

Journal of the  
Communist Workers'  
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Revolutionary  
Perspectives

# 'Recovery': Whose Recovery?



- Housing is a basic need not a commodity
- Amazon - a modern capitalist microcosm
- Climate Change: social collapse or socialism
- Onorato Damen and the Italian Left
- Class Consciousness - a reply to The Commune

# Revolutionary Perspectives

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## Front cover

**Motorola Factory Texas: working standing up, these workers assemble  
phones whilst being monitored to increase productivity relentlessly.**

## ‘Recovery’: Whose Recovery?

**F**ive years ago capitalism experienced its biggest-ever financial crash. Thanks to central banks (particularly the US Federal Reserve) conjuring up unimaginable amounts of capital to cover financial losses and protect the banking system, the world capitalist economy was saved from complete breakdown. The threat of currencies collapsing, banks and businesses going under and economic life in general seizing up, gave way to the ‘Great Recession’: a period of ‘negative growth’, state spending cuts and drastic ‘austerity measures’, which now, we are assured, is turning into the ‘hoped-for recovery’. “It’s going to be a bumpy ride”, of course. “There’s still a long way to go.” Nobody knows, for instance, what effect the US Fed’s steady withdrawal of the monthly billions of dollars life support machine will have on either the domestic economy or the rest of the world. [Despite all the forewarning about the ‘taper’, when the \$85bn monthly cash injection was reduced to a mere \$75bn in December there was financial panic in some of the favoured destinations for the Fed’s ‘easy money’. As we write Argentina is joining countries like Turkey, Brazil, South Africa, Indonesia and India as the victims of ‘capital flight’.] One thing is certain: the outlook for the working class is anything but rosy.

In the first place, as is well-known by now, the net result of so-called Quantitative Easing programmes is that central government debts have increased while stock markets have risen and financial assets have been protected. So the rich have become even richer at the expense of wage workers whose share of the wealth pie has dropped substantially just about everywhere. In the United States the Occupy movement coined the slogan ‘We are the 99%’ in response to the fact that since 2009 the richest one per cent has received 95 per cent of all income gains. Here in the UK the Bank of England calculates that 40 per cent of the QE benefit has gone to the top 5 per cent which includes top bankers and financiers in general.

### **Attack on Workers**

Of course that’s not the end of the story. Workers have faced an onslaught of attacks which leave them substantially worse off than previously. With an enlarged pool of unemployed (it’s nonsense to imply that nobody lost their job in the recession) — real wages have fallen. Working class households in the US and the UK have seen their income drop by an average of 7 per cent since 2009. These two are the countries supposedly leading the way out of the recession. Elsewhere — from Turkey to Mexico, France, Germany, Italy and Japan — wage labour’s share of the pie has diminished even further. On top of this, just as more and more people are in need of support, the process of dismantling post-1945 universal welfare services has accelerated in the so-called advanced areas of the world. As state debts (and the cost of servicing them) ballooned while national income declined governments — encouraged by the ratings agencies — have played on the need to ‘reduce the deficit’ as a way of pushing through so-called austerity measures. Capitalist politicians have conveniently turned their system’s debt crisis into a ‘national problem’ about the cost of welfare when the real issue behind the debt overload is capitalism’s declining ability to generate new value. This decline is right at the heart of what makes capitalism tick: the drive to maximise profits (the rate of return on capital) by increasing

the amount of new value (wealth) created by workers over and above the value of their wages.

In truth this structural crisis has been in evidence now for more than four decades. Once upon a time the reigning ideology was that the advent of consumer capitalism meant that life-threatening economic crises were a thing of the past. Now though, both Keynesianism and Friedmanite monetarism are out of the window. They have been replaced with out and out speculation and knee-jerk policy reactions. Regardless of everything the working class has forfeited over more than four decades: the hundreds of thousands who were 'left on the scrapheap' in the Eighties after once key industrial sectors were dismantled and capital rushed to transfer manufacturing to areas of the globe with much cheaper labour power; the millions more who have grown up or become accustomed to considerably worse "conditions of service" to the point where they see the 1960s and 70s as some kind of golden epoch; still we are told the problem is "low productivity". And from the capitalists' standpoint this really is a problem. Never mind the gargantuan amount of revenue being generated, all over the world the rate of production of new value is declining. The capitalist pundits are running scared. Many are wondering whether capitalism can survive and betray their fears by allusions to Marx. For instance in a parody of Marx's *Communist Manifesto* a *Financial Times* article in January began with 'A productivity crisis is stalking the global economy...' It sure is. No wonder the allusions to Marx. Despite all the decades of crisis management, technological innovation, globalisation, and so on that crisis of falling profitability will not go away and capitalism is more and more reverting to what it does best: milking as much as possible out of the existing workforce in a frantic bid to up 'total factor productivity'.

The reality is that this feeble 'recovery', which no-one is pretending will reverse the decline in workers' living standards, is not going to change capital's drive to increase productivity by the most ruthless and advanced means of absolute exploitation. The article on working for Amazon here is a cautionary example of how the world of work is shaping up for more and more wage workers as millions of infinitely flexible workers face the prospect of becoming part of the 'precariat', possibly on zero hour contracts, working for 'Mac wages' and subject to all of present-day capitalism's mischievous psychological ploys based on the personal isolation of each worker from another.

### **More Capitalist Contradictions**

Here is the rub. In economic terms capitalism is caught up in a web of its own contradictions. The more it grows the more labour's share of the pie diminishes and the more consumer capitalism is threatened. The more capitalism introduces labour saving machinery and equipment the lower the rate of profit and higher the rate of growth required to employ the same number of people. Eventually — as now — capitalist firms are faced with trillions of dollars of accumulated capital with fewer and fewer places to invest (hence the turn towards speculation) while a growing portion of young people in the world find themselves facing the abyss of a lifetime of little or no paid employment. If there were anything remotely rational about capitalism as a means of organising human beings' social existence then logic would dictate that instead of upping the

work rates and lowering the wages of people with jobs, people without jobs would be absorbed into the workplace and everyone would enjoy a reasonable standard of living without being worked to death. Instead capitalism has its own profit-driven logic which drives it to create more and more misery, depriving people of the means of existence and destroying their quality of life even as the 'rich get richer' and the very existence of human life on the planet is threatened by capital's cavalier attitude to climate change and general environmental degradation. The article in this issue, *Climate Change: Social Collapse or Socialism*, spells out yet again how capitalism's profit based 'development' has also been at the expense of short-term plundering of natural resources with little or no regard for wider and future consequences. Despite all the talk, the global communiqués, the target-setting, the fact is that the present economic crisis and sharpening of global competition is set to reverse what little progress had been made towards the elusive goal of 'sustainable development'. (The EU, for example, has just watered down its carbon reduction programme in the face of industrialists' lobbying in the light of competition from US companies employing the windfall of cheap shale oil and gas.)

So it goes on: social and environmental needs sacrificed on the altar of profit. It doesn't have to be so. As the article on the UK housing crisis mentions, in a world where the purpose of work was to directly meet social need, no-one would be without a roof over their head. In such a world, however, neither would growing millions be without a job or obliged to work in old-fashioned sweat shops or grotesque 'fulfilment centres' such as Amazon. Instead we would all be involved in deciding on the what, how and when of production and distribution to meet the needs of a global human community unhindered by capitalist commodity production and archaic state borders. These are not far-fetched, utopian goals even if the capitalist crisis is making them more compelling. However, the goal of communism — because that is what we are talking about — not only cannot be achieved without a revolution on the part of the world's working class; communism cannot be achieved unless at least a part of the working class understands the lessons of our own class experience, lessons which will have shape the political programme that revolutionaries put forward to the working class as a whole. There is no escaping it. Spontaneous uprisings and revolts will surely occur but we cannot avoid the need for communists to face a political struggle to win the hearts and minds of the wider working class against all kinds of elements claiming to be on the side of the working class. When it comes to a worldwide working class movement that has a clear idea of how to overthrow the capitalist profit system, including wage labour and commodity production; how to replace existing state set-ups with a global network of organs of direct democracy ready to organise production for human needs, there is no place for the Micawber tendency. No, it is an abdication of political responsibility to wait for 'something to turn up'. Times are hard. Working class consciousness is at a low ebb. But the conditions for the re-shaping of working class identity and the search for a real alternative to capitalism are growing by the minute. We make no apology for publishing debates from the past or for rectifying misinterpretations of what we are saying today. We do so, not in the spirit of dry scholasticism but in the hope of recovering the basis for a collective development of a revolutionary programme for today.

# Housing is a Basic Need Not a Commodity

*I am not going to stand back while people's aspirations to get on the housing ladder, to own their own flat, to own their own home, are being trashed.*

(David Cameron, September 2013).

With this, the government launched the second part of its Help to Buy scheme, its latest solution to the housing problem. Without doubt there's a big problem to solve. The housing shortage that has been building up over the past 30 years is reaching the point of crisis. Homelessness is on the increase and has been for three consecutive years<sup>1</sup>. At least 50% of those affected are women and children and according to Shelter some 80,000 children are classified as homeless. The shortage of affordable housing and cuts to benefits play a major part, but 27% of households accepted as homeless between April and June lost their home when their private landlord simply decided to stop renting to them<sup>2</sup>. In fact the loss of a private tenancy is a growing cause of homelessness and has been since late 2011, with the proportion of households citing the loss of private tenancy as the trigger for their longer-term homelessness at an unprecedented high. In London this is having a visible effect; the number of people living on the capital's streets has risen fast in the last three years and is now 13% higher than last year. For those renters still with a roof over their heads, the costs of keeping it are rising.

## Rising rents

The average monthly rent in the UK is currently £743 but in London rents are typically £1,126 and rising at a much faster rate than inflation, up by 4.8% year on year. Official figures released in January showed that house prices in London are also up by nearly 10% year on year, indicating the strength of demand for homes in the capital. Overcrowding is rife with 11.6% of the capital's dwellings having too few bedrooms for their occupants. And like the rest of the country, more of its working households are on the bread line facing food and fuel poverty which are at shocking levels. In all, some 13 million people in the UK can't make ends meet. Private rents have increased by 37% in the past five years and are forecast to rise by a further 35% over the next six years<sup>3</sup>. According to a recent report by Shelter, one in five of us borrow to meet rent or mortgage payments. Over one million people had borrowed from high-cost payday loan companies to fund their housing costs last year<sup>4</sup>.

And the dream of home ownership for many is just that; a distant dream. For years Greater London has been failing to generate the numbers of new homes it needs. London councils have recently calculated that to clear the backlog and meet growing demand more than 100,000 new homes a year will have to be built until 2021 some 809,000 in all, and this numerical shortfall is accompanied by the ever growing problem of affordability. House prices in London are now soaring above where they were before the crash, making homeownership beyond the reach of ever more people. The days when an average

Londoner could buy a first modest home in a run-down part of town disappeared more than 20 years ago.

Now most people in London just stretch to pay their high rents which inevitably means they can't save up for a deposit. Someone working full time on the minimum wage won't earn enough for an affordable room in the average shared flat in any borough of London let alone an average first-time buyers deposit of £64,000<sup>5</sup>. As a result the percentage of homeowners in the capital has plunged from nearly 60% to under 50%, reversing an upward trend since the 1960s.

### **Help to Buy**

This is a bitter blow to the notion of the "property-owning democracy" touted first by Tories then Labour, which is why Help to Buy was dreamed up. The scheme started in 2012 in response to the low take up of new mortgages. Under the plan, banks and building societies are encouraged to lend up to £130 billion to potential buyers seeking 95% loans. Some £12 billion of taxpayers' money has been earmarked to insure deposits of up to 15% on properties worth £600,000. Supporters of the scheme see it as win-win; desperately needed new homes are created (even if they are the smallest in Europe, and often part of an ill-designed and ill-equipped urban sprawl eating up all available green space). At the same time desperately needed jobs are created.

When it was launched, its critics predicted it would cause a further housing bubble, and this is precisely what is happening. At present, the average house now costs £164, 654 – an increase of 1.3% since last year. According to Duncan Scott, director of PricedOut which campaigns for more affordable housing for first-time buyers:

*Guaranteeing mortgages can only cause more money to be lent into the housing market, meaning house prices pushed even further out of reach of first-time buyers.<sup>6</sup>*

The main beneficiaries, (apart from the big construction firms who have been given a windfall from the state) have been private landlords who have been snapping up properties to rent. Alongside the usual eagle-eyed developers are a new breed of existing well-off homeowners who are buying up in such force it's leading to a new phenomenon known as 'let to buy,' i.e. homeowners keep properties for profit then release cash from them to subsidise a new home for themselves. There has been 13% increase in let-to-buy properties compared with last year, according to broker John Charcoal. The Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors (RICS) claims that the number of surveyors reporting house price rises has surged to an 11-year high.

### **Bedroom Tax**

As the government pours money into Help to Buy and subsidises the well-off middle

## **Social Crisis**

class, at the other end of the spectrum we have the continuation of the bedroom tax. It was introduced to free up larger family sized properties in the social housing sector, a growing necessity especially in London where demand for social housing is at a premium. Basically anybody on a low income and/or receiving benefits, living in a property rented from either the council or a housing association with a spare bedroom, faces a cut in Housing Benefit of 14% for one extra bedroom and 25% for two or more bedrooms. Billed as a 'fair system' to stop under occupation, the bedroom tax has caused misery to thousands of the poorest families in the country. Many who want to move find there aren't enough smaller properties, especially in the North and councils are struggling to cope with the demand. Others, with young children under ten whose homes are fully occupied, have been shocked to discover that their child only counts as half, making them also liable to pay. Those who have been forced to move have faced massive disruption to work and family life with children having to change schools etc.

Most people are losing an average of £14 a week, with housing association tenants losing on average £16 a week. One in four households hit by the tax have been pushed into rent arrears for the first time, and just over half of the 63,578 tenants of 51 housing associations were unable to meet their rent payments in the first months of the new system. According to the *Independent*, some 50,000 people are now facing eviction as a result, with one council tenant in three now in arrears directly because of the tax. At least another 30,000 people living in housing association properties have fallen behind on rent payments since the tax came in with potentially tens of thousands more affected, according to the National Housing Federation. The vast majority of those hit are people with a disability. At least one person has committed suicide as a result.<sup>7</sup>

The confidence of the government in carrying out such a stark class attack was further cemented in September 2013 when a United Nations' special investigator, Raquel Rolnik, issued a report denouncing the bedroom tax as shocking and against human rights, calling for it to be abolished immediately. Grant Shapps, Tory Party Chairman, denounced Rolnik's report as 'a disgrace.' Not even the disgust of other factions of the ruling class has had any impact.

Both the bedroom tax and the Help to Buy scheme could be written off as at best ill-conceived and at worst as knowingly divisive, but both pale in comparison at the mess left by the housing policy which has dominated for the past 30 years, namely the Right to Buy.

### **The Death of Council Housing**

The great Council house sell-off started with the onset of the capitalist crisis in 1973 but was pushed in earnest from 1979. Designed to make us a nation of homeowners, was Britain's biggest privatisation (worth £40 billion in its first 25 years). It was also part of the unravelling of the post war settlement which had offered decent housing for the working class. Of all the spending cuts made by the Thatcher government in its first term, three

quarters came from the housing budget. The government not only sold council housing at a huge discount, it allowed the original buyers to keep the profit when they sold those on to a private landlord at market price.

However, councils were not allowed to spend the money replacing the homes they sold, and central government funding for housing was slashed. And by stopping the councils rebuilding their stock, it created a huge demand, artificially raising market rents by choking off supply. It then paid those artificially high rents to the same private landlords in the form of housing benefit, many times higher than the housing benefit it would have paid had the houses remained as council stock.

And so the right to buy created a leak of money into the hands of a rentier class. With cheap “buy to let” mortgages, everyone with money was encouraged to become a private landlord. The result has been a housing shortage with consequent staggeringly inflated rents.

A recent report<sup>8</sup> by Labour London Assembly member Tom Copley, found that since the introduction of right-to-buy, more than 271,438 council homes have been lost from the council housing stock in London alone. In the decade between 2001 and 2011, the proportion of privately rented households with dependent children increased from 19% to 29%. Those living in privately rented accommodation claim as much as £100 a week – £520,000 a year – more in housing benefit than council tenants in the same area. Tower Hamlets, where four in 10 children live in poverty, has the highest proportion of homes that were sold through “right-to-buy” but are now believed to be privately let. Here a tenant in a council house will pay an average of £121 a week, compared with £212 a week paid by someone in a private rented property.

The report states that’s the right to buy is “possibly unrivalled” in providing poor value for money for taxpayers and local authorities, not to mention for the tenants themselves.

