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04

Revolutionary
Perspectives

It is Still Nation v. Class



- **Social Democracy, the 1st World War and the Working Class in Britain**
- **The Period of Transition and its Dissenters**
- **Beyond Bordigism and the Fraction**

Revolutionary Perspectives

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Front cover

The German Revolution - workers take up arms in November 1918.

Economic Crisis, War and Revolution

Despite all the optimistic noises emanating from capitalist politicians their economic system is in deep trouble. What is more, the options open to them are as limited as they have been since the Wall St Crash of 2007-08. In Marxist economic terms the problem is that the organic composition of capital is too high to make investment profitable.¹ Banks are not and cannot lend anyway. They are too busy gobbling up the money the government prints to get them out of the debt hole they are in ever since they discovered “toxic assets”. Even so there is no shortage of money around. The problem is finding somewhere to invest it profitably. Apparently the investment management firms, like Pimco etc, have between them \$79.3 trillion in cash. This dwarfs the global public debt of all the world’s governments (currently standing at about \$54 trillion, but ever rising as we write). The great bulk of this sovereign debt has been acquired to save the financial sector which indulged in such reckless speculation in the decade and a half before the bubble burst in 2007. Now the working class all over the world face government attempts to bring down the public debt via austerity. But this has so far been in vain. Global debt continues to rise and the world economy is largely stagnant. Debt in the past could be taken on because future growth would make the money that would repay it. This is not happening. Financial asset managers are sitting on piles of cash which they cannot get much return on. Since 2007 they have speculated in currencies, in primary products (especially agriculture) and in so-called developing economies but real rates of return are meagre. The main reason why the stock markets are doing well is because they are funding company mergers. Such mergers inevitably mean taking on more debt and sacking people to raise the bottom line. The result is a global economy in stagnation. Commenting on this low rate of return in invested capital last year James Mackintosh even seemed to see some virtue in the Marxist analysis

Most investors ... would probably be happy to dismiss the idea of a world war or communist revolution destroying their investments in coming decades, so a global historical average may be far lower than they would be ready to assume.

(Financial Times March 14 2013)

And indeed this is what capitalism has come down to. The organic composition of capital is too high for any significant measure to raise the rate of profit and get the system going again. What is needed is a massive devaluation on a scale not seen since the Second World War. Basically we have been 40 years in a period of relative stagnation at the end of this cycle of accumulation and the capitalist class has used all its tools to try to revive accumulation without resorting to all out imperialist war or provoking working class revolution. But today the situation is different. The speculative bubble was the last card they had to play. Its bursting in 2007 has set world history off on a different course.

Its precise outcome is, of course an open question. The historic alternative of war and revolution may be the only one possible, but we are not on the cusp of either currently, so our investors can relax and take their 1% for some time yet. However the increasing international tensions from the borders of the EU to the South China Sea via the turmoil of the Middle East are all indications that imperialist imperatives never go away. The dangers of a situation where the power which dominated the world for a century is now experiencing threats to that dominance from several quarters, but above all China is a recipe for more tension. At the end of the Second World War a victorious US government laid down the marker for the “American century” which was that US GDP should equal some 45% of global purchasing power. According to the *Financial Times* (17.7.14) that figure has now fallen to 19.2%. And when

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a rising power feels it is being thwarted by the former great powers the scope for negotiation narrows. Already the US has responded to the more aggressive policy of Beijing in the South China Sea with its “Asian pivot” which seeks to reinforce its Asian allies (especially Japan and the Philippines). The consequence of this has been to spark off an arms race in the region.² The lesson of history in the period leading up to the First World War was that arms races only end in war and those wars are often started by big powers supporting their little power allies when the stakes are high enough. We are not there yet but we should recall that Engels predicted in 1887 that the next war would be of an entirely and different global character 27 years before it actually broke out. We may stand in a similar relation to the next one.

Of course the other half of the alternative is working class revolution. This seems at first sight to be even further off. After decades of restructuring and the fragmentation of the old working class organisations of every description in the traditional capitalist states, a great deal of our historic memory as a class has been lost. However today there are 3.2 billion workers around the world and we can see from China to South Africa that they are not a mere sociological category. They are fighting against the drive to exploit them more and more which is the very essence of how capitalism has always treated its wage slaves. It is also the reason that the class struggle never goes away.³

Whilst some weep over the demise of the old mass labour movement of social democracy (in all its forms) we have no such regrets. As the article in this issue on the First World War and Social Democracy shows this movement was riddled with opportunism, racism and imperialism. Despite the shock of its support for imperialist war in 1914 the signs were there long before that historic moment. It is a lesson we have to take on board. Today in the older capitalist countries too we are seeing the creation of a class of young educated workers who cannot be integrated into the system other than via part-time precarious zero-hour work. It can only be a matter of time before this helps to create a wider anti-capitalist movement than currently exists. At present serious economists recognise that austerity will have to last 15 years. 15 years of declining living standards, even when cleverly managed as it is now, cannot but find an echo. The key will be if they understand the lessons of working class history, of our failures and our moments of success. Our greatest success has been the discovery of workers’ councils as the organisational tool which not only allows each and all to participate actively in the decision-making process in society but will also ultimately lead to the abolition of the state itself and the institution of a really communist society. However this will not come about overnight as we argue in our document on the period of transition. The post-bubble crisis has led once again to interest in what comes after capitalism and some are now denying that we need a period of transition at all. In this issue we also look at three theories arguing that there is no need for any transitional measures. And finally we should be aware that any simultaneous move to generalised warfare is only the final attack of the capitalists on our very existence. To the nationalist agenda which is being whipped up everywhere our task and duty is to oppose it with our own agenda; class war to create an entirely different world order. For us this means contributing to the construction of a global political organisation, not as a government in waiting (as Onorato Damen always argued) but as a rallying point for real anti-capitalists, one capable of taking the ideological fight to the system and against all its supporters.

Notes

1 For the theoretical stuff behind this see many of our previous issues. In particular “The Tendency for the Rate of Profit to Fall, the Crisis and its Detractors” in *Revolutionary Perspectives 62 Series 3* (Summer 2012)

2 See “Imperialist Rivalry in the Pacific” in *Revolutionary Perspectives 01* (Winter-Spring 2013)

3 See “Recovery: Whose Recovery?” in *Revolutionary Perspectives 03* (Winter 2014)

The Working Class and the First World War

It is still Nation v. Class

Given this year's barrage of state-sponsored propaganda over the First World War — a barrage which is set to continue long beyond the hundredth anniversary of its outbreak — we are republishing a document which has been long out of print. Originally published in *Internationalist Communist Review* in 1993, it was written at a particularly bleak time for the working class, especially in the long-established capitalist heartlands. Here ruthless economic restructuring had already pulverised whole sections of the industrial working class. The 'new economy' was already dominated by services and a new generation of flexible wage slaves brought up to believe that a working class with its own distinct interests opposed to those of capital was an outlandish notion left over from a bygone past. This triumphant capitalist ideology was of course reinforced by the collapse of the state-capitalist Russian bloc which ended the Cold War and which in the popular mind meant the defeat of 'socialism'. The level of capitalist jubilation was summed up by one Francis Fukuyama whose 1992 book coined the term "the end of history". His message that capitalism and Western liberal democracy marked the end point of human history was seized on and popularised by the media, at any rate in the West.

But history, as Marx was well aware, has no vital goal of its own. History is the product of class society and class struggle and its outcome is not preordained. No sooner had the end of history been proclaimed than the world began to realise that even when capitalism holds sway throughout the globe this does not mean the exclusive domination of 'liberal democracy' (i.e. the United States), much less the disappearance of the profitability crisis which had beset the world since 1971 and certainly not the disappearance of imperialist tensions and rivalry. First came the destruction of the Twin Towers and the unlikely challenge of Islamic jihadism from those who had been erstwhile allies of the US, a challenge which was used as the excuse for the American invasion of Iraq in 2003, an act above all designed to secure US control of oil flows and the consolidation of the dollar as the instrument for its international trade. Then, in 2008 came the spectacular bursting of the financial bubble fuelled by banks and financial fund managers borrowing against unimaginable amounts of fictitious capital. Since then the capitalists' confidence in their bankrupt system (not just the banks) has been maintained by the illusion that state intervention to provide even more fictitious capital will keep the good times rolling, even as investment in the creation of new value continues to decline. Yet it is not the capitalists who are bearing the brunt of the crisis. As always it is the wage working class who are being told to work harder for less reward, to expect less and less in the way of welfare benefits; to accept that more people will be left without the means to live; in short to put up with everything that capitalism throws at them because this is the best of all possible worlds.

Meanwhile, as trade in today's globalised capitalism flows more freely than at any time since before the First World War, 'capitalism with Chinese characteristics' has grown to challenge the supremacy of the USA, particularly in the Pacific. The parallel between the rise of Germany and the increased economic weight of the United States which threatened Britain and her empire before the First World War is being increasingly drawn. It is not the only comparison that is being made. Today the gulf between the richest and the poorest in the 'advanced' capitalist world is bigger than at any time since 1914. Without over-extending

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the parallels, the contemporary world situation resembles the run-up to 1914 in several key aspects. First, a global profitability crisis for capitalism which demands the destruction of capital values on a scale far beyond even the most dramatic domestic restructuring. Second, the sharpening of old and new imperialist rivalries. Third, the diminishing share of 'national wealth' accruing to the working class, a fact which accounted for the "repeated outbreak of serious strikes" (Arthur Marwick), not just in Britain but in all major capitalist states in the run-up to the First World War.

Of course this latter point begs the question as to why so many workers supported the war when it broke out. The powerful hold of social democracy over broad layers of the working class can hardly be over-estimated. The 2nd International had resolved to oppose a European war should it break out. The article here is an attempt to explain how social democracy's support for the war (and here we include the Labour Party) was not an inexplicable act of treachery towards the working class but a consequence of its inability to understand that the capitalist state represents the interests of capital which are fundamentally opposed to the interests of the working class. Today, as yesterday, attempts to 'democratise' capitalist state institutions only foster illusions and throw obstacles in the road towards workers recognising that they owe no allegiance to their 'nation state'. On the contrary, the only way to resist the increasing sacrifices that the state is demanding of the working class is solidarity with workers everywhere to overthrow the existing world order. In 1914 this might have seemed an unrealistic goal. By October 1917 the working class in Russia held out a revolutionary way out of the nightmare of capitalism's first global war for workers in the rest of the world. That project found only a dim echo and ultimately failed. The isolation of the Russian working class not only destroyed that revolution but for ever afterwards has spawned the lie that Stalinism was socialism. But the fact remains that the option of taking the revolutionary road was presented to the world's workers. Revolutions, strikes and mutinies broke out across Europe and the wider world from Seattle to Shanghai. It was enough to make the capitalist classes tremble but not enough to bring them down. Against the tide of propaganda telling us that despite all its horrors, 'The Great War' is justified because without it we would not be 'who we are today', we should remind ourselves that history has no predetermined outcomes. With capitalism offering us only more austerity, and with imperialist rivalries once again on the rise the same question posed at the start of the last century is still with us. "Socialism or barbarism" is the historic choice confronting humanity still.

Social Democracy, the 1st World War and the Working Class In Britain

For Marxists the 1st World War marks a watershed in capitalism's history. Unlike previous wars this war encompassed the entire globe. It was a direct outcome of the imperialist rivalry amongst the 'great powers' — a rivalry which was not simply the result of bellicose policies on the part of particular governments but an inevitable consequence of the process of capital accumulation. By the beginning of the 20th century the concentration and centralisation of capital had reached monopoly proportions and the 'purely' economic competition between firms inside national boundaries was more and more becoming competition between national capitals where the lines between economic, political and military interests merged into a single interest: the interest of the state.

In short, as Lenin was the first to point out, capitalism had reached a new stage in its development from which there could be no going back. With its economic laws now operating on a world scale the system's cyclical crises could no longer be resolved by the old means of bankruptcies, shut-downs and take-overs. Henceforward a much more massive devaluation of capital would be required; the kind of devaluation that can only come with the wholesale destruction and rundown of constant capital associated with modern warfare.

For the working class too the 1st World War also marks a watershed. For those who had eyes to see, it proved the impossibility of capitalism being peacefully and gradually transformed into socialism. The absurdity of the idea that the same expansionary forces which had led to capitalist imperialism would go on to usher capital towards some sort of centralised world system where war was a thing of the past was staring the workers' movement in the face. Few chose to face up to this. On the contrary, when war finally broke out in 1914 the 2nd International collapsed as the majority of its affiliated parties abandoned any pretence at proletarian internationalism. In truth though, despite its pledges to wage "war on war" in the run up to 1914, the 2nd International had never been able to reach agreement on what the international working class should do in the increasingly likely event of an inter-imperialist war.

Imperialist war and the 2nd International

Only a minority — associated with the figures of Lenin and Luxemburg — actually regarded such a war as an opportunity for the working class to overthrow capital. In 1907 for example, they had managed to get a further paragraph added to the resolution on war adopted by the International Socialist Congress which met at Stuttgart. It read as follows:

In case war should break out anyway, it is their (the working class') duty to intervene in favour of its speedy termination and with all their powers to utilise the economic and political crisis created by the war to rouse the masses and thereby to hasten the downfall of capitalist class rule.¹

Yet, as the opening words of this sentence imply, the majority of the 2nd International were not seriously considering the possibility of war actually happening, much less the possibility of the working class seizing

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the opportunity to “hasten the downfall of capitalist class rule”. A predominant aspect of social democratic thinking was the belief that the democratising of existing society would inevitably lead to the proletariat gaining political power (since it was assumed that the working class would be the majority in an advanced capitalist society) and thereby to socialism. The advent of socialism was seen as the logical follow-up to the democratic revolution. And inside the stronghold of social democracy, the German Social Democratic Party (SPD), this was a ‘revolution’ which an increasing number of social democrats assumed would come via the ballot box. This, despite the fundamentally undemocratic system of Germany under the Kaiser. In fact there was compelling evidence that sooner or later those holding political power in Germany would have to take account of the electoral strength of the working class — or else go under. By 1912 the SPD could boast that it had 110 seats out of 397 in the Reichstag — the result of 4.5 million votes at the polls. But it is one thing for capital to be pressurised into conceding political reforms, it is another for the working class itself to take hold of political power and overthrow capitalism altogether.

