

Journal of the
Communist Workers'
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Revolutionary Perspectives 16

Covid Crisis or Capitalist Crisis



The Murder of George Floyd

Communistation:

Seeking Refuge in Utopia

Review of Class Power on Zero Hours

Bukharin on State Capitalism

1920: The Battle of Warsaw

Revolutionary Perspectives

Magazine of the Communist Workers' Organisation

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Covid Crisis or Capitalist Crisis?

Our last issue (January 2020) included the perspectives agreed by the CWO Annual General Meeting in November. We repeated in them our long-standing position that capitalism has basically been in a crisis of accumulation since the 1970s but that this crisis was now accelerating. Even before Covid-19 hit, the amount of global debt was continually increasing. The fallout from the banking collapse of 2008 had not been contained and at least 10% of the world's companies were "zombies" (i.e. only able to make enough revenue to pay wages and the interest charges on their loans). In the US the figure is 18% and in the UK over the past 20 years investment had fallen from 5% to 1% of net output. In many sectors from oil and car manufacturing to "the hospitality industry" bankruptcies were already on the agenda. As we said then there was a sense that "history is beginning to accelerate faster than we once thought possible".

The Covid-19 pandemic has thus contributed to a debt crisis which has remained unresolved from 2008. There is no doubt that it has had a profound impact on the social life of the entire planet. Since it began we have published over 20 articles associated with various aspects of this pandemic.¹ These have covered strikes against the refusal of employers to close non-essential businesses (by May, 20% of the deaths from coronavirus in Italy were workers in such workplaces); denunciations of the attempts by various political leaders to play the national card that we are "all in this together". (When, for example, a fifth of the world live in such overcrowded conditions that they cannot possibly socially distance or where millions of poor Americans have no health insurance. At the same time billions have been given to companies that have spent the last few decades boosting executive pay, based on inflated stock market returns, whilst being unable to find any profitable form of investment in the system.) We have also concentrated on demonstrating how the coronavirus pandemic, far from uniting the world in the face of a common danger has only exacerbated inter-imperialist tensions and nationalist rivalry.

The key question that, as yet, cannot be answered fully, is "how will the capitalist system emerge from this crisis?". According to the July 2 editorial in the *Financial Times*:

Public deficits have exploded across the world. Never before in peacetime have governments spent as much money without taxing as today — the IMF estimates that this year global public deficits will rise by 6.2 percentage points to 9.9 per cent, higher than after the 2008 crisis.

Ever since Reagan there has been a capitalist school of thought that "deficits don't matter". It's an odd contradiction that this so-called neo-liberal idea has provoked the biggest state financial intervention in history over the last 12 years. Not to

save the people (who have seen their real wages, welfare and health benefits continually diminish) but to save the system. Mario Draghi's declaration ahead of the European Central Bank back in 2008 that he "would do what it takes" to save the system has been echoed by Jay Powell at the Fed this year.

When the stock market went down at the beginning of the year everyone knew, Covid or no Covid, it was overvalued, but when the bond market started to go down too the Fed was forced to act since the financial contagion was in danger of spreading over into government bonds, "the last bastion of financial stability" (John Redwood in the *Financial Times*). Three trillion dollars of printed money later the Fed could feel satisfied with its intervention. Every other central bank of the main OECD states has followed suit. The Bank of England, so far, has got away with a mere £200 billion. The outcome is that the US (and all other states) have preserved the idea that the state is the ultimate stop gap, and thus the most reliable source for long term investment. This has kept interest rates low and thus enabled states to borrow more and more, tax less and support some firms and their employees who have been legally banned from working, as well as those laid off, without having massive repayments on their balance sheets.

It cannot last. Until there is a vaccine, Covid-19 will remain a threat to workers everywhere, yet the system is desperate to drive them back into production whatever the consequences. State support for workers will run out soon (support for the capitalists and their financial system will go on whatever). This crisis has only emphasised the gulf between those who control the vast majority of the wealth of the planet and the rest of us.

And many workers will have no job to go back to, especially if they work in the "hospitality" sectors where many smaller businesses like restaurants will simply not reopen. This only causes the capitalists to worry about the knock-on effect for profits. A greater impoverishment of the population will mean they won't be able to afford the commodities that are produced. At best we are in for a further period of "secular stagnation" of the world economy with millions facing poverty, unemployment and starvation. Such a situation will exacerbate not only the misery of millions but the imperialist reflexes of a system in crisis.

The alternatives are becoming ever more dire. Aside from the ecological threat to the planet (which has not diminished in this pandemic) there is also the fact that the crisis is exacerbating imperialist rivalries. Since 2009 the protective measures that G20 countries have taken to restrict imports has risen from 1 to 10%. However the trade war of the last few years will be nothing compared to what is in preparation now.

We have already seen this in the US pressurising its allies to refuse the superior technology of Huawei. The increasing belligerence of Xi Jinping's China towards its neighbours (e.g. India and Taiwan), its massive arms spending since 2012 and its clampdown on Hong Kong have undone most of the damage Trump has inflicted

on “the Western alliance”. Now the West has suddenly noticed that the Uighurs are being oppressed. The battle cry of “democracy” has been launched against the authoritarianism of the Chinese Communist Party in the new propaganda war. Even the search for a Covid-19 vaccine has become a race for imperialist kudos. As the capitalist world economy limps into its third decade of the millennium “the new cold war” is creating the conditions for a new and generalised conflict. The only force that can put a stop to that dire prospect is the international working class. It alone can dismantle a system which, for all the bombast of its supporters is both unsustainable and a serious threat to humanity itself. As we wrote in January “Socialism and barbarism are still the historic alternatives which will be decided by the class war against capital”.

In this situation it is up to communists to attempt to get their analyses across to the wider class by whatever means we can. There are already a swathe of strikes across the world against the unacceptable conditions the system is trying to impose. These need to be linked and become a movement not just for the redress of grievances but for a complete historical reboot. This can only be accompanied by the conscious formation of a political international, to present an anti-capitalist critique, and a programme of how we can live in a world without money, but where the needs of everyone are satisfied.

Communist Workers’ Organisation

Notes

1. For all our articles on the coronavirus and capitalist crisis, see: <https://www.leftcom.org/en/articles/2020-covid-19-pandemic>



For a free copy or copies of our broadsheet *Aurora* email or send a stamped addressed envelope to our London address.

The Murder of George Floyd: The End of Racism Starts with the Death of Capitalism

The killing of George Floyd in plain sight by the Minneapolis police rightly shocked millions of people across the world. The killing of a black person by the police is not an unusual event, particularly in the US. Black Lives Matter was founded in 2013, after the acquittal of George Zimmerman, a Neighbourhood Watch volunteer, for the killing of black teenager, Trayvon Martin. However, it really took off in 2014 after the police killings of Mike Brown in Ferguson, and Eric Garner in New York. Garner was asphyxiated just like George Floyd who repeatedly told his cop killer “I can’t breathe” as he held his knee on his neck for almost nine minutes. Numerous other black Americans have been killed since 2014 by the police including Tanisha Anderson, Breonna Taylor, Jonathan Ferrell, John Crawford, Ezell Ford, Laquan McDonald, Akai Gurley, Tamir Rice, Eric Harris, Walter Scott, Freddie Gray, Sandra Bland, Samuel DuBose, Jeremy McDole, Alton Sterling, and Philando Castile. There are many, many more. And there have been demonstrations and riots before against the monumental racist oppression of black workers in the US from Watts in 1965, through Los Angeles in 1992 (following the acquittal of cops who beat Rodney King to a pulp) to Ferguson in 2014.

2020 though is different. On this occasion, probably as a result of overt and deliberate nature of the killing being captured on a mobile phone, it ignited a series of demonstrations, protests and riots across the US, and in many other countries largely under the banner of Black Lives Matter. In the US the specificity of the killing, i.e. the murder of an unarmed black person by a white police officer was the main initial focus of the protests, whereas in the UK and other European countries where police killings are less prevalent, Floyd’s death was seen more as symbol of a wider racist malaise in society. As communists and internationalists, we are programmatically opposed to racism as a barrier to the unity of the working class, a unity which is fundamental to the revolutionary process of abolishing capitalism. Our comrades of the Internationalist Workers Group (USA) and Klasbatalo (Canada) were among the first internationalists to react with a statement. Entitled *Minneapolis, Police Brutality and Class Struggle* it was distributed in many cities throughout the US and Canada (as well as in the UK, Italy, and Australia)¹ In this article we attempt to examine the significance of BLM in the wider context of the development of class struggle and proletarian internationalism.