Copley himself puts it perfectly when he states:

*Not only did taxpayers fund the initial building of the council homes, they subsidised the substantial discounts offered to tenants and then – once the homes were sold – missed out on the rental income that would have covered the build costs. To add insult to injury, the evidence uncovered highlights that at least 36% of all homes sold by councils across London are now let by private landlords.*

*Substantial numbers of these are being let to tenants who are now supported by housing benefit, while many would-be council tenants have now been forced into the private rented sector because of the dwindling supply of council homes. The consequence of both phenomena has been that taxpayers are again being charged more to subsidise higher private rents.<sup>9</sup>*

### Rachman's Back

Much is made in the popular media of people on benefits, but the main beneficiaries of housing benefit are property tycoons such as Charles Gow, (whose father, Ian Gow was Housing Minister under Thatcher at the height of right to buy) who owns at least 40 ex-council flats on one South London estate and is raking in thousands a month from housing benefit. And because a handful of the super-rich increasingly dominate what used to be social housing, they know every trick in the book to squeeze out the maximum profits from their tenants. Welfare benefits being cut? No problem. Simply get rid of your tenants, as one of Britain's best-known landlords, Fergus Wilson, did when he recently issued eviction notices to every tenant who was on welfare. As he succinctly put it:

*Rents have gone north, and benefit levels south. The gap is such that I have taken the decision to withdraw from taking tenants on [housing benefit](#). From what I can gather just about all other landlords have done the same. Our situation is that not one of our working tenants is in arrears – all those in arrears are on housing benefit. This new breed are making Rachman look like a soft touch<sup>10</sup>.*

This government may be blatant in its class bias when it comes to housing, but Labour has an equally appalling record. Less social housing was built in the 13 years of the last Labour government than under the Conservative one which preceded it and in practice its policies followed the same ideology that housing is not a basic human right, but something to make a profit from. As a result every government's housing policy since Thatcher has treated housing as a prime investment which has resulted in this growing crisis. But the last four decades of housing policies are more than merely short-sighted and ill-conceived. They are proof that capitalism is utterly incapable of meeting a very basic need. Its only solution is to increasingly marginalise and demonise those at the bottom of the property owning pile, increasingly coming up with policies that only exacerbate the problem, causing more misery for the poorest and the more vulnerable while lining the pockets of the super-rich. If any proof were needed of capitalism's toxic incompatibility with the basic needs of humanity, then look no further than the housing question.

Under a saner system which for the sake of brevity we would call communism a first step would be to guarantee the right to residence in perpetuity to all tenants and mortgage payers for nothing. As a corollary all surplus accommodation (second homes, empty offices capable of conversion, etc) would be sequestered to house the homeless. Over a longer period we could begin to plan real communities for real people to choose how and with whom they wanted to live. However, solving the basic question comes first and it is not difficult to tackle if housing is seen as a need and not about "property".

RT

**Notes**

1 This is official homelessness as defined as street homelessness or people living in emergency accommodation. It does not include hidden homelessness or overcrowding.

2 Shelter Report 2013

3 According to Mayor Boris Johnson, your rent is affordable if it doesn't take up more than 35% of your take-home pay. For example, the average household in London aims at an estimated £2,608 per month after tax, so an affordable rent for them to be anything up to £913 per calendar month.

4 Shelter Report 15 January 2014. The charity said it had helped 8,995 people with payment or arrears difficulties over the last 12 months compared with 6,797 the year previously. It warned that for every family it had helped, more would be keeping their difficulties hidden. The survey found that 25% would feel too ashamed to ask for help when struggling to pay.

5 From data released in August 2013 by the Council of Mortgage Lenders quoted in the *Daily Telegraph* 28 August 2013.

6 Duncan Scott quoted in the *Independent* 29 September 2013.

7 In May 2013 Stephanie Bottrill, a 53-year-old woman with an auto immune system deficiency, left her home, headed for the M6 motorway, and walked out in front of a lorry. Days before her death, she had told neighbours, "I can't afford to live anymore". She had wanted to downsize her home in Solihull West Midlands, but the council had nothing smaller available. After being told she would need to find £80 a week to make up the shortfall, the stress of having to find extra money to stay in her home became too much so she took her own life.

8 *From Right to Buy to Buy to Let*. Copley compiled the report from responses to freedom of information requests made to councils. The report was published in January 2014.

9 Copley's report concludes with a call for mandatory covenants on all right-to-buy properties so they cannot be let through the private sector. It says a new system should be introduced whereby local authorities retain an equity stake in any property sold. However the notion of stable doors and horses comes to mind, with this particular horse having bolted sometime in the 1980s.

10 Peter Rachman was a notorious property tycoon in London in the 1950's and '60's, but many of his worst excesses, such as getting rid of sitting tenants and replacing them mostly with immigrants who were then exploited and charged much higher rents, is not too dissimilar to Wilson's plan to replace single mothers on benefit with Eastern European migrants, who, he claims, default much less frequently than single mothers on welfare. As he puts it: "Tenants on benefits are competing with eastern Europeans who came to the UK in 2005 and have built up a good enough credit record to rent privately. We've found them to be a good category of tenant who don't default on the rent. With tenants on benefits the number of defaulters outnumbers the ones who pay on time...Single mothers on benefits have been displaced to the bottom of the pile; sympathy for this group is disappearing. There aren't enough places for people to live." According to the Guardian there is another reason pushing landlords to evict: "A key factor for Wilson and other landlords is that it is impossible to obtain rent guarantee insurance for a tenant on housing benefit. This type of insurance is sold to landlords and is designed to cover the rent if the tenant stops paying for any reason." (Guardian, 4th January 2014).

## **Amazon – A Modern Capitalist Microcosm**

**T**here has been a great deal of focus on Amazon's global operations recently. As we write workers in Germany are on strike over pay and conditions, and there have been *exposées* in several countries of the nature of Amazon's working operations both in evading tax and in the gloriously named "fulfilment centres". The latter sound like places to realise your dreams, a veritable cornucopia of desirable goodies accessed at a click of a button. We used to call them "warehouses" but in Amazon's brave new world (which has its own lexicon) they have been repackaged and redefined to fit our global internet economy.

Amazon employs 100,000 permanent people in 89 of these warehouses around the world. Starting off as an internet bookselling business, Amazon has expanded into almost every commodity area of the personal consumer. It was floated on the stock market in 1997, since when its turnover has gone up 420 times to \$62 billion in 2012. And to the continuing surprise of most commentators it continues to register an ever higher share price (at over \$400 it has increased ten times since the launch). The surprise about its rapidly rising share price is that Amazon has yet to register an annual profit. For those who argued in the 1980s that only the bottom line (i.e. the profit) counted, this is a surprise, but Amazon has risen at a time when speculation is the name of the game. According to its supporters its shares are being bought not because Amazon is currently profitable but because it is expanding so rapidly all the profits are ploughed back into new warehouses<sup>1</sup> (sorry, "fulfilment centres") which in their time will give Amazon such a global retail monopoly that it will be able to name its price for everything and thus become immensely profitable. Not bad for a company that actually produces nothing itself. The argument for investor confidence is a bit like that used by European imperialists during the scramble for Africa in the late nineteenth century. The actual colonies that were acquired were never profitable but they were acquired on the basis that one day they would be (and if one country did not grab them than another would).

### **Benefitting from State Subsidies**

Amazon is also not just a single firm. Aside from its own internal divisions (which allow its boss Jeff Bezos to switch profits to loss-making sections as part of the tax avoidance strategy) Amazon allows other retailers to offer their products for sale on their websites through its Marketplace scheme. This is clever monopolist move. It increases turnover and leaves the rivals to deal with the various orders for low-demand products which Amazon does not want to fill its shelves with. It also means Amazon get to police their rivals' pricing. They can then charge less (check it out for yourself on their site) and over time they ultimately destroy the sales of their smaller rivals. One Devon bookseller interviewed on the BBC's Panorama programme recently said that he got virtually nothing in sales from being on Amazon. The French Booksellers Association reckons that 18 times more people are employed by bookshops in like for like selling compared to Amazon whilst the American Booksellers Association reckoned that 42,000 jobs in retailing were lost in 2012 alone due to Amazon. According to them every \$10 million of Amazon turnover represent 33 jobs in

local bookshops. Amazon is doing for retail generally what the supermarkets did for the high street and corner shop three decades back. The Amazon claim is that it creates jobs but this does not stand up to examination

The Amazon model has been commented on by many although none in more detail than Jean-Baptiste Malet:

*Irrespective of their location, Amazon's distribution centres have similar architecture and working practices. They are near motorway junctions in areas where the unemployment rate is above the national average and assiduously surveilled [sic] by security firms. The giant metal boxes sometimes extend over more than 100,000 square metres, nearly 14 football pitches. Trucks come and go constantly: every three minutes Amazon fills an articulated lorry with packages. In the US, the company sold 300 items every second during the 2012 Christmas season.<sup>2</sup>*

Let's start with the location of warehouses in areas of higher unemployment. This is critical to all Amazon's operations. Not only do they have a pool of desperate people to pick from, they can also auction their arrival to local authorities. Amazon just ask what incentives they can be offered to locate warehouses in this or that area. Local authorities desperate for headline good news which they can use to their political advantage ("new jobs created") will do almost anything to fall over to get Amazon retail centres. In Swansea the Welsh Assembly agreed to build a new road to the warehouse at a cost of £4.9 million. In Bad Hersfeld near Frankfurt the same thing happened (similar cost to the local government at €7 million) with the addition that the road has been called "Amazon Strasse".<sup>3</sup> In France the Socialist-run Government, the Burgundy regional government and the department of Saone-et-Loire have all given Amazon subsidies. Burgundy region gave €1.125 m for Amazon to employ 250 people on open-ended contracts thus paying for Amazon's selection process. Opening the facility in Swansea, First Minister Rhodri Morgan gave us the predictable soundbites.

*"Amazon is an iconic global company right at the forefront of the e-economy.*

*"Amazon is one of only a handful of truly world brands that have emerged since the internet changed the way we live our lives.*

*"This is one of the biggest investments announced in Wales since devolution began nine years ago.*

*"It is a powerful shot in the arm for the Welsh economy and the Swansea Bay area in particular.*

*"I am proud of the role that the Assembly Government has played in attracting Amazon to Wales."<sup>4</sup>*

The Nationalist government in Scotland bent over even further to get Amazon to locate two warehouses there. At least £3 million in grants has been handed out to create the Dunfermline warehouse which is the biggest in the UK. There is some debate about the total incentive package but it is thought to be in the region of £10 million when the second

warehouse is set up. This could yet turn out to be an own goal for the SNP. As well as the well-documented nature of work at Amazon there are also powerful voices being raised about the overall economic impact of Amazon on employment in Scotland. Hugh Andrew, a bookseller and publisher fired the following broadside in *The Scotsman*.

*Let us stand back and look at Amazon. It is a retailer, pure and simple. In a time of flat retail expenditure, its market share expands in only one way: at the expense of others. Those others are the high street and town centres across the UK, those others are independent businesses struggling to survive in an ever bleaker environment. It is a company that has paid minimal UK tax (apart from National Insurance) in at least the past three years. It is a company that has specialised in minimum-wage labour under no contractual protection whatsoever (last year it was censured for its behaviour in Greenock where, when the work finished in the small hours, workers were left unpaid and with no means of getting home). It is a company whose market share has grown to a great extent by predatory pricing and elimination of rivals through purchase. In a completely deregulated market it has proved a remarkably successful strategy.<sup>5</sup>*

Amazon is however beloved by most European publishers who can cut their own costs through using Amazon distribution rather than the messy servicing of hundreds of retail outlets.

### **But Not Paying Much Back**

Whilst receiving all these grants, Amazon pays back a pittance in taxation in countries where its sales are measured in billions. The dodge is to invoice the sales to spurious offices in a low tax area. This is not strictly illegal and was a practice widely tolerated by all states until the financial bubble burst and getting down the deficit became a priority. Then questions started to be asked. In the UK Amazon sold £7.6 billion in goods in 2012<sup>6</sup> but paid not a single drop of corporation tax as all the sales were invoiced to Dublin (where Irish corporation tax is lower) but a recent Amazon whistleblower has revealed the dodge so this has further put the spotlight on Amazon's claims to be good for local economies. In the nine years 2003-11 Amazon only paid £3 million in tax on transactions which should have yielded £360 million. Today the same thing happens in all the countries Amazon operates in and it is under investigation in China, Japan, the US, Germany, France, and even Luxemburg where it has no warehouses. This is because Amazon's European operations are nominally based in Luxemburg where the firm set up Amazon Europe Holding Technologies SCS and to where all profits are invoiced. At the end of 2011 it had reserves of €1.9 billion yet did not have a single employee there.<sup>7</sup>

The whole business of inducements and tax evasion, which states have colluded in until, now raises the question of the nature of the state in a capitalism which is fundamentally racked by new contradictions (and the old ones have not gone away as we shall see below). The state was originally drawn beyond its original role of acting as a framework for the defence

of private property by the process of concentration and centralisation of capital identified by Marx in Capital Volume III. It became more deeply involved in the economic management of capitalism when imperialist expansion took competition beyond the level of individual firms within each nation state on to an international level. It is a process which has never stopped since the late nineteenth century but it has gone through many phases. Initially the state supported national monopoly producers expanding abroad (by military means when all else failed) but as the process developed and as defence of the national capital was seen as essential the state was forced to take over or at least heavily subsidise the “commanding heights of the economy”.

It is no accident that in the wake of the First World War we got new forms of state capitalism, ranging from Fascism and Stalinism, to the mixed economy of the Keynesian model. The aim was to keep heavy industry (the basis of armaments production) functioning, despite the fact that these were increasingly the least profitable sectors of the economy. Two world wars converted this into an absolute must for any respectable imperialist power. Throughout the post-war boom a combination of transference of tax revenues and deficit-financing enabled all the leading national capitals to maintain their basic industries. But the onset of the end of the cycle of accumulation at the end of the sixties and beginning of the seventies turned the “commanding heights” into “lame ducks”. At first there were attempts to actually extend state control in the face of the crisis but the consequent costs of this led to further deficit financing which led to threatening hyper-inflation. In the days of “sound money” some states like Britain and Italy were driven nearly bankrupt by this in the 1970s.

However one other event which signalled the new crisis of accumulation was the US abandonment of the Bretton Woods Agreement which fixed 35 US dollars as worth an ounce of gold. The US deficit too was so great that it had to abandon Bretton Woods in order to devalue the dollar. Floating currencies was the beginning of a gradual shift into financialisation, deregulation and speculation. Capital now flowed out of the major capitalist countries to less developed areas, principally in Asia, where labour was cheap and investment conditions in “Special Enterprise Zones” favourable. The crisis also helped to fuel the microprocessor revolution as the cheap semi-conductors could be put together in China (in those very Special Enterprise Zones”) to put workers on the dole in the advanced capitalist world. In capitalist history it was the first technological revolution which destroyed jobs rather than created them.

At the same time deregulation allowed banks to speculate more and more. Clinton dumped the Glass-Steagall Act brought in during the Depression to prevent retail banking from getting involved in speculation. In other words in the face of a long profits crisis which led to financialisation and globalisation the balance between capital and the state changed. Whereas the states had set the legal framework for capitalists for much of the twentieth century by the end they now were rolling back laws in order to make their patch attractive to global capital.

## **Crisis and Class Struggle**

And with deregulation of finance the financial institutions, backed by neo-liberals like Greenspan, began the orgy of debt-fuelled speculation which ended so calamitously (but predictably) in 2007-8. By giving principally housing loans to those who could only afford them if house prices continually rose they created a world of so-called “toxic assets” which was hidden amongst the various financial derivatives and other instruments which were supposed to ensure no financial failures. It is a story that is now well-known and we have written about it many times over the years. But Amazon is not unconnected with this story. It is a child of all the trends highlighted above. And in the final analysis its rise still depends on the backwash from the speculative bubble. In fact some have commented that both modern capitalism and Amazon seem like giant Ponzi schemes where the whole thing depends on fuelling expansion through debt, both corporate and individual. Amazon could not function without credit cards, and modern information technology. To maintain its share price it has to maintain its reputation as the retailer of first resort. It uses complex algorithms to track consumer patterns on purchasers’ computers and relentlessly bombards anyone who has bought from them with suggestions for further purchases. It also rents this information to third parties via the Amazon Web Service business.<sup>8</sup> Volume and speed of delivery have become the twin obsessions for this globalised retail outfit.

### **Working for Amazon**

Following some high profile exposées about working conditions in Amazon’s warehouses in the US, in France and most recently in Germany there has been a rash of reporters going undercover in Amazon to report on what it is like to work there.<sup>9</sup> Their stories paint a graphic picture of the world of work today. Each warehouse is very like the next. All are monstrously huge, generally in excess of the size of ten football pitches. To step into one is to enter an Orwellian world of double-speak. Workers are “associates” in “fulfilment centres” where the walls are emblazoned with the slogan “Work hard, have fun, make history”.

And Big Brother is watching you. It comes in the shape of a handheld wi-fi device. This uses barcodes and GPS to tell “pickers” where they can find stuff in Amazon’s “chaotic storage” system. The device also tracks the worker and even, as the Panorama programme shows, verbally counts them down in seconds to try to make them pick up the order in a designated time. Workers are not allowed to talk to each other but managers can talk to workers through this device to egg them on. Perhaps it’s more like “Modern Times” than “1984”. Bezos aim is to get each item picked within 20 minutes of the computer order. Why? The only answer for this insane obsession is to keep ahead of the competition in a capitalist market-driven system.