Yet what today seems glaringly obvious was not so apparent to those who lived under autocratic regimes such as Wilhelmine Germany or, even worse, Tsarist Russia. The institution of bourgeois democracy — some sort of parliamentary system with possibly a constitutional monarchy — would have involved a revolution in the political make-up of these states. Whilst such a revolution was inconceivable in Russia with the forcible overthrow of the Tsar, in more capitalistically advanced Germany the peaceful transformation of the capitalist state came to be seen as a distinct possibility by the ‘revisionist’ rightwing of the SPD. Strictly speaking this did not involve a direct split between reformists and revolutionaries, at any rate from the standpoint of the proletarian revolution. The issue at stake was the bourgeois democratic, not the socialist revolution. Kautsky, for example, did not suppose that the political system of Wilhelmine Germany could be peacefully transformed and in this sense he was an anti-revisionist. Yet he came to theorise that the centripetal forces of international capital would eventually lead to a ‘supra-imperialist’ capitalist world where wars would be unnecessary and which would furnish the basis for international socialism. By implication of course international socialism would be instituted piecemeal and peaceably, but the full import of this was not clear. For the present — that is until 1914, the distinction between the long-term maximum programme (socialism) and the minimum programme (immediate reforms) enabled social democrats to hold on to the illusion that revisionists, reformists and revolutionaries alike were all working for the same ultimate goal.

Illusion it was though; an illusion fostered by the apparent unanimity of the forces of the 2nd International against war and their very real ability to mobilise workers in anti-war demonstrations. During the first Balkan War (1912) the International Socialist Bureau (ISB) issued an anti-war manifesto which recognised that “the Balkan conflict can at any time become a general conflict” and appealed to the proletariat of Europe to “take action against war and against the spread of the Balkan conflict ... with its whole organisational might, with mass action.” Even before the manifesto was published on 29th October, 1912 there were massive demonstrations in Germany. On 20th October 150,000 workers had demonstrated in Berlin alone and mass demonstrations spread throughout Europe. On 17th November — following the request of the SPD — large-scale protests were organised in all European capitals where there were parties affiliated to the International.

On this occasion representatives of various socialist parties, Jaurès and Renner in Berlin, MacDonald, Vandervelde and Scheidemann in Paris, spoke up and warned governments that ‘they shall not set Europe ablaze with impunity’ ... In Pré-Saint-Gervais near Paris over 100,000 people demonstrated. ‘We

are not powerless', the whole socialist press said again and again, 'because the rulers will not wage war if they realise that the people do not want war.'²

Against this background an extraordinary Congress of the ISB was held at Basle. In the words of Jean Longuet (French right-wing Socialist), it was intended to be "a powerful demonstration of the unity of the socialist movement in the anti-war struggle, a harmonious expression of the power of the International". Yet, despite the rhetoric and heady atmosphere generated at Basle, the social democrats were further away than ever from agreeing a concrete strategy in the event of war actually breaking out. The overwhelming emphasis at the Basle Congress was the **prevention** of war by putting pressure on governments. Alexandra Kollontai (then a Menshevik) recorded her impressions of the Congress in a letter,

One felt the need to frighten Europe, to threaten it with the 'red spectre', revolution, in case the governments should risk a war. And standing on the table which served as a platform I did threaten Europe ... It was tremendous, you know, the protest of the peoples against war, and Jaurès's marvellous voice, and the wonderful and hoary old head of my beloved Keir Hardie, and the great organ, and the revolutionary songs, the meetings ... I am still dizzy with all I have lived through ...³

Not only did the majority regard the prospect of proletarian revolution as a means of threatening governments rather than something to be directly worked for, at Basle the ISB resolved to step up the anti-war campaign by "ever more energetic protests" which would be propagated by the middle class and pacifists, extended to include the working class. In other words, working class action against war was to be limited to demonstrations and turned into a populist movement. Any notion that imperialist war was intrinsic to capitalism was quietly rejected. The establishment of a peaceful capitalism via disarmament, not socialism via revolution was now the International's express aim. Accordingly the ISB rejected out of hand Luxemburg's proposed amendment on mass action to the draft Basle manifesto. This read as follows:

The ruling classes' fear of a proletarian revolution as the sequel of a world war has proved to be a real guarantee of peace. [Basle Manifesto, 1912]

This action must be strengthened in form and in intensity as the threat of war increases so that in the event of the ultimate calamity it can culminate in decisive revolutionary mass action.⁴

Similarly, opposition by Pannekoek, Radek and Lensch to the working class aligning itself with middle class pacifists went unheard, as did their critique that the International's policy of urging capitalism to disarm was utopian. Although the ISB continued to call for socialists to organise meetings and demonstrations right up to the beginning of the war, once this policy of threatening governments with revolution had inevitably failed and war finally broke out, nationalism proved to be the strongest sentiment within the ranks of social democracy.

When the war finally did begin, amongst the social democratic parliamentary representatives of the belligerent countries only the Serbians voted against war credits while in Russia the Menshevik and Bolshevik

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deputies (to Lenin's anger) abstained. As Schorske has put it for German Social Democracy:

*The slogan 'To this system, no man and no penny' was finally abandoned for the slogan which had competed with it since 1907: In the hour of danger we shall not leave the Fatherland in the lurch.'*⁵

In France, Guesde and in Belgium, Vandervelde — leader of the Socialist Party and President of the ISB — joined capitalist war cabinets soon after the war began. Labour stalwarts, Arthur Henderson and J.H. Thomas in Britain joined Lloyd-George's Cabinet in May 1915.

Imperialist War and the British Working Class

Revolutionary Marxists have tended to explain mass working class support for the 1st World War in terms of the betrayal of socialism by the leaders. Clearly this has more than a little bearing on the situation in Germany where thousands of young recruits went off to war singing social democratic songs, having been assured by the SPD leadership that this was a war of legitimate national defence against attack from the *bête noir* of the International, reactionary Russian Tsarism.

In Britain however the Labour Party, as distinct from the Independent Labour Party (ILP), was composed largely of trade unionists who generally made no claim at all to be socialist or else Fabians who rejected outright the idea of proletarian revolution and supposed that socialism had something to do with the extension of state (i.e. the capitalist state) control over society. In any case the Marxist conception of socialism coming about through class struggle was anathema to Labourites who, in the words of Engels, acted politically as the tail of the Liberal Party while the thought that "workers have no fatherland" (*Communist Manifesto*) never entered their heads.

Amongst this working class which "think about politics in general the same as the bourgeois think" (Engels, 1882) there was no shortage of cannon fodder for British imperialism. Only five weeks into the 1st World War 175,000 men had responded to Kitchener's *Call to Arms*. In all the voluntary system lasted until the end of 1915 and brought 2.5 million recruits. The majority were working class and many left relatively well-paid jobs to go to the war front. In the coal industry, for example,

*... 191,170 trade unionists, almost a fifth of the total labour force, had joined the armed forces by February 1915.*⁶

In the early days, at any rate, there was undoubtedly popular enthusiasm for war, an enthusiasm which was encouraged by trade union and Labour leaders who not only agreed to suspend the class struggle during the war but encouraged workers to risk sacrificing their lives by urging them "to rise to the national crisis".

The widespread support for the war amongst the working class cannot be explained simply in terms of a desire for adventure and a change from the monotony of work and life at home. Nor is unemployment a satisfactory answer. Working class volunteers did not come exclusively from the ranks of the unemployed. With 20 per cent of the male population of prime military age (20-35) voluntarily responding to appeals "to help your country at this critical moment", it is clear that patriotic values pervaded the British working class

as much as the rest of society.

And patriotism was part of imperialist ideology: an ideology which, as Lenin later put it, “also penetrates the working class. No Chinese other classes”. (*Imperialism, Capitalism.*) Today this may so obvious in August 1914. Lenin’s use of the “workers to emphasise the betrayal there had by no means been principle within Social

Imperialist ideology also penetrates the working class. No Chinese Wall separates it from the other classes. [Lenin]

Wall separates it from the *The Highest stage of* appear obvious. It was not In the first place, despite have no fatherland” slogan of the 2nd International, an established anti-patriotic Democracy. If anything, it

was assumed that the interests of the working class represented the interests of the nation (i.e. in the sense of the majority of the ‘people’), no matter that ‘the nation’ was increasingly identifying itself with the imperialist state. Thus, Rosa Luxemburg could still couch her attack on the German Social Democrats’ failure to oppose the war in terms of their “desertion of the fatherland”.

Yes, Socialists should defend their country in great historical crises ... the highest duty of the Social Democracy toward its fatherland demanded that it expose the real background of this imperialist war, that it rend the net of imperialist and diplomatic lies that covers the eyes of the people. It was their duty to speak loudly and clearly, to proclaim to the people of Germany that in this war victory and defeat would be equally fatal, to oppose the gagging of the fatherland by a state of siege, to demand that the people alone decide on war and peace, to demand a permanent session of Parliament for the period of the war, to assume a watchful control over the government by parliament, and over parliament by the people, to demand the immediate removal of all political inequalities, since only a free people can adequately govern its country, and finally, to oppose to the imperialist war, based as it was upon the most reactionary forces in Europe, the programme of Marx, of Engels and Lassalle.

That was the flag that should have waved over the country. That would have been truly national, truly free, in harmony with the best traditions of Germany and the international class policy of the proletariat.⁷

Here in a nutshell is the Social Democratic conception of internationalism: a coming together of distinct nations or peoples, not the overcoming of nationalist sentiments within the working class through a common struggle against capital which of necessity extends beyond national frontiers. It was a conception which had its roots in radical democracy and in Britain, in an even earlier period of capital’s development. Here too, but particularly in England, there had been a tradition of radical patriotism inside the working class.

It was a tradition which reached back before the French Revolution and incorporated populist myths such as the liberty enjoyed by the English people in Saxon times, under “Good King Alfred” before the imposition of the “Norman yoke”; and variations of the “God is an Englishman” idea invoked by a strand in radical Protestantism from the English Revolution onwards. By the 18th century the radical patriot would probably have defined himself as a “freeborn Englishman” who had a constitutional right to liberty; a right which was being usurped by a corrupt and tyrannical government in favour of an aristocracy which hailed from abroad. As the century progressed ‘patriotism’ became so much identified with radical opposition to government, especially extra-parliamentary opposition, that it was no longer regarded as a respectable

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attribute by the establishment. In the 1755 edition of Samuel Johnson's dictionary, for example, a 'patriot' is described as "One whose ruling passion is the love of his country". Twenty years on, after mounting calls for a radical reform led by figures such as John Cartwright (who wrote a pamphlet whose demands prefigured those of the Chartists), this definition was replaced by the famous aphorism that "patriotism is the last refuge of a scoundrel".— A 'scoundrel' presumably being someone who took the struggle for a representative parliament and against corrupt government to the populace as a whole. By the time of the French Revolution there was a thriving radical movement ready to absorb Paine's ideas on the Rights of Man and the Revolution's notions of democratic government.

The freeborn Englishman merged with the bourgeois democrat in a popular movement for radical parliamentary reform. The artisans and wage labourers who were at its head articulated their political aims through Corresponding Societies and clubs like the Manchester Patriotic Society, comprising "mechaniks of the lowest class". The calls for the restoration of "Ancient Liberties" mingled with declarations about being "Citizens of the World". This particular blend of English radical democratic patriotism survived in working class political life through until Chartism, when:

Once again there were Patriotic Societies and Patriotic newspapers. Chartist leaders, particularly if they had suffered imprisonment, were the "distinguished patriots", "the noble-minded patriots", the "liberated patriots" (McDouall and Collins), "one of the greatest patriots the world ever saw" (O' Connor), "one of the most unflinching patriots of the world" (Fletcher) or simply the "PATRIOT LOVETT".⁸⁸

Yet it was a concept which never belonged exclusively to the radical democrats and which was always ambiguous. The 'true patriot' was just as likely to invoke images of the Roast Beef of Old England (which tune was played at the Manchester dinner to celebrate the release of imprisoned Chartists McDouall and Collins) as the internationalism espoused by Harney and the Fraternal Democrats. Both sets of imagery could and were absorbed by the existing parties of the political establishment as part of the process of undermining the threatening aspects of the radical movement. Liberalism, for instance, took over the old working class internationalism with its campaigns against autocracy and tyrannical government abroad. The Tories, on the other hand, skilfully used the sort of patriotism espoused by Cobbett or O'Connor as they peddled the image of England as the home of freedom whose benefits should be spread to less fortunate nations.

This notion of patriotism was easy to tie in with John Bullish, 'little Englander' Toryism. Like all historical processes, the ideological undermining of radicalism was not a clear cut affair but there was a turning point somewhere in the 1870s when, round about the same time as the Workmen's Peace Association was entreating the Foreign Office, "... to use your utmost influence in Favour of Neutrality in the horrible War between Russia & Turkey, and also against any increased expenditure on our armaments",⁹ G.H. MacDermott was launching what would become known as the 'jingo Song' round Britain's Music Halls (by this time a potent source of Tory propaganda). This became the most well-known of a host of similar patriotic songs which expressed the Tories', pro-Turkish policy (i.e. the fear that Russia might gain naval access to the Mediterranean) in popular form. It ran as follows,

*We don't want to fight, but by jingo if we do,
We've got the ships, we've got the men, we've*

got the money too.

We've fought the bear before, and while we're

Britons true,

*The Russians will not have Constantinople.'*¹⁰

Well before 1914 patriotism had become inextricably bound up with an imperialistic world view which was by no means the exclusive preserve of jingoistic Toryism but which extended across the political spectrum and throughout society. Already, in 1881 Lord Roseberry was countering the Liberals' traditional antipathy to imperial aggrandisement by redefining 'imperialism' as 'patriotism'. ("I mean the greater pride in Empire which is called Imperialism, a larger patriotism.") During the 1895 election campaign, Roseberry declared himself a 'Liberal Imperialist', defined as:

*First, the maintenance of the Empire; secondly, the opening of new areas for our surplus population; thirdly, the suppression of the slave trade; fourthly, the development of missionary enterprise; and fifthly, the development of our commerce, which so often needs it.*¹¹

Whether cast in terms of militaristic territorial expansion or the reluctant shouldering of the white man's burden, the Empire had come to be regarded as almost an intrinsic part of Britain. By 1914 patriotism and imperialism were interdependent. A new ideological consensus had been forged in response to the changing international economic and political context in which Britain and her Empire found itself. Increasingly capitalist competition was becoming rivalry between states. Imperialist ideology was not just about hanging on to or even extending Britain's existing overseas possessions but, as with all the other 'Great Powers', involved identification of the nation with the interests of the state. In the early years of the twentieth century this dominant ideology came more and more to be associated with Empire loyalty.