Racism in the US

Perhaps more than any other western country, the history of the US is a history of deeply entrenched racism. The founding fathers of ‘the land of the free’ were pretty much slave owners to a man. Jefferson had over 600 slaves and Washington around 320. Of the first twelve US Presidents only two had never

been slave owners. Slavery characterised the economy particularly of the Southern plantation states until 1865 when it was abolished after the defeat of the Confederacy in the American Civil War. For the victorious and more Northern states slavery was seen as an anachronistic impediment to the development of a modern capitalist economy – why incur the overheads of slave ownership when you can employ ‘free’ wage slaves at less expense instead? Unsurprisingly, emancipation from slavery provided little by way of social advance or equality for America’s black population. In the Reconstruction era, Jim Crow laws which gave states and local municipalities powers to impose racial segregation were introduced, and remained in force for around 100 years, until the pressure of the civil rights movement in the 1960s forced their formal repeal.

Until that point segregation was not only enforced by law but also by white supremacist vigilantes such as the Ku Klux Klan who terrorised and murdered black people who got too “uppity” (successful?) or wittingly or inadvertently crossed the lines set by Southern white society. This situation kept most African Americans in a permanent state of disadvantage, confining them to the worst housing, education, health care and other public facilities. Moreover this state of poverty ensured a supply of cheap black labour for American capital. The ‘great migration’ of 1916 -1970 saw some six million African Americans move from the rural South to the Northern industrial cities such as Chicago, Detroit and New York, where they usually ended up in the lowest paid jobs. Whilst this offered greater social freedom as segregation was not official policy in the North, continued poverty and racism, including a number of violent race riots ensured that Northern cities soon became unofficially segregated along racial lines, and still remain so today to a far greater extent than is generally the case in other metropolitan capitalist countries. The civil rights movement might have ended Jim Crow but the subsequent history of the USA shows that it did not end racist state action.

In this context it is hardly surprising that black people have all too often found themselves at the sharp end of America’s brutal criminal justice system. As we have shown the killing of George Floyd is no isolated example of police racism, and even just one month after the event, it is certainly not the last. Statistics are not entirely clear but the general picture is that whilst black people account for approximately 13% of the US population they represent around 24% of people killed by the police, so are disproportionately significantly more likely to become victims. However race is not the only factor, as the statistics also indicate that victims of police killings are more likely to come from poorer neighbourhoods, suggesting that class is also a significant factor, and to see this issue in purely racial terms is an over-simplification.

More compelling evidence of racial discrimination in the criminal justice system arises from looking at the prison system. The statistics are shocking; the USA has 5% of the world population yet holds 25% of the world’s prisoners of which over 40% are black. 1 in 17 white people go to prison compared to 1 in 3 black people.

Race and Class

The 13th amendment to the US Constitution prohibits slavery ... except for prisoners. In the US, over a million prisoners are forced to work for as little as two cents an hour or sometimes nothing at all. Private corporations are profiting from a new form of slavery as the private prison labour industry is growing at a rapid rate.² The corporations that employ prisoners include Starbucks, Victoria's Secret, Whole Foods, and Nintendo who have all used prison workers to increase corporate profits. The huge increase in prisoners was funded, in part, by corporations looking for cheap labour. Many 'respected' companies funded the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC), which passed the "Prison Industries Act" to expand prison labour. The Federal Government itself promotes the "business opportunities" at dozens of federal prison factories across the country.

Looking beyond the criminal justice system we can see that by most indices black people in America are significantly worse off than white people. Official unemployment statistics issued by the US Bureau of Labour Statistics show that prior to the escalation of the economic crisis fuelled by Covid-19 in the second quarter of 2019 unemployment amongst black people was 6.1% compared to 3.1% for white people and 3.5% for the total population. For the second quarter of 2020 unemployment for black people has risen to 16% and to 12% for white people. Whilst the black unemployment rate is still considerably higher, the rate of increase in unemployment has been significantly higher for white people. The figures illustrate a more complex picture than simplistic notions of white privilege and black oppression – the key determinant of disadvantage remains class rather than race.

This explains why this time feels different. We have had four decades of decline of living standards for workers in all the leading capitalist countries³, but especially amongst low paid workers of all ethnic origins. During that time high paid jobs have disappeared, as manufacturing has shifted to the lower wage economies, mainly in Asia. And the bursting of the speculative bubble of finance capitalism has only added to the pain. As a comrade wrote on our website

*The residual effects of the 2008 "financial crisis", colossal debt, low growth, low pay, austerity, in a word, the erosion of living conditions of the vast majority were still very much present as the downturn began manifesting itself. This however was merely the warm-up act for the present catastrophe, opening up before our very eyes and whose eventual depth we are yet to experience.*⁴

Previous protests have largely been confined to black neighbourhoods and black people but in the demonstrations and riots across both the USA and the world young white workers have joined the demonstrations in great numbers.

Racism in Britain

The origins of contemporary racism can be traced to the origins of capitalism. The idea of the inferiority of black people was first used to justify the slave trade

and slavery and then further developed later in the 19th century to justify the imperialist colonisation of Africa and other countries and continents primarily populated by people of colour, with the attendant atrocities often perpetrated against the indigenous populations. In the US racism was used to divide black and white workers from the outset.

In Britain it was different; whilst the primitive accumulation of capital was largely funded by the slave trade and the repatriated profits from the plantations in the Americas, within the UK itself, the small number of black people who could be counted in their thousands did not require the working class to be fundamentally differentiated along racial lines. However, maintaining the structure of the capitalist economy demands that workers regard other workers as competitors for employment, accommodation, entry to educational institutions, etc. This is an important window of opportunity for nationalist and racist ideas, whose effects Karl Marx was already observing in the 19th century. But what he saw was that the British ruling class used innocent starving Irish farm labourers as scabs to break strikes in the mines and factories, nationalism (backed by religion) was more the weapon of choice.

“Every industrial and commercial centre in England now possesses a working class divided into two hostile camps, English proletarians and Irish proletarians. The ordinary English worker hates the Irish worker as a competitor who lowers his standard of life. In relation to the Irish worker he regards himself as a member of the ruling nation and consequently he becomes a tool of the English aristocrats and capitalists against Ireland, thus strengthening their domination over himself. He cherishes religious, social, and national prejudices against the Irish worker. His attitude towards him is much the same as that of the “poor whites” to the Negroes in the former slave states of the U.S.A.. The Irishman pays him back with interest in his own money. He sees in the English worker both the accomplice and the stupid tool of the English rulers in Ireland. This antagonism is artificially kept alive and intensified by the press, the pulpit, the comic papers, in short, by all the means at the disposal of the ruling classes. This antagonism is the secret of the impotence of the English working class, despite its organisation. It is the secret by which the capitalist class maintains its power.” (Marx to Sigfrid Meyer and August Vogt In New York, 9 April 1870)

Thus racism undermines the only way to successfully resist the daily impositions of the system — class solidarity. In spite of the internationalisation of capitalism, the bourgeoisie exercises its rule in the form of national states. In opposition to this, the proletariat is an international class, a class of migrants. Every split weakens its struggle and tightens the screws of exploitation. For this reason, it is an urgent task for communists to struggle without compromise against racist ideas and for this reason we can see sparks of hope in the current support for anti-racism amongst many workers.

There have been precedents. During the American Civil War some sectors of the

working class in Britain supported the blockade of Confederate ships in the hope that a victory for the Union would lead to the abolition of slavery. This was at great cost to themselves as the ships carried the cotton that would be manufactured into cloth in England, without which workers in the textile factories were laid off. Of course not all workers were prepared to pay that price and some actively opposed the blockades. Racist ideology and its pseudo-scientific 'justification' in the form of eugenics became widespread in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, fostering notions of the superiority of white Europeans and justifying the subjugation of the indigenous populations of the British Empire. Anti-Irish sentiments and anti-semitism were common, but racism against black people did not manifest itself as a major phenomenon in Britain itself until the 1950s when (initiated by the government to provide labour during the post-war boom) mass immigration from the Caribbean and other Commonwealth countries started to take place⁵. Whilst the British ruling class are not slow to play the race card when it suits them, usually in terms of hostility to immigration, it would be an overstatement to say that the UK is as racially divided as the US. This is not to downplay the issue - whether it is poverty or incarceration rates, people from ethnic minority backgrounds are over-represented compared to their proportion of the general population⁶. The Metropolitan Police force was famously branded "institutionally racist" in 1999 by the Macpherson inquiry into the fatal stabbing of black teenager Stephen Lawrence in 1993. Macpherson defined this as "the collective failure of an organisation to provide an appropriate and professional service to people because of their colour, culture or ethnic origin". This form of racism is seen in "processes, attitudes and behaviour which amount to discrimination through unwitting prejudice, ignorance, thoughtlessness and racist stereotyping which disadvantages minority ethnic people". There is little evidence that it has changed since few of Macpherson's recommendations have been implemented. This comes as no surprise to revolutionary internationalists and only emphasises that it is not enough to demand reform - we need a complete change of system.