Management techniques have been borrowed from Japanese car firms like Toyota called “5S”.<sup>10</sup>

*Every warehouse has its own “continuous improvement manager” who uses “kaizen” techniques pioneered by Japanese car company Toyota to improve productivity. Marc*

*Onetto, the senior vice-president of worldwide operations, told a business school class at the University of Virginia a few years ago: "We use a bunch of Japanese guys, they are not consultants, they are insultants, they are really not nice ... They're samurais, the real last samurais, the guys from the Toyota plants."<sup>11</sup>*

The system involves monitoring real time performance of workers and demanding that they beat their previous speeds, or organising competitions between individual workers. Pickers have to walk more than 17 kilometres (11 miles) a night wearing poor quality plastic safety boots<sup>12</sup> rather than trainers, so blisters are a serious problem. All productivity details are recorded and sent to Amazon's headquarters in Seattle.

The "have fun" bit of the strategy is the organising of raffles during your half hour break (in your 10 and half hour shift) as well as handouts of chocolates and sweets. Management also encourages workers to come to work in fancy dress based on themes chosen by management. Unloading a lorry dressed as a clown is not to everyone's taste but it is somehow symbolic of "Amazonia". Recently pre-shift stretching and warm-up exercises have been organised by management (presumably whilst you wait your turn for the security check before you can clock in or out<sup>13</sup>). The basic Amazon attitude is that all workers are potential thieves. Security can even demand to search you during your shift. So its cheery attempts at paternalistic "we-are-all-hands together" management have withered over the demeaning nature of the way workers are treated the rest of the time.

Add to that the conditions in the warehouses. Unbearably hot in summer and freezing cold in winter. In Montélimar in France workers had to work in parkas with hats and gloves in 2011's sub-zero temperatures until a dozen of them went on strike and got the heating turned on. The opposite problem is more generally the case as temperatures in summer can reach 40 degrees. In the Bad Hersfeld warehouse Sonia Rudolf,

*... came across a girl lying on the floor throwing up. Her face was blue. I really thought she was going to die. Because we did not have a stretcher the manager told us to go and get a wooden pallet so we could carry her to the ambulance.<sup>14</sup>* There are many more examples of workers collapsing from heat exhaustion in the Louisiana and Tennessee operations.

And then there is the points system Amazon operates. It is basically three strikes and you are out. A minute late is half a point, an hour is one point and any day of illness is another point. They are not allowed to talk to each other during work and are encouraged to report any workers so doing (with the promise of promotion or more job security). Workers' contracts include a gagging order which Amazon claim is to stop commercial secrets being leaked. But, as one worker noted, since they are not privy to such information the real purpose has to be to stop workers telling about conditions in the warehouses.

Continually not walking fast enough leads to more disciplinary action. Amazon is not alone

here. The points system it employs has been in use in US warehousing for some time and Amazon is not the worst in the business.<sup>15</sup> What they are doing is reducing the worker to an automaton. In fact workers are better than robots – for the moment. We know this because Amazon says so<sup>16</sup>. In 2012 Amazon bought (for \$775 million) a robotics firm called Kiva Systems. This has developed a robot which can slide under a one foot high shelf and pick up weights up to 1,300 kg. Mighty powerful but it still lacks that little bit extra flexibility you get from relentlessly pushed human beings. But the robots are coming<sup>17</sup> even if we can dismiss Amazon propaganda about drone deliveries in the near future as just another headline grabbing gimmick to keep the bad news stories about working conditions off the front pages. For the time being Amazon is basically concentrating on “robotising” its workforce. In the 60s at the height of Fordism they used to talk of the monotony of production line work in the car factories but then labour was scarce so absenteeism, strikes and even sabotage were escape valves from the dreariness of that existence. Car assembly pay was high compared to most jobs at the time and certainly compared to the few pence above the minimum wage rate that Amazon now pays to its workers.

And of course the final factor on which Amazon depends is the existence of high rates of unemployment in its locations. Only the desperate work at Amazon and they know it. You can tell that by the locations they choose. South Wales, Central Scotland, Rugeley all have higher than average unemployment rates. In Poland Amazon is locating in deregulated “Special Economic Zones” which were so attractive to Western capital in China 25 years or so ago. And just to add to the insecurity Amazon use employment agencies for recruitment. This is useful in several ways. Agency workers have fewer rights, are easily got rid of and don’t come with all the on-costs of full-time workers. At this time of year (Q4 when Amazon gets 70% of its annual turnover) Amazon will take on thousands of temporary staff (reaching as many as 15,000 per warehouse) who outnumber the permanent staff several times over. They are told in training videos that they might get a permanent job after Christmas and from there promotion to management is rapid. It is all hogwash but designed to make workers flog themselves to death to get that permanent job. Even when they do get kept on they are not really permanent as Amazon have a hierarchy of statuses (denoted by the colour badge you wear). Getting a blue badge means you finally made it and you get better pay and conditions but the more general rule is for you to get laid off and taken on successively. Once again we see Amazon typifying the modern labour conditions of the entire capitalist world. Low pay, job insecurity, poor working conditions and gruelling schedules are not just for Cambodian and Bangladeshi textile workers.

### **Strikes in Germany**

At Bad Hersfeld though, the worst of Amazon’s practices in areas of high unemployment has been revealed. Germany has one of the most regulated labour markets in the world and has a relatively low rate of unemployment. Nowhere are the unions more integrated into management. This has enormous advantages for German capitalism. In return for rolling over and accepting draconian cuts in welfare in the past (the Hartz IV agreement they signed

with the last SPD Chancellor Schroder) the unions have maintained some bargaining rights in some sectors of the economy but not ones that favour workers. There is a myth (amongst workers outside Germany) that German union organisation means more employment and better conditions. This is not true. Hartz IV was introduced to compel workers to take low paid part-time work (which accounts for the fall in German unemployment) or face penury. A quarter of all German workers earn less than two thirds of the median wage. The EU classes nearly twice as many German workers as low paid (17%) compared to France. This was largely because Schroder's eventual deal with the unions,

*made it easier for companies to use temporary workers.*

[See "German meat industry stirs debate on low pay" *Financial Times* 28 December 2013]

And haven't Amazon been quick to pick up on this. They opened their first store in 2000 and are now on the verge of opening their ninth there. The possibilities offered by the EU and German labour laws means that they can ship in temporary workers from all over Europe. At Bad Hersfeld one employee said that 44 different nationalities were taken on in 2012's Q4 season. And they needed to be housed. A German IT worker who lost his job tells what it was like.

*I spent three months with five foreigners in a bungalow used for summer lets. It had no heating. I have never been so cold in my life. We were all adults and we had to take it in turns to sleep in a child's bed.<sup>18</sup>*

Many of these workers were bussed in from crisis zones like Spain, Greece, Poland, Ukraine and Portugal.

*Some of them were very highly qualified: there was a historian, sociologists, dentists, lawyers, doctors. They were out of work so they came here on short term contracts.<sup>19</sup>*

Amazon boasts about the "international" character of its workforce but at bad Hersfeld they were policed both at work and in the stinking "accommodation" provided by Amazon by a literally fascist security firm whose agents wore neo-Nazi uniforms and had HESS as its acronym. The brutality of the treatment of these migrant workers by HESS caused such a scandal when it became known Amazon terminated their contract. This was not out of humanitarian consideration for the workers but because it was one bad news story that resonated and could have damaged the turnover Amazon depends on.

Workers' only weapon lies in their collective strength and in uniting together. Part-time, precarious workers on short-term contracts though are not in the best position to fight back. When they have done so in the past it has been spontaneous and out of desperation, involving relatively small numbers (often with remarkable success it has to be said). In Germany and to a lesser extent in France workers are now turning to the established unions. In Germany the Ver.di union has been the most successful in penetrating Amazon's anti-union policy and

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is behind the wave of strikes at Bad Hersfeld and Leipzig since the beginning of November. The main demand is for the nationally agreed wage rate for delivery workers of €12.18 an hour as Amazon only pays €9.83 (and temporary staff get less). It is a demand which unites union and workers but they have different agendas. For the workers it is a question of getting a better wage with which to survive. The unions however are fighting for their traditional right to be part of the management of German capitalism, a role which in the past allowed them to play a part in negotiating the conditions which Amazon now takes advantage of. And in these days where the bosses have the unions on the back foot they are not much use to workers. Any collective organisation which accepts the legal framework of the state is accepting that little can be done. Sending a delegation to Seattle to picket Amazon's HQ (as Ver.di did) isn't class struggle but begging to be taken into the system. To have any real weight workers will have to break with capitalist legality through actions like creating flying pickets and blockading distribution. The strikes in Amazon's German operation were timed to coincide with the Christmas rush when Amazon has 70% of its annual turnover. Sounds a good idea until you realise that the normal workforce is outnumbered 3 or 4 times over by the temporary staff who are desperately compelled to work. Ver.di in fact could call out other workers in logistics (including in 7 other Amazon warehouses) to give real concrete support to the Amazon workers but will not do it as that would damage their "responsible" position in the labour management system. What they are really doing is using the misery of the workers for their own image-building and as a recruitment exercise. Amazon thus seems to have ridden out this particular challenge.

Some have guiltily stated that they use Amazon all the time (who does not?) and that the solution is a consumer boycott, but as one German journalist (a supporter of Ver.di) put it *It is not possible to fight this business individually. It's a multinational organised according to a well-defined ideology. Its system doesn't just pose a neutral question about whether we want to shop on its site or not: it raises political questions about what sort of society we want to belong to.*<sup>20</sup>

So true, but the questions go deeper than ones posed by social democrats about "neo-liberal" capitalism. The Amazon experience is far from untypical and goes to the very heart of capitalist exploitation today. It epitomises the massive contradiction at the heart of the system. Capitalism has created the technology to ensure that the every single human being on the planet can live without fear of famine or homelessness and all their needs satisfied for a minimum of labour. However capitalism's antagonistic social relations demand that this technology is used to enslave the many for the profit of a few. And it is this class which is obliged to work for a wage which is constantly being re-shaped by the system through technological change and capitalist restructuring. This is nothing new in capitalist history but in the last few years the contradiction has become more acute.

A decade or so ago there was much talk of "job polarisation" as relatively well-paid manual jobs disappeared in the face of the new technology so that you either got a university education or you were condemned to a low-paid service sector job (exemplified by the term

“burger-flippers”). Now even a university education does not guarantee that you will not end up in low-paid work in the service sector (look at the examples of the highly educated migrant workers in Amazon’s Bad Hersfeld facility highlighted above). The increase in a highly educated layer of workers whose skills cannot be integrated into the workforce have been growing geometrically with the passing out of every university generation. It is these educated but pauperised young who are the backbone of the resistance in the “Arab Spring” as well as the Occupy and Indignados movements. Capitalism has no way of integrating them and operations like Amazon only underline what kind of future capitalism holds for them.

And yet the automation it has created offers us the prospect of a “leisure society” in which all human beings can find something useful to do whilst no-one is compelled to work more than they feel capable of contributing. It is not a question of “taxing the rich” or even eating them as the populist Class War slogan had it. The current exploiters are in some ways irrelevant. It is the system they dominate that is the real enemy. The question is about an entirely new way of doing things or in Marxist terms a new “mode of production”. To achieve it we have to abolish commodity relations, money and exploitation. Even *Financial Times* commentators can see the problem. Automation of tasks poses a question.

*The question is whether we are equipped to deal with the possibility that in future, there will be people who – despite being willing and fit to work – have no economic value as employees. By the time today’s 10-year-olds have their degrees, computers could be a hundred times cheaper and smarter than they are today. A future full of robot servants could be a bright future indeed, but only if we can adapt our institutions quickly enough.*<sup>21</sup>

But it is not just “institutions” that will have to be adapted. In a capitalist world more automation means more misery. Exchange the Santa Claus grotto from what are wants we don’t need to needs that we really want and Amazon, or any other retail warehouses, could really be converted into “fulfilments centres” supplying the real needs of human beings. However this doesn’t require mere institutional adaption. It requires proletarian revolution.

**Jock**

### Notes

1 Though this also included a one-off \$1.4bn for purchasing Amazon’s headquarters building in Seattle in 2012). See <http://ben-evans.com/benedictevens/2013/8/8/amazons-profits>

2 Jean-Baptiste Malet “Amazon – the future of retail?” in *Le Monde Diplomatique* [English edition] November 2013. The translation is by LMD. Malet has also written a book *En Amazonie: Infiltré dans le Meilleur des Mondes* (Undercover in the best of all possible worlds) [Fayard Paris 2013] which he wrote after working in an Amazon warehouse. The information from the French and American Booksellers is quoted in the same article.

3 According to the LMD article already cited there are 3 more towns in Germany (Graben, Pforzheim

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and Kobern-Gondorf) plus 2 in French (Sevrey and Lauwin-Planque) in France with streets named after the company.

4 <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-560113/Online-retailer-Amazon-opens-largest-warehouse-Britain--size-football-pitches.html>

5 <http://www.scotsman.com/news/hugh-andrew-amazon-jobs-come-at-a-high-price-for-scotland-1-1994067>

6 <http://www.theguardian.com/technology/2012/apr/04/amazon-british-operation-corporation-tax>. The same article states that Amazon is fighting a one billion dollar tax demand from the US government over its operations in the US.

7 See "Not paying the tax" in *Le Monde Diplomatique* [November 2013] by Jean-Baptiste Malet. Amazon now claims that 380 people work in its Luxemburg offices.

8 Amazon has also set up a market in online work which is called Amazon Mechanical Turk. It invites people to complete microtasks for micropayments. Pierre Lazuly "Artificial artificial intelligence" in *Le Monde Diplomatique* [English edition] November 2006

9 Besides Malet (quoted above) there was also <http://www.theguardian.com/technology/2013/dec/01/week-amazon-insider-feature-treatment-employees-work> by Carole Cadwalladr in the *Observer* whilst Richard Bilton conducted an investigation for BBC's *Panorama* programme entitled "The truth behind the click".

10 Apparently Motorola were the first to import these methods into the US.

11 An Amazon manager quoted in "Amazon unpacked" by Sarah O'Connor in the *Financial Times Magazine* 8 February 2013

12 It is an EU law that safety boots be worn in warehouses but Amazon furnishes such bad ones that many workers are forced to buy their own just to be able to keep working.

13 Workers in Kentucky, Washington state and Tennessee have brought lawsuits against Amazon arguing they have to wait 40 minutes a week at security checks which take place before breaks as well as at the beginning and end of the day.

14 See Malet in LMD.

15 See the articles on the *Mother Jones* site by Mac McClelland such as <http://www.motherjones.com/rights-stuff/2011/07/ohio-warehouse-temps-unemployment>

16 See "Amazon unpacked" by Sarah O'Connor in the *Financial Times* 8 February 2103

17 Again we have to stress it, Amazon is more representative of mainstream capitalism than most of its critics acknowledge. Google too has bought a firm called Boston Dynamics which specialises in robots for the military. See Tim Harford "The robots are coming" *Financial Times* 28 December 2013 at <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/0ca021c0-680b-11e3-a905-00144feabdc0.html?siteedition=uk> It sounds trivial (because it is) but Amazon is obsessed with its packers wasting too much tape on its packages so a robot is being developed to take over this task.

18 See Malet in LMD.

19 *ibid*

20 Guenther Wallraff in Malet *op cit*

21 see Tim Harford in note 16 above

## Climate Change: Social Collapse or Socialism

**T**owards the end of 2013 the spectre of ecological catastrophe, which now threatens humanity, again raised its head. Since the start of the 2007/2008 crisis our rulers have managed to largely ignore the questions of global warming and ecological degradation of the planet. This is because other issues dominated the headlines and, in any case, they consider it too costly to deal with<sup>1</sup>. However, two recent events have brought the issue back into view. The first was the publication, in September 2013, of the latest report by the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, Assessment Report 5 (IPCC AR5). This is the first report since 2007 and shows how much the condition of the planet has deteriorated in the last 6 years, and it is clear that this deterioration is due to the activity of humans. The report marshals a wealth of scientific evidence which shows that, despite all the posturing and hot air produced by our leaders, they have totally failed to reduce emissions of greenhouse gases, and are highly unlikely to limit the temperature increase this century to the 2°C above pre-industrial times. This is the agreed threshold of temperature increase beyond which the process of global warming spirals out of human control and becomes self-perpetuating. The second event was the November climate conference in Warsaw. This was the 19th such conference since the UN IPCC was set up and like all the others failed to achieve anything concrete. It ended with the usual unctuous words and the commitment to work towards a future conference in Paris in 2015 at which, it is hoped, as always, that some binding limits to carbon emissions could be agreed. Leading green groups such as Friends of the Earth, Greenpeace, various NGOs and others<sup>2</sup> walked out of the conference claiming the developed world was effectively blocking progress towards either cutting emissions or providing help for those most impacted by climate change. There seems little reason to expect anything concrete to emerge from the future Paris conference.