It was not just about patriotism but involved militarism, the cult of royalty and national heroes, and social Darwinism. After the Boer War in particular imperialist ideology became bound up with statism and national efficiency: the need for a strong economy to combat foreign commercial and industrial competition; the need for a strong army and navy to combat the growing military strength of rival states; and the need to reduce infant mortality since the birth rate was now seen as a matter of national importance. Children were a "national asset", "the capital of a country" on whom "the future of the country and Empire" depended. It was a world view many of whose aspects were shared by Conservatives, Liberals, Liberal Imperialists, Fabians, as well as a large number of trade unionists, Labourists and socialists.

By the late 19th century patriotism had become a key aspect of the ideology of the imperialist state. The weight of that ideology over the working class was immense. Empire propaganda permeated almost every aspect of workers' lives — from the school text book to cigarette cards and imperial exhibitions which linked British capitalism's success to imperialism; from the mass circulation popular press to music hall turns and songs; from children's literature to everyday advertising and commemorative knick-knacks. It was an ideology that was sometimes unconsciously, but often consciously propagated amongst the working class as an antidote to class conflict: a world view which assumed unity of the 'national interest' and where individuals, not classes stood in equal relationship to each other and the state. The ease with which this ruling class ideology was transmitted through the bulk of the working class is undoubtedly linked to the development of a commercial, mass culture — part of a process more complicated than simply the 'bribery'

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to his Merthyr constituents:

*A nation at war must be united with the boom of the enemy's guns within earshot the lads who have gone forth to fight their country's battles must not be disheartened by any discordant note at home.*¹³

Similarly, MacDonald's pacifism did not prevent him from offering his services to his country or from recommending that the working class do their duty:

*Should an opportunity arise to enable me to appeal to the pure love of country — which I know is a precious sentiment in all our hearts, keeping it clear of thought which I believe to be alien to real patriotism — I shall gladly take that opportunity. If need be I shall make it for myself. I want the serious men of the Trade Union, the Brotherhood, and similar movements to face their duty. To such men it is enough to say 'England has need of you.'*¹⁴

Compare this to Lenin whose first public utterance on the war (made in Switzerland to a group of Bolsheviks in September, 1914 shortly after his extradition from Austria) was to condemn "The betrayal of Socialism by a majority of the leaders of the 2nd International (1889-1914) [which] signifies an ideological and political collapse of the International."¹⁵ Far from collaborating with governments and bosses to ensure social peace, the task of revolutionaries was to work for the continuation of the class struggle during the war. Inevitably this would mean coming up against the state but if this involved the mass of the working class a civil war situation would be created — i.e. a potential revolutionary struggle between the working class and the capitalist class. Clearly such a tactic meant that revolutionaries must be prepared to adopt illegal methods of work. An important part of this work would be in the armed forces where revolutionaries must advocate, not pacifism and disarmament, but the turning of soldiers' and sailors' weapons against their immediate class enemy.

*The slogans of Social-Democracy must now be: First, an all-embracing propaganda of the Socialist revolution, to be extended also to the army and the area of military activities; emphasis to be placed on the necessity of turning the weapons, not against the brother wage slaves of other countries, but against the reaction of the bourgeois governments and parties in each country; recognition of the urgent necessity of organising illegal nuclei and groups in the armies of all nations to conduct such propaganda in all languages; a merciless struggle against the chauvinism and patriotism of the philistines and bourgeoisie of all countries without exception.*¹⁶

It was these principles and tactics which were behind the concept of revolutionary defeatism adopted by the Bolshevik Party and later incorporated into the programme of the Zimmerwald Left. They formed the only coherent basis for revolutionary opposition to the war.

The Response of Socialists in Britain

The split which occurred within Continental Social Democracy over the issue of support for the war only had a faint echo in the British socialist movement. For the Labour Party as a whole, which made no claim to be socialist — and which had only been admitted to the International in 1908 by means of a special resolution

of the upper strata of the working class with some of the material rewards of imperialism. The consolidation of the bourgeoisie's ideological hold over the working class through the eradication and replacement of relatively autonomous elements of popular, working class life was not simply the result of technological advance. Rather, the latter stemmed from the necessity to maintain profitability by producing for ever-wider markets. Before the mass market came into being the more autonomous aspects of the popular press had to be either destroyed or absorbed and redefined. For example, the launch of the first mass circulation newspaper, the Daily Mail (which reached a circulation of 700,000 in four years) in 1896 was only possible once the old radical press had disappeared or been marginalised.

After the defeat of Chartism this was accomplished not so much by State repression but by the abolition of stamp duty and allowing free reign to the establishment of a commercial capitalist press. In the 1850s more perceptive representatives of the capitalist class, such as Milner-Gibson, president of the Association for the Repeal of the Taxes on Knowledge, had realised that,

... a cheap press in the hands of men of good moral character, of respectability, and of capital [would give them] the power of gaining access by newspapers, by faithful record of the facts, to the minds of the working classes.¹²

Free speech, one of the pillars of popular radicalism, was thus one of the weapons taken up and used by capital to eradicate it. The commercial and political interests of capital complemented and reinforced each other. This, not just with regard to the establishment of a popular capitalist press, but to virtually every aspect of what was to become the 'leisure and entertainments industry'. The result was a culture organised by capital for the working class. With this came capital's imperialist ideology as an intrinsic aspect of it.

This is not to deny that there imperialist state based on politicised workers. Nor does were prepared to forsake in the years immediately Challinor argues, "Industrial However, the working class strife remained a marginal

***The ideas of the ruling class are, in every age, the ruling ideas...
[Marx]***

majority of workers. *The Syndicalist*, for example, achieved a monthly circulation of 20,000 at its height in 1912 — a far cry from the

daily circulation of the commercial press. In keeping with their emphasis on industrial struggle, a broader anti-imperialism was not central to syndicalist propaganda, although anti-militarism was. Amongst socialists in general, few saw a contradiction between supporting the 'national interest' and the goal of a socialist future. This was not just in the case of the Blatchfords with their *Merrie Englands* and the Hyndman's peddling *England For All* — i.e. those who openly supported British imperialism. Socialists like Ramsay MacDonald and Keir Hardie (both ILPers) who regarded themselves, and were regarded by others, as anti-imperialist, fell in line on the outbreak of world war. Nation was now unambiguously put before class. Here is Hardie, for instance, the man who supposedly died of a broken heart as a result of the 1st World War and only four days after taking part in an anti-war demonstration in Trafalgar Square, speaking

was implicit antipathy towards the class solidarity from a minority of it mean that workers in general their immediate material interests before the 1st World War when, as strife at times verged on civil war". political press associated with that aspect of everyday reality for the

— there was never any question of whether or not to oppose the war. Any debate which did occur therefore tended to be out of the main frame of the labour movement and reserved for the meeting rooms of the socialist sects, out of earshot of the majority of workers. Even worse than their political isolation though, was the muddle-headedness of the majority of British socialists, brought up in their own peculiar Lib-Lab radical tradition and for the most part without even a token adherence to Marxism or the necessity for the political overthrow of capitalism. In short, the ingrained nationalism and reformist mentality of the majority of the British left ensured that issues such as the nature of the war and the possibility of a class struggle against it for the most part escaped them.

The Independent Labour Party

There was thus no talk inside the Labour Party proper about “betrayal of the elementary truth of Socialism expressed long ago in the *Communist Manifesto*, that the workers have no fatherland” (Lenin). However, the ILP had been part of the 2nd International since its early days and its representative at the 1910 Congress of the ISB, Keir Hardie, had been in favour of a general strike as the best way to “prevent and hinder war.” What then was the ILP’s official response to the war? — Basically a middle of the road, pacifist one. It was in favour of a negotiated peace and on 11th August, 1914 the Party’s National Council issued the following anti-war statement which is clearly couched in national, not class terms.

*Our nationality and independence, which are dear to us, we are ready to defend: but we cannot rejoice in the organised murder of tens of thousands of workers of other lands who go to kill and be killed at the command of rulers to whom the people are as pawns.*¹⁷

In practice, though, even this mild anti-war statement was not complied with by many ILP leaders. Out of seventeen ILP councillors in Glasgow only two opposed the war in 1914, while twelve ILP MPs had signed a declaration in defence of the war by October 15th.¹⁸ By February, 1915 the ILP had organised a Congress of socialists from the Entente powers (to which the Bolsheviks were not invited) where it agreed to resolutions describing the war as a war of ‘liberation’. The inconsistency of this position does not appear to have struck ILPers like MacDonald, Glasier and Snowden who continued to propagandise against the introduction of conscription while the Labour Leader published sympathetic reports on the fraternisation of troops in January, 1915. Clearly the Party was confused and it is untrue to say that it “had not supported the war” or even that it was “unashamedly pacifist”.¹⁹

Moreover, the pacifism which did exist within the ILP could not provide the framework for developing a revolutionary defeatist position. The ILP did not regard the quest for peace as anything to do with socialist revolution and had no conception of utilising the wartime crisis to develop the class struggle at home. For the ILP to have done this would have necessitated a break with its loyalty to the British state. This it was far from doing. Despite the anti-war sentiments and anti-militarist propaganda made by some of its members, this was made in the tradition of the ‘freeborn Englishman’ and the old radicalism rather than the standpoint of proletarian internationalism.” Thus ILPers joined with Liberals in December, 1914 to form the Union of Democratic Control which aimed to secure a negotiated peace and open diplomacy on the part of the British government. In the same month ILPers also helped to form the No Conscription Federation which, needless to say, did not prevent the introduction of conscription in 1916.

At the same time the ILP maintained its Labour Party links (for example, sending delegates to the Labour Party Conference in 1916) and often worked with it on various committees set up by the Government. In short, it was an umbrella organisation only capable of spreading confusion. What's more, unlike the SPD or the PS1 in Italy, there was no organised minority striving for revolutionary clarity which could have split from the social democratic framework of the organisation.

The British Socialist Party

Unlike the ILP, the British Socialist Party (BSP), with its origins in the Social Democratic Federation, claimed to have a Marxist basis. However, this had not prevented Hyndman and other SDF leaders from taking an expressly nationalist position during the Boer War, resulting in dissension within the party which was never resolved politically. By the time of the first BSP conference in May, 1912 the Hyndmanites found themselves in a minority on the newly-elected Executive. With the endorsement of a resolution by Zelda Kahan beginning,

Recognising that the armies and navies of modern capitalist states are maintained and employed only in the interests of the capitalist classes of those states; recognising further that so far as the workers are concerned there is nothing to choose between German and British imperialism and aggression, the executive committee of the British Socialist party dissociates itself from the propaganda for increased naval expenditure ...²¹

BSP official policy at once made a U-turn and came into line with the resolutions of the 2nd International. While the internationalists in the Party by 1914 once more in control the crucial question of the war remained

It is sometimes charged against the ILP that it has never formulated its theory of socialism. That is true, and therein lies its strength. [Keir Hardie]

remained the majority the Hyndmanites were of the executive while the party's attitude to unresolved.

In the early days of the one of the three anti-war demonstration in Trafalgar Square organised by the British section of the ISB. Nevertheless, by 13th August he was writing in Justice that "everybody must eagerly desire the defeat of Germany". A month later the Party executive (which now included members with anti-war views) issued a manifesto stating that since,

war Hyndman spoke on platforms at the anti-war

...the national freedom and independence of this country are threatened by Prussian militarism, the party naturally desires to see the prosecution of the war to a successful issue.²²

This was followed by a manifesto advising party members to take part in the Government's recruitment campaign which evoked protest from several London branches and from Pollockshaws in Scotland, where John Maclean was a member. Yet although this further revealed the extent of the BSP's disunity it was not the signal for a decisive stand against national defencism by the majority. Instead, the old factional skirmishes for control of the Party's executive organs began again.

John Maclean's Stand

Only in Scotland did John Maclean and a few of the BSP local branches oppose the executive's line from the start. On 17th September, 1914 Maclean denounced the war as an inevitable result of capitalist imperialism and went on:

*It is our business as Socialists to develop a 'class patriotism', refusing to murder one another for a sordid world capitalism. The absurdity of the present situation is surely apparent when we see British socialists going out to murder German socialists with the object of crushing Kaiserism and Prussian militarism. The only real enemy to Kaiserism and Prussian militarism, I assert against the world, was and is German social democracy. Let the propertied class, old and young alike, go out and defend their blessed property. When they have been disposed of, we of the working class will have something to defend, and we shall do it.*²³

Maclean immediately began to pursue an independent course of propaganda against the war in Glasgow but he remained aloof from the opposition's attempts to oust the warmongers from the Party's executive. This was in keeping with his attitude throughout the internal struggles which had been going on since the Boer War. It illustrates the lack of significance he placed on political organisation. Maclean was a teacher who placed great emphasis on Marxist education classes as a means of developing the class consciousness of workers on an individual basis. His ideas of how the working class as a whole would become revolutionary were vague however and he placed little importance on the creation of a programmatically coherent and unified party which could give a clear political and organisational lead to workers.

One implication of Maclean's views on organisation, or rather lack of them, was that he made little attempt to argue his case inside the Party. He had no intention of leading a national split from the BSP to create an alternative organisation firmly based on opposition to the war. Unlike Lenin and other revolutionaries like Gorter and Pannekoek, Maclean did not see that an ideological break with national defensism implied an eventual organisational split with social democracy. By the end of 1914 Lenin was already writing that:

Internationalism consists in coming together (first ideologically, then in due time also organisationally) of people who, in these grave days, are capable of defending Socialist internationalism in practice, i.e. to gather their forces and "to be next in shooting" at the governments and the ruling classes of one's own 'fatherland' because it is not an easy task, it must be done in company with those who only wish to do it, who are not afraid of a complete break with the chauvinists and with the defenders of social chauvinism.

*... only through the policy of a most decisive break and rupture with the first current, with all those who are capable of justifying the vote of appropriations, 'the defence of the fatherland', 'submission to martial law', the eagerness to use legal means only, the renunciation of civil war. Only those who follow such a policy do in practice build a socialist international.*²⁴

In the early years of the war Maclean did not share this conception. He didn't find it necessary to break from the BSP whose official mouthpiece, *Justice*, supported the British Government's war aims; whose right-wing attacked other members as "acting under instructions from Berlin", who attacked Maclean's own anti-war

activities and plotted and campaigned for the arrest of fellow-BSPers who were opposed to the war. Like Luxemburg, Maclean seems to have thought that social democracy could be 'revolutionised' from within. Also like Luxemburg, Maclean took the view of the majority at the Zimmerwald and Kienthal conferences — i.e. for 'peace without annexations' and not revolutionary defeatism. Even so, his principled stand meant that by 1916 he was much closer to a revolutionary position and the editorial in the first edition of *Vanguard* presaging the founding declaration of the 3rd International three years later.

