisation bureau of the Workers' Group of the RCP(B)

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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 stultified 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*.

ICC Press

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Dunya Devrimi, Turkey

Because of the political situation, there is no PO Box. Write to the address in Switzerland or to: turkiye@internationalism.org

Communist Internationalist

(published in Hindi)
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Internacionalismo, Venezuela

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