While it is clear that capitalism, as an economic system, cannot lay the spectre of ecological collapse to rest, it is also clear that the environmental lobbies, such as Friends of the Earth, think that capitalism can solve these problems. For them it is simply a question, as their conference briefing says, of “making the world wake up to the need for urgent action.” Reversing climate change could, they think, be achieved without any fundamental change to capitalism if only our leaders would wake up. This is a common view amongst environmentalists; a view which sees capitalism moving towards sustainability and zero growth. This view has been considered in detail by an organisation launched by the Stockholm Environmental Institute called the “Global Scenario Group” which baptised it as the “New Sustainability Paradigm.” They attempt to outline the theoretical basis of this scenario in a document entitled “The Great Transition”<sup>3</sup> and claim it is theoretically underpinned by the work of the 19th century economist, J S Mill. He argues that the capitalist economy must reach a stationary state where growth ceases. We argue that such a scenario completely ignores the way capitalism operates, and must operate, as a system and is therefore hopelessly utopian. We’ll come to this but let’s start with the scientific findings of the IPCC report AR5.

### Ecological Collapse

Global warming, which has now become a threat to life on Earth in the longer term, is only the most publicised part of a general ecological degradation of the planet. This degradation stems from the way the capitalist system operates, the result of which is a continual and relentless demand for growth and reduction of production costs. The system's need for infinite growth and the finite resources of Earth stand in contradiction to each other. Successful operation of the system, which in the terms of capital means growth, or accumulation of capital, means that on the one hand nature is treated as a resource to be exploited ruthlessly, and on the other it is treated as a rubbish tip into which inexhaustible quantities of toxic trash can be dumped indefinitely. However, as Marx noted in his Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts, humans are a part of nature;

*Plants, animals, minerals, air, light etc. constitute ... from the practical aspect ... a part of human life and activity. In practice man lives only from these natural products, whether in the form of food, heating clothing, housing etc. ... The universality of man appears in practice in the universality which makes the whole of nature into his inorganic body: (1) as a direct means of life; and equally (2) as the material object and instrument of his life activity. Nature is the inorganic body of man; that is to say nature excluding the human body itself. To say that man lives from nature means that nature is his body with which he must remain in a continuous interchange in order not to die.* <sup>4</sup>

The interchange which humanity has with nature has now become so unbalanced that we consume or deplete 25% more of nature's resources in a year, than the Earth's ecosystem can replace<sup>5</sup>. To make up the shortfall we simply use up the planet's reserves, a process that can only continue until they are exhausted. If this point is ever reached there will be a catastrophic collapse of civilisation. The capitalist system is like a juggernaut heading for a precipice; but a juggernaut with its own internal system of guidance which cannot be altered.

### Global Warming

Anthropogenic, or human-made, global warming, is caused by emission of greenhouse gases (GHGs). The most significant of these is carbon dioxide, CO<sub>2</sub>, which is produced by burning fossil fuels such as coal, oil and gas. GHGs, because of their molecular structure, reflect back to Earth its own long wave radiation emissions. They thereby affect the balance of energy received from the Sun with that emitted from the planet and so obstruct Earth's cooling system. The temperature of the Earth then rises until a new state of energy balance is reached. The Earth has been in a state of energy imbalance since the late 70s which means it has been receiving more energy than it can emit. This creates a general rise in temperature and puts more energy into the atmosphere. The process whereby GHGs reflect radiation back to Earth is known as "radiative forcing." The IPCC report AR5 lists the constantly increasing volumes of CO<sub>2</sub> in the Earth's atmosphere and the consequent

<b>Time Period</b>	<b>1750-2011</b>	<b>Decade 1980-89</b>	<b>Decade 1990-1999</b>	<b>Decade 2000-2009</b>	<b>Decade 2000-2011</b>	<b>2002 -2011 % of total since 1750</b>
Total emissions	545	69	80	89	92	17
Emissions from burning fossil fuels and cement production	365	55	64	78	83	23
Land use emissions (deforestation)	180	14	16	11	9	5
Ocean to atmosphere absorption	-155	-20	-22	-23	-24	-15
Residual terrestrial absorption	-150	-15	-27	-26	-25	-17
Increase of CO2 in atmosphere	240	34	31	40	43	18

Table 1: Emissions of Carbon dioxide in Giga tonnes Gt (billion tonnes as C) {Mean figures from IPCC report AR5 table 6.1}

increases in radiative forcing.

Table 1 shows the inexorable rise in the amount of CO2 in the Earth’s atmosphere, and that this is mainly due to burning of fossil fuels, though deforestation and cement production account for about 12% of the total. It also shows that this rise is accelerating. In the last 4 decades the emissions per decade have increased from 69Gt (billion tonnes of carbon) to 92Gt, an increase of 33%. At present annual emissions amount to 10.2Gt/yr, the highest they have ever been. Even if all growth in the global economy were halted at today’s level of emissions, and J S Mill’s fabulous “stationary state” was established, we would still be pumping an extra 5.3Gt of CO2 into the atmosphere every year. The concentration of CO2 in the atmosphere has been in the range of 180 to 290 parts per million (ppm) for the last 2.1 million years, yet it has risen from 278 in the late 17th century to 400ppm at present, a rise of 122ppm or 43% in the last 2.5 centuries.

Table 2 (below) shows the increase in anthropogenic radiative forcing between IPCC’s 2007 report AR4 and the 2013 report AR5. In the 6 years between the two reports it has increased by 7.2% and CO2 accounted for 84% of this increase. Overall CO2 accounts for about 65% of all anthropogenic radiative forcing.

The global economy is largely dependent on carbon for energy. Today according to the International Energy Agency 86% of the world’s energy is supplied by fossil fuels which, in 2011, received state subsidies amounting to \$523bn!<sup>6</sup> The use of fossil fuels is also increasing faster than all other sources of energy combined. In the period 2000 to 2008 global energy use increased by 22% and 86% of that increase was supplied by fossil fuels and half of this was from coal, the dirtiest of all the fossil fuels<sup>7</sup> . The correlation between the growth of the economy and the growth in CO2 emissions is fairly close. In the decade to

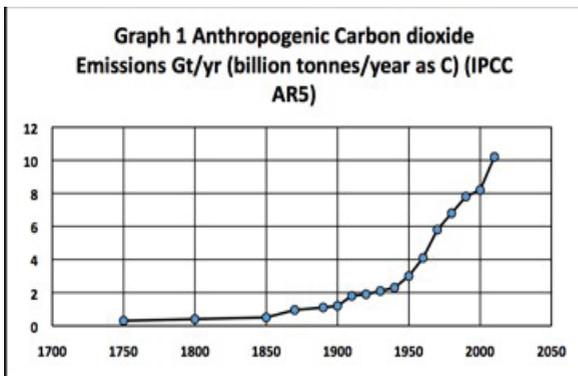
## Climate change

Gas	2011 W/ m <sup>2</sup>	2005 W/ m <sup>2</sup>	%in- crease	% contribu- tion to total RF increase
Carbon dioxide (CO <sub>2</sub> )	1.82	1.66	9.6	84.2
Methane (CH <sub>4</sub> )	0.48	0.47	2.1	5.3
Nitrous oxide (N <sub>2</sub> O)	0.17	0.16	6.3	5.3
Other green- house gases (GHG)	0.36	0.35	2.9	5.3
Total RF from GHG	2.83	2.64	7.2	100.0

Table 2 Increases in anthropogenic Radiative forcing between 2005 and 2010 {From IPCC AR5 Table 2}

02007, for which figures are available, the global economy grew, on average, by 2.5%, in terms of GDP, and CO<sub>2</sub> emissions grew by 2.8%. The historical correlation of the increases in atmospheric CO<sub>2</sub> and radiative forcing shown in Tables 1 & 2 with the increasing size of the global economy is shown graphically below.

These 3 graphs indicate quite clearly how the increase in CO<sub>2</sub> in the atmosphere and radiative forcing are tracking the increases in the global economy. Growth in the global

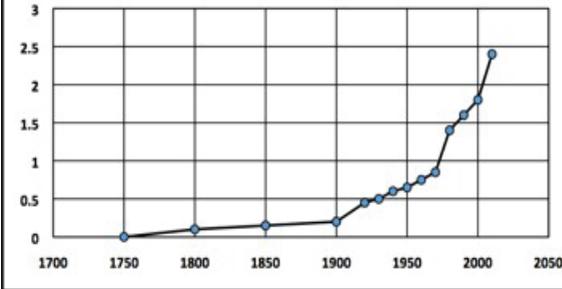


economy demands burning of additional fossil fuels which produce CO<sub>2</sub>. Over the last 3 decades the world oil consumption, for example, has risen from 62.3 million barrels per day (Mbpd) in 1980, to 74.7 Mbpd in 2000, and to 87.3 Mbpd in 2011<sup>8</sup>. Similar rises in extractive industries could be listed. However, a representative example is steel production since steel is used in most industrial

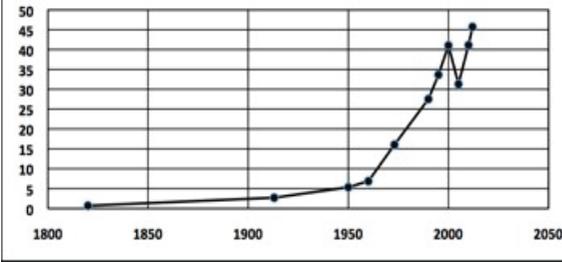
commodities. Steel production has risen from 700 million tonnes per year (Mt) in 1980 to 851 Mt in 2000 to 1547 Mt in 2012<sup>9</sup>.

There is a clear causal relationship between global capitalism's search for profitable

**Graph 2 Anthropogenic Radiative Forcing W/m<sup>2</sup> (IPCC AR5)**



**Graph 3 Global GDP in \$ trillion (rebased to 1990 \$) {CIA factbook Figs & D Harvey "Enigma of Capital"}**



accumulation and global warming. Even bourgeois commentators are no longer able to deny this, and it is for this reason that environmentalists aim to create a “no growth” capitalist economy.

**Overload of the biosphere**

As mentioned above global warming, which is caused by human interference with nature’s carbon cycle, is only one of a host of degradations which capitalism is inflicting on the natural cycles of the planet. The “Millennium Ecosystem Assessment” concluded that out of the 24 natural ecological processes on which human survival depends, 15 are in decline or becoming unsustainable. Humanity’s

interchange with nature has become so profligate and destructive that within a few generations we may not be able to sustain life. The US environmental association, “The Earth Policy Unit” in a publication called “Plan B: Rescuing a Planet under stress and a civilization in trouble” expresses the present situation of the Earth’s biosphere as follows:

*Resources that accumulated over eons of geological time are being consumed in a single human lifespan. We are crossing natural thresholds that we cannot see and violating deadlines that we do not recognize. These deadlines, determined by nature, are not politically negotiable.*

*Nature has many thresholds that we discover only when it is too late... For example, when we exceed the sustainable catch of a fishery, the stocks begin to shrink. Once this threshold is crossed, we have a limited time in which to back off and lighten the catch. If we fail to meet this deadline, breeding populations shrink to where the fishery is no longer viable, and it collapses.*

*We know from earlier civilizations that the lead indicators of economic decline were environmental, not economic. The trees went first, then the soil, and finally the civilization*

## **Climate change**

*itself. To archaeologists, the sequence is all too familiar.*

*Our situation today is far more challenging because in addition to shrinking forests and eroding soils, we must deal with falling water tables, more frequent crop-withering heat waves, collapsing fisheries, expanding deserts, deteriorating rangelands, dying coral reefs, melting glaciers, rising seas, more-powerful storms, disappearing species.... Although these ecologically destructive trends have been evident for some time .... not one has been reversed at the global level.*

*... The world is in what ecologists call an "overshoot-and-collapse" mode. Demand has exceeded the sustainable yield of natural systems at the local level countless times in the past. Now, for the first time, it is doing so at the global level. Forests are shrinking for the world as a whole. Fishery collapses are widespread. Grasslands are deteriorating on every continent. Water tables are falling in many countries. Carbon dioxide (CO<sub>2</sub>) emissions exceed CO<sub>2</sub> fixation everywhere.<sup>10</sup>*

When natural cycles do not regenerate the resources, capitalism simply uses up the Earth's reserves. When timber, for example, is not replaced more natural forests are cut down thereby reducing the planet's reserves and in the process making the removal of atmospheric CO<sub>2</sub> even more difficult; when water tables fall, aquifers are pumped to lower levels so using up historical ground-water which has accumulated over centuries; when topsoil erodes more forest lands are cleared; when fertility declines, and 40% of farmed soils are now degraded, artificial fertilisers and insecticides are used. These in their turn pollute ground-waters, rivers and wetlands killing aquatic life producing dead rivers and lakes, and so on. Insecticides and loss of habitat are killing off the world's bee population. A recent study found 35 different pesticides in the food store of honey bees<sup>11</sup>. At the same time wild insect pollinators are being killed off. Yet 75% of the crops we produce depend on insect pollination and this decimation of pollinators is already beginning to threaten food production. Chinese farmers are now pollinating certain crops by hand!<sup>12</sup>

It must be clear to anyone with their eyes open that we face an urgent crisis yet the ruling representatives of capitalism have greeted all the above with indifference.

### **Capitalism's response – "drill and frack 24/7"**

As the IPCC report shows, far from slowing down the emissions of GHGs, the rate at which they are released has accelerated. The response of our rulers to the melting of the Arctic sea ice is a fair example of capitalism's global response to these issues. As is well known the Arctic Circle is a sink, removing CO<sub>2</sub> from the atmosphere, a sink which is equivalent to 10% of the total terrestrial sink, and in addition the Arctic ice reflects incoming radiation out of the atmosphere thereby reducing the heat received by the atmosphere. The ice sheet has been reduced from 10 million km<sup>2</sup> in 1982 to 7.1 million in 2012, a reduction of about 30%<sup>13</sup>. Furthermore scientists estimate that there are a further 200 billion tonnes

of frozen GHGs trapped in the Arctic regions which could be released by this warming. In the longer term the Thermohaline Ocean currents (e.g. the Gulf Stream) which warm the northern hemisphere could be altered with incalculable consequences. However, the melting of the Arctic ice has been treated, not as an ecological disaster which requires urgent action, but as an opportunity to drill, recover and burn the oil and gas deposits of the area which were previously inaccessible. We are told these deposits represent 30% of global undiscovered gas and 13% of the undiscovered oil and, of course, capital's economists have costed it all up and announced, with a smile, that it will bring in \$60bn of profit.<sup>14</sup> The fact that such action can only make global warming worse is not even considered. Worldwide drilling and fracking<sup>15</sup>, for ever more oil and gas are the order of the day, and as far as the general ecological crisis is concerned the response of Capital is *"What have the future generations ever done for us?"*

Since the IPCC was set up by the UN all its publications, which were supposed to be providing advice for governments, and all its international meetings have achieved nothing. The only binding treaty on reduction of emissions was the Kyoto protocol, however it was undermined by the refusal of the US to ratify it and weakened by Canada, which withdrew from the treaty to develop its oil sands. The treaty was supposed to reduce emissions from 1990 levels by 5% by 2012, however by then they were approximately 30% above their 1990 levels. The voluntary emission reductions, which have been announced by various nations including the EU and UK, are generally a deception. Reductions can be achieved in developed countries while the level of global emissions increases by simply outsourcing emissions. It is estimated that 33% of the CO<sub>2</sub> emissions for consumption goods used in developed countries are now emitted in developing countries<sup>16</sup>. Alternatively countries can simply ignore their voluntary commitments as Japan, for example, is doing<sup>17</sup> following the Fukushima disaster, and there is no sanction for this.

The capitalist class, of course, appoint their top economists, rather than environmental scientists, to advise them on the ecological crisis. In the UK, for example, the economist Nicholas Sterne produced a report for the government in 2006 advising that CO<sub>2</sub> concentration in the atmosphere should be limited to 550ppm, which he advised would be equivalent to a temperature rise of 3°C. He concluded that 1% of global Gross Domestic Product (GDP) needed to be spent annually to achieve this. However, to reduce emissions and temperature rise more than this would be too expensive. Such a temperature rise is, of course, beyond the 2°C threshold which climate scientists estimate would trigger runaway global warming. Sterne has subsequently admitted he was wrong on the temperature rise, and it would be 4°C, a rise which makes runaway global warming even more likely<sup>18</sup>. Similarly the US economist W. Nordhaus in a book called "The Climate Casino" has calculated that a 2°C rise in global temperature could be achieved if 1.5% of global GDP is spent on reducing GHG emissions. This cost could only be achieved if all the main polluters agreed and cooperated in limiting emissions. If only half the main polluters agreed the costs would rise to 3.5% of global GDP which would be prohibitively expensive and eliminate global growth.

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What these economists do not appear to realise is that, while starting from the assumption that the ecological crisis can be solved within the capitalist system, their calculations, which show the required costs would be unsustainable, prove the opposite, namely that this crisis cannot be solved within capitalist relations of production.

It is clear that the demands of the capitalist system, namely profits via cheap energy are being followed in preference to any strategy which could ensure the long term survival of life on the planet. Why are we doing exactly the opposite of what rationality should dictate? The capitalist imperative – “accumulate, accumulate!”