*Nothing but socialism will do. This monstrous war shows the day of social pottering or reform has passed we shall oppose all national wars as we oppose this one. The only war worth waging is the class war, the workers against the world exploiters, until we have obtained industrial freedom.*²⁵

In effect this was calling for the "defeat of one's own government" but without preparing the working class for using the opportunity to overthrow the system in the crisis that followed. As we have said, Maclean had not reached this conclusion in 1916 but he was to change his mind when news of the Russian Revolution broke in 1917. Meanwhile, though there was no organised revolutionary opposition inside the BSP. The majority continued to vacillate between a position somewhere to the right of the Zimmerwald majority and outright national defencism. When *Vanguard* ceased publication in 1916 after the arrest of Maclean and his followers there was not even the embryonic basis for the development of a revolutionary fraction inside the BSP. This, despite the exit of the Hyndmanites in June of that year.

The Socialist Labour Party

With about two hundred members in 1914, the Socialist Labour Party (SLP) was much smaller than the other socialist organisations. Like the BSP it had its origins in the SDF from which it had split in 1903 over the latter's increasing opportunism. Like the BSP the SLP claimed a Marxist base for its politics and, at least during its early years, demanded much greater political agreement and understanding from its members.

*A party which has undertaken the work of revolutionising society must be dominated not only by a common purpose but also a common plan of action. A revolutionary socialist party ... must present not only the appearance but the reality of an intelligent disciplined unity.*²⁶

Challinor has rather dubiously (given the SLP's undoubted syndicalist-style abdication of broader political work in the strikes of munition and engineering workers during and after the war) pointed to the similarity of outlook between the SLP and the Bolsheviks on the role of the revolutionary party. However, on the extent of social democracy's opportunism in 1914, the SLP was more Bolshevik than the Bolsheviks. Until the outbreak of war Lenin had shared the view of the SPD as the "jewel in the crown" of social democracy as a whole. As early as 1903, however, the SLP saw the seeds of the SPD's downfall as a revolutionary party in its success at the polls. Commenting on Eisner's explanation that the SPD had polled three million "republican, democratic, socialist, anti-military votes", the SLP retorted:

This lumping of opinion and diversity of interest is to our mind the beginning of the undoing of German socialism ... the revolutionary party in Germany ... fed and nurtured on the revolutionary tradition, has become the ghost of its former self. The mere mass of constantly increasing supporters at the polls is the

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*most dangerous ground that a revolutionary party can accept ... Regarded, then, from this point of view, the German socialist party has ceased to be **revolutionary** and has become **reformatory** ... We in England of the Socialist Labour Party must learn the lesson of mere political success, if we desire in England there be formed a real militant class conscious working class.*²⁷

Given this analysis, the SLP had no trouble seeing the capitulation of social democracy to national defencism as a direct consequence of revisionism nor did it share the centrist view of many in the ILP and BSP that the war could be ended by 'open' diplomacy. The SLP saw the war as an inevitable result of imperialist competition. The political conclusions were drawn in *The Socialist*,

*Our attitude is neither pro-German nor pro-British, but anti-capitalist and all that it stands for in every country of the world. The capitalist class of all nations are our real enemies, and it is against them that we direct all our attacks.*²⁸

The SLP was apparently also amongst the small number of revolutionaries who in 1914 supported Lenin's view that a new International had to be formed.²⁹ In January, 1915 *The Socialist's* view that the war could open up a revolutionary situation was in keeping with the resolution of the Left at the 1907 Stuttgart Congress.

*As revolutionary socialists, we are bound to make the most of whatever opportunities present themselves for carrying our revolutionary principles into effect, and this war, involving as it does the working class of the leading countries in Europe in common disaster, may prove a blessing in disguise by providing them with the opportunity of throwing off the yoke of their common oppressor.*³⁰

Clearly these views put the SLP ideologically in the camp of the revolutionary defeatists. There is some evidence too that the organisation took practical steps to implement such a policy whose practical implication was not for socialists to conduct an idealistic campaign for workers to refuse to serve in the army, but to agitate within the armed forces. In November *The Socialist* claimed the SLP had been disseminating literature inside several regiments and quoted an internal document which stated "we shall do all that can be done towards stirring up insurrection in the army."³¹ However, there is also evidence to suggest that the SLP's position was not so clear-cut as Challinor would have us believe. It is certainly the case that the Party rejected national defencism immediately (the editor of *The Socialist*, John Muir was obliged to resign in 1914 for advocating such) but it's not so clear whether the official policy of "active opposition to the war" finally adopted at the April, 1915 Conference was one in line with revolutionary defeatism or with the Centrists and pacifists who wanted a negotiated peace without annexations. There was a difference. As Lenin put it in his report on the 1915 Zimmerwald Conference,

*... if we are really and firmly convinced that the war is creating a revolutionary situation in Europe, then it is our bounden duty to explain to the masses the necessity of a revolution, to appeal for it, to create befitting organisations, to speak fearlessly and in the most concrete manner of the various methods of struggle and of its technique.*³²

The SLP may not have been so clear-sighted about this as Challinor makes out but of all the socialist

organisations in Britain at the time it was ideologically closest to the Bolsheviks. In terms of capacity to influence masses of workers though it was, like all the other socialist groups in Britain, in the position of a sect with the great wall of the Labour Party and the trade unions preventing wider access to the minds of the working class.

Some Concluding Remarks

As we said at the beginning of this article, the 1st World War marks a historical watershed for both capital and labour. As to why the majority of workers in Britain saw no reason to oppose it, we have to look further than the treachery of social democratic political leaders. A sell-out can only occur when established principles are thrown overboard. Despite its relationship with the ILP, the Labour Party did not stand for socialism. As part of an alliance of trade unionists still engaged in deals with the Liberals to prevent Tories being elected in working class constituencies, most Labourites were not interested in the formation of a socialist party of any description. The reason for this must be sought in the material situation and precise history of the British working class. Marx and Engels had put down the "political nullity of the English workers" (Engels) to the relatively high standard of living they enjoyed as a result of British capital's domination of the world market. The net result was that workers in general tended to associate their own interests with those of the imperialist state. In 1883 Engels said (in a letter to Bebel) that this situation would continue so long as British capital's world monopoly remained. Likewise, until there was a spontaneous movement against falling living standards by the working class which socialists could get control of, socialism would remain "a hotch-potch of confused sects, remnants of the great movement of the forties, standing behind them, and nothing more".³³ However, Engels did not reckon on the Labour Party, that peculiarly British form of reformism whose existence pre-empted the formation of an independent working class party with a substantial working class base.³⁴

Given the 2nd International's collapse in 1914 and the fact that revolutionaries today are not part of a mass 'socialist' movement but isolated from the bulk of the working class, whichever country they happen to find themselves in, it might be asked what bearing the absence of a clear-cut social democratic period in British working class history has for us today. In a general sense of course it's true that revolutionaries today are all in the same beleaguered boat, waiting for a change in the tide of working class passivity in the face of capitalism's economic crisis. However, each 'national' section of the global working class has its own historical legacy. That legacy in Britain is a Party which has never done anything other than defend the wider interests of the British state as it followed the coat tails of the avowedly capitalist parties (First Liberal, then Tory). Yet it has managed to define itself as the legitimate 'labour movement', outside of which there are only sects. Labour's failure to act in the interests of those who work for a wage is not new: it is just more obvious today. Today Labourism and the narrow-minded trade unionism that goes with it are still barriers to workers in Britain reaching a clearer view of where their real interests lie. This was a hundred times more the case during the time of the 1st World War and the revolutionary upheavals which came in its wake. This is not just because the Labour party could appear to be something it wasn't as a result of its umbrella-like inclusion of 'socialists' like the ILP but because the very absence of a mass social democratic party in Britain meant that the political issues which were discussed in front of the whole working class elsewhere were simply not an issue for Labour, and as often as not that included the ILP as well.

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This is not insignificant. The absence of wider political debate helped to reinforce Labourism and the low level of political awareness in general amongst the working class in Britain. Though revolutionaries were always a minority in all the important debates inside the International: on whether socialism could be achieved gradually and whether they could justifiably enter capitalist governments; on the difference between mass political strikes and trades unionism; on the nature of a revolutionary working class political organisation; on the question of how to oppose imperialist war itself; at least these issues were reported and discussed in front of a wide working class audience. Not so in Britain where, as we have said, would-be revolutionary political fractions were left in the position of sects. Elements from these socialist sects did respond to the workers' movement which rose as the material hardships of war increased, and when the example set by the Russian Revolution inspired even workers in Britain to look beyond Labour, leading eventually to the formation of the Communist Party of Great Britain. Yet Labour remained the 'workers' party' in the minds of the majority of the British working class while the relatively tiny Communist Party became an apparently easily adaptable mouthpiece of the Comintern as the counter-revolution took hold in Russia. It is striking too how that Party took up again the banner of popular radicalism in the Thirties and Forties whilst the Communist Party Historians' Group led by Dona Torr and comprising people like Christopher Hill produced a whole host of works under the heading of 'people's history', 'our history', 'the common people' to reinforce the idea that the class struggle is a people's and therefore a national struggle. The theory of the Norman Yoke was revived to show that the task of the English working class was, in the words of Dona Torr, "to win the battle of democracy", a battle which stretches in an "unbroken English revolutionary tradition from John Ball to Tom Mann" while Christopher Hill explained to readers of a volume entitled *Democracy and the Labour Movement* that:

*Marxism has subsumed what is valuable in the Norman Yoke theory — its recognition of the class basis of politics, its deep sense of the **Englishness** of the common people, of the proud continuity of their lives, institutions and struggles with those of their forefathers, its insistence that a propertied ruling class is from the nature of its position fundamentally alien to the interests of the mass of the people.*³⁵

He went on to argue that the working class must stand as a defender of the nation. Very convenient as a justification of the popular front antics of the Communist Party in the Thirties and its call on workers to participate in the 2nd imperialist world war under the banner of a people's struggle against fascism. For revolutionaries today the significance of the 1st World War remains — all such talk of 'people's struggle' of 'defence of democracy' or the like is so much bilge. The British working class is part of a world working class and 'our history' teaches us that we have no interest in sacrificing ourselves for imperialism.

The collapse of the 2nd International in 1914 marked the end of an era; the end of any possibility of a progressive political alliance of the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. In capitalism's imperialist epoch there are no longer any progressive capitalist wars and there is no room for popular radicalism and the patriotism associated with it. What the 1st World War also shows us is that the class struggle does not end once war is declared. On the contrary, as Lenin realised, an all-out imperialist war spells the making of a political crisis for the capitalist class while the hardships, death and destruction which accompany it provide the material impetus for the development of a spontaneous working class movement against war and the existing political order. As the third cycle of capital accumulation this century drags to its inexorable close, world war is once again on the historical agenda and revolutionaries have to face up to the need to frame a response.

Certainly we cannot expect the working class to act en masse on the outbreak of war. If workers' heads were full of capitalist ideology in 1914, how much greater and more sophisticated is capital's thought control today? Only dreamers suppose that capital's ideological hold over the working class can be undermined by the force of revolutionary propaganda alone. Until the existing order is undermined by the weight of its own material contradictions then the working class in general will remain unreceptive to revolutionary ideas. Despite twenty years or so of economic crisis, and despite the marginalisation of significant sections of the working class, workers in the capitalist metropolises are still relatively well off. It may be that the material impetus to revolt will once again be the deprivations of war. In any case, the response of revolutionaries will not be to suspend activities for the course of the war, to preach conscientious objection or pacifism. Their task will be to work for the continuation of the class struggle with the aim of turning the war amongst capitalist states into a war against the bosses at home in preparation for a revolutionary struggle for a new society. This is the basis for proletarian internationalism, not the pacifism of CND nor the patriotism of Labour.

Notes

1. From 'Resolution Adopted at the Seventh International Socialist Congress at Stuttgart' in Lenin, *Collected Works* Vol. XVIII, Martin Lawrence p.467.
2. Georges Haupt *Socialism and the Great War* Oxford 1972 p. 84.
3. Letter to T.L. Scepkina-Kupemik, quoted op.cit. p.91.
4. op.cit. p.89.
5. C.E. Schorske *German Social Democracy, 1905-1917* Cambridge Mass. p.285.
6. Raymond Challinor, *The Origins of British Bolshevism* London, p.123.
7. Rosa Luxemburg, *The Junius Pamphlet* Merlin, London p.113.
8. Hugh Cunningham 'The Language of Patriotism 1750-1914' in *History Workshop Journal* 12, 1981 p.17.
9. op.cit. p.23. Cunningham notes that this particular petition came from Mursley in Buckinghamshire "... and was signed by fifty-three people, three of whom marked with the cross of the illiterate, and at least thirteen of whom were women. Some gave their occupations: there were fourteen labourers, two carpenters, two bricklayers, two farmers, a publican, a shoemaker, a builder, a farm bailiff, and an 'eadgecutter'."
10. Dave Russell, 'Patriotism, Jingoism and Imperialism' in *Popular Music in England, 1840-1914*, M.U.P. p.114.
11. C.C. Elridge, *Victorian Imperialism*, London p.180.
12. Quoted by James Curran in 'The Press as an Agency of Social Control' in Boyce, Cunan and Wingates, eds., *Newspaper History: from the 17th Century to the Present Day*, p.60.
13. Challinor op.cit. p.124.
14. Letter to the Mayor of Leicester, 10.4.14., quoted ibid.
15. Lenin, 'Revolutionary Social Democracy and War' loc.cit. p.61.
16. From a resolution proposed by Hardie and Vaillant (leader of the French United Socialist Party) and voted down by the SPD as an anarchist tactic. See Haupt op.cit.
17. See R.K. Middlemass, *The Clydesiders*, Hutchinson p.56.
18. Walter Kendall, *The Revolutionary Movement in Britain 1900-21* London, 1969 p.111 and Middlemass loc.cit.
19. As do Kendall and Middlemass respectively, thus adding to the myths about the Labour Left.