Under Capitalism No Workers' Lives Matter

It is clear that racism is functional to capitalism. As communists and internationalists we abhor racism and the divisions it can foster within the working class. But what about anti-racism and movements such as BLM, should they be supported or are they also effectively fostering racial divisions themselves? Earlier we argued that race and class constitute a complex matrix where racial oppression and class exploitation collide and interact. The form in which oppression appears may seem to arise out of race, gender or other numerous forms, but those who experience the worst of it do so primarily because of their economic exploitation as proletarians or their marginalisation as workers surplus to requirements. Whilst we recognise that there are glass ceilings that hinder women in attaining the highest levels of bourgeois society, the real problem is for women who struggle to support families on low and precarious incomes or welfare benefits. Similarly middle class black people will encounter degrees of social racism but those who really suffer are the unemployed and low paid black workers who struggle to

survive against both state and capitalism. And those real problems are also the problems that affect all workers irrespective of race, gender or whatever other oppression you care to name, it is the fundamental problem of the economic exploitation of the proletariat.

The problem with BLM is that it divides workers along the lines of oppression rather than recognising the basis of capitalism is the fundamental and universal problem of economic exploitation. This is not lost on the bourgeoisie who in the main have no problem in endorsing and recouping these movements. BLM has been fully endorsed by most politicians except those of the far right, not to mention just about every celebrity worth their salt. Inane virtue signalling gesture politics such as 'taking the knee' or the idiotic spectacle of white police officers washing black peoples' feet have become the modus operandi of this circus. The big names of corporate America make donations (in order to boost market share from the good publicity) whilst many of them only employ black workers as cleaners. Demands to defund, reform or abolish the police have no meaning when the function of the police is essentially to protect the property of the bourgeoisie rather than to protect workers.

We do however have to recognise genuine people who would like to see a better world are attracted to these sort of movements. Our point is that capitalism might make gestures about race or gender or almost anything you like but they will remain just that. The divisions capitalism has created won't disappear overnight but once its divisive existence is out of the way we can begin a serious fight to heal the wounds it has inflicted on humanity. This is the struggle communists and revolutionaries are organising for.

The only force capable of toppling more than statues, emphasising token gestures like bending the knee, of toppling the entire system of oppression is the working class: black, white or anything else, united. As Karl Marx wrote "Labour in a white skin cannot emancipate itself where it is branded in a black skin."⁷ Only this working class, united in its own revolutionary International, can take down capitalism, a class society, rotten with prejudice and reeking of inequality. The movement that was engendered by George Floyd's murder may already be subsiding but if this leads to a wider questioning of capitalist society that has produced such exploitation and oppression then it will be a first step towards a more general anti-capitalist movement. The next step is to organise in a new revolutionary working class international. No society in history has been eternal and all the signs are that this one is long past its sell-by date. Its gravediggers across the world need to unite in order to finally bury it.

PBD

Notes

1. <http://www.leftcom.org/en/articles/2020-05-30on-minneapolis-police-brutality-class-struggle>
2. For more on US prisons see <https://www.leftcom.org/en/articles/2018-09-03/new-us-prison-strike-takes-us-to-the-dark-heart-of-capitalism>
3. This is now regularly and openly admitted by many capitalist commentators. See, for example <https://www.bloomberg.com/graphics/2020-the-fleeing-of-the-american-worker/>

Race and Class

The graph in this article shows that workers pay in the US kept level with rising productivity until the mid-1970s when the post war boom ended and then they diverged massively so that workers pay has grown by 115% whilst productivity has grown by 252%.

4. <http://www.leftcom.org/en/articles/2020-06-29/capitalism-is-a-class-divided-racist-sexist-horror-without-end>

5. "In spite of his later vocal opposition to black and Asian immigration in general, Health Minister Enoch Powell championed the recruitment of overseas nurses in the early 1960s. As historian of the NHS, Charles Webster suggests, this apparent anomaly was perhaps because the immigration of nurses not only 'provided a plentiful supply of cheap labour, reduced wastage, and undermined the shortage argument' but also 'strengthened his hand in pressing for a strong line against the nurses' pay claim, which itself was his chief weapon in his wider campaign to induce colleagues to adopt a more aggressive approach to the control of public sector pay.' Immigrant nurses were therefore an expedient means of providing political leverage." See <http://www.historyandpolicy.org/policy-papers/papers/immigration-and-the-national-health-service-putting-history-to-the-forefront> The immigration policies of the current government are of course helping it ensure 100,000 vacancies in the NHS during the pandemic.

6. According to the June 23 report of the Office of National Statistics, the average household income of white Britons was almost 65 per cent higher than that of black ethnic groups if the impact of taxes and benefits are excluded. The same report says that income inequality had been rising for 2 years before coronavirus. In 2017, the Lammy Review, a report on the outcomes for Black and Minority Ethnic people in the criminal justice system in the UK used 2016 figures to find that "Despite making up just 14% of the population, BAME men and women make up 25% of prisoners" (p.3: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/643001/lammy-review-final-report.pdf). Two years later it was reported that more than 50% of young people in jail were from BAME backgrounds <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2019/jan/29/more-than-half-young-people-jail-are-of-bme-background>

7. He uses similar formulations in a November 1866 letter to Francois Lafargue, and in Vol.1 of *Capital*.

The Disappointed of 1968

Seeking Refuge in Utopia

Communisation theory has attracted many from the fringes of left-communism and anarchism and its positions have even been taken up by groups within the left-communist milieu itself¹. There is no single platform or manifesto of this school; instead a number of organisations, groups or isolated theoreticians have developed elements of the theory and, of course, there are disagreements between the various groups and theoreticians. A somewhat heterogeneous body of theory has resulted, however, there is a common body of ideas which are largely accepted by the school and which we will consider below. These ideas generally represent an attempt to “modernise” Marxism but have also grafted on elements of anarchism, such as organisation being unnecessary for revolution and the state to be immediately abolished.

The roots of this school lie in the failure of the 1968 French social upheaval to take a revolutionary direction. The initial theorists were influenced by the Situationist International and the publication *Invariance* whose main animator was Jacques Camatte. A negative critique of social democracy (which we can share) was combined with an admiration for the Autonomists’ struggles in Italy. Much theoretical elaboration followed making use of works of writers from the Frankfurt school and German academic Marxist theoreticians of the “New Marxist Reading” school, while also returning both to the early texts of Marx and to his previously unpublished notes which had now become available. The result was a new attempt to periodise capitalism’s development using the concepts of *formal* and *real subjection* of the labour process and to use this and “value-form” analysis to undermine the programme of what they call traditional Marxism. This provided the theoretical underpinning for the complete rejection of the theoretical programmes of the Second and Third Internationals and with this a rejection of any lessons which could be learned from previous revolutionary efforts. Endnotes, the British communisation group, bluntly stated in their first publication;

“Strictly speaking we have nothing to learn from the failures of past revolutions.”²

The general conclusion is that the entire programme for creating communism which emerged from the lessons of the failures of the Second and Third Internationals was useless. Instead communism needed to be created immediately during the revolutionary period without the proletariat taking political power or any transition from capitalism. Communisation would destroy both proletariat and bourgeoisie simultaneously, end work, destroy the economy and destroy the state. What makes all this utopian is that the social force to carry through this revolution is not clear. This is because, we are told, there is a disintegration of the labour/capital relation itself³. The productive working class is seen as a shrinking, atomised and decomposing segment of an increasingly surplus proletariat. The

communisers' explanation of how this enormous and immediate social change is to come about is either totally absent or simply mystical. We are told there needs to be no party, or at least it is a spontaneous organisation⁴, and no general organisation. Possibly inter-class struggles, looting, rioting and refusal to work will initiate this revolution. Théorie Communiste, the principal French group of the school sees the working class as no longer a potential revolutionary force. They simply declare that communisation will be a result of the historical and social development of capitalism. In other words historical development will solve these questions and for this we must wait. This is a recipe not just for the complete failure of the revolution but for acquiescence in capitalism's road to barbarism. However, it is based on a mass of theoretical work which we intend to review below.