The capitalist system requires continuous accumulation of capital. If capitals do not accumulate they will collapse, and there is therefore a general struggle for accumulation of capital, which means growth and expansion of markets, throughout the entire system. This drive for accumulation is derived from the internal functioning of the system and cannot be avoided. As Marx noted, for capitalism, the watchword was:

*Accumulate, accumulate! That is Moses and the prophets!*<sup>19</sup>

Capitalism is a productive system which produces for profit not for human needs. It is based on the separation of the working class from the means of production; a separation which enables the capitalist class to extract unpaid labour from the working class. This unpaid labour is converted into surplus value and forms the basis of capitalist profit. Technical developments and improvements in production increase productivity and tend to reduce the number workers in production. As the number of workers employed by a particular capital decreases the amount of unpaid labour extracted, and hence profit, similarly decreases. This leads to a tendency for profit rates to fall. As Marx notes:

*The progressive tendency of the general rate of profit to fall is, therefore, just an expression peculiar to the capitalist mode of production of the progressive development of the social productivity of labour.*<sup>20</sup>

The fall in profit rates in turn leads to increased competition between capitals. Capitals responds to this by converting part of the surplus value extracted from workers into fresh capital and accumulating it in order either, to introduce further technical improvements, or to increase the scale of production or both. This produces a circuit of continuously expanding reproduction with each circuit of production leading to an increase of capital. Although the rate of profit tends to fall, by increasing the scale of production, and selling more commodities, the mass of profit can be maintained. These tendencies which are felt initially at the level of the individual capitals, tend to generalise themselves over a whole economy and finally operate on a global scale as profit rates tend to average out. This results in capitalism’s desperate struggle for growth. Capitalism has to “expand or die”, which is why all national economies measure their success in terms of growth. At present the global economy, measured by GDP, is growing at approximately 3% annually which means it will double in size every 24 years. This means doubling the CO2 emissions and

doubling demands on an ecosystem which is already overloaded by 25%.

Only when the ecological problems start to affect profits will capitalists start to treat them seriously. This will occur when the ecological reserves have been used up and by then it will be too late to do anything about it.

This brief sketch of the dynamic behind capitalism's continual drive for growth shows that the forces propelling this drive come from the workings of the capitalist system itself, not from the immorality of the capitalist class. They are material forces, they are not ideological ones. Consequently the attempts of environmentalists to persuade the capitalist class to "wake up" and to adopt a zero growth economy, reflect a failure to understand the internal dynamics of capitalism, and are therefore futile. However, this is exactly what the most serious environmentalists are trying to do.

### **New sustainability paradigm**

J Porritt<sup>21</sup> in his latest book, *The World We Made*, describes the transformed world of 2050 through the eyes of a teacher who has lived through a complete change of lifestyle and the global economy in the period from the present to 2050. The "brave new world" is one where global warming and ecological degradation have been overcome or reversed and human society is in a harmonious relationship with nature. Yet the basic elements of capitalism remain in place. He describes how corporations have changed into B corporations or "benefit" corporations, committed to environmental targets and the good of society. Customer stock ownership schemes, cooperatives, community interest companies and social enterprises dominate the economy. Recycling, local food and local energy production are the norm. All this has been brought about by popular pressure. It was started by a protest movement in 2018 called "enough," which appears to be a reincarnation of the "occupy" movements. "Enough" was sparked off by a World Bank report showing increased global inequality and a new explosive IPCC report. This movement led capitalists to see the errors of their ways, stop producing for profit, and accept the changes he describes. These changes are enforced by Government legislation. Capitalism has, he notes, "became something worth fighting for."

The idea that capitalism can be reformed to become the charitable and green system envisaged by Porritt is fairly typical of the environmentalist movement. As has been mentioned above the clearest explanation of this position comes from the "Global Scenario Group" in their description of the "New Sustainability Paradigm." In this society the basic structures of capitalism remain intact but the distribution of the social product is changed to end inequality. Institutions of capitalism, such as multi-national corporations become social organizations. Lifestyles change and social structures are reformed while technical green advances are applied worldwide. The market becomes harnessed to sustainability. Some sort of world union under the main international institutions of global capitalism, UN, World Bank, IMF, WTO is brought about to police the system. In the "Great Transition"

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they state:

*A vigilant civil society would foster more responsible corporate behaviour and new values would change consumption and production patterns...The new development paradigm would include lifestyle changes and greater social solidarity...*

*... policy instruments as eco-taxes, social subsidies and green accounting (would be enforced). But these would be manifestations of deep processes that reorient the way the economy functions. The economy becomes a means of serving people and preserving nature... The transition would be expressed in altered behaviours and practices of people, firms, governments and international governance systems.*

*Enlightened businesses would increasingly seize the initiative, showing that eco-efficiency, green marketing and social responsibility offer a competitive advantage. Corporations that pursue new codes of conduct would be rewarded in the market place, while those that do not would be punished by an increasingly informed and vigilant public mobilized by NGOs.*

*A green dividend would flow from the cost-savings of eco-efficient corporations and the maintenance of society's environmental capital. A peace dividend would stem from gradual reduction of the world's \$700 billion annual military expenditure to a sufficient level for world peace-keeping, perhaps \$30 billion (?). A human capital dividend would come from harvesting the creativity and contributions of the billions who would otherwise be consigned to poverty.<sup>22</sup>*

For a theoretical underpinning to such a utopian vision “The Great Transition” looks to J S Mill. In his *The Principles of Political Economy*, published in 1848, Mill distinguishes between the progressive state of capitalism, in which growth or accumulation of capital occurs, and the stationary state in which growth ceases. He writes:

*It must always have been seen, more or less distinctly, by political economists, that the increase of wealth is not boundless: that at the end of what they term the progressive state lies the stationary state, that all progress in wealth is but a postponement of this... The richest and most prosperous countries would very soon attain the stationary state... This impossibility of ultimately avoiding the stationary state—this irresistible necessity that the stream of human industry should finally spread itself out into an apparently stagnant sea—must have been, to the political economists of the last two generations, an unpleasing and discouraging prospect..<sup>23</sup>*

Mill welcomes such a stationary state and considered it was close to being achieved in 1848<sup>24</sup>. As he himself notes, other classical economist, such as Adam Smith, David Ricardo regarded the “stationary state” as being incompatible with capitalism, and thought that if it ever occurred it would be the death knell of capitalism.

The “New Sustainability Paradigm” also takes up Mill's idea<sup>25</sup> that the distribution of the

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social product could be changed, while the relations of production remained unchanged. This would allow more to be distributed to the working class.

*The laws and conditions of the Production of wealth partake of the character of physical truths. There is nothing optional or arbitrary in them. ... It is not so with the Distribution of wealth. That is a matter of human institution solely. The things once there, mankind, individually or collectively, can do with them as they like. They can place them at the disposal of whomsoever they please, and on whatever terms.*<sup>26</sup>

Mill's attempt to separate the laws of production from those of distribution, and to distribute the social product more equally was exposed by Marx as impossible under capitalism.

*The prevailing distribution of the means of consumption is only a consequence of the distribution of the conditions of production themselves; the latter distribution, however, is a feature of the mode of production itself. The capitalist mode of production, for example, rests on the fact that the material conditions of production are in the hands of non-workers in the form of property in capital and land, while the masses are only owners of the personal conditions of production, of labour power. If the elements of production are so distributed, then the present day distribution of the means of consumption results automatically.*<sup>27</sup>

In an afterword to the German edition of Capital, Marx described Mill's attempt to separate relations of distribution from those of production as "shallow syncretism", that is an attempt to reconcile contradictory economic interests, namely those of capital and labour, and a "declaration of bankruptcy of bourgeois economy."<sup>28</sup>

As outlined above capitalism needs to constantly accumulate and operates in a circuit of constantly expanding production. Mill and the "new sustainability paradigm" want it to operate under a regime of simple reproduction where surplus value is not accumulated but is shared out equitably with all members of society. For this to occur private property in the means of production, which, under capitalism, determines distribution of the social product, would have to be ended! Also competition between capitals would have to cease on a global scale. The equal distribution of the social product throughout society undermines the motive of capitalist production which is production for profit.

The present world order is driven by the struggle for profit which leads to competition, nationalism and imperialism. These are the characteristics of capitalism. Yet all of these have been eliminated in the utopias described by the "Global Scenario Group" and by Porritt. On the one hand they admit that the present order of states, dominated by an economy exploiting the working class, struggling for profits, operating with relentless competition and backing all this up by imperialism, cannot possibly lead to their utopia, since it specifically excludes these things. On the other hand by excluding these key

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characteristics of capitalism they admit their utopia is in certain fundamental respects non-capitalist. Porritt is, in this sense, admitting his utopia is not achievable without a break from capitalism. Yet this is something he is not prepared to countenance. He maintains his utopia is a type of capitalism worth fighting for.

The whole scenario is shallow reformism, shot through with contradictions and quite unachievable. It is clear we are dealing with half-baked ideas and the attempt to give them theoretical underpinning from J S Mill only exposes their shallowness.

### **A Communist Planet**

Although previous societies have inflicted local environmental damage on the planet which sometimes was so severe that it led to their extinction, as possibly the case of the Easter Islanders, the present scale of degradation is of an entirely different order. It is global and affects everyone. As has been shown above the present destruction of the planet is rooted in the capitalist system of production and cannot be solved without a break with capitalism. We need to create a higher form of social organisation before the present system destroys us all.

The entire system of production based on wage labour and capital needs to be replaced with a system which produces for human needs. All the half measures of converting aspects of capitalism to socialism, while the fundamentals of capitalism remain in place, are just wishful thinking; and to pretend they could solve our problems is pure deception. A higher form of society needs to be created, before most of the measures described by Porritt in his "brave new world" could be put into practice. However daunting this prospect is, it remains the only realistic solution to our problems.

The means of production need to be converted from capitalist class property to social property before an equitable system of distribution can be achieved. Instead of the present system in which workers are alienated from the means of production and from the products of their labour, a free association of producers producing for the needs of humanity, is required. Instead of the interchange with nature being determined by capitalist profit, this interchange needs to be collectively planned and regulated by all. Only after such changes can we achieve a balanced exchange with nature. We call a society of socialised property and freely associated producers, producing for human needs, "communism" though this has nothing whatsoever to do with the system of state capitalism which existed in the former Soviet Union. It will be a society which will inscribe on its banners:

*"From each according to their ability, to each according to their needs."*<sup>29</sup>

A society where the free development of each will be the condition for the free development of all. Such a society will differentiate itself from capitalism in a myriad of ways, but the principal differences will be that it is a society without state, without money, where the

mass of humanity participate in the planning and running of society. It will be a society without wage labour and commodity production and without classes.

For the first time in human history it will be possible to collectively plan the future of the human species. Humanity will have a common interest and will be able to work towards achieving it. Working time will be reduced and the mass of the population will be drawn into the running of that new society. All will have a common interest in solving the ecological problems inherited from capitalism. With the abolition of capitalist society, all its waste, its cruelty, its wars, together with the “misery, agony of toil, ignorance, brutality and mental degradation” it inflicts on the working class, will be ended. Communist society will draw on the abilities of all and produce for the needs of all. It will be able to balance these needs with sustainability. It will then be possible to roll back and repair the dreadful damage capitalism has inflicted on the planet in the few centuries during which it has been the dominant system of production.

The choice facing the world on the environmental front, as on the social front, is one of the ruin of civilisation or the construction of a communist world.

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## Notes

1 The last climate change conference attended by world leaders was the Copenhagen conference of 2009, which like the previous 14 conferences achieved nothing whatsoever. Since then there have been 4 further conferences, in Cancun, Durban, Doha and the latest in Warsaw (capital city of one of the worst polluters in Europe!) have all been low key with world leaders keeping well away.

2 Some other groups who walked out were WWF, Oxfam, Action Aid, Jubilee South, 350.org. In all 800 people walked out.

3 See [http://tellus.org/documents/Great\\_Transition.pdf](http://tellus.org/documents/Great_Transition.pdf)

4 K Marx *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts Alienated Labour XXIV*

5 The figure for 1999 calculated in a study by the US Academy of Sciences was 20%. The figure for 2009 given is 25% see:

<http://books.google.co.uk/books?id=KQivVHd39hQC&pg=PA74&lpg=PA74&dq=National+academy+of+sciences+Earth%27s+regenerative+capacity&source=bl&ots=qs7YDtfj2C&sig=ul197Q7TcA71FxFpRhcF2CPqnKEI&hl=en&sa=X&ei=d1zIUpDZKLPy7AbbgIHQCQ&ved=0CFsQ6AEwBA#v=onepage&q=Nation%20academy%20of%20sciences%20Earth's%20regenerative%20capacity&f=false>

6 See [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/World\\_energy\\_consumption#Fossil\\_fuels](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/World_energy_consumption#Fossil_fuels)

7 See [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/World\\_energy\\_consumption](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/World_energy_consumption)

8 See BP statistics <http://sowellslawblog.blogspot.co.uk/2011/04/speech-on-peak-oil-and-us-energy-policy.html>: and <http://www.indexmundi.com/energy.aspx>

9 See <http://www.issb.co.uk/global.html>

10 See: [http://www.Earth-policy.org/books/pb2/pb2ch1\\_ss2](http://www.Earth-policy.org/books/pb2/pb2ch1_ss2)

11 *Financial Times* 9/11/13

12 Apple and pear farmers in Szechuan China are now forced to use paint brushes to pollinate the

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flowers of their trees. *Financial Times* 9/11/2013.

13 See *Financial Times* 12/04/2012

14 *Financial Times* 25/01/2013

15 The UK government has provided tax breaks for fracking and incentives for local authorities to encourage drilling.

16 See Water and Environmental Management December 2010

17 Japan promised a 25% reduction of emissions for 1990 levels but now admits they will be 3% greater than 1990

18 See Sterne's statement at the Davos summit January 2013

19 K Marx *Capital Volume 1 Ch 24 Section 3*

20 K Marx *Capital Volume 3 Ch 13*

21 See J Porritt "*The World we made*". Porritt was previously a leading member of both the Green Party and Friends of the Earth and founded the charity "Forum for the Future."

22 The great transition. [http://tellus.org/documents/Great\\_Transition.pdf](http://tellus.org/documents/Great_Transition.pdf)

23 J S Mill *Principles of Political Economy Book 4 Chapter 6*

24 Since 1848, when Mill thought the "Stationary State" was close the global economy has grown by a factor of approximately 30.

25 Mill took this idea from David Ricardo (1772 – 1823). Ricardian socialists argued that workers were entitled to the full value of what they produced. They considered that the distribution of the social product could be carried out independently of the distribution of the means of production.

26 J S Mill *Principles of Political Economy Book 2 Chapter 1*

27 K Marx *Critique of the Gotha Programme*.

28 K Marx in Afterword to 2nd German Edition of *Capital Volume 1* writes "The Continental revolution of 1848-9 also had its reaction in England. Men who still claimed some scientific standing and aspired to be something more than mere sophists and sycophants of the ruling classes tried to harmonise the Political Economy of capital with the claims, no longer to be ignored, of the proletariat. Hence a shallow syncretism of which John Stuart Mill is the best representative. It is a declaration of bankruptcy by bourgeois economy."

29 Marx *Critique of the Gotha Programme*.

# Onorato Damen and the Italian Left

## Introduction

We began serialising the translation of the book *Bordiga – Beyond the Myth*<sup>1</sup> by Onorato Damen in the first two issues of this series of *Revolutionary Perspectives*. Here we offer a third article taken from those collected works. This first appeared in *Battaglia Comunista*, monthly paper of the Internationalist Communist Party, in 1966. We have already published the part of this article entitled “Centralised Party, Yes – Centralism Over the Party, No!” on our website with a full introduction which we do not have space to repeat here but which we recommend to those who know little about the history of the Italian Left.<sup>2</sup>

We would only add here that this was just one of many polemics conducted with the Bordigists and Bordiga on the issue of whether the party could only exist in revolutionary periods. Damen insisted that there was a permanent need to attempt to maintain a presence in the working class in advance of any future revolutionary revival. The Bordigists justified their attitude of simple reflection on the causes of the class defeat (work already carried out by the international communist left in the 1930s and 1940s) by denouncing the Internationalist Communist Party as activists who did not really understand the situation of the working class. Damen not only takes on that issue but also the whole nature of how the Bordigists view the party both in relation to the class and in its internal operation. The final part of the polemic is directed towards those who reduce political activity to mere discussion “circles” and thus abandon any attempt to work in the wider working class.

### We Defend the Italian Left

Every so often we need to check our own political assumptions in order to critically evaluate our conduct in relation to what is currently going on. We also need to examine the behaviour of those who believe they are the repositories of who-knows-what coherence, with principles and methods that should be common to us all.

At first our aim was limited to a non-formal adherence to Marxist ideology and its correct application, without intending to carry out any restoration of this doctrine. However we found we had to distinguish ourselves from those who translate the thought of Marx and Lenin into idealistic, voluntarist terms as well as those who formulate it in terms of economism and mechanical determinism, following the precepts of positivism rather than revolutionary dialectics. The “Italian Left” has never endorsed the theoretical argument that says the party is everything and the proletarian masses nothing, precisely because this is based on an erroneous and sterile premise. This premise makes the party not just the advance guard and guide, something that we all agree with, but also sees it as carrying out the revolutionary rupture and exercising the power of the dictatorship, in the first phase of implementing socialism. In other words, not with the proletariat but for a proletariat which is unable to carry out this task for itself.