Workers' History

20. For example, Bruce Glasier's pamphlet *The Peril of Conscription* stresses that the author is not against 'the fatherland' but imperialism and compulsory military service. Imperialism is typically seen in moral terms and not as an unavoidable product of capitalism's development.
21. Kendall op.cit. p.53.
22. op.cit. p.86.
23. In a speech on Glasgow Green. Quoted in Nan Milton, *In the Rapids of Revolution*, London, 1978, p.77.
24. Lenin op.cit. p.97.
25. Kendall op.cit. p.96.
26. Quoted from 'The SLP: Its Aims and Methods' in Challinor, op.cit. p.34.
27. Quoted from 'What is a Revolutionary Party?' SLP 1903; reprinted in *Proletarian* no.3, Communist Organisation of the British Isles (n.d.).
28. Challinor op.cit. p.125.
29. In November, 1914 *The Socialist* published a translation of an article by the Dutch revolutionary Marxist, Pannekoek which analysed the war as the consequence of imperialism and called for the formation of a new International. loc.cit. p.151.
30. loc.cit. p.126.
31. Kendall op.cit. p.75.
32. Lenin op.cit. p.347.
33. Engels to Bebel, August 30th 1883 in *Marx-Engels Selected Correspondence* Progress Publishers, p.344.
34. Though before he died Engels did think that the formation of a Labour Party would be a step towards the establishment of a socialist party proper in Britain. However, he could not have predicted the staying power of Labourism. By the time the Labour Party officially mentioned 'socialism' in its programme, in 1918 — the famous clause 4 on nationalisation! — it was part of a strategy to undermine support for a genuine revolutionary programme.
35. Quoted by B. Schwarz, 'The "People" in History: the Communist Party Historians' Group 1946-1956' in R. Johnson et. al. eds. *Making Histories* p.70.



AURORA

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The Period of Transition and its Dissenters

Introduction

Capitalist society, like the slave and feudal societies which preceded it, is a class society in which the dominant class lives off the labour extracted from the subject class. Humanity has lived in class societies for an extremely short period of its history while for the overwhelming majority of its history it has lived in societies which can be described as a form of primitive communism. In these societies labour was communal social labour with free distribution of the products of labour according to social needs, while private property in land or means of production was unknown.

Class societies have been historically limited and capitalism is no exception. Capitalist production relations, which the intellectual ideologues of capitalism claim the entire history of humanity has been advancing towards, are similarly historically limited. This can be clearly seen in capitalism's economic crises and its ever present class struggle. Marxists argue that the contradictions of capitalist production relations generate the historical forces which negate and will eventually overthrow the system. These forces are generated within the system and spring from the system's imperative to continually attack and pauperise the class which it exploits, thereby cutting the source of the surplus this class generates. Marxists further argue that the next historical stage for humanity is the negation, not just of capitalism, but of class society in general and the construction of communist society.

Under capitalist social relations the working class is separated from the means of production and the product of its labour. Human labour is forced, antagonistic labour and the workers are themselves alienated from their labour and its products. Workers are dominated by the products of their labour which appear as capital, as an autonomous enslaving power to which they are subjected. A worker's labour reproduces the conditions of her/his enslavement, it is alienated labour and takes the form of value. The purpose of labour is to expand the value of capital by generating profit. Human development is thus thwarted by capital. The social relationships between producers take the form of social relationships between the products they have produced, relationships are determined by value. Labour is only indirectly social, made so by market relations which operate behind the workers backs. The result is that men and women are individualised, atomised and separated from their social being.

Communist Society

The obnoxious nature of capitalist society, outlined above, is the result of its method of production. Once communist relations of production are established a whole host of other changes will follow as a result. Under communism the means of production will become social property and labour will therefore be social labour. The products which are produced will consequently be social products and distributed free according to need. The products such a society produces will only be use values without the exchange values imposed by capitalism.

Communist society will be a free association of producers producing for human needs. Products will be freely distributed without the intermediary of money. It will be a classless society without a state where

administration is simply the organisation of things.

The nature of labour will change. Instead of the agony of toil, brutality and mental degradation which capitalism imposes, labour will become something freely given. It will lose its alienated character, which capitalist relations enforce, and become an expression of human ability and a connection to social humanity. Labour will become, as Marx notes, life's prime need.

In communist society the freedom of each is the condition of the freedom of all. Society will inscribe on its banners:

*"From each according to their ability, to each according to their needs."*¹

The future communist society will be the start of real human history. How can we progress from today's capitalist society to communism?

Period of Transition

Marx argues that for humanity to pass from capitalist society to communist there needs to be a period of transition. This will consist of a political revolution in which political power passes to the working class in a lower stage of communism which will, in due course, lead to full communism as described above.

The capitalist system is a global one and production relations are dominated by the law of value which is likewise global. This system does not allow islands of communism to exist within it, consequently revolution must occur before any thoroughgoing communist measures can be implemented. This does not, of course, exclude local communistic measures during the revolutionary period. For example in areas under control of revolutionaries rents, mortgages and debts can be abolished and free transport, electricity, water, health, education and other services introduced.

Capitalist society has carried out the material tasks which are historically necessary for the construction of communist society. In particular it has developed a global proletariat, the class which will bring about communist society, and developed the forces of production to the extent that they can sustain a communist world.

We argue that the new society must be controlled by a system of workers councils democratically controlled and delegating representatives to higher bodies. The capitalist state needs to be abolished and a proletarian power created. This can only be, as Marx states in the "Critique of the Gotha Programme" the **revolutionary** dictatorship of the proletariat.

"Revolutionary" in that it is abolishing the remnants of capitalism and instituting communism. It is a transitional power in that it will only exist so long as classes exist in transitional society. The existence of residual classes and class interests gives transitional society its dynamic. It is moving to a resolution of these conflicting interests.

Theory

Communist society must, however, develop out of capitalist society. As Marx points out in his "Critique of the Gotha Programme":

*"What we have to deal with here is a communist society, not as it has developed on its own foundations, but, on the contrary, just as it emerges from capitalist society; which is thus in every respect, economically, morally and intellectually, still stamped with the birth marks of the old society from whose womb it emerges."*²

It is for this reason that a transitional period, in which a lower form of communist operates, is required. In broad outline the measures which we envisage in a transitional period are as follows:

- Means of production need to be converted from class property into social property and production changed to social production.
- The means of consumption need to be centralised through the workers councils and distribution organised through a system of local cooperatives.
- Everyone is to be integrated into productive work but it should be noted that work in the transitional society is not wage labour but social labour.
- The working day should be shortened and disposable labour time created. This time should be used for developing the abilities and potential of people.
- Non-proletarian strata need to be integrated into productive work. A successful revolution will inherit a world, probably devastated by war, in which a significant minority of the population stand in opposition to any attempt to create a communist world. Antagonistic class interests will still exist. Under capitalism masses of people are involved in useless or socially harmful work. Sectors such as finance, insurance, advertising, defence, state functionaries etc. will need to be abolished and those people affected integrated into socially useful labour. In addition the petit bourgeoisie, and the peasantry need to be encouraged to collectivise and socialise production.
- Money needs to be abolished and an exchange system based on labour time vouchers introduced. These are discussed below.
- Production should be planned for human needs and human development.

Labour time vouchers are a transitional measure. They will not circulate and will have a limited exchange period so they cannot be accumulated. Marx, in his "Critique of the Gotha Programme" describes the system as follows:

"He (the worker) receives a certificate from society that he has furnished such and such an amount of labour (after deducting his labour for the common funds), and with this certificate he draws from the social stock of the means of consumption as much as the amount of labour costs."

The same amount of labour he has given to society in one form he received back in another.”³

Labour time vouchers are also a means of undermining capitalist production. Profits, dividends, interest and market speculation will disappear. Since the vouchers do not circulate they are not, as Marx notes, a type of money, and since they cannot be accumulated they cannot form a store of value for restarting capitalist accumulation. They represent a break with wage labour. As Marx points out, this system will not produce distribution according to needs but this is an inevitable defect as the new society emerges from capitalism.

Labour time vouchers have been criticised as still being a system of exchange, a disguised value system on which state capitalism can be erected. Marx had himself criticised Proudhon and the Ricardian socialists for their advocacy of labour time vouchers as a replacement of money, but his criticism was based on the fact that they advocated their use as a method of altering the distribution of the social product while leaving the method of production unchanged. Relations of production remained capitalist and the products remained commodities. Since the relations of distribution are determined by the relations of production, as Marx repeatedly points out, this means that such attempts to alter distribution were bound to fail. In his *“Critique of the Gotha Programme”* Marx is advocating distribution of the social product by labour time vouchers as a temporary measure put in place at the same time as the relations of production are being revolutionised. Capital is expropriated and becomes socialised property which makes the product of the socialised sector a social product. As the process of socialisation advances products can be distributed freely.

The labour time voucher, however, is a receipt for useful activity a recognition of partnership in the social productive process. Marx admits it is not a just system of distribution as all labour is reduced to abstract labour measured by time and it takes no account of the needs of individual workers. Only in the higher phase of communist society can distribution be completely according to need.

What we are dealing with is a transitional period not a transitional mode of production or a transitional social formation which is stable.

The Dissenters

A lot of the arguments over the period of transition have been informed by what occurred in Russia after the revolution of 1917. However, there has never in history been a period of transition anywhere. The lessons from the Russian Revolution are almost entirely negative as far as the period of transition is concerned. Developments in Russia in the years following 1917 were not in any sense a period of transition. The relations of production were capitalist in 1917 and remain capitalist to this day. Wage labour was never abolished.

The Russian revolution was a political revolution premised on the fairly rapid support from revolutions in the industrial heartlands of Europe, most notably Germany. When the European revolutions were crushed the Bolsheviks proceeded to construct state capitalism in Russia. This was accompanied by an enormous theoretical muddying of the waters. Initially Lenin declared that:

State-monopoly capitalism is a complete material preparation for socialism, the threshold of socialism, a rung on the ladder of history between which and

Theory

the rung called socialism there are no intermediate rungs”⁴

This was, of course, the standard view of the Second and Third Internationals. It was also, of course, expected that carrying out measures to create monopoly state capitalism was the task of the bourgeois revolution not the proletarian one. It was not long, however, before state monopoly capitalism was baptised as “Socialism” or the lower form of Communism and the party and state were mobilised in its creation. By 1922 the Supreme Council of the Economy (VSNKh) was complaining;

“The cost of labour power is in absolute and relative terms is far too high.”⁵

This is not simply an admission that the category of labour power existed in Russia, which implies the existence of capital, it is also the familiar complaint of the bourgeoisie down the ages that capitalist profits and capitalist accumulation can only be achieved if wages are lower. It illustrates that, as Marx noted in his “Preface to the Critique of Political Economy”, social relations of production determine the superstructure of society. Capitalist relations of production in Russia were engendering a new bourgeois class centred on the Bolshevik Party and the state. A class which was committed to rapid accumulation of capital by means of the proletarianisation of the peasantry in a frenetic drive to catch up with the West.

All the above can no longer be hidden, but despite this, the idea that state capitalism is a transitional measure still has wide currency and has coloured the discussion on the Period of Transition.

To clarify the issue further we wish to examine 3 political organisations or currents which dismiss the need for a Period of Transition; the Socialist Party of Great Britain, The Marxist Humanist Initiative and the Communisation tendency.

Socialist Party of Great Britain (SPGB)

The SPGB’s views on the period of transition have been explained in a recent book called “The Alternative to Capitalism.”⁶

Following a clear description of communist society the SPGB argue that this society can be achieved without a period of transition. They see the period of transition as primarily concerned with developing the productive powers of society. They argue that these have been developed so extensively by capitalism since 1875 that all of Marx’s prescriptions in his Critique of the Gotha Programme are now obsolete.

“Nothing is more ridiculous than to repeat the stale formulae of over a hundred years ago and to ignore the immense developments in the techniques of producing wealth which capitalism has brought about.”⁷

The influence of the Russian experience, however, is evident in that their principle argument is that state capitalism is not a transitional mode of production. They quote the Trotskyist, E Mandel who claims a period of transition is necessary to increase productive forces because of scarcity and in this period consumer goods will still be commodities. Leninism, they argue, sees a gradual evolution from state capitalism to socialism

which they correctly point out is impossible.

They also point out that a gradual transition from capitalism to communism is impossible because of the different forms which wealth takes in the two societies, exchange value as against use value. Wealth, they claim, is a totality and can only be produced as exchange value or use value. The change can only take place as a rupture.

The transition period, however, is not principally about increasing the productive powers of society. The real problems such as integrating non proletarian strata into social production are not considered. This is presumably because they regard present society as consisting almost entirely of workers. Capitalism and socialism, they explain, are all or nothing systems. They cannot coexist.

“The route to socialism has to be direct; as a moneyless, classless, stateless world community, socialism has to be achieved immediately, or not at all.”⁸

While admitting there will be a need for “temporary measures” there is no explanation of how this immediate transcending can be done. The general answer which the SPGB provides is that after winning a parliamentary election they would, legislate or decree the socialisation of capital, the abolition of the state, the ending of money, the ending of countries and the free distribution of products in a massive rupture. How would such a rupture be enforced in the face of inevitable resistance by the bourgeois class? Clearly not through the state which has been abolished. The SPGB answer that such questions are illegitimate, since the conscious majority of the population had elected them to parliament to carry out such a programme, and would not prevent them implementing it. The argument is a circular one in which the conclusion is contained in its premise.

They assume a level of revolutionary consciousness which could only be achieved by the proletariat during a revolution, not a bourgeois election campaign. As Marx says in the German Ideology:

“Both for the production on a mass scale of this communist consciousness ... the alteration of men on a mass scale is necessary, an alteration which can only take place in a practical movement, a revolution; the revolution is necessary, therefore, not only because the ruling class cannot be overthrown in any other way, but also because the class overthrowing it can only in a revolution succeed in ridding itself of all the muck of ages and become fitted to found society anew.”⁹

The rejection of a period of transition is part and parcel of an utterly utopian programme for the achievement of socialism.

Marxist Humanist Initiative

Another grouping which has taken up the issue of the period of transition is the “Marxist Humanist Initiative.” Andrew Kliman outlined their position in a talk called “The Incoherence of “Transitional Society” as a Marxian Concept” at a lecture given to the “Workers and Punks University” in Ljubljana Slovenia.

Theory

Like the SPGB the initial target of his criticism is the notion that state capitalism is a transitional economic system leading to socialism, and again goes back to what happened in Russia post 1917. He examines a book by E Preobrazhensky published in 1926 called *"The New Economics,"* which argues that the Russian economy was part socialist and part capitalist. The socialist part being that controlled by the state in which production is planned. Preobrazhensky called for the expansion of this sector by *"primitive socialist accumulation"* which meant savage exploitation of the peasantry. At this time Preobrazhensky¹⁰ was a theoretician of the Trotskyist left opposition group which was calling for rapid industrialisation rather than accommodation with the peasantry enshrined in the New Economic Policy adopted in 1921. When in 1928 Stalin adopted a policy of forced collectivisation of the peasantry and break-neck industrialisation the left opposition considered Stalin had adopted their policy and dissolved itself. Kliman clearly shows that for capitalist relations to disappear the mode of production has to change, and that a change in the formal ownership of capital does not change capitalist social relations. State capitalism remains capitalism not socialism and cannot, therefore, be a transition to socialism.