Does Marxism need updating?

Communisers claim that in the 150 years since Marx wrote the *Critique of the Gotha Programme* the development of capitalism has totally undermined Marx's proposals and the programme of the traditional Marxist movement. They claim that in the 19th century capital's subjection, or subsumption as it is often called, of the labour process was only *formal* but since the start of the 20th century this subjection has become *real*. The distinction between formal and real subjection is mentioned briefly by Marx in *Capital* Volume 1 and in greater detail in his drafts of *Capital* written in 1861-1863, now available as "The results of the direct production process"⁵. This is certainly not a key concept in Marx's analysis, but it is a central vehicle in communisation's critique of what they call traditional Marxism. For Marx the formal subjection he refers to is the early stage of capitalist development within feudalism;

*"The class of wage-labourers, which arose in the latter half of the 14th century ... formed ... only a very small part of the population ... master and workmen stood close together socially .. the subordination of labour to capital was only formal – i.e. the mode of production itself had as yet no specific capitalistic character."*⁶

Under capital's formal subjection of the labour process, capital has not yet acquired direct control of the labour process. For Marx, it represents an early and transitory stage in the development of capitalism. One of the characteristics of this stage is that increases in surplus value are achieved by extending labour time rather than revolutionising the means of production, reordering the work etc. This stage is therefore characterised by the extraction of "*absolute*" surplus value by capital.

*"... the mere formal subjection of labour to capital suffices for the production of absolute surplus value, if, e.g. it is sufficient that the handicraftsmen who previously worked on their own account, or as apprentices of a master, should become wage labourers under the direct control of a capitalist; ..."*⁷

The production of relative surplus value assumes capital has taken full control of

the labour process, or *real* subjection exists. This Marx calls the capitalist mode proper. Here use is made of machinery, organisation of the work and large numbers of workers. Increases in surplus value are achieved by revolutionising the means of production thereby increasing productivity and so reducing the necessary labour required for the reproduction of the workers. This stage is characterised by extraction of “*relative*” surplus value. It is clear that real subjection of the labour process is what is assumed throughout Marx’s analysis in *Capital* including in the reproduction tables in Volume 2. It is also clear that Marx uses these terms strictly in relation to the labour process whereas the communisers expand the application of real subjection to all aspects of society. The terms are being invoked in a way that was not intended by Marx.

Periodisation of capitalism’s development

The primary use of this division is an attempt to periodise the development of capitalism and relate this to tactics the working class should adopt within each period. This is, of course, problematic as capitalist development is uneven globally and even within a single country both stages may exist together. Hence there is disagreement about periodisation. Endnotes, for example, regards the division as completely useless for periodising capitalist history. There seems, however, to be some agreement that the period up to 1914 represents formal subjection. For *Théorie Communiste* the real subjection which follows 1914 is divided into two periods the first ending in 1970 and the second, encompassing restructuring, lasting to the present. However, others such as *Internationalist Perspective* see certain sectors of the economy existing under formal subjection while others simultaneously were under real subjection. British agriculture, they consider, was under formal subjection until 1900 whereas industry was not. Despite this confusion, the periodisation is used to draw out implications for the class struggle and revolution.

In the period of formal subjection, which it appears covers the 19th century, there was no hope of revolution. The working class could only attempt to protect its position by struggles for betterment of its conditions within capitalism. It was thus affirming its position as a class within capitalism as one pole of the labour/capital relation. It was unable to negate its class position and thereby overthrow the labour capital relationship. It was not yet a revolutionary class. The period of real subjection, they argue, sees capitalist subjection extend not just to the labour process but to all aspects of life.

“The value-form and the social relations that instantiate it invades every “pore” of civil society, of socio-cultural and political existence, subjecting them to its imperatives.”⁸

Integration of the working class into capitalism?

The result of this is that the working class becomes ever more integrated

into capitalism. In all aspects of its life it is dominated by capital. The Italian Autonomist theorists who preceded the communisation school, and whom the school admired, drew out some of the conclusions of the idea of total social domination by capital. Mario Tronti⁹, for example, concluded society had become one big factory producing surplus value for capital throughout society, while Antonio Negri, another theorist of the Autonomists, took the analysis one step further and concluded this meant the end of the centrality of the factory working class as the site of the emergence of revolutionary subjectivity. Revolutionary consciousness would thus not emerge from the class at the point of exploitation. Endnotes explains:

“We can no longer appeal to the notion of class consciousness. We are forced to confront the fact that the working class is a class of this mode of production, unified only in separation.”¹⁰

This can only mean the working class is integrated into capitalism becoming a class for capital by real subjection. A host of statements confirm this is the conclusion of most of the communisers. For example Endnotes tells us that the wage form is no longer the locus of contestation¹¹, that science and ... engineering have replaced labour at the heart of the production process¹². If workers are no longer at the centre of the production process one can only wonder how surplus value is being produced and what has happened to the theory of value. We are also told that there has been a disappearance of any positive worker identity. Workers, they claim, are no longer a vital force instead they have become appendages of machines. The basis of working class unity has been eroded. The proletariat is atomised. There is no collective worker¹³ no revolutionary subject¹⁴.

Because of the extraction of relative surplus value and consequent expulsion of workers from the productive process, communisers conclude there has been a relative decline in the productive working class which is becoming an absolute decline. The productive working class, they argue, is no longer the motive force of revolution. It is a fallacy that the development of capitalism unifies the working class, rather it atomises it. The proletariat has become a mass of surplus population no longer even a reserve army of labour, but a human mass that can never be integrated into productive work. The proletariat has become jobless, landless, powerless, homeless and undocumented¹⁵.

We appear to have reached the conclusion that the revolution could not have been made during the period of formal subjection because the class antagonism was undeveloped but neither could it be made in the period of real subjection because the productive proletariat was integrated into capitalist productive and social relations and the proletariat as a whole was an atomised, broken mass of surplus humanity.

The programmes of the working class, which were developed in the late 19th and early 20th centuries were developed under conditions of formal subjection

and, the communisers argue, sought to affirm the working class condition within capitalism. They sought to generalise the productive working class and integrate all into productive work in a republic of labour. They did not aim to explode the labour capital relationship and contained within themselves the seeds of counter-revolution. They are consequently completely redundant. This is why, they claim, we have nothing to learn from previous revolutionary attempts. The programmatic working class movement is dead. In particular the steps envisaged to construct communist society which were broadly, establishing a proletarian political organisation, initiating mass strikes leading to workers' councils, then revolt, then taking of political power by force of arms and instituting a transition to communist society are all things of the past. More than being things of the past support for them is now reactionary. This is especially true of the transition period which Marx argued for in his *Critique of the Gotha Programme* and which the communisers argue would lead straight back to capitalism¹⁶. Bruno Astarian, a theorist of communisation writes:

*"One wonders how this gross fiction [of a transitional period – CWO] could delude people for such a long time."*¹⁷

Marx, the communisers argue, was even wrong to identify with the 19th century workers' movement since it was a movement for emancipating the proletariat within capitalism¹⁸. Instead, the argument goes, the revolution must abolish both the proletariat and the bourgeoisie and introduce full communism¹⁹ immediately. But if these are not mere words the revolutionary force to overthrow capitalist social relations must be identified. This must be a class with material interests which compel it to revolt against its conditions but also a class on which the capitalist system is dependent. An exploited class providing the material wealth which sustains its exploiters is required, in Marx's words a class in radical chains. A class which is only able to break its chains by tearing the entire system to pieces. The only class which fits this categorisation is the productive working class which the communisers have more or less written off. The productive working class are able to stop capitalism operating through striking and able to give a lead to the unemployed and the surplus population in the revolutionary process. The communisers have, however, provided a general description of how communisation might come about.

Communisation's revolution

Bruno Astarian, in his text *"Crisis Activity and Communisation"*²⁰ has the merit of stating issues clearly rather than wrapping them up in a maze of mind numbing abstraction, so we will quote from him at length. What appears to be envisaged is a complete breakdown of capitalist society in which the system becomes unable to provide even the basic needs of the proletariat. The proletariat will, Astarian says, be **forced** to rise up and find another social form capable of restoring its socialisation and immediate reproduction. There will be a phase of what he calls *crisis activity* leading to the overcoming of the labour/capital contradiction and

at the same time to communisation. In crisis activity the proletariat will take possession of factories, vehicles and buildings and refuse to work. Because of deskilling the proletariat is incapable of taking over the means of production. If they were to hand over the management to a particular category of workers these workers would become the collective capitalist and communisation would fail. Hence the need to abolish wage labour and work itself, fixed capital and the state. He cites the Bangladesh textile strikes where workers burned down factories as the indication of refusal to work²¹ which indicates what crisis activity would bring. Riots without demands such as the French riots in the banlieues, demands for severance pay instead of demands for jobs, the CPE struggles in France²² are all indications of how crisis activity will develop.