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For these comrades the October Revolution is a kind of a bastard, anti-feudal socialist revolution. It is socialist only insofar as it is based on the armed proletariat and a socialist programme. In short, they are talking about a revolution made only by the Bolshevik Party and not by an expression of the Russian proletariat.

But if we recognise the presence of the armed proletariat, it is precisely because the proletariat alone gives social content to revolution, and real substance to the work of its party. The fact that October is a socialist revolution is not just due to the Bolshevik Party, it must be said clearly, but to the Russian proletariat, as a historically revolutionary class under the leadership of Lenin's party. It is clear that wherever the proletariat exists, whatever the extent and power of its development as a class, there is also a historical framework, capitalism, even if it is only a capitalist oasis scattered in the ocean of a backward and primarily agricultural economy. In spite of all this it is still capitalism, a capitalism that had already been the tragic protagonist of an imperialist policy in its first major conflict with the emerging Japanese capitalism, and had had its days of class terror when faced with the spectre of proletarian revolution, in 1905.

The Bolshevik Party had to take on an alliance of the Russian proletariat and the poor peasantry, which was possible then. It was a fortunate moment of a development that had, of necessity, to be Russian and international at the same time, as part of an international socialist revolution that had managed to break the chain of imperialism at its weakest link. There was a clear awareness that victory would not come about unless the Russian example was the first step in the international extension of the revolution. This would allow the development of socialist construction in Russia in line with a rising revolution in the major, more economically developed, European countries, such as England, Germany and France.

The Italian Left always based its fight on these principles, both within the Party and the Third International. Therefore, these recent theoretical contortions on the question of the party and the revolution are for us merely the amateurish exhibitionism of schoolchildren.

All this explains why, following the collapse of the Communist International, those comrades<sup>3</sup>, who held posts of responsibility in the Party maintained that there was nothing further to be done for a whole historic period. So they retired to their tents substituting the tasks of revolutionary militancy, even at a personal level, with a facile intellectual coherence and an easy "sedentary" adherence to the principles of the class struggle, which however, continued without them, and against their very theories, first under fascism, then in the hybrid democracy which followed fascism.

It is precisely at the time of reflux of workers' struggles in Italy that these comrades adopted this mentality. They theorised the tactic of pulling in the oars of the boat, the dissolution of the party and a return to the tasks of the fraction, thus breaking up the one internationalist organisation that had proven itself in the fight against Stalinism. In whose interest?

For us the party is forged day by day through the slow and exhausting work of training cadres who are never selected enough in the fire of struggle, violent repression and disillusionment,

especially when you are stabbed in the back by the betrayal of your own comrades. It is not and never has been true historically that the party only emerges in a time of revolutionary assault. On the contrary, it has to be militantly active throughout an entire previous historical period before it can reach its fullness as an organ of leadership and revolutionary action.

In this regard, we must mention the ridiculous confusion that has befallen comrades when there have been spontaneous movements of the working masses, especially in the countries of the Soviet bloc. This confusion came to a head with the Hungarian events<sup>4</sup> which some, like the small group of immigrants in France, have considered as a provocation of American capitalism. Others, however, have seen Russian armed intervention in defence of institutions and conquests that, while they were not Communist, were in any case progressive from the capitalist point of view, and therefore should be protected from Western capitalist attack. Finally still others have seen in these events a national anti-Russian front which supposedly includes the armed forces of the "workers' councils". The relativism that differentiates between one reactionary and another, between Thiers and Stalin, between Stalin and Khrushchev, between a reaction carried out by a parasitic capitalism and that of a progressive capitalism, leads to the same result.

Rather, this is an experience that must be sieved by a Marxist critique to determine what are undoubtedly predominant, positive class aspects, and also point out the negatives. This separates us from those who seek to transfer to factory bodies which lack political tradition, a complete vision of the fundamental tasks of the class and especially organisational continuity and leadership tasks that belong to the party of the working class.

It has to be said, and we have already said it many times, that the "councils" really are the highest organic expression of the workers' struggle and their revolutionary consciousness, despite the fact that, in the absence of the class party, they can only go as far as insurrection, but not on to socialist revolution.

In short, we reject the conception of the party as an abstract entity that is not tied to the objective possibilities, that is not a living thing nor tested in the changing reality of the struggle. In short one that does not translate the objectives of the revolutionary struggle into the terms of working class life. Such a party would just be an easy way out, a cultural circle functioning like Thespis'<sup>5</sup> cart, in which one lectures and other comrades, reduced to the rank of mere cultural helots, nod in agreement.

No, this concept of a party is not that of Lenin who has spent all his life among books, in struggle and exile, to prepare the human material without which the international proletariat might not have carried out those October days; if the Bolshevik revolution is an incontestable historical fact, it is due to the fact that this party was tied to the working class, and the latter to this party, as an inseparable whole, in a time that had become objectively favourable to the revolutionary solution thanks to the collapse of one of the pillars of war and imperialism.

Is this not here, in these issues, that we can see what differentiates Blanquism and Leninism? Needless to say our place, the position of our party, has always been, and remains, on Lenin's side.

### **The Party**

In line with the historical tradition of the class party, we have considered the problems inherent in its existence, convinced that in raising them we do not immediately solve them, but only make a start in doing so.

The main thing, therefore, is to address the central problem that has been, and is, the subject of our concerns, the existence of the party, or what is the same thing, its cadres, and how to adapt to tasks which change with the situation, whatever its numerical importance, its capacity for influence and the reach of its activity amongst the working masses in the anti-capitalist struggle.

The important thing is that we constantly confirm the precision of our ideas and our critique in events as they happen, monitoring closely the corruption that the class dialectic exercises on the body of those mass parties, which still claim to be socialist, and to help fight this corruption with a relentless and sharp Marxist critique. Above all, we also do this without tactical expedients or administrative solutions, i.e. without compromises, to bring towards the party those who prove to be ready to fight against capitalism and the parties that support it, starting from the premises formulated by Marx, Engels and Lenin.

In this sense, we do not share the mindset of those who will not get their hands dirty. We do not fear, we even seek dialogue with class elements who say they are interested in the problems of socialism and revolution and who want to engage in the hard work of rebuilding the party of the working class, and we are not particularly irritated or disgusted by those comrades who, having put an end to a long, sometimes too long, Stalinist experience have finally broken or intend to break with the party of Togliatti, provided they have a clear awareness of wanting to appropriate the ideology, tactics and discipline of the party of Lenin.

Basically, while in some ways the situation is different, today the same problems are again present, the same concerns about people and currents which emerged in the preparatory phase of the Imola Meeting<sup>6</sup> and the Congress of Livorno, out of which emerged the Communist Party of Italy.

There is no doubt that at that time the Abstentionist Fraction of the Socialist Party, given the impressive theoretical nature of its platform and effectiveness of its local groups at a national level, was the organisation that most actively opposed the political line of the party leadership and could now be considered, in embryo, as a party within the party. However, at the moment of the most acute crisis of the First World War, when the appeal of the experience of the first proletarian state which had emerged out of the October Revolution was strongest, Bordiga was fully aware that, though a specifically revolutionary party was needed the chances of success

of the Abstentionist Fraction to become a party of the working class were limited. Although the split had taken place at the Congress of Bologna (1919), the Abstentionist Fraction, as such, could not objectively lead a party appropriate to the situation and the pressing tasks of the revolution. Given that the Abstentionist Fraction split had been possible at Bologna, not to have carried it out would have been a mistake of such proportions that would have forever compromised the theoretical orientation of the fraction, as well as its organisation and the name of its biggest promoter.

This was why Imola was a compromise meeting, a concrete anticipation of the Gramscian "historic bloc" of the left tendencies in the Socialist Party, in short, a centre where currents converged from diverse backgrounds, differing from each other on many issues, some critical. The Abstentionist Fraction was not really the focal point of convergence of these forces, even if it was its most important nucleus. The main focus was Lenin's ideas and the attraction of the October Revolution and the organisational needs of the Communist International.

Moreover, this did not contradict the Abstentionist Fraction's thinking but was in perfect harmony with its own decisions. In this connection we should remember the third part of the motion that concluded the National Conference of the Fraction in Florence (8 - 9 May, 1920), which mandated the CC to

*"convene immediately after the International Congress, the Congress establishing the Communist Party, inviting all groups that fall within the field of the communist programme to adhere, both within and outside the Italian Socialist Party".*

But what happened was that soon after, at Imola and Livorno, this tactical policy was given a narrower theoretical-organisational interpretation.

These are the groups and currents which participated as equals in the Congress of Imola and formed the skeleton of the party at Livorno:

1) The already mentioned Abstentionist Fraction which deserves to be studied separately, given the positive factor it represented in this preparatory phase of the party and also given the negative factor of its eclecticism when it came to formulating and implementing its thesis on abstentionism on the terrain of political activity. In the pre-Livorno phase, which was not very different from the current period, the essential problem was the formation of the revolutionary party and not abstentionism, and it was not historically possible to form this party on a programmatic basis in which the ideology of abstention had a predominant role.

2) The group L'Ordine Nuovo (The New Order). Given its social and especially intellectual composition, this group already anticipated a trend which would emerge later, giving a key role to intellectuals rather than workers, both in the factories and in the broader arena of revolutionary action. Influenced by the neo-idealism that prevailed at the time in the world of bourgeois culture, this group tended to Marxism, but a Marxism riddled with an idealism that

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contradicted the traditional schemes of socialism and the socialist left itself.

Indeed, while the Left Fraction thought that the revolution is subordinate to the existence of a party and tried to conquer its governing bodies to impart revolutionary will and leadership, continuing the traditional line of the class party, the Ordinovists thought less about the fundamental role of the party and focused their attention on the capitalist factory, regarding it as *“the necessary form of working class political organisation, the ‘territory’ of workers’ opposition.”*

For these comrades, unlike the party and the union, the council

*“does not develop arithmetically, but morphologically, and tends, in its most developed forms, to promote the proletarian conquest of the productive and exchange apparatus created by capitalism for its own benefit.”*

*“The need for these new powers [the organisation of councils] to immediately flourish, irresistibly driving the great working masses, will cause a violent clash between the two classes in the course of which the proletarian dictatorship will prevail. If the foundations of the revolutionary process are not laid in the midst of proletarian life, the revolution will be reduced to a sterile voluntarist appeal.”*

The differences between these two currents focused on this idea: party and councils; the party has its historical setting in the territorial structure and political-administrative organs that capitalist development provides, while the councils embody the vital breath, the rhythm of progress of communist society. The highest form of consciousness of the proletariat condenses in the party, its doctrine and the theory of class revolution, whilst in the councils, worker solidarity:

*“is embodied even in the smallest details of industrial production, it is an organic whole, a homogeneous and compact system affirming its sovereignty, power and historical freedom.”*

We conclude, therefore, that these two streams, the most important of the Communist Party, had in common the perspective of the final outcome of revolutionary action, but they could not be further apart in terms of their original impulses, their methods, and even their understanding of Marxism: some professed orthodoxy and integrity, others were leaning towards syndicalist conceptions of the De Léonist kind<sup>7</sup>, which even today attract workerist trends.

The circle of theoretical and tactical confusion of the groups that came together at the meeting of Imola was later expanded, if we take into account the minority currents and individual members, ranging from the Graziadei-Marabini<sup>8</sup> formation through the electoral maximalism of many actual or aspiring deputies, to young revolutionary combatants solidly anchored to revolutionary Marxism but not in any particular school or trend.

We will have to come back to the experience of Imola when faced with the issue of rebuilding the party, since parliamentary opportunism, the corruption of those who sought to do well for themselves and the fact that opposing class interests predominated within the party ended up draining the struggle of its strength and clouded its aims after corrupting its ideological heritage. The reasons for the limits, shortcomings and contradictions that accompanied the formation of the Communist Party of Italy can only be understood by basing them on this critique.

Will these negative outcomes be avoided in the future? Our view is that, rather than the organisational, statutory provisions and the dissolution of groups as such, we should stress the dissolution of their ideology, whenever they are alien to Marxism, to achieve unity not only in the purely formal organisational aspects (dissolution of groups, individual membership, candidatures, etc.), but also regarding the unconditional and comprehensive adherence to a theoretical-practical platform from which emanates the conscious discipline that unites forces, gradually resolves the contradictions and ensures continuity of the revolutionary struggle. And so far we have been consistent to this critical orientation, which has been able to mature among us thanks to the experience we passed through during the formation of the party at Livorno.

### **Centralised Party, Yes – Centralism Over the Party, No!**

We should first address the issue of centralism which the “Programmists” have never been able to define in an “organic” way. Linked as it is to the interpretation of a given historical experience, it simply cannot be reduced to formal and scholastic abstractions.

These muddle-headed “left communists” argue thus: in Lenin’s International, there were no “pure communist parties” so the use of the democratic mechanism was inextricably linked to what went on at that particular historical time. It is therefore obvious that an International unlike the Third, which consists of “pure communist parties” should be identified by a different internal mechanism and not by democratic centralism, which ceased to be operative with the death of Lenin. What happened after that, in the Stalinist era, is not covered in their analysis because it had nothing to do with the working class and the objectives of the revolution.

But to suppose, as the “Programmists” do, an organisation in a state of chemical purity, an international of “pure Communist parties” as opposed to that of Lenin made of “impure parties”, is playing with a metaphysical paradox. Instead of formulating the problems of a whole series of historical events through the lenses of dialectical materialism, they adopt a formal mechanistic calculation, which tends to get lost in the fog of the most obsolete idealism.

We can tell these comrades in all certainty that there will be no international of pure communist parties, but only an international that will reflect within it the good and the evil, the contradictions and absurdity, of a society divided into classes, themselves torn by various

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layers of interest, social conditions, culture, etc. The assumption of communist parties in a pure state with an equally pure world organisation, even as a simple aspiration, is not the result of any serious investigation based on Marxism. It strangely resembles a certain mysticism which had its heyday in the twenty years of fascism.

Lenin's International certainly had its weaknesses, due to the immaturity of the historical period that followed the collapse of the Second International and the crisis then afflicting the capitalist world. Every proletarian organisation reproduces, though in a more advanced way, and on an inversely proportional scale, the characteristics of the historical period in which it was formed. And it is certain that the negative aspects present in the Third International will be present, although differently articulated in future international organisations, as amply proved by the objective conditions in which the various Left Communist groupings, who today claim the right to make a contribution to the reconstruction of the international proletarian party, are operating. Amongst these groups, the one that suffers most from intolerance and crises is the Bordigist "Communist Programme" where the dynamics of democratic centralism work more deeply, as seen in the explosive cycle of its internal contradictions. Today, for polemical convenience, the "Programmists" would like to pass off the Third International as made up of "impure" parties. But here's how Bordiga previously judged Lenin's International, in clear contradiction with the current positions.

"After restoring proletarian theory, the practical work of the Third International towered over the divisions raised by opportunists of all countries in banning from the ranks of the world's vanguard all reformists, social democrats, and centrists of all types. This renewal took place in all the old parties and is the foundation of the new revolutionary party of the proletariat. Lenin guided with an iron hand the difficult task of dispelling all confusions and weaknesses."

### **The real strength of these Bordigists lies in their inconsistency!**

How can this group, with its structure of an aristocratic and intellectual elite, with a filtered and distilled Marxism, developed in backrooms rather than in the storm of class struggle, contest the accuracy of what we are saying? So then, how can we resolve, with Leninist integrity, the debate over the two faces of centralism?

In the phase of imperialist domination and proletarian revolution no organisation of the revolutionary party can conceivably exist which is not based on a highly centralised structure. Perhaps this is the feature that most dramatically distinguishes it from parliamentary parties. If centralism is therefore an imperative requirement imposed by class conflict, the attributes of "democratic" and "organic" define the subjective terms of a polemical distinction that has never affected the substance of this centralisation. Who can say with absolute precision how far bodies involved in this centralisation make use of the tools of democracy (active participation and active control of the rank and file) and how far the centres of power are based on an authoritarian regime in the physical person of a leader, and through him, to the Central Committee?

For the Bordigists of “Programma” the problem is posed in terms that come from the counterrevolutionary practice of Stalinism. This is how they tried, finally, to clarify their extraordinary theory that goes under the name of “organic centralism”. We have reproduced it above in the same words in which it was formulated.

But we need to clarify once and for all the relationship that has to exist between the centre and the base so that the party is structured and operates according to Leninist principles. An ongoing dialectical relationship exists between the members and the party centre. It is obviously on the basis of that relationship, in the context of a theoretical and political platform already agreed that the party leadership develops its tactical action. Lenin never advocated, either in theory or in his political actions, any other way in which the organisation could act. And how can we understand the organisational formula of a Central Committee or of a leader who relies only on himself, on his capacity as related to a “set” of already planned possible moves (our emphasis) in relation to no less foreseen outcomes whilst the “so-called membership can usefully be ordered to perform actions indicated by the leadership?”

It simply means the same as the policy of the Central Committee under Stalin, once all working class elements had been eliminated from the dictatorship of the proletariat. It means a deep and irreparable rupture between the members of the party and its directing centre and the resulting slide into the open reconstruction of capitalism. It also means that the Central Committee of the Russian Communist Party and Stalin himself was tied to a “set” of possible moves that were perfectly planned in advance, that would be carried out with equal accuracy, in terms, and in a reality, we all know. What we are denouncing are the disastrous consequences which occur in a supposedly revolutionary party when its central organ, as a body, operates outside of the bounds and control of the organisation’s membership.