The brunt of his criticism is, however, directed at the notion of a "transitional society" which Preobrazhensky accepts without question. He ridicules the idea that different modes of production could co-exist in a transitional society. What is the mode of production in such a society, he asks. Is there a third type of society between capitalism and socialism? He admits he can envisage a period of instability and a state of flux in the change from capitalist to socialist production, and will admit the need for a transition period but not a transitional society.

Kliman uses the basic Marxist axiom that the economic infrastructure determines the superstructure throughout his lecture. Changes in political and legal forms and consciousness are produced by changes in the economic foundation of society, not vice-versa.

"... The division of society into classes is rooted in the mode of production. So the transition from the capitalist state to the socialist non-state is intelligible, as a Marxian concept, because this transition is based on and corresponds to the revolutionary transformation of the mode of production."¹¹

While all this is generally true in the longer historical view, the practical question of how the mode of production is transformed is not addressed. The fact that a significant minority of the population will oppose such a transformation and will lose their means of existence because of it, all of which will require measures for integrating these people into the new society is not considered. A transition period means a period of time. While it is true that communism cannot coexist with capitalism for a long period in the way that capitalism could co-exist with feudalism, some sort of hybrid society must exist during this time. It is an unstable society in flux, subject to change carried through by a revolutionary proletarian dictatorship. The new society must develop out of the old, and it must be created by the actions of men and women. This can only occur through the will of people whose consciousness is not directly determined by infrastructure of society in the way that Kliman suggests. Consciousness is an indirect product of the infrastructural basis of society, a product mediated by social and historical factors. If this was not the case revolutionary change would be quite impossible. As Marx says in the 3rd thesis on Feuerbach:

“The coincidence of the changing of circumstances and of human activity or self-changing can be conceived and rationally understood only as revolutionary practice.”

Communisation

A current theory which also opposes the need for a period of transition and has gained in popularity in recent years is that of “communisation.” This theory has been developed by groups who developed out of the events of 1968 to 1975, some of whom came out of the Situationist International or were influenced by the publication “Invariance” whose leading theoretician was J Camatte¹². Behind a lot of this theorising is the suspicion that a period of transition will lead to a repeat of the Russian experience and the construction of state capitalism. Dauvé and Nestic of the group *Troploin*, for example, complain that “Leninists” forgot about Marx’s objective of abolishing wage labour, and their sole concern was running a planned economy.

In general instituting a period of transition is seen as a recipe for counter-revolution. Instead they demand that the revolution should immediately establish communism. Bruno Astarian, in a recent essay stated:

“The goal of proletarian revolution no longer consists in establishing a transitional society but in directly establishing communism”¹³

However not all the communisation theorists agree on why this is so, and in what follows we will try to extract what we consider to be the most important elements of the theory.

The groups supporting communisation have, generally, tried to provide an historical basis for it. They reject the notion of the material decadence of the capitalist mode of production as claimed by the Comintern. They look instead to the distinction between “formal” and “real” subordination, or subsumption as it is often called, of the labour process by capital. During the period of “formal” subordination the reproduction of the working class was not, they claim, totally integrated in the capitalist cycle. During this period it was therefore possible for the working class to assert its interests as a class within capitalism. However, with the transition to “real” subordination the reproduction of the working class becomes totally integrated within the capitalist cycle. At the same time it becomes irreversibly fragmented and its reproduction becomes increasingly difficult. This transformation of the character of the class relation, so the argument goes, causes the proletariat to question its own existence as a class, and thus the capitalist mode of production, and consequently puts communism on the historical agenda.

Camatte sees the period 1914 to 1945 as the period in which subordination passed from “formal” to “real.” 1945 he claims, represented a counter-revolution. *Theorie Communiste* (TC) have proposed a more involved periodisation in which “real” subsumption, as they call it, is divided into two phases. Formal subsumption ends around 1900; the first phase of “real” subsumption lasts to the 1970s and the second phase continues to the present. TC see the period 1974-95 as a counter-revolution. By freeing the movement of capital, breaking national labour markets, privatisation of welfare, neo-liberalism etc. capital has transformed the nature of the class relationship. The proletariat becomes internal to capitalism. This, they argue, has caused the labour movement to become useless to the proletariat. The proletariat’s existence as a class within capitalism becomes precarious and questionable. All this makes communisation a possibility.

Theory

During the period of “formal” subordination the labour movement could assert the interests of the working class as a class within capitalism; that is to say as one pole in the labour/capital relationship. With the transition to “real” subordination, or for TC the second phase of “real” subordination this becomes impossible. All that is possible is the abolition of the proletariat as a class and the abolition of class society. It is from this premise that their criticism of the period of transition stems.

They see the task of integration of non-proletarian strata into socially useful work, which the period of transition sets itself, as a demand to generalise the condition of the proletariat to everyone in a republic of labour. It is therefore an assertion of the proletariat as one pole of the labour/capital relationship. Capitalism can never be abolished while one pole of the capital/labour relationship exists and generalisation of the proletarian condition can never do away with capitalism. It will reappear in some form or other. Instead the proletariat must abolish itself. How can this be done?

They see the traditional Marxist view of the period of transition as being one in which the political revolution is made first and then implementation of communist measures follow as a recipe for failure. Instead they demand immediate communist measures during, or even before, the revolution itself. Describing communisation theory the journal *End Notes* comments:

“Thus whereas communism had previously been seen as something which needed to be created after the revolution the revolution was now seen as nothing other than the production of communism (abolishing wage labour and the state).”¹⁴

Communist measures, therefore, need to be implemented from the first stages of the revolutionary struggle even before the conquest of power.

The struggle of the working class needs to be simultaneously against capital and labour. Only this can herald the abolition of classes and the appearance of a universal class.

Also they argue that the law of value cannot be progressively destroyed, it must therefore be destroyed immediately. From this we would conclude that we are dealing with a fairly rapid transformation but “Troploin” informs us that the transformation from capitalism to communism will span decades or even generations:

“... there will be a transition in the sense that communism will not be achieved overnight. But there will not be a transition period ... a period which is no longer capitalist but not yet communist.”¹⁵

Some Preliminary Comments

The theory of formal and real subordination which appears to serve as the theoretical premise of communisation is questionable. Marx does speak of formal and real subordination of the labour process but relates this to the extraction of surplus value, formal subordination being associated with extraction of absolute surplus value and real subordination with that of relative surplus value. The communisateurs do not appear to have given their theory a material basis which distinguishes the formal from the real.

They say that in “real” subsumption the reproduction of labour power is fully integrated into the capitalist economy. However, was this not always the case once the connection with the land was lost? What do the reproduction schemes in Volume 2 of Capital show if not that the reproduction of labour power takes place entirely within the capitalist economy? The theory seems more descriptive of intellectual and cultural subordination, and applies principally to workers in the older core capitalist countries. Bruno Astarian states:

“Capital has seized all of life to the point where, whatever you do, you are always on its property.”¹⁶

The theory does not seem to describe the lot of workers in the peripheral countries. The irreversible fragmentation of the working class, which the communisateurs observe, is primarily a development in the core capitalist countries as a consequence of globalisation. In the peripheral countries massive concentrations of workers in large factories, remain. In addition the size of the global proletariat is increasing as predicted in Marxist theory. In what sense, we ask, are workers in peripheral countries such as China or South Africa “really” “subsumed” by capital when they are often first generation proletarians and are able to return to the countryside during capitalist downturns or long strikes, such as the recent platinum miners’ strike in South Africa?

What needs to be explained is how “real” subsumption can make the working class see the need to struggle to abolish itself as a class. How can a class, which exists within capitalist society, struggle to abolish itself rather than assert its needs as a class. To demand this is to expect the working class to act outside the parameters of historical materialism. As long as it exists within capitalist society the working class can only struggle to defend its interests and reproduce itself within the circle of this society. This must mean affirming its class interests within capitalism. It will surely have to do this until capitalist society suffers complete breakdown. Such a breakdown will itself have been precipitated by class struggle for demands within capitalist society. At this point the question of an alternative society and the abolition of itself as a class can arise, but this is an outcome of struggle for interests within capitalism. How such a struggle can result from “real” subsumption has not been explained. The key question which looms behind this theorising is whether the communisateurs still regard the working class, which they see as “irreversibly fragmented” and whose reproduction is “fully integrated” within capitalism, as the **subject** of the revolution. It is a short step from *real* domination to *real* integration. Camatte, for example, took this step and finally saw the working class as an aspect of capital unable to supersede its situation and abandoned Marxism altogether.¹⁷

The criticism, which the communisateurs make, of the integration of all into socially useful work during the period of transition, appears based on the confusion of socially useful work with wage labour. During the transitional period the means of production are becoming social property and their products therefore social products. Work is becoming an activity rather than forced labour. Workers are no longer alienated from their labour and its product. Integration into useful work is a step towards the integration of all into a human community. The rejection of work which is so frequently demanded by the communisateurs would undermine any attempt to build a new society. As Marx notes all social formations must require labour:

“Just as the savage must wrestle with nature to satisfy his wants, to maintain and reproduce life, so must civilised man, and he must do so in all social formations and under all possible modes of production.”¹⁸

Theory

The point is to convert labour into a social activity in which men and women express their talents so that work becomes a human need instead of alienated toil.

The demand for immediate socialisation, which the communisateurs make, takes no account of the fact that the new society will arise out of capitalism and will still have many defects of capitalist society. The fact that it must develop out of revolution and civil war is not really addressed. Some of the publications give the impression that communisation can take place without revolution. B Astarian, quoted above, speaks of local initiatives seizing capitalist property and distributing it free to assure its own survival, then resuming production with free distribution. Such things could only take place after the destruction of the bourgeois state power, they will not in themselves destroy state power.

After the revolution remnants of classes will still exist and will fight to regain their lost privileges. Marx's description of a lower phase of communism which takes account of this still appears to us as correct. Many communist measures will be implemented fairly rapidly in the lower stage of communism. For example, socialisation of the means of production, abolition of money, the institution of labour time vouchers, free distribution of services, free transport, shortening the working day etc. So far these measures sound very like communisation but do not, of course, include abolition of the state.

The political power, the dictatorship of the proletariat, will be the workers councils. It will enforce transitional measures, such as socialisation of all capitalist property, and distribution of social product, and to dissolve the remnants of capitalist classes into humanity in general. This cannot be done overnight! Only when classes no longer exist will the need for the political power disappear and the "state itself wither away".

Conclusion

The theoretical conclusions of Marx and Engels regarding the need for a transitional period remain correct despite 140 years of capitalist development since the "Critique of the Gotha Programme" was written. This development has reduced the numbers of the industrial proletariat as a proportion of the total population in the core capitalist countries, but in the peripheral countries, however, the opposite has occurred. Globally the weight of the proletariat has increased.

This working class remains the subject of the revolutionary change from capitalism to communism. Disillusion with the working class' failure to make the revolution from 1871 to 1968 does not mean it is integrated into capitalism as implied in the theory of "real" subsumption. The working class remains the only class able to overthrow capitalism and construct a communist world and cannot be integrated into the system since it is in an antagonistic relationship to capital.

As has been pointed out, many of the objections to the period of transition still have their roots in the rejection of state capitalism as a transitional mode of production, but also, along with this a rejection of a role for an autonomous class political party. Both are viewed as "Leninism". The political party of the working class, however, has a key role to play both in the process of the development of revolutionary consciousness and in the revolutionary period itself⁹.

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Notes

- 1 Karl Marx *Critique of the Gotha Programme*.
- 2 Karl Marx *Critique of the Gotha Programme* p.15
- 3 K Marx *Critique of the Gotha Programme*.
- 4 V Lenin *The impending catastrophe and how to combat it*. <http://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1917/ichtci/11.htm#v25zz99h-360>
- 5 See S Pirani *The Russian Revolution in Retreat 1920 -1924* p. 193
- 6 See A Buick & J Crump *The alternative to capitalism*
- 7 A Buick & J Crump *The alternative to capitalism* p. 89
- 8 A Buick & J Crump *The alternative to capitalism* p. 92
- 9 K Marx *The German Ideology* p. 94
- 10 Preobrazhensky was shot without trial, confession or ceremony in 1939
- 11 See <http://www.marxisthumanistinitiative.org/alternatives-to-capital/video-the-incoherence-of-transitional-society.html>
- 12 See Capital and Community" <http://marxists.org/>
- 13 Bruno Astarian *Communistisation as a way out of the crisis*. <http://libcom.org/library/communization-way-out-crisis-bruno-astarian>
- 14 *End Notes* 1 p. 13
- 15 *Communistisation* Giles Dauvé and Karl Nestic p. 11
- 16 B. Astarian op. cit.
- 17 Theorists of the Frankfurt School such as Adorno and Marcuse saw the working class as fully integrated into capitalism and looked to other sections of society for a force to overthrow capitalism.
- 18 K Marx *Capital* Volume 3 Chapter 48
- 19 For an elaboration of this important issue, see our pamphlet *Class Consciousness and Communist Organisation* (£4 including postage from CWO address).

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Beyond Bordigism and the Fraction

The following translation is from the penultimate chapter of *Bordiga: Beyond the Myth*, a collection of writings by Onorato Damen. This article is from the last decade of his life and is historically interesting for giving various arguments in defence of the founding and development of the Internationalist Communist Party (PCInt) in 1943. Its main target is naturally the Bordigist current which originally left the PCInt in 1952 before fragmenting into numerous splinters in the years that followed. Damen was always prepared to engage politically with anyone, including the Bordigists (it was they who refused to have anything to do with a party which they considered “activist”) and this article is no exception as he engages with a split from a split in Bordigism. His argument is thus not motivated by mere self-justification but was made to mend “the broken framework of the internationalist communist movement”. In 1972 this was once again a possibility and was to lead, five years later to the calling of the International Conferences (1977-80) out of which eventually emerged the IBRP (1984) which became the Internationalist Communist Tendency.