No workers' councils or neighbourhood councils will be formed²³. The proletariat will produce forms of struggle with "*imagination*"! There will be no programme and no planning. Localism as in Spain 1936 will prevail. By multiplying the seats of struggle the state will be dislocated and unable to resist. The problem of taking power disappears and there is no transition period. There will be no accounting. Looted and requisitioned products will be distributed without counting.

In this fantastic scenario we see an admiration for rioting, plundering and looting which indicates multi-class struggles are what is envisaged. The surplus population carries through these measures. The productive working class, which as we have been told is a broken, atomised, and degenerating mass, participates by refusing to work but does not lead. No workers' councils are formed. The communisers wash their hands of the problems of organisation of the proletariat and, of course, of bourgeois resistance. The result is mystical wishful thinking and we wonder, in Astarian's own words, *how this fiction could delude anyone!*

We have a vision of communism without work, without organisation, without planning and without accounting. How could 7.8 billion people on the planet exist without working to provide for basic needs, without organisation and without planning to collectively satisfy those needs?

But these absurdities are actually the outcome of some of the theoretical issues which we have mentioned. A key issue is work itself and accounting for labour or the products of labour. Any form of accounting, even simply by time needed to perform tasks, is seen as a reintroduction of value, and so a Trojan horse leading back to capitalism.

The value-form and the abolition of work

Under capitalist social relations, and only under capitalist social relations, labour is expressed in value. The duration of the average necessary labour time required for production of a product is transferred to the product as value. In this process concrete labour becomes abstract labour which gives products their exchange value. The production process creates all the value which is crystallised in the

product. The exchange process realises the value already attached to the product during the production process. Value is not created in the exchange process. Abstract labour time thus becomes the measure of value expressed in exchange-value. Communisers maintain that the traditional Marxist view of communism does not involve the abolition of abstract labour and that Marx himself maintains abstract labour in the period of transition as outlined in his *Critique of the Gotha Programme*. What is being maintained, they argue, is an affirmation of the proletariat as producer of value not the abolition of the proletarian condition and more insidiously the period of transition is intended to transform other classes into proletarians cementing capitalist relations.

Value-form theorists argue the entire social process, including the activity of the working class, is dominated by the value-form²⁴. This is a consequence of real subjection discussed above. Value, they claim, pre-exists and has priority over labour. Value-form posits labour as its content. In a society no longer dominated by alienated social forms the compulsion to labour will disappear; hence the idea that communisation will abolish work. From this conclusion follows the notion of abolishing accounting and planning. Astarian tells us that:

"If nothing is accounted for there is no exchange value ... time will not count. It won't matter if projects are a total mess."²⁵

The affirmation of labour as an organising principle of communist society means, communisers argue, abstract labour time remains and capitalism is not abolished. But even if the value-form posits labour as its content this does not mean that all labour necessarily takes the form of value. In the middle ages the labour of serfs and vassals did not take the form of value. Time labouring on the lord's fields or products delivered to the suzerain were not accounted in value terms. In the first volume of *Capital* Chapter 1 Marx gives the example of patriarchal peasant family to illustrate how various sorts of labour within the family are direct social functions and the products are not commodities nor does labour take the form of value though the labour is measured in time. Use values are produced as social products and shared as social products within the family. Communist society will similarly produce social use values for distribution and use by the associated producers. Although labour exists, this does not mean such a society is dominated by the value-form. What has been ignored, in all this, is the social relations under which labour is performed. Gilles Dauvé also argued that any form of accounting for labour would lead back to capitalism.

"Labour time is capitalist blood labour time, it is the substance of value."²⁶

He arrived at that conclusion by asserting that use-value was an analytic category which contained exchange value. Hence producing use-values would necessarily produce exchange values and therefore abstract labour measured in labour time. Value-form theorists, on the other hand, argue value is a form which posits labour as its content and reach the same conclusion. Hence different communisers reach

the same conclusion by different theoretical routes which indicates that the conclusion was probably arrived at before the theory to justify it was generated.

Labour

Despite saying work will be abolished by communisation, even the communisers cannot seriously think that mankind can survive in any form of society without work. Labour represents the necessary real link between humanity and nature. Astarian himself recognises that:

“For a relation between men to be social in the fundamental sense, it has to include a reproductive relationship with nature.”²⁷

A reproductive relationship with nature is another way of saying work or labour is required to produce from nature what we need to survive. But according to Astarian work cannot exist without exploitation²⁸ so rather than calling it work, he calls it totalising activity:

“Totalizing activity – in which humans do not have to give up enjoying their relationship because they produce something.”²⁹

Totalising activity is work without productivity, without standardisation, without measurement by time without supervision, without planning and so on. These are all the things which, we are warned, bring back value production and with it capitalism. When one remembers that there is to be no transition period and this Utopian vision of work is to be introduced at once one can understand why even Astarian admits:

“Much remains to be done to understand why and how communisation will get production under way again without productivist measures.”³⁰

In other words he himself has serious doubts about his prescriptions. Communist society will, of course, abolish wage labour but will still require useful labour, i.e. labour producing use-values. It is simply incorrect to say that all labour entails exploitation, also incorrect is the assertion that integrating parasitic classes into useful labour is the same as converting them into proletarians. This integration would be part of the process of the abolition of class society. Whether labour is exploited or not depends on the social relations under which the labour is performed.

Productive Working Class – still the only force for communism

Communisers see the world as deindustrialising and the productive working class as shrinking not only relative to the proletariat as a whole but also shrinking absolutely. Endnotes goes even further, and suggests the productive working

class is no longer the main productive force, its place having been taken by science³¹. These considerations lead communisers to doubt the revolutionary potential of the productive working class.

But capitalism, however it restructures, globalises, stratifies or otherwise reforms itself cannot do without the productive working class since this is the **only** source of surplus value and thus the only way its capital can be valorised. The system would collapse if the productive working class stopped producing surplus value. The tendency to exclude workers from the productive process, which is a result of the falling rate of profit, simply expresses the system's contradictions and its inevitable tendency to crisis and breakdown.

Objectively, the conditions for global revolution today are better than ever before and certainly better than 1917. The weight of the peasantry has been massively reduced and it no longer represents a significant counter-revolutionary political force. The globalisation in the period since the 70s has produced a working class that is more unified than ever before. Production has become internationally integrated and a collective effort. We also dispute the communisers' assertion that the productive global working class is shrinking. Richard Freeman, a Harvard University academic, estimates that the entry of China, India and the Soviet bloc to the world market in the 1990s resulted in 1.47 billion additional workers becoming available to global capital. Critically these workers brought very little capital with them thus reducing the global organic composition of capital. This increased the global workforce to 3 billion³². Current figures from the International Labour Organisation (ILO) for 2018 give a global workforce of 3.5 billion, a further 500 million increase from the figure produced by R Freeman. Of these 3.5 billion the ILO tells us, 3.3 billion are employed, 172 million unemployed and a further 140 million not available for work or have given up looking for a job³³. While we accept that these figures do not define the productive workforce, they simply give those employed by capital, they are reason to doubt the idea that it is shrinking. Further, if the productive workforce were in absolute decline the global surplus value produced would also be in absolute decline and capitalist accumulation would be in absolute decline. This would be reflected in declining global growth but this is certainly not the case.

The question we have to answer is how can the working class, which is a class of capitalist society, abolish that society while being an integral part of it? To answer this the mystical thinking of the communisers looked at above is just a way of avoiding difficult issues. What is lacking today is the subjective consciousness of the need to overthrow the present rotten system and build a higher organisation of production, namely communism. This can only arise through a massive period of struggle against a system in crisis. The struggle will start as a struggle for basic class needs, that is to say a struggle for life within the system. The communisers will object that such a struggle is only a struggle to affirm the working class as a class within capitalism and cannot lead to overthrow of capitalism. But we have to start from where we are, from reality not from dreams. Only when the struggle for

basic needs cannot be satisfied will the struggle take a revolutionary direction. But for this to occur these struggles need to become political and for this to occur a revolutionary political organisation and revolutionary political intervention are required. A revolutionary political organisation will not appear automatically³⁴, as communist theorists imagine, it needs to be built and linked to the working class before these struggles break out. If this does not happen we know from the past that the bourgeoisie is very able to turn revolutionary energies into the path of nationalism and war.