But closer to our experience, we have to denounce precisely those who postulate, or allow to be postulated, this laughable distinction between a political membership required only to carry out acts indicated by the centre and a centre that is entrusted with such powers of foresight and divination that it does not offer us a very encouraging sight. And here we are dealing with comrades who in terms of preparation and long militancy are highly skilled and command the respect and confidence of the whole party.

Was the leadership of the Communist Party of Italy (PCd’I), through Bordiga’s declarations to the Comintern, perhaps not bound to a set of possible options that denied the possibility of Fascism’s rise to power at the very time when it was carrying out the March on Rome? And was this glaring error of perspective not “in correspondence with the no less foreseeable outcome” of jeopardising the party with the tactic of the offensive for the offensive’s sake?

And who prepared a “scientific” analysis of the Russian economy defining the October Revolution as an anti-feudal revolution after having celebrated it as a socialist? Had Bordiga not affirmed (in *Lenin nel cammino della rivoluzione*): “The revolution will be made in Russia,

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by and for the working class itself"? And further: "Soviet power was victorious, the dictatorship of the proletariat predicted by Marx, made its tremendous entrance onto the stage of history"?

How should we judge someone who was the most prominent exponent of the party and of "left-wing communism" who refused to become a "militant" in the Internationalist Communist Party at the time of its formation, as he considered it a mistake to fight directly against "the national communist party" (the PCI)<sup>9</sup> with the excuse that the workers were in the party of Togliatti? Then, when our split occurred, agreed to enter the PCd'I provided that the rump remained true to him, politically neutered and reduced to a sect of repeaters of not always digested formulae?

What was his contribution to the development of a critical examination of the nature of the Second World War and the role played by Russia as a major imperialist player, when he rejected our definition of state capitalism to speculate about Russia as a spurious form of "industrial state"?

The questions could continue, but we have said enough to show how ill-founded, precarious and objectively dangerous is his claim to assign to the Central Committee and this or that person, whatever their esteem, or skills of divination, the tasks of arbitrarily developing our theory, and functions of leadership, outside of and above, the party as a whole.

Lenin, at his most personal and most decisive, by which we mean the Lenin of the "April Theses" had a desperate determination to "go to the sailors", beyond the formal organisation of the Bolshevik Party's Central Committee whose positions which were based on misunderstanding and compromise. Lenin was not operating on organic or even democratic centralism here, but acting as the chief pillar of the coming revolution, the only one who had understood and endorsed the demands of the working class and this is because his feet were firmly on a class terrain, because he thought and worked in class terms, and for the class, and had a very lively sense of history which teaches us that revolution loves action and hates cowards who turn up a day late.

In this constant dialectical relationship between the membership and leadership of the party, in this necessary integration of freedom and authority, lies the solution of a problem to which professional objectors have perhaps paid too much attention.

Any revolutionary party which is not a mere abstraction has to address the problems of the class struggle in a historical climate in which violence and unchallenged authority dominates. In order to increasingly become a living instrument of combat it can only be organised around the most iron unity. Its ranks therefore have to be closed against the general thrust of the counter-revolution. The revolutionary party does not ape bourgeois parties, but obeys the need to adapt its organisational structure to the objective condition of the revolutionary struggle.

The elementary tactical principle of the revolutionary party in action, is that it must take into

account the characteristics of the terrain on which it works and that its members are adequately prepared for their tasks. We do not believe there needs to be disagreements on the question of centralism. These only begin when we talk in “democratic” or “organic” terms. The use, or worse, the abuse, of the term “organic” can lead to forms of authoritarian degeneration which break the dialectical relationship that must exist between the leadership and the members. The experience of Lenin is still valid, and it is vital to be able to fuse together, in a single vision, the seeming contradiction between “democratic” and “organic” centralism.

### **“Circles” and the Revolutionary Party.**

After clarifying the party’s traditional thinking concerning the problem of centralism, a problem that sophists, pedants and obscurants place at the centre of a debate that has neither head nor tail which reduces the question to a futile bar-room debate about whether centralism should be “democratic” or “organic”, we think that centralism, understood and practiced by Lenin, is the best way to run a revolutionary party called upon to solve the onerous task of organisation and handling the most irrational and violent events, full of inexorable, unknown, unforeseen factors, namely, the revolutionary conquest of capitalist power, which is the most skilled and ruthless organiser of violence, whether police or military, that history has ever known.

But a revolutionary party, which for the most part should only be made up of worker cadres selected in the class struggle, can only be a powerful instrument of revolutionary action to the extent that its iron unity resolves the problem of permanent interdependence between the top and the bottom of the organisation, namely to the extent that the constant relationship between freedom and discipline lives and acts in the collective consciousness of the party.

And we come to another aspect of the debate that Programma started in such a clumsy and thoughtless manner: that of the “circles”, in which today the chaotic and scattered anti-Stalinist left seems to be enclosed and almost lost. We use the adjective “anti-Stalinist” and not “revolutionary” because obviously not all anti-Stalinists are revolutionary, but only in certain cases. To what and whom do these circles refer? What are they really? What are the analogies with the historical phase in which circles were developed, with the period of the old *Iskra*?<sup>10</sup> Are there now objective conditions in place that allow these circles, assuming that they exist, to be a factor in the reconstruction of the revolutionary party, even if not a determinant factor?

It is always a pleasure, for its freshness and because there is always something new there, to look back to the events that preceded the II Congress, in the years of preparation (1890 - 1900). The work of ideological, political and organisational delimitation of the different organisations which later went to make up the party had to be carried out then, following the plan drawn up by the old *Iskra*.

Lenin also thought it was the party’s historical tendency that made (keep in mind that this happened two or three years before 1905, the year of the first revolution ) the convergence of numerous groups so important, which although they did not have a common platform, did

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at least have a minimal agreement that could be used as an indispensable bond. This is how Lenin concretised the essential task of that Congress<sup>11</sup>:

*"To create a true party founded on the ideological and organisational principles formulated and developed by Iskra. The three years of Iskra's activity and the fact of having been recognised by most of the committees, obliges the Congress to work in that direction."*

"Iskra's programme and tendency should become the programme and the tendency of the party; Iskra's plans on organisational issues should be sanctioned in the party's organisational statutes. But it is clear that this will have to be fought for: the representation for Congress ensured the presence of organisations that had fought resolutely against Iskra (the Bund and Rabocheye Dyelo<sup>12</sup> and others who, while recognising Iskra as the governing body, actually pursued their own plans and were distinguished by their instability in the realm of principles (the group "Youzhny Rabotchi"<sup>13</sup>) and delegates of some committees who joined them). Under these conditions, Congress could only become the arena for the victory of the Iskra trend."

And when addressing the challenge of unifying forces that were not homogeneous, following the plans of Iskra, Lenin knew he had to have the support of external groups as well as those representing Iskra itself, as the Second Congress was to make clear.

The debate, or rather, the altercation between all these trends arose around certain articles of the statutes, and not by chance. And this certainly did not happen because they posed a different way of solving apparently formal, purely organisational problems, but actually arose due to the political-ideological character of the statutes, intended to exclude, or rather, make it impossible to coexist in the same organisation, those forces perhaps seeking unity in good faith, but which did not conceive of, or want, the party as a concrete and irreplaceable instrument for the class and its revolutionary leadership.

Given that all this happened in the historical climate of the Second International where parliamentary democratic guidelines dominated, the commitment to legal struggle is not surprising, the strange thing is that we are still not clear that, as the experience of Lenin in the old Iskra shows, the solution to the party's organisational thesis involves having a political intuition deep enough to realise that the development of the revolution occurred in the context of an objectively conservative reality.

The clash between the militant activity of Lenin, and Plekhanov, Martov and Axelrod, who were seeking an purely formal party unity (circles, according to them had "historical greatness", and had to continue to enjoy a permanent and active presence within the party), was because they expected that this delimitation of the party would act like a centrifugal force on the circles. Indeed, in the October Revolution, these forces would be on the other side of the class barricade.

The experience we went through in Italy is no less full of lessons, in the phase prior to the formation of the party. At both the Imola meeting, and the Congress of Livorno, overcoming

the groups that could be defined generally as of the left provoked quite harsh and controversial internal disagreements, but the fact is that the agreement around unity developed with an ease inversely proportional to its sincerity.

It is true that what most contributed to make this possible was the attractiveness of the October Revolution, but one must take into account that, in Imola, no group played nor could play the role Iskra played in the Second Congress. Neither Ordinovists nor abstainers, nor pro-Communist maximalists ever claimed that "their programme and their tendency had to become the programme and tendency of the Party of Livorno". That is how far the domination of the politics of the Centre of the International extended.

What was missing in 1921 was a platform to serve as an effective central pole as did Iskra in the years 1890-1900.

The comic, yet at the same time sad, moment at the Congress came when the representative of the abstentionists solemnly declared the fraction dissolved and retracted its main demand, abstentionism, to allay the suspicions and ill-concealed anger of the maximalist representatives, expressed with eloquence by Luigi Salvatori during the proceedings. Another of the comic and deplorable moments at Imola was the sacrifice of the *Ordinovisti* on the altar of the party that was about to be born.

All this happened in a situation in which the real possibilities for revolution were increasing, but what would happen later when the reflux of the revolutionary wave led it to break on the wall of the counter-revolution? What would happen was what actually happened in 1924, when Gramsci and Togliatti grew their old horns back, namely, the original vices of immediatism and idealism upon which the experience of L' Ordine Nuovo in Turin was based. These were blunt weapons but, according to them, they were the most suitable for expressing the ideas and methods of the workers' struggle. They were the best suited to their changing conditions, when a policy of compromises and contingent commitments substituted the perspective of uninterrupted revolution and the catastrophic outcome of the class conflict; when, in short, it was time to be legalistic, in and in favour of the republican constitution, and all because with the apparent and transitory consolidation of capitalism it seemed that democracy was "untouchable", i.e. not deteriorating over time nor was it subject to the changing and conflicting vicissitudes of capital.

In light of this double experience, we can now proceed to examine the current situation, in which the dispersion of the groups of the communist left is usually due to causes profoundly different to those we have discussed above, although the problem in the background is always the same, namely the rebuilding of a party capable of facing the demands of the revolutionary struggle.

But let's look at the true nature of these groups, paying more attention to their ideological-political features rather than their numbers. It is disconcerting to note that all claim that

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we need a party and all claim to be the party in embryo. In this sense, we can say that in the present situation in terms of the stature of men, their political foresight and sense of responsibility, the revolutionary minority is well below the experience of the old Iskra and even the Imola meeting .

If we cannot establish a criterion that differentiates the Communist left groups, then it would be impossible to justify and politically myopic not to consider objective factors which confer historical legitimacy on the theoretical elaboration of a sustained and consistent opposition to any policy of compromise and capitulation, as well as the building of an organisational base of selected cadres. We are part of the history of the workers' movement under the name of "communist left". The entire Internationalist Communist Party was born within this movement, having been the left opposition in the Socialist Party up until the Livorno Congress, the majority in the Communist Party of Italy until the Bolshevisation<sup>14</sup> of the party, after which it became the opposition until the outbreak of the Second World War. It organised itself as a Fraction in France and Belgium in 1928, in constant touch with the Internal Centre, which in 1945 resolved to organise itself as a party, following a class line which had never deviated nor broken through all these years, despite the twin attacks of the traditional class enemy and the new reactionary forces of Stalinism. And it is here, in a position where it has not always been easy to work but which nevertheless is always fertile, where one has to look for the ideas, motives and energies and experiences of new people, to get down to work resolutely on the enormous task of rebuilding the revolutionary party, with the prestige and moral and political authority this involves.

Besides the communist internationalists, who are responsible for this task not through natural or divine right or birthright, nor because they are deemed *primus inter pares*, there are other groups that have recently emerged from the crisis within the PCI, whose good faith or ability is not in question. But this is not enough to be a militant revolutionary, if one does not also prove capable of facing and successfully carrying out critical re-examination of one's political views in regard to the great problems such as the class nature of the Soviet state and the nature of its economic and political organisation, the nature of war in general and in particular colonial wars in the historic imperialist phase of financial capital. Finally you have to decide whether to accept the revolutionary strategy which means that in Russia, in China and in democratic countries directly or indirectly allied to these centres of power, the full extent of the problem of the conquest of power is raised. We have to destroy the structures of the capitalist commodity economy upon which the rising power of state capitalism is being erected.

The rise of these fractions can be attributed almost exclusively to the process of decomposition of the first workers' state, which has spawned a new opportunism which considers state capitalism in Russia as a phase required in the construction of socialism, or rather, as a necessary stage of the lower stage of socialism.

Those who do not take this into account will not understand what is common to the experience

of Lenin's old *Iskra*, which unfolded in the historic setting of the Second International, and the current situation in which the historical problem of the revolutionary party is similarly up against huge barriers, sometimes insurmountable, on a proletarian terrain largely shaped by Stalinism which nurtures those bad mushrooms who call themselves Trotskyists, Bordigists or Maoists. They all claim to embody the ideology of the revolution, but actually diminish the political heritage of the entire proletariat to their own intellectual level, their own vanity, if not their own personal gain.

Therefore, these differences that separate the groups of the historical minority that claim to be internationalist are not insignificant from those who tend to merge into a single organisation and who generally originate from the chronic crisis of the PCI, although they declare themselves communist internationalists. The former recognise the need for a class break with PCI ideology and politics which have raged and still rage, in our country, while the latter, the Trotskyists, Maoists, pro-Chinese activists, must demonstrate with their theoretical contribution and political activity that they have broken all ties with opportunism.

And really in our analysis we are most interested in the former, the groups of the historical minority.

**Onorato Damen**

## Notes

1 This book now exists in Italian, French and Spanish (the footnotes are added for the English edition which we will eventually bring out as a book as we have now completed most of it).

2 See <http://www.leftcom.org/en/articles/2010-03-17/centralised-party-yes-centralism-over-the-party-no>

3 Damen means Bordiga here. Bordiga retired from political activity and refused all contact from 1926-45.

4 This refers to the Hungarian workers rising against Stalinism in 1956 in which "workers' councils" made their appearance before the movement was crushed by Russian tanks.

5 Although he had no university degree Damen was a notable classicist so his writings are dotted with such references. Thespis was named by several sources, including Aristotle, as the first actor (i.e. one who took the identity of another). He sang the main part in dithyrambs whilst the chorus supported him ("helots" being slaves). He toured with all his costumes and props in a wagon hence the reference here. He gives us the name "thespian" for an actor.

6 National Conference of the Communist Fraction of the PSI, November 1920.

7 Daniel De Léon (1852-1914) played a prominent role in the foundation of the Socialist Workers' Party of America (SLP) and Industrial Workers of the World (IWW).

8 Antonio Graziadei (1873-1953) became a P.C.d'I. executive member when Bordiga was arrested in February 1923 and before Bolshevisation consolidated the future group of Stalinists around Gramsci. Anselm Marabini (1865-1948) was an old maximalist who in 1921 formed part of the Central Committee of the P.C. of Italy.

9 The Italian Communist Party (PCI) was formed under the leadership of Togliatti as a completely Stalinist party after the war. It dropped the old name of the Communist Party of Italy (PC d'I) as a symbol that it no longer had internationalist pretensions.

10 *Iskra* (The Spark) was founded by Lenin in 1900 as a Marxist underground newspaper throughout Russia. Later, at the Second Congress of the RSDLP (Russian Social Democratic Labour Party), it became the organ of the party, under the leadership of Lenin, Julius Martov and Plekhanov Giorgi. Lenin left the editorship in 1903, when *Iskra* became the

## Italian Left

organ of the Menshevik trend.

11 The Second Congress of the RSDLP, held between London and Brussels in 1903, confirmed the support of the party majority for the left wing led by Lenin, who conceived the party as political vanguard, strictly disciplined and composed of professional revolutionaries, a scheme that suited existing conditions in Tsarist Russia.

12 *Rabocheye Dyelo* (The Cause of Labour) was published between 1889 and 1902. It adopted intermediate positions between economism and revolutionary social democracy. Lenin wrote in 1902: "*Rabocheye Dyelo* has become particularly important, historically if you will, as it expresses in the most clear and complete manner, not coherent economism, but the confusion and hesitation that characterise an entire period of the history of Russian Social Democracy."

13 The newspaper *Youzhny Rabotchi* (The Worker of the South), published clandestinely between 1900 and 1903 was led by a group that, while condemning terrorism and economism and claiming that a mass revolutionary movement was required, proposed building the party based on the regional Social Democrats unions. At the Second Congress of 1903 it adopted a centrist position.

14 The campaign for "Bolshevisation" launched by the Communist International leaders in the years 1924-1925 with the purpose of subjecting all national sections to the discipline and directives of Moscow, replaced the territorial organisation which until then the PC of Italy maintained with factory cells. The Left, with Bordiga, condemned this "policy of manoeuvring and expedients" which actually went so far as to deny the centralisation of the communist parties. Indeed, the cells drowned internal party life by trapping the workers within the narrow confines of the factory, reinforcing the bureaucratic power of party officials divided into watertight compartments. Particularism and individualism were strengthened and corporatism and workerism ended up breaking the organic unity of the party while the Comintern gave intellectuals the monopoly of political authority.