For Damen the main issue is always the relationship between party and class and he writes at length on this so we will add no more. For us the historically interesting issues are the question of electoralism and the unions. In this article he gives a clear outline of the issues. On the question of standing in elections Damen makes it clear that this is always a tactical issue and not one of principle. Indeed he was always critical of Bordiga putting abstentionism before communism in the period leading up to the formation of the Communist Party of Italy in 1921. Putting a tactic before your real goal made no sense to him and was indicative of a certain mechanical way of thinking that Bordiga constantly employed. For Bordiga the corruption of the old Socialist Party was due to its parliamentary orientation. This may have been true but from there to seek to exclude any possibility of using elections was to perhaps cut off possible supporters who only disagreed over the tactic. And as Damen pointed out elsewhere, Bordiga then not only abandoned abstentionism to join the Third International, but in his proposal to make the 21 Conditions mandatory for all parties wishing to enter the Third International made acceptance of electoralism mandatory! Damen though saw that electoralism after the Second World War was now largely impossible but did not exclude its use in exceptional circumstances. As he says here the only time that the Internationalist Communist Party found that it was worthwhile to participate in elections was in 1948. The Italian Republic had just come into existence two years earlier with the referendum abolishing the monarchy and this was the first election proper to be held. Only parties registering candidates had the right to a platform in each town and in the struggle against the Stalinists this was one way that the Party could reach thousands, if not millions of workers. As Damen states, this was not to win votes (they actually called for abstention in the election!)¹. It was also as he says a one off situation which gave the Party the chance to extend its influence inside the working class at a time when the period of post-war reconstruction had not yet begun.

The second issue is the question of the unions. From the beginning Damen and his closest comrades in the Internationalist Communist Party had concluded that the unions were now integrated into the capitalist state. Usually Mauro (Stefanini) was the spokesman on this issue but he spoke for Damen too. In the split between the Internationalist Communist Party and the Bordigists this was one of the key issues. The latter still were very confused and considered it possible to win positions in the unions. Damen and his comrades considered that though they had to be members of unions to be close to the class they should try to form organisations which tried to go beyond their manoeuvres on the economic level as well as insert a political

agenda into the daily struggle of the class. These were the internationalist factory groups and were intended to ensure that there was a constant dialogue between the revolutionary internationalists of the PCInt and the class as a whole. This was yet one more issue that separated the PCInt from the Bordigists who never really understood how the role of unions had changed. It was an issue which was to lead to further splits in the Bordigist camp (even before Bordiga died).

Finally, a word on “Leninism”. Damen uses the term as did Bordiga, to refer to the successful Bolshevik experience of October 1917. For them it was the equivalent of “revolutionary”. What he was identifying was the role the Bolsheviks played in the development of the revolutionary class consciousness of the working class. Today the term is more controversial and more often used by those who are critical of the role the Bolsheviks played in the counter-revolution in which the party substituted itself for the class and imposed a new state authority. Damen was fully in agreement that this should not be repeated and one of the hallmarks of the 1952 Platform was the statement that

“At no time and for no reason should the proletariat surrender its role in the struggle. It should not delegate its historical mission to others or transfer its power to other – not even its own political party”.

You Can't Build the Party Playing with Paradoxes

(from *Prometeo* 18 first half 1972)

A couple of words of clarification on the theoretical-political platform published by some French comrades based round the initiative “*Parti de Classe*”.²

In the line with the historic continuity of the “Italian Left” the formation of the Internationalist Communist Party in Italy represented the logical and necessary outcome of the Fraction. In the final phases of the Second World War the Fraction could not just re-form, faced as it was with new and more complex tasks that had to be addressed.

In this line of continuity the Fraction was a passing moment between the party experience of the “Italian Left”, the Party of Imola and Livorno with its final historical affirmation in the “Committee of Agreement” (Comitato d’Intesa) through to its reconstruction as the Internationalist Communist Party (1943). This formed the only theoretical and organisational basis for any possibility of rebuilding the revolutionary party of the international proletariat.

Building the party once again was possible in the historical phase of the collapse of fascism, which occurred concomitantly with a wider collapse, that of a socio-political and military front in the Second World War within which Fascist Italy was one of the most important pillars. The same operation would not have been possible at the time of the Fraction unless except by some slide into idealism and spontaneism and because the necessary objective and subjective conditions to generate its transformation into the party did not exist, not even in the slightest degree. Historically, the “Italian Left” was not and could not be, or embody, a “Belgian Left” or a hypothetical “Franco-Belgian Left”.

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We don't need not cling to an indefensible thesis built on "*more geometrico*"³ and formal logic to undertake a review of the events that led to the formation of the Internationalist Communist Party (PCInt). Sometimes, a mistaken theoretical premise, or at least one not based on Marxist methodology, does not lead to constructive criticism which, in itself, is always useful, but to its opposite: the slippery slope towards degeneration.

Let's make the real issue clear.

The "Italian Left", despite the ups and downs of its experience, never theorised that the party could only come into existence in a revolutionary period, and that it should dissolve itself and reduce its tasks to that of a fraction in a counter-revolutionary period: was the Communist Party of Italy, created at Livorno under the ideological and political pressure of the "Italian Left", not founded in a period of growing counter-revolution?

The experience of the Italian Communists during the Fascist period, with the shift of the party to underground work, is typical in this respect: In that period not only was the problem of continuity and contacting the masses solved, but also the training of new cadres, who could, of course, strengthen the Stalinist organisation⁴, but proportionally, could also have been used to expand the area of influence of the "Italian Left". (It should be borne in mind in this connection that the exclusion from the party of Damen, Fortichiari and Repossi, which took place in 1933, was precisely because these comrades were working to rebuild the Left fraction).

But a closer examination of the document reveals its most specious argument, and that is about the relationship between party and class. When it postulates that "the reconstruction of the proletariat as a class, that is, in a class political party" it is fully in line with a Marxist interpretation if it is saying that there can be no revolutionary class without a class party which comes from within the class itself, but the postulate becomes a joke if it maintains that the party is useless when the class is temporarily a prisoner of opportunism and counter-revolutionary forces.

This type of identity between party and class is undialectical. It is mechanically conceived and has all the seriousness and consistency of a purely intellectual exercise.

The class as a whole, in its daily work and in the long history of its struggles has never gone beyond corporatist limits, beyond the stimulus of demands; trades union consciousness of the class has never become conscious of its historic goal as a revolutionary class: the battles, revolts, and insurrections which punctuate the long road of the workers' movement have never been transformed through their own virtues into moments of revolutionary assault of the entire proletariat against the capitalist system as a whole.

From here arises the historic, permanent function of the revolutionary class party which has to carry out the task of theoretical elaboration, preparation of cadres, and act as the scientific laboratory of the class to spur and guide the process towards the historic objective of seeing the proletariat constituted as the dominant class.

To assign this task of self-sufficiency to the class in a pre-revolutionary period, as well as confining the

building of the party to the period of the assault on power, where the consciousness of the masses is still mainly instinctive, even if its violence breaks the structures of the class enemy, means abandoning revolutionary Marxist methodology for metaphysical thinking. The latter replaces concrete, scientific data derived from economic and social reality with an ideological construct.

And this brings us to the critical comments on the formation of the Internationalist Communist Party which are made by the comrades of *Parti de Classe*, which nevertheless refers to our experience (though it is appropriate) as something on which to draw out lessons and prospects for the construction, in their country, of the Internationalist Communist Party.

They write:

“Outside and against the erroneous and voluntarist attempt by Trotskyists to build a new international “born of the worst defeat”, the Left showed that the duty of revolutionaries was not to attempt major practical tasks (which belong to revolutionary times), but to maintain the thread of continuity, not so much in organisational (in the narrowest sense) as theoretical terms. But activism, an attitude then subjectively false in an objectively unfavourable situation imagines that the current situation can be changed not by objective economic factors (the end of the period of capitalist reconstruction), but through activity of a febrile character whose example would bring about a new revolutionary process. It is with this intention (despite some reservations) that in the midst of the democratic orgy (the intervention of the United States, the Anti-fascist Italian Committee of National Liberation) and despite the complete absence of the proletariat as a revolutionary class in 1943, that the Internationalist Communist Party of Italy, an artificial organisation whose practice we can say has always been inversely proportional to their theoretical effort, was proclaimed.”

“At first, there was the illusion that the revolutionary party might not be ready in the immediate post-war situation because it was considered that the “war-revolution” schema where the victorious revolution of October 1917 was the outcome, would not fail, once again, to reproduce its essential lines in a militarily defeated, economically ruined, Fascist Italy. This schema could not be discounted since it was for this that the organisation was proclaimed – but because it did not try to gradually build itself: it had to be present and available immediately – this not only did not recur, we had exactly the opposite.”

“The “party” of 1943, born not of the deep contradictions of capital, but of some surface wrinkles of its re-accumulation process in the period of reconstruction, gradually saw a reduction in the number of its militants, losing after 1948 all Marxist justification for its immediate existence.”

Our Activism

It's easy to see we are dealing here with an extremely hostile presentation in which it is obvious that adherence to certain positions typical of the “Italian Left”, taken to the extremes of formalism can provide convenient cover for a deep but inarticulate critique of the Leninism that was and will continue to be the Leninism of the “Italian Left” which, in its most productive years and as a consequence of its activity, was total.

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For the rest, there is also the *vexata quaestio*⁵ (but not too much of the truth) of participation in elections and revolutionary parliamentarism which has also been prudently extinguished; that is to say, reduced to a tactical moment. This was badly understood by some epigones, subsequently won over by the left, who then brought to the fore the issue of the theoretical immutability of abstentionism. But even those positions have, in this specific case, a short life, and it is no surprise that the much vaunted “*invariance*” was ultimately reduced to a pile of shifting variations which brought ridicule to what was more serious in the inheritance of the “Italian Left”.

For us, the October Revolution is an undeniable fact that presupposes a Bolshevik party, that is to say that Lenin’s party should be considered as a historical precedent and an ideal model to follow; everything else offered to us by the later revisionist, and objectively anti-Leninist, culture arises from the psychology of defeat of the revolution and is most often a by-product of a sentimental aversion to Stalinism.

We said that Lenin’s party was the perfect model, the only successful one in the history of the revolutionary proletariat, and from which we draw the following:

1. The permanence and continuity of the party whose propaedeutic⁶ and revolutionary work is the stimulus without which the proletariat is unable to release the handbrake and go beyond the limits of a trade unionist and corporatist consciousness that it naturally tends towards.
2. It is necessary to critically retrace the positions taken by the “Italian left” from even the depths of the First World War to find the thread of its continuity, with the most significant steps being the Congress of Bologna (1920), the Congress of Livorno (1921), its leadership of the Communist Party of Italy until the dismissal of the Left leadership (1923), and the Committee of Agreement (Comitato d’Intesa) on the eve of the Congress of Lyon (1925-1926).

The Fraction, made up of the long serving and most effective cadres of the Left who had been the backbone of the Communist Party of Italy, were then regrouped around the “Committee of Agreement” to defend its majority political line against the leadership and its platform of opposition in the Congress of Lyons, against the new course imposed by the International. This fraction was therefore already a potential party.

In 1943, in the tumultuous and final phase of the Second World War, with the prospect of the collapse of a key sector of the war front, with the economic and political disintegration of fascism underway and the inevitable deterioration of the state structure, the basic and immediate task of the Communists was to work to create the most suitable tools for generating a favourable revolutionary outcome to the crisis. Lenin had acted in this way and achieved a favourable outcome, but he would have acted in the same way even if the result was not consistent with the immediate needs of the party. Not one of those who believed then in the need for the organisation of the party was mechanically fixed on seeing an exact repetition of the events experienced by Lenin before the Bolshevik October.

The views expressed by Comrade Perrone⁷ at the Turin Meeting (1946), which he later confirmed at the First Congress in Florence (1948), were open expressions of an entirely personal experience which contained perspectives based on a political fiction that it is unfair to refer if you want to make a valid criticism of

the formation of the Internationalist Communist Party. Similarly, it is quite arbitrary and not based on any serious Marxist research to ascribe the later numerical decrease of the party to objective causes and to errors of perspective, while not having the courage to deepen their analysis of the internal process of disintegration which was the result of the defence of the personal interests of one who was not ready for militant activity, and disagreed over the analysis of the nature of the Soviet economy, and the role of Internationalist Communist Party.⁸

This is the climate in which we took on the initiative of building the class party, and any reference to Lenin and the Bolshevik Party was, and remains, the only possible and valid one in history; a different assessment would have been impossible because of the reluctance that was common to all of us to tie our work to a theory unrelated to the material situation of the class struggle, lost in the clouds of a theoretical paradox like, for example, considering the party and the historical legitimacy of its existence as mechanically linked to the reconstruction of the proletariat as a class. Hence the totally idealistic attempt to identify the party and class, as when the objective of the “reconstruction of the proletariat as a class, that is to say, in a class political party ...” is posed. This is intellectual sophistry that appears brilliant in its mathematical certainty, but is completely baseless when it relates to the vicissitudes of the class struggle and the historic and ongoing role of the party which is linked to the ups and downs of these struggles. In this aspect, the Bordigist distinction between “historical party” and “formal party” is no less false because there never has been a case of a party as the bearer of theses, doctrine, programme and capacity for development of revolutionary theory, which lives in the stratosphere and does not find every day in the heart of the class struggle, the reasons for the theoretical elaboration and constant confirmation of its validity.

The fundamental problem, and the most difficult to solve for a revolutionary minority is the problem of its presence and of operating on a political platform for a whole historical period of capitalism, whatever the objective conditions, including those of war and a counter-revolution still in progress, to help the working class to rise from a consciousness of its immediate interests to a consciousness of being the historical class antagonist to capitalism.

The problem of the continuity of the party is not our invention, but it is the characteristic position of the “Italian Left.” Leaving aside what Bordiga infamously had written on this subject, we consider it useful to reproduce a significant passage from a statement prepared by the Executive Committee of the Left Fraction of the P.C.d’I August 1933

*“With Fascism victorious in Germany, events took a different path to that of world revolution, taking instead the road that could lead to war. The party does not cease to exist even after the death of the International. The party does not die, it betrays. The party is directly related to the process of class struggle, and is expected to continue its action, even when the International is dead. Thus, in case of war, when the International has disappeared from the political scene, the party exists and calls the proletariat to take up arms, not to transform the imperialist war into a civil war but to continue its own struggle even during the war ... “. (Excerpt from *Towards the Two and Three Quarters International ...?*)*

Bilan, Year I, No. 1).

We in the “Italian Left” who bear the responsibility for having formed the Internationalist Communist Party,

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even if we do not think we solved this problem, we are nevertheless conscious of being in the process of working towards solving it. We have done this with perseverance, tenacity and through our ongoing contact with the factories, paying attention to the daily problems of workers in order to translate them into class terms, through issuing the party press which gives constant nourishment to activists on a national scale, and in the factory groups which we are in the process of building.

But we are not worried about knowing, with mathematical precision, where the task of the fraction finished and how and when that of the party begins.

We lived through it all, we were the main instigators and we are proud to have done what we considered the right thing to do.