Conclusion

The communisation school retains some influence because it offers a credible explanation for two significant issues. The first is the decline of the industrial working class in the metropolitan countries and the consequent decline in class struggle. The second is the changes in capitalism as a system in its historical development. The second issue is theorised in the formal/real subjection theory which appears as an alternative to the decadence theory which was initiated in the Third International (but it quickly soon abandoned in practice as it sought to integrate the USSR into the capitalist world order). However, in our opinion what is being presented is a myopic European view not a global one. As we have attempted to show, communisers extend the real subjection of the labour process to the subjection of the entire social reproduction process, material, intellectual and cultural. The next step is the integration of the working class into capitalism as a class for capital. We consider this step has already been taken by some of the communisation school. They see the production process become ever more efficient, rendering workers ever more superfluous to it. Workers become no longer the sole producers of value and so no longer a revolutionary force. Hence the flirtation with rioting and looting.

But the outcome of all this is removal of the proletariat from a position as a revolutionary class. Instead a completely mystical explanation of how revolution and communisation would come about is concocted. The communisers do not have a strategy for exiting capitalist society. The real and difficult problems of class consciousness, political organisation, bourgeois power and a period of transition are simply brushed aside as non-problems. What this represents is disillusionment and a cry of despair.

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Notes

1. The group Internationalist Perspective (IP), for example, who split from the Internationalist Communist Current (ICC) in 1985 being "centrist towards councilism". They thus already rejected the need for a communist organisation but it would be a number of years before they would shake off their residual Luxemburgism in economics (to embrace value-form analysis) and embrace many of the theoretical positions of this school. The commonality lies in the rejection of political organisation.
2. *Endnotes 1*, p.4
3. See *Endnotes 4*, p.75
4. See Gilles Dauvé *Eclipse and re-emergence of the communist movement*, p.105

5. <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1864/economic/ch02b.htm>
6. *Capital* Volume 1, p.689 Progress Edition
7. *Capital* Volume 1, p.478 Progress Edition
8. See Internationalist Perspective "The world as we see it" <https://internationalistperspective.org/article/226-2/>
9. See out texts on Autonomism: <http://www.leftcom.org/en/articles/2017-09-02/autonomism-%E2%80%93-cutting-the-ground-from-under-marxism> and <http://www.leftcom.org/en/articles/2018-02-21/autonomism-%E2%80%93-%E2%80%9Cmany-flowers-little-fruit%E2%80%9D-1>
10. *Endnotes* 4, p.166
11. *Endnotes* 1, p.19
12. *Endnotes* 4, p.184
13. *Endnotes* 4, p.174. Internationalist Perspective disagrees with this. For them real subjection has eliminated the distinction between the productive working class and the non-productive producing the collective worker.
14. *Endnotes* 3, p.247
15. Gilles Dauvé Eclipse and re-emergence of the communist movement, p.140
16. A critique of some of the objections to the transition period have been made in Communist Society, Value, labour and time: a reply to Gilles Dauvé <https://www.leftcom.org/en/articles/2015-02-15/communist-society-value-labour-and-time-a-reply-to-gilles-dauve%C3%A9>
17. Bruno Astarian *Crisis activity and communisation* <http://libcom.org/library/crisis-activity-communisation-bruno-astarian>
18. See *Endnotes* 2 p.97, This is a conclusion drawn by the value-form Marxists.
19. Full communism is what Marx envisaged as the final outcome of the period of transition in his *Critique of the Gotha Programme*.
20. Bruno Astarian *Crisis activity and communisation* <http://libcom.org/library/crisis-activity-communisation-bruno-astarian>
21. The textile workers were rioting over not being paid. They were rioting for their rights within the system. Burning factories was an attack on the capitalist owners for non-payment of wages not a refusal to work.
22. See Reflections on the student movement in France: <https://www.leftcom.org/en/articles/2006-08-01/reflections-on-the-student-movement-in-france>
23. Bruno Astarian *Crisis activity and communisation* <http://libcom.org/library/crisis-activity-communisation-bruno-astarian>
24. Yet *Endnotes* 4 p 146 see the value-form as obsolescent and human labour no longer the main productive force. Science has taken labour's place. This is justified by the fragment on machines written in 1858, 9 years before *Capital* Volume 1. Communisation is led thus to doubt the revolutionary potential of the working class.
25. Bruno Astarian *Crisis activity and communisation* <http://libcom.org/library/crisis-activity-communisation-bruno-astarian>
26. See Gilles Dauvé "Value time and communism" in the *Eclipse and re-emergence of the communist movement*.
27. Bruno Astarian "Value and its abolition" <http://www.hicsalta-communisation.com/accueil/value-and-its-abolition>
28. *Ibid*
29. *Ibid*
30. *Ibid*
31. *Endnotes* 4, p.146
32. See Labour market imbalances Harvard University paper. Richard Freeman.
33. https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---dcomm/---publ/documents/publication/wcms_670542.pdf
34. See Gilles Dauvé *Eclipse and re-emergence of the communist movement*, p.105

“Class Power on Zero-Hours”: Learning the Hard Way?

A review of the recently published book by the Angry Workers of the World “Class Power on Zero-Hours” published by PM Press.

Introduction

On the back cover of *Class Power on Zero Hours*, the Angry Workers of the World (AWW), a group based in West London, and heavily influenced by operaismo and syndicalism, make the bold claim that “*it is essential reading for anyone who is grappling with the question: what next for working class politics and revolutionary strategy?*”. This review examines how far the book’s fifteen chapters answer this important question.

The book documents the experiences of the AWW members who, as they say themselves, got fed up with central London, and parachuted themselves into the working class area of Greenford. Here there are factories where thousands of workers are employed, mainly immigrants or children of immigrants from the Indian sub-continent, the Caribbean, Africa and Eastern Europe. The AWW moved into the area and worked in the various factories for a period of six years putting great energy into trying to foment solidarity, struggles for wages and conditions and strikes, as well as assisting with social problems. Their efforts included leafleting, joining the official unions, assisting recruitment for rank and file (or base) unions and producing a newspaper. The book is a fairly honest account of all this and shows how they failed to achieve their objectives.

At the end of one of their most sustained efforts to achieve grass roots solidarity and a struggle for pay and conditions, namely the struggle at the Bakkavor ready meal factory, they conclude: “*Things didn’t work out this time, but that’s the class struggle folks! Better luck next time.*” This is a summation of their efforts. They now have decided to leave Greenford for reasons which are not absolutely clear but between the lines it looks like individual militants have drifted away burnt out with their efforts. What is ironic is that the book ends with a call to build a grass roots organisation urging others to follow precisely the strategy which the book documents as having failed.

Getting Rooted

But let’s begin at the beginning. In the introduction they say, “*This book documents our experiences. It is material for getting rooted. It is a call for an independent working class organisation.*” They suggest “*a different kind of class politics, one that is embedded in the daily lives of working class people.*” For the AWW, a major problem is that the “*left*” have “*no concrete relationship with working class people.*”

The AWW felt *"an urgent need to break out of our cosmopolitan bubble and root our politics in working class jobs and lives."* And now they hope to persuade others to adopt their model of organisation. To embed themselves in the workplace and *"fight the bosses"* using what they would term a *"class union"* as a *"vehicle"* for organising the workers. We will go on to examine what they mean by *"class unionism."*

In their introduction, the AWW identify *"four layers"* of an organisation. These are: workplaces, a solidarity network, a newspaper and an organisation. Together these comprise their *"organisational framework"*.

They correctly see workplaces as central because *"our ability as producers is crucial in our aim to create another society."* While a solidarity network is important to them because, *"we have to drive a wedge between the middle class and lower ranks of the working class, through direct mutual aid, action and solidarity."* The solidarity network will assist in building the *"class union."* Their newspaper, *Workers' Wild West*, is important to *"share experiences from the solidarity network and from workplaces and to reflect on them."* And the final layer, organisation, is needed *"to hold together the solidarity network, the activities in workplaces and the newspaper and to give it all a direction Our organisation has to be of practical use for the class and at the same time provide a compass: these are the conditions for our class to act independently from the parliamentary and state system, and these are steps the movement can take to capture and defend the means of production."*

In a book of almost 400 pages, we will largely concentrate on the chapters concerning the workplace, organisation and revolutionary strategy because these are necessarily linked; the organisation being the embodiment of the distilled lessons of experience derived from the history of working class struggles. Any organisation aspiring to be a revolutionary force in society must have a praxis, that is a body of tried and tested theory which informs their intervention in the class. We will first examine the AWW's ideas on organising the working class and then go on to see how this fits in with their *"revolutionary strategy."*

The Workplace & Organising the Working Class: Mainstream, Base or Class Unionism?