**The Communist Workers' Organisation** was founded in 1975 and joined with the Internationalist Communist Party (Italy) to form the International Bureau for the Revolutionary Party in 1983. The Internationalist Communist Party was the only significant organisation to emerge in the Second World War (1943) condemning both sides as imperialist. It is the most significant organisation produced by the internationalist communist left which fought the degeneration of the Comintern in the 1920s as well as the process of "bolshevisation" (i.e. Stalinism) imposed on the individual communist parties. In 2009, in recognition of the new elements that had joined the founding groups, the IBRP became the **Internationalist Communist Tendency**.

We are for the revolutionary party but we are not that Party. Nor are we the only basis for that party which will emerge from the workers' struggles of the future. Our aim is to be part of that process by participating in all the struggles of the class that we can with the aim of linking the immediate struggle of the class with its long term historic programme — communism.

# Class Consciousness and Revolutionary Organisation

## A reply to The Commune

Some months ago The Commune published on its website a short review of our pamphlet “Class Consciousness and Revolutionary Organisation”.<sup>1</sup> We welcome such reviews, however critical. There are too few real debates and discussions amongst revolutionaries today and we would like to see and participate in more. However the Commune review is hardly much of a contribution in this respect as it is full of criticisms of positions we do not hold.

Just to put matters in context, we have had a rather odd relationship with The Commune since it first emerged from a split from the Trotskyist AWL 5 years ago with the promising call for “revolution from below”. We had a number of interesting debates with them over organisation, trades unions, nationalism and national liberation struggles early on.<sup>2</sup> We also attended Commune meetings in London where we had some positive exchanges with various comrades. Thus in July 2013 when the organisers of the Sheffield Anarchist Bookfair asked us if we would share our already booked meeting on “Marxism and Anarchism” with The Commune we had no trouble agreeing to it. The Commune (in the person of Barry Biddulph himself) were less happy but were forced to accept it by the organisers. We then discussed between ourselves how we would approach the meeting. We found we agreed on many basic points (about the Marxist interpretation of the state for example) and decided to hold a joint introduction. The meeting was well attended and the discussion was broad ranging and serious on all sides from Marxist to anarchist<sup>3</sup>. However in the Commune’s report on that meeting you will not find any reference to the fact that the CWO were there, let alone supplying the moderator and on the platform of speakers! The Commune has also recently taken two texts from our site on the death of Mandela and the ANC and re-published them with no acknowledgement of their provenance. Some people (not known by us) who posted on their site expressed annoyance that this was not made clear. We cannot understand this narrow-minded attitude towards us but it certainly also comes out in the review of our pamphlet.

Our original intention was to have made this reply directly to the review on The Commune’s site but we found that it was “closed to comments”. However we had a foretaste of Barry Biddulph’s argument in the joint meeting of the Midlands Discussion Group and the Free Communist last July.<sup>4</sup> Despite the fact that it was not our meeting he seemed to think that the main purpose of the meeting was to discuss the views in our pamphlet which he began by immediately equating with those of Lenin in *What is to be Done*. When we asked him to read further on in the pamphlet he then retreated a step but the same accusation is repeated in slightly modified form in the review on the Commune website. According to Barry we are both “abstract” and “mechanical materialist”, we are “substitutionist” but reject “the notion of a workers’ state” and argue that “workers power can only be rooted in the mass organisations thrown up in struggle against the state”. In short what we have in this review is a failure to understand the real sense of our

## Debate

argument and the review becomes a bit of a rant. This comes out most neatly in the conclusion when Barry concludes that the pamphlet is so inconsistent it must have been written by several comrades. All this reveals is that Barry is an ex-Leninist (of the Trotskyist variety) for whom the god has failed so now everything Lenin said is reactionary. We in the communist left today don't base our politics on Lenin, either as saint or sinner but do take up those arguments which he makes that are valid. In the Midlands Discussion Forum/Free Communist Meeting most participants identified themselves with the "communist left" but Barry only replied that there "could be worse things to be called". The review makes it clear that he has no idea of what communist left positions are and his failure to acquaint himself with our basic ideas makes the review all the weaker.

### Spontaneity and Organisation

However let's start from what we agree with. The review states:

*Communists attempt to facilitate the development of the working class into a self-conscious subject striving to forge an alternative to capitalism. The communist organisation is an organic part of the ongoing process of struggle. The working class become conscious of its aims and fights for them. Communist organisation is not joined or linked to the working class: it is the working class's own movement. Communism comes from within the working class movement, not from the outside. The idea of communism was not invented by Marx.*

This is supposed to be a criticism of the pamphlet but is in fact largely consistent with what it intends to express, as in for example:

*The class party does not bring this programme down from a Mount Olympus or a Mount Sinai. The members of the party are part of the working class and have roots and connections through it which go beyond the actual party membership.(p.52)*

Nowhere in the pamphlet does it say that the idea of communism was invented by Marx and the chapter on Lenin was intended to show that he was wrong to accept Kautsky's (and we might have added Plekhanov's) view that social democratic (or communist) consciousness can only be brought to the working classes from outside by the educated representatives of bourgeois origin.

What we make no apology for asserting is that there is a distinction between the class instinct of the struggle against exploitation and the communist consciousness of the all out attempt to overthrow the capitalist order. Barry is not wrong that all are aspects of "class consciousness" but in order to analyse it we need to isolate the different parts (and we apologise near the end of the pamphlet for having to be so paradigmatic)<sup>5</sup>. White light appears first as white light but it is made up of a spectrum which can run through all the colours of the rainbow. We can only analyse its constituent parts by refracting it to the prism of analysis. Hence when analysing consciousness we do see a range of class responses from immediate class instinct, through a

growing class awareness to a declared communist identity. Barry asserts that these are all as one as our attempt to analyse them means that we do not “go with the flow”. Well as we state above revolutionaries are part of the class and the conscious organisation is produced by the class in its struggle for self-emancipation. But that does not mean that revolutionaries always “go with the flow”. At certain reactionary periods in history when the class follows nationalist and imperialist ideologies we stand against them. This is one reason why we see the Lenin of 1914 as different from the Lenin of 1902. It was the raising of the internationalist banner of revolutionary defeatism against the current of opinion which paved the way for the revolutionary wave of 1917-21. However such a statement like this about Lenin is like waving a red flag to a bull for our reviewer. This leads him into total distortion. He states that we see class consciousness as

*... the passive reflection of the lessons of the previous revolutions.*

But we don't argue that there is anything passive about it. Debates and discussions are the active constituents of such acquisitions of communist (not merely class) consciousness and we would not be replying to a very poorly constructed and tendentious review if we were not committed to that idea. But the review then states more outrageously that

*They partially agree with Lenin's WITBD agreeing that the working class cannot formulate an independent ideology, claiming that what Lenin really meant by outside was outside the physical boundaries of the daily class struggle.*

This is simply not true. We state that we disagree with Lenin who was quoting Kautsky (who he regarded at the time as the “Pope” of Marxism) to say that class consciousness was brought from outside the class. However we also point to the fact that Lenin contradicted this view several times in his comments about the working class being a long way ahead of many so-called professed revolutionaries. What we do agree with him on is that economism (or as we used to refer to it in the 1970s “money militancy”) is insufficient in itself. We think this is self-evident and completely consistent with Marx's own view that the working class has to go beyond fighting for a fair day's wage instead inscribing on its banners the slogan “abolition of the wages system.”

We also do not deny that there are moments of sudden outbursts of class activity and resistance which transcend and surprise all those who have participated in previous struggles. Such spontaneity has been part of the class struggle since the dawn of capitalism. But precisely because it is spontaneous there is not much more to be said about it. The “old mole of revolution” will always surface at moments which surprise even those who have waited all their lives for it. We though are not into speculation but have to concentrate on those aspects of the class struggle which are susceptible to analysis. We did not choose the title of our pamphlet by accident. We did not want a vacuous philosophical discussion about what is class consciousness in isolation from the “real movement” but analysed it in terms of the historical acquisitions and (let it be said) past failures of the working class.

### **Bolshevism: A Lesson not a Model**

Which brings us to the thorny issue of the October Revolution. Barry does not understand the communist left analysis of the Russian Revolution which is neither the all-embracing “Lenin and Trotsky could do no wrong” of his old pals in Trotskyism nor is it the ahistorical denunciation of the worst of the anarchists. For us the October Revolution was proletarian in 1917. It was not the work of a small minority but overwhelmingly supported in the soviets (80% of the delegates to the Second Soviet Congress were supporters of the Bolsheviks). The Bolsheviks (the only party calling for “all power to the soviets” had been the majority party in both Moscow and Petrograd for at least 6 weeks. More thoughtful anarchists like Paul Avrich point to the adoption of the April Theses in 1917 as the main reason why many anarchists in 1917 saw the Bolsheviks as a break with the parliamentary cretinism of Social democracy and offering real revolution. And that is the point. The Bolsheviks were as we said “the best of the Social democrats” but they had not broken sufficiently with the Social Democratic framework which they came from. They thus followed the Mensheviks and the Social Revolutionaries in creating a cabinet of ministers (disguised as revolutionary by adopting Trotsky’s suggestion of “People’s commissars”). Sovnarkom (the Council of People’s Commissars) was imposed on top of the soviet structure rather than making the Vtsek (Executive Committee elected by the All-Russian Congress of Soviets) the responsible body. However, this and many other Bolshevik errors, did not cause the counter-revolution (the “why”). This was due to the fact that the revolution was confined to one very weak link in the capitalist chain. What this explains is the “how” of the defeat and even this was not pre-ordained in anything the Bolsheviks thought. The Bolsheviks were responding to circumstance and were flying by the seat of their pants in dealing with all the problems that the civil war threw up.

The Left Communists of 1918 were also Bolsheviks but they were the first to raise the spectre of the emergence of state capitalism (which Lenin dismissed by insisting that state capitalism was a step towards socialism). Radek, who at the time (1918) was a left communist (before later becoming a National Bolshevik and later again a supporter of Trotsky) actually warned that the worse thing that could happen would be for the Bolsheviks to win a military victory but lose the fight for socialism.<sup>6</sup> This was precisely what they did by setting up the party-state in a process which went from 1918-21. Our pamphlet actually says the October Revolution was a lesson for the working class not a model to be followed today. This is presumably the contradiction which the review does not explain but cannot understand. But then the beauty of a review is you ask questions and don’t have to give answers. It is currently fashionable to denounce the need for revolutionary organisations, programmes and ideologies (as it was in the late 60s) but the notion that “the movement is everything” has always ended up by recognising that the goal is nothing. This is a great consolation for the capitalist class.

### **Bourgeois and Proletarian Consciousness**

In looking at class consciousness Barry fails to face up to the nature of the proletariat as a class. The bourgeoisie did not have to agonise over the issue. Why? Because they were a propertied

class. For them class instinct melded into class awareness and into class consciousness. When they intoned universal rights they meant the right to free trade, free movement of goods, minimal taxation of trade. The slogan of liberty so beguiling for all classes though was simply to win freedom for those who could afford it. They thought they had discovered the ideal system for humanity and considered it to be the acme of history. All the bourgeoisie had to do was fight for a legal framework to defend their property interests, destroying feudal restrictions *en route* and the rest followed.

The review is right in that Marx did not invent communism. He said himself he did not invent class struggle either. What he did was point out that capitalism for all its advances on feudalism was not the end of history and that the last exploiting class would be the bearers of a new and still higher mode of production. However having no property to defend how does proletarian class struggle develop into communism? First, by resistance to the everyday encroachments of capital and, from this, developing a critique of the whole system. This can only happen historically as we learn more about the traps which beset us on the way. Our consciousness is expressed in our ideas and our ideas can only take powerful material form when they are expressed in organisations (class wide and minority). Our pamphlet attempts to show how the working class has acquired a historically discovered method to reach a stateless and classless society in the form of class wide organisations like soviets based on the principle delegation. It also argues that the fight for these discoveries, at least initially, has to be conducted by those in the class who first recognise the bankruptcy of capitalism. The more united and organised we are in both senses the less painful will be the birthpangs of a new society. We naturally welcome further debate on this most important issue for the proletariat today<sup>7</sup> but we hope in future that it will be from a more careful reading of what we say.

**Jock**

#### Notes

1 See <http://thecommu.co.uk/?s=Class+Consciousness>. Although their review was entitled "Class Consciousness and Communist Organisation". The Commune also did a review of our pamphlet on *Trotsky, Trotskyism, Trotskyists* but it was more their own reflections on the issue rather than a review of our critique.

2 See <http://www.leftcom.org/en/articles/2009-07-01/the-commune-a-radical-new-grouping-or-old-left-in-a-new-form>

<http://www.leftcom.org/en/articles/2010-03-01/comment-on-the-commune%E2%80%99s-reply-to-rp-50>

<http://www.leftcom.org/en/articles/2010-03-01/reply-of-the-commune-to-the-ict>

<http://www.leftcom.org/en/articles/2010-09-15/the-national-question-today-and-the-poisonous-legacy-of-the-counter-revolution>

3 The recording of the discussion can be found on <http://www.indymedia.org.uk/media/2013/05//509569.mp3>

4 The Free Communist recorded the meeting and it can be heard at: <http://youtu.be/fpLd7vt2xmY> and

<http://youtu.be/eDyQzIzTCUM>

5 "in real life historical processes never unfold as paradigmatically as the attempts we make to understand them". (p.52)

6 See <http://www.leftcom.org/en/articles/2007-11-20/ninety-years-on-the-lessons-of-the-russian-revolution-for-today>

7 The pamphlet, like all our work, is a contribution to an ongoing debate. We now recognise that we should have tackled those who argue like the "communisateurs" that the movement will somehow take us to communism without us knowing about it and we are also aware, as our Greek, German and Canadian comrades have pointed out as they translate it, that the pamphlet contains a number of errors (but not seen by this review). Once we have sorted these out a new version will be prepared.

## **The Internationalist Communist Tendency**

### **Britain**

The Communist Workers' Organisation which produces Revolutionary Perspectives (a six monthly magazine) and Aurora (an agitational paper)  
BM CWO, London WC1N 3XX

### **Italy**

Il Partito Comunista Internazionalista  
which produces Battaglia Comunista (a monthly paper) and Prometeo (a quarterly theoretical journal)  
CP 1753, 20101, Milano, Italy

### **Canada**

Groupe Internationaliste Ouvrier / Internationalist Workers' Group  
which produces Notes Internationalistes/Internationalist Notes (quarterly)  
R.S. C.P. 173, Succ.C, Montreal, Quebec, Canada H2L 4K1

### **USA**

Write to: [us@leftcom.org](mailto:us@leftcom.org)

### **Germany**

Gruppe Internationaler Socialistinnen  
which produces Sozialismus oder Barbarei (to appear quarterly)  
GIS, c/o Rotes Antiquariat, Rungestrasse 20, 10179 Berlin, Germany

### **France**

Bilan&Perspectives  
produces a quarterly journal of the same name  
ABC-LIV, 118-130 Av. J. Jaures, 75171 Paris Cedex 19

## **Sunderland Meeting**

**The NE Section of the CWO is holding a meeting open to all. The main topic being:**

**The cuts - act of an 'evil' government or  
a problem created by a bankrupt capitalist system?**

**Wednesday February 12th 2014 at 7.00 p.m.**

**upstairs in the Ship Isis, Silksworth Row, Sunderland**

## Our Pamphlets

- The Platform of the Internationalist Communist Tendency** **70p**  
(formerly the International Bureau for the Revolutionary Party)  
Revised English version (including postage in UK)
- For Communism** **£4**  
An Introduction to the Politics of the CWO
- Class Consciousness and Revolutionary Organisation** **£4**  
The issue of “consciousness” is one of the most important for the working class and for revolutionaries. Our approach is unashamedly historical and attempts to draw out the real experience of the working class in its struggles of the last two centuries. 56pp
- Trotsky, Trotskyism, Trotskyists** **£3**  
How Trotsky, who made such an enormous contribution to revolutionary practice, ended up giving his name to a movement which returned to the counter-revolutionary errors of Social Democracy.
- Stalin and Stalinism** **£1**  
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Examines how the nature of imperialist warfare comes to inflict mass murder on the world through an examination of these seminal events.
- Capitalism and the Environment** (by Mauro Stefanini) **£1**  
Translated from *Prometeo* these articles were written some time ago but show that our late comrade was ahead of his time in analysing the unsustainability of capitalist production.
- Spain 1934-39: From Working Class Struggle to Imperialist War** **£3**  
Reprint of key CWO articles long out of print and translations of contemporary documents from the Italian Left in exile. New introduction.
- Platform of the Committee of Intesa** 1925 (new edition) **£3**  
The start of the Italian Left’s fight against Stalinism as Fascism increased its grip.
- South Africa’s New Turmoil** **£2**  
An analysis of class relations in the period after the fall of apartheid thrown into relief by the strike wave which followed the Marikana massacres.