In this specific case, the Internationalist Communist Party has all its papers in good order: it has to its credit defined the capitalist nature of the Russian economy; openly denounced, in the middle of the Second World War, the imperialist role of Russia which is no different from the other belligerent States through its participation in the division of the world into spheres of economic and political influence; made a frontal attack on Stalinism as part of the global counter-revolution; struggled against the war and against the supporters of the anti-fascist national war movement, pointing out that it was in reality, a decisive factor in the strategy of U.S. imperialism and not an armed people's uprising against capitalism and imperialist war. Also to its credit, there is its open struggle, without tactical concessions, against the leadership of the Togliattian PCI, the Italian version of Stalinism. This poisoned the terrain of the working class forces emerging from the fascist war, already on the edge of being dragged into a new deception, that of the anti-fascist national war, a prelude to dragging the proletariat into the politics of economic reconstruction to resume the process of accumulation practically broken by the disastrous outcome of the war.

The Italian bourgeoisie owes above all (if not only) to the policy of Togliatti, and thus his party, the fact that the liquidation of fascism was largely limited to external appearances, and that the true essence of fascism, its nerve centres and essential structures passed safe and sound into the hands of the men and parties of the new Christian Democrat and Communist management, the two main pillars of the "resistance" and therefore the two biggest profiteers of the democratic-republican partyocracy.

Our party, strong in the best militants forged in the heat of ideological and political conflict at Imola and Livorno, or heirs of the Fraction; strong in the adhesion of large groups of partisans who had understood the real nature of partisanism, of whom everything could be asked except to lead the armed struggle in an anti-fascist rather than anti-capitalist direction; strong especially in the accession of young recruits committed to opposing imperialist war and the Stalinist mystification, forced the Togliatti leadership into a policy of provocations and blackmail to break and silence the only voice that at the time spoke in the language of the class and posed before the masses the only possible perspective for the proletariat, the socialist revolution.

The party's participation in the election campaign of 1948 has to be seen and understood in that context: it was not for electoral gains or even slavish application of the theses on revolutionary parliamentarism of the Second Congress of the International. There was only one goal at the bottom of the decision to be "participationists": inserting the party in the electoral mechanism was to enable the organisation to

conduct a major battle of political clarification; not to ask for votes but to have the opportunity to show the working masses, in the broadest possible way, the true face of the revolutionary party which the press and propaganda of Togliatti's party sought to defile with accusations and insinuations that it always failed to prove. The occasion was more conducive than ever to face the beast in its very lair⁹. In reality, the party has never been offered, neither before or after, the possibility to frontally and openly attack the Stalinist vulture in the factories, in the biggest industrial complexes, and on the streets, with the consequence of seeing the Stalinist front break every time and the alignment of the most politicised elements, and those most inclined to critical independence, with the internationalists.

This tactic may seem adventurous only to those looking at the party with the fixed eyes of the Fraction. In this regard, here is how the comrades of the "International Communist Left" expressed it

"Participation or not in elections is conditional and subject to the assumption that any tactic is justified only to the extent that, in any given situation, it helps to increase the political tension against capitalism. (From the Draft Outline of the Declaration of Principles for the International Bureau of the International Communist Left, 1946).

From a tactical point of view, the party was out in the open for the first time, and was engaged in the class war against the strongest and most dangerous fortress of the capitalist parliamentary democratic system.

Between a tactic which tends to bring the party out into the open and the opposite tactic of withdrawing from the game; between the development of the party and the reduction of the party to a fraction, we find the nub of the split of the party into two sections, which by a strange coincidence, then in fact became two parties.

And what is worse in this review of the events is the discovery that the split occurred at a time in the history of the labour movement when the conditions were favourable for expansion and consolidation of the revolutionary party. This is demonstrated in fact courtesy of the growing influence the two parties later had. It was the only political force in the Italian experience that embodied a tradition, a method, and a class platform of the revolutionary left which now has the task of patiently repairing the broken framework of internationalist unity. Moreover, disputes of theoretical, organisational and tactical issues, which had divided the two internationalist formations such as national revolutions, the nature of the Russian economy, the nature and role of the union in the imperialist epoch, are now behind us in the sense that two decades of experience have pushed the 1952 dissidents back to the original positions of the "Italian Left."

The Unions and Leninist Teaching

And we come now to the union question, the *punctum dolens*¹⁰ of the minority of the French revolutionary left. The French group "*Parti de Classe*" to which we dedicate this note, start from a critical premise about the entryist tactic (it presupposes a different and opposing way of seeing the nature of the union in the imperialist phase) we consider fair and which coincides with the position that our party has always supported, but it concludes with indications for tactics towards the unions that leave us surprised and greatly perplexed.

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In this group too, the tendency to avoid the Leninist teaching on how Communists work with unions which are integrated into the system, is also alive.

Moving away from the line drawn by Lenin's work involves, in every way, a vertical drop into the void. It is also somewhat surprising that a movement that claims to uphold Marxist methodology and is in the tradition of "Italian Left" addresses the union problem in terms of a certainty that is matched only by the simplicity of its formulation.

"Tactically – these comrades write – the revolutionary party, instead of trying to vainly extend its influence in unions integrated into the capitalist system should instead exercise it in informal economic organisations that are created more or less spontaneously by workers – and even encourage – and transform them into vehicles of its slogans. Otherwise, this would introduce confusion among the workers and lead them to believe that the official unions organisations belong to them or may be captured by them provided a Red leadership seizes them."

"The mobilisation of the proletarian forces will no longer be in the official unions, but outside of them and against them."

The polemical argument that these comrades are conducting against the deformation of the policy on the unions as it has been understood and applied by the comrades of *Programma Comunista* about which we agree, does not here concern us because, contrary to the belief of the *Parti de Classe* comrades, we do not recognise that group as the exclusive interpreter of the "Italian Left" tradition. Unless you want to consider Comrade Bordiga as we knew him before and after Livorno, before and after the Second World War, as the personification of this current. Thus the comrades of *Parti de Classe* are invited to send their critical analysis of the political line followed by the one section of the Left, ours, whose members were the initiators and organisers of the constitution of the "Committee of Intesa (Committee of Understanding or Agreement)" (1925) which aimed to set in motion the defence of the current platform with an attack on opportunism; the same comrades who were the followers and leaders of the Fraction against its desired dissolution by Comrade Perrone when the Second World War broke out; those same members who, in 1933, were excluded and reported to the fascist police by the leaders of the PCI with the accusation that they were re-organising the "Left"; those same comrades who founded and developed the Internationalist Communist Party; finally, the very ones who, in order to defend the platform of the Left and its continuity, realised that they also had to break with the man who gave the Left, until 1926, the best of his theoretical and militant activity.

To return to the "union" problem, the best way to refute the criticism is to review the main aspects of what the party has done, and intends to do, consistent with the known position of the Left:

1. In the phase of imperialism and the planned economy, any planning would be impossible without the active consent of the unions. They have become in fact, on a par with the state and private entrepreneurs, guarantors of the success of the plan.

2. The unions, having reached the top of the economic and political state of which they feel a necessary and integral part, the only policy open to them is to work with it, by subordinating the protests of the working masses to the requirements of its plans and the realisation of greater profits. It is only on this condition, which is

offered by unions that have moved away from their historic task, that the plan is possible, and with it, the consolidation and the salvation of the system.

3. But the union leaders can only do this if the unionised masses are ready to submit to their political power. This demands a strategy that limits and reduces the threat of intervention of the masses. This is done through the bait of the rolling strike always being offered to them, to deal with their wider and more pressing economic and political demands. From this changing reality, the union, whatever its politics, draws the sustenance that defines its existence and its functionality, throughout the entire history of capitalism.

4. If the union apparatus is integrated into the system, the mass of workers they oversee are not, or at least not directly, and they, however, have never stopped fighting against a capitalism which exploits them, although they are as yet unable to exceed the limits of trade unionist and sectional demands. This is basically the same framework experienced by Marx, by Lenin, by ourselves, and consequently the unions of the Third International have brought nothing new in relation to the Social Democratic unions of the Second International, or against the unions of today which bring such delight to our social and political life.

5. The mass of workers will not come spontaneously and autonomously to a consciousness of their essence as class antagonist and to the consciousness of the historical purpose that is implicit in their struggle against capitalism, but it is this same mass of workers who through their work create the objective conditions for that consciousness and it is from this the consciousness that the class party brings together and elaborates the goal of a revolutionary propaedeutic¹¹ needed to revive the whole class.

6. To this end the "Italian Left" aims to create with the permanent organisation of "factory groups", even in the midst of enormous difficulties, training centres for ideological and political dissemination which become in fact vehicles for slogans critical of the unions. Factory groups solve the problem of contact with workers in the areas which are socially and politically the most sensitive to party propaganda, a prime and indispensable condition for a policy of recruiting new worker cadres on the basis of active militancy and revolutionary struggle.

7. Should we create a new union outside and against the official union? Or should we join new organisations arising spontaneously from working class initiative? Leaving aside the facile observation that new unions would never find enough space to form a self-sufficient grassroots organization, even if it were possible, the new union would be modelled on the official union with all the faults and the few virtues of traditional unions.

We would like to ask the comrades of "*Parti de Classe*" to point out a single example of an unofficial union on an international scale which is an exception to our analysis and which can be taken as a model by revolutionary organisations, outside the experiences offered by the history of the workers' movement of the Second and Third Internationals.

If we then refer to the more or less spontaneously created union organisations which we might use to spread the union policy of the party, it must be said without fear of contradiction that those organisations which were formed on the wave of the union agitations of the hot autumn of 1969 by extra-parliamentary groups and students in Italy, France (1968) and elsewhere, have slowly faded away and are, in any case, forced to flow back into the channel for the maintenance of the system, bringing bitter and acute disillusionment to the few minorities who responded to their quite idealistic appeal. This is the reason for a new stampede to

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the parties against which they had carried out their so-called revolutionary struggle.

On the presence or absence of Internationalist Communists in the unions, let's look again at what is said in "Draft Outline of the Declaration of Principles for the International Bureau of the International Communist Left" (1946):

"A) In a historical situation where the problem of the seizure of power is not posed, the mass organisation can only be based on demand struggles: the unions. When the situation becomes revolutionary, and the problem of the seizure of power is posed, it is then that we find the factory workers' councils (soviets), whose goal is not to advocate improvements in capitalist society, but to seize power in the factories." "It is obvious that if the historical rupture does not led to revolution, the process of the existing unions linking with the state will continue. As long as this process is not over, that is to say is not completed, our position is to remain in the unions. If they remain statified then the question of giving birth to new mass organisations will arise."

There is one and only one fundamental problem which comes out of this debate: to break down the barriers of a theoretical premise vitiated by a series of fallacies which are linked by a formal logic, which ignore the actual and historic task of the workers' struggle and to distort it, by playing down the class role of the revolutionary party of the proletariat.

The assertion of the absence of the class in the context of the current situation is piece of sophistry, even if in class terms, it is temporarily defeated; and the consequences that is drawn from this is a fallacy which is that if there is no class there can be no class party genetically linked to it; and the final fallacy is the identification of the dictatorship of the proletariat with the dictatorship of the party by transferring to the post-revolutionary party-class identity from the pre-revolutionary period.

The conclusion? With a proletariat which is not yet a class, with a political organisation which is not a party, with official unions where workers are considered lost to the class struggle and to any attempt by the revolutionary minority to influence them ideologically and politically, the resulting framework, and the perspectives that can be drawn from it, would lead to our depressing self-elimination from the political scene if Marxism did not indicate that the following certainties, even if relative, are still certainties, permanently present in the labour movement.

The proletariat has been the only historically antagonistic class to capitalism throughout its existence. It comes to consciousness of its essence as a revolutionary class in the phase of the attack on capitalist power, conditioned as it is by a process of education and development in the tormented and uninterrupted course of an irrepressible class struggle.

This process of education and development is possible within the class because of the active presence of the party which is formed out of the class and engages with it in a powerful synthesis, the ideal reasons for its growth as a revolutionary force.

Onorato Damen

Notes

- 1 The leaflet issued in 1948 “Don’t Vote for Any Party” can be read in Italian at <http://www.leftcom.org/it/articles/2013-01-19/non-votate-non-votate-per-nessun-partito>
- 2 The comrades regrouped around the review “Parti de Classe” initially came out of a French group of the Bordigist International Communist Party which produced the review “Invariance” which we are talking about here and only later did they also break with “Invariance” to form the present group.
- 3 Literally “in the manner of geometry”. Damen here refers to the futile attempt to turn ideas into mathematically worked out axioms or theorems (following the principles of [Euclidian] geometry). The most famous example of this was Spinoza’s attempt to systematise the thoughts of Descartes in this way.
- 4 After 1923 the process of “bolshevisation” of Communist Parties outside the USSR was begun which developed into a purge of any internationalists who could not accept the Moscow line. In Italy Gramsci and Togliatti were brought in to replace the Left and to carry out this process which culminated in the Lyons Congress of 1926.
- 5 Disputed question
- 6 Work of preliminary preparation before you can embark on a course of study
- 7 Ottorino Perrone, also know as Vercesi was a leading member of the Fraction in Belgium and later the main supporter of Bordiga in his campaign to dissolve the Internationalist Communist Party. He was the main instigator of the dissolution of the Fraction on the eve of the Second World War on the grounds that as the proletariat no longer existed then neither could proletarian political organisations. It was this kind of abstract metaphysical position that became one of the hallmarks of Bordigism and which Damen fought all his political life.
- 8 In short, Bordiga
- 9 To which we can add the material fact that by registering and putting up candidates the PCInt got the right to speak on all platforms in every town square where they could directly confront the lies of the Stalinists.
- 10 Key point.
- 11 See footnote 5.

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

Germany

Gruppe Internationaler Socialistinnen
which produces Socialismus 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

Durham Open Meeting

The Communist Workers' Organisation (North East Section) holds regular meetings in Durham open to all who are interested in defending the independence of working class action. These are usually on the third Wednesday of every month at

7.00 p.m. in Room 2 in

Alington House

4 North Bailey — Durham — DH1 3HT

Main topic: Do we need a period of transition between capitalism and communism?

All Welcome!

The next meeting will be on Wednesday August 20, 2014.

London

We hope to revisit this theme in a meeting at the London Anarchist Bookfair on October 18th. For details of the bookfair see <http://www.anarchistbookfair.org.uk/>

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**
The lie that the former USSR was “really existing socialism” remains a potent weapon against the working class. This pamphlet not only examines the origins of the regime that emerged from the defeat of the October Revolution but also explains the motivations of Stalinism.
- Holocaust and Hiroshima** **50p**
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.