The book's introduction tells us that the AWW were formed in 2014. In chapter 3 we read about two separate actions, early in their history, where members of the AWW, as agency workers on temporary contracts, organised a refusal to work overtime at a Waitrose warehouse complex and then a slowdown at a similar Sainsbury site. At the Waitrose site they were able to persuade most temp workers to refuse to work overtime in opposition to the change of contract and this lasted for a short period. But there was a marked difference in solidarity between temporary and permanent workers and management were able to use the permanent workers and union reps to cover the overtime not being worked. At the Sainsbury site they managed to get three quarters of temps to

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follow their example and significantly reduce their productivity rates to below 70% of the norm, which earned the attention and anger of management. The 3 AWW members involved were identified as the ring-leaders of the slowdown and sacked after a disciplinary process.

As a result of the actions described in chapter 3 it seems the AWW concluded that the main unions and their representatives cannot be appealed to or relied upon to help in any actions being organised by them in support of workers' immediate interests. For example, *"when agency workers jointly stopped working overtime, Wincanton were able to use the permanent staff as scabs, which saved the company from serious trouble. **With the union reps more than willing to help management out, temps were a bit screwed.**"* And in the Sainsbury slowdown, after two members of the AWW had joined Unite in order to garner support from the union for their action, they say, *"the union never approached us. You would think that if temp workers start joining your union you would make an extra effort to welcome them, hoping that you would be able to organise the other temps too. But this obviously wasn't going to happen. **This meant that there was no practical use in asking our workmates to sign up to the union as there was little chance for a short-term plan of action that could improve things.**"*

The union did not bother with recruiting temp workers when there is such a high turnover of them, and when they can be paid lower rates than permanent workers. And despite the AWW's appeals to the regional Unite office to get the site reps to defend them against management in their disciplinary meeting, they were told it was a matter for the site reps and were referred back to them, who in turn said they *"**didn't want to be involved in unofficial action.**"* Nothing ventured, nothing gained we suppose; but regional management were not going to overrule their site representatives.

So what conclusions did the AWW draw? You would expect that from this experience, if not from the many lessons of struggles past, the AWW would have rejected mainstream union representation as a way for workers to struggle in the workplace. Yet referring to the union at the Waitrose site, the writer seems surprised that, *"Five years on, what's happening? **The union is still crap.**"* As if the union was going to change character after five years or indeed any amount of time! The established unions have been fully integrated into the state apparatus for more than a century, and it is because the mainstream unions everywhere are uninterested in representing low paid temporary and gig workers that this gap in the market is being filled by the new base unions, which in 2015 the AWW apparently discovered.

The passage on page 272 entitled, *"To Rep or not to Rep"* discusses whether or not a revolutionary should become a union representative. *"As a rep you have to obey the rules laid out in the recognition agreement. You are also seen as a representative of the union apparatus, so even if you do 'good work', you end up putting a gloss on a union institution that essentially cannot be turned into a weapon for workers. **Here***

we would have to look at the deeper historical and material reasons why unions in modern capitalism have become what they are, machines of co-management of exploitation." Despite this "apparent understanding", in chapter 10, part of the second of three "workers' inquiries" in the book, we see the writer with other comrades experiment again with becoming union reps in a Tesco CFC in Greenford. As they say, they "wanted to see if the union structure would allow us to meet more workers both within the company but also beyond the company" and "to widen the scope of workers' involvement with each other." In fact, the decision, they say, can be seen as part of their workers' inquiry.

Inevitably, the writer experiences difficulties in trying to be at one and the same time workplace organiser and union rep. Prevented from starting a union newsletter by senior union officials and unsupported by the other reps, the writer found it hard to start an unofficial newsletter. Attempts to distribute the AWW paper gained the attention of management and the writer became "marked" by management and therefore decided that, "the best form of defence is calculated attack." He informed the Health & Safety Authorities about management's practice of penalising workers after accidents; put in a grievance against "some high-ranking managers for not letting me conduct union surveys"; and finally called for a break time protest against redundancies. For this he was called into a meeting with the main CFC manager and the area USDAW organiser and heard them say to each other, "we can't physically stop him but I have seen cases where union reps not only lost their role as reps but also their job."

After becoming involved in some minor disputes with management over the picking of 6 x 2 litre water packs and seeing the union fail again to oppose redundancies and support workers over the consequent increase in workload the writer concludes, "in the end you feel like a caricature of a union rep – you hand in one grievance after the other but management just isolates the issues. You cannot threaten to use the usual union tools (newsletters, meetings, etc.) against them, because the union itself doesn't back you up. So in many ways it was a **strategic mistake** to become a union rep under these conditions."

We are wondering why this "strategic mistake" was made in the first place when the AWW had already dismissed mainstream unions in favour of "class unions." Why was there no attempt to use base unionism or create a "class union" here? "Lack of capacity" hardly seems an adequate answer when the alternative seems to have been "bang[ing] our heads against brick walls as shop stewards in the bigger unions." They might as well instead have banged their heads against brick walls trying to build a "class union." There are many contradictions in the AWW's approach to organising workers, one of the chief of which is that they want to try to urge workers to take militant action before they are ready for it. The only way to do this is to resort to the union organising model and this not only pre-empts class-consciousness but ends up stifling it.

The Next Best Thing to a Class Union: The Industrial Workers of the World

Chapter 11, the 3rd workers' inquiry, set in a 3D printer manufacturing plant, focusses on an attempt to set up a branch of the IWW. It seems that the AWW had decided in this case that the established unions and their representatives could not be used, since the plant was largely un-unionised, but the workers lacked sufficient consciousness to form a class union. The writer's remarks about the GMB union from chapter 8 which is about an attempt to organise a strike in a Bakkavor plant sum up the AWW's contradictory approach: *"The culture of working class struggle (as well as the infrastructure), is not there any more and needs to be rebuilt from the bottom up. If my experience is anything to go by, the mainstream unions are not up to the job in any substantive sense."*

So it seems five members of the AWW worked in the 3D plant in 2016 and returned to the factory gates a year later in 2017 having signed up to the IWW and together with IWW people tried to get workers to set up their own branch of the union. It is reported that these workers are low waged and are put on reduced hours when it suits the company. They leafleted workers and, they say, *"addressed the fact that some workers had had bad experiences with mainstream unions and emphasised that with the IWW decisions are made by workers themselves, supported by other workers,"* and pointed out the hypocrisy of management. They tried to get workers to meet them outside of work but this failed because in reaction to the AWW's efforts to organise them management bought off the workers by offering a £100 bonus and promising improvements in working conditions. Instead of regarding this a minor victory in that even the fear of collective action had forced the bosses to make concessions the chapter concludes, *"So workers received an extra bonus but still have no union."*

The workers still had no union and the AWW still had no success in creating a branch of the IWW let alone creating a "class union." This kind of voluntarist activism especially in periods of low class struggle inevitably leads nowhere. The AWW were chasing unicorns.

Confusion and Inconsistency

Chapter 6 entitled "Syndicalism 2.0 and the IWW organising drive" attempts to explain the genesis of their positions regarding unionism and appears to show that the AWW have understood the role that mainstream unions play in the decadent period of capitalism and even has a critique of syndicalism. The chapter describes their embrace in 2015, and subsequent rejection, of syndicalism including a rejection of the IWW in favour of what they call "class unionism". Yet we see various attempts to use the mainstream union framework to organise workers as described in chapters 3, 8, 10 and 11 during the six years of their existence, which suggests that the AWW still think that in certain circumstances the unions can be used as a tool in the interests of the working class. They even continue to

try to use mainstream unions instead of base unions after saying that the Italian SiCobas' union was a revelation to them when they discovered it because "they were able to get migrant workers struggling" and so were the way forward. Then after apparently rejecting base unionism later in the chapter, including the IWW, in favour of "class unionism", we see the AWW nevertheless try to set up a branch of the IWW. If all this appears to be contradictory and confusing, that is because it is.

While acknowledging "the pitfalls of syndicalism", the AWW give as one reason for using the IWW during an "IWW Organising Drive" described on page 114 as, "the fact that the IWW could act as a legal vehicle to organise a strike for higher wages within a short period of time". It is this need to act within the bourgeoisie's legal framework that constrains and delimits organising. It is inevitable that you will be trapped in this legal framework as you attempt to negotiate the minimum wage (an arbitrary sum determined by the bourgeoisie) on behalf of workers.

The phrase "workers' autonomy" is mentioned a lot in the book but if the objective really is to raise the consciousness of workers this is not the way to go about it. The AWW's whole approach leads them to run a major risk of burnout. Their method of adopting any "vehicle" available (be it a mainstream union, a base union, a class union, or a solidarity network) to help "organise" workers betrays a complete inconsistency in approach and a contradiction of stated political positions.

"Class Unionism"

So if "class unionism" really is an aspiration of the AWW, what is it? On page 111 we learn that "*a class union shares many traits of rank and file unionism.*" It is not a service union and it is not overly bureaucratic. It is for all workers not just certain professions or sectors. What makes it different from the IWW is that it "*would be an explicit organisation to fight the bosses, not a vehicle for this or that political cause.*" As an example they tell us that "*the IWW support regional and national liberation movements*"². A class union "*would be totally self-organised, meaning no professional organisers. And most importantly, it would have a firmer class line.*" This means apparently that a class union would not support pay differentials, for example, which would be divisive.

For the AWW there are three material foundations for a class union:

- "It can act as a formal and legal vehicle to take strike action."
- "It can act as a unifying force amongst workers who are in need of associational power."
- "It is an organisation for times when the class movement is too weak to create more offensive forms of organisation."

But these three "material foundations" for a "class union" bespeak a kind of substitutionism for class-consciousness. It is unsurprising that the AWW find this necessary when on page 113 we read, "*workers in our neck of the woods weren't*

approaching us with the idea they wanted to fight. It was more like trying to convince them they should. This cold approach was immediately at a greater disadvantage than operating from a position where workers approach you, ready and willing to engage." Workers ready for a fight don't need a union to organise it for them. And the most class-conscious workers will give a lead to less class-conscious workers but this will only happen in the right conditions. It cannot be forced.

Class Autonomy and the Capitalist Crisis

In many ways chapter 6 is the most interesting chapter in the book. It is a pity then that the AWW ignore their own analysis of mainstream unionism and their understanding of syndicalism and base unionism. However, it is significant that the analysis of "class unionism" takes up only one page of the whole chapter and is mostly quoted above. On page 110, the writer says that class unions should be doing everything in their power to make leaders unnecessary but this is impossible within a union framework. The negotiators of the price of wage labour will always emerge as the leaders. A permanent organisation such as a union will inevitably become bureaucratic. The AWW tie themselves in knots trying "*to dissolve the boundaries between organisers and organised*", but this is an insoluble problem. The whole concept of "organising" workers is one which leads to the control of the struggle being taken out of workers' hands. But the AWW know full well the dangers of organising workers in this fashion, and if their aim really is to develop a revolutionary strategy, they are going the wrong way about it.

Attempts to create such a class union would result in failure or at best in simply establishing a traditional base union which would eventually end up behaving exactly like a mainstream one. A bureaucracy would necessarily arise which would put the union organisation before the struggle, as the experience of the various CoBas organisations in Italy shows. Even in the UK we have seen that the first thing rank and file unions do is to sign up members and get them paying dues. Their priority is to build their union.

And unions remain on the terrain of negotiating working conditions. In periods of militancy, an attempt to create a "class union" would either be superfluous or counter-productive, and a barrier to the growth of an anti-capitalist class-consciousness. Revolutionaries in the workplace in such a situation should be the first to call for a workers' assembly to discuss next steps. Workers have shown countless times that they know how to organise themselves when they are ready. Workers assemblies and strike committees appear in times of militancy. In workplaces where there are already militants of the revolutionary organisation they will likely have a part to play in this. Our primary role as revolutionaries is to provide a political perspective and push for the extension of struggles in and outside of the workplace whenever they arise. To "*get involved in struggles in [our] workplace and community – but without ever becoming paid organisers, union representatives, or struggle consultants (we don't want to reproduce the division of labour between revolutionaries as "service-providers" and workers as "service-users").*"

(<http://www.leftcom.org/en/articles/2020-04-22/what-does-the-communist-left-do>) We support those demands that extend the struggle and criticise those that don't – but we are not just trying to win higher wages for workers, we are trying to abolish the wages system!³

We said above that the AWW “appear” to have understood the role that unions play in the decadent period of capitalism but the AWW only pay lip service to the idea that capitalism is in structural crisis. A structural crisis means that due to the tendency for the rate of profit to fall the capitalists are forced to attack the living standards of the working class in order to extract more profits, both directly through wage cuts and indirectly through reductions in the social wage. In such conditions, as we wrote in the context of a SiCobas led strike in Rome a few months ago:

“An internationalist communist intervention must, necessarily, try to do what SiCobas, and other movements like it, do not and cannot do because of their nature as trade unions, that is movements which operate entirely within the system. This means we have to link immediate demands directly with the perspective of class struggle against capitalism. In short, it must be said that the dispute [...] is an immediate struggle that must be supported by the whole class, beyond the boundaries of sector or this or that trade union acronym — up to this point some of the speeches we heard would agree — but since the cause of workers' exploitation is capitalism itself, and since the crisis of capital — the crisis, a great theme totally absent from any of the interventions we witnessed — is a structural crisis, then it is necessary, while fighting for the immediate demand, to emphasise that we cannot stop there at any struggle. Never.” (<http://www.leftcom.org/en/articles/2020-03-11/demonstration-and-strike-of-peroni-workers-at-tor-sapienza-rome>)

A Note on “Capturing and Defending the Means of Production”

In chapters 12-15 on revolutionary strategy the writer sets great store by analysing how production is organised, the location of key installations, etc. in order that workers can better plan how to take over control of the means of production. Strikes are praised as a way “*we can organise work differently, potentially without the mediation and control of capital*” but the writer never says anything about the political struggle, and talks about the state only in terms of **defending** the means of production. There is no talk of going on the offensive. If we passively ignore the state in a revolutionary situation while we are on the front foot, we will sooner or later be forced to face an offensive from the state once the bourgeoisie have rallied their forces and revolutionary momentum has waned. The priority must be, as soon as proletarian forces are powerful enough, to completely dismantle the capitalist state wherever the revolution occurs first and then concentrate efforts on extending the revolution to every other country.

At the same time the process of removing the control of the law of value over our lives has to be begun though it cannot be completed until the capitalist state has been destroyed everywhere. Yet we read in chapter 13 that, *"the two main strategies of the 'radical' left – the violent attack on the state and its armed forces, and the peaceful electoral taking over of government, which seem to be the two extreme ends of the political spectrum – are both misjudging where the power of the system lies."* We would suggest that it is the writer who has completely misjudged where the power of the system lies. Incredibly, they go on to write, *"violent insurrection or electoral politics don't help to undo the power of capital, as they don't actually question its power to determine how we produce and therefore how we live our lives."* Obviously, a change of government will not undo the power of capital. This is the goal of the capitalist left who think state capitalism is socialism. But does the writer really think the capitalist state will stand idly by while the workers are busy in the workplace reorganising production along socialist lines?

Again, we can learn from history. The events in Spain (1936-9) or Italy (1919-20), which saw the working class take over the means of production while leaving the state untouched and free to make its plans for counter-revolution, led to a resounding defeat once the momentum had been lost and the capitalist class had rallied. The tragedy here is that in both cases there was no political organisation at the time capable of leading the class towards the overthrow of the state. In fact, the whole approach of the AWW to fomenting working class struggle with its emphasis on building a "solidarity network" is more like Gramsci's gradualist perspective which focussed only on the factory and ignored the power of the capitalist state. As Bordiga put it at the time, revolution is not simply a process of building up workplace democracy and proving that the working class could *"responsibly and efficiently manage production"*. Rather it is a conscious political movement to overthrow the existing state that has to be centralised and coordinated by an organisation with a clear revolutionary programme. The AWW seems to shun taking responsibility for political leadership, preferring to let the working class re-learn lessons that are already part of its historic experience and which revolutionaries carry down through time.

A real world example of the AWW's confusion on this question can be found on libcom with the AWW's post entitled, *"Factory occupation! Temporary and permanent Honda workers in Manesar India"*. In introducing the factory occupation they say, *"What we lack is a collective reflection of the inner-dynamics and global dimension of the current protests. We lack a vision of how to go beyond the clash with state forces and to imagine a collective take-over of the means to produce a better life. This is why struggles such as the current factory occupation of Honda workers are of essential importance. They are literally occupying the means to produce, and in doing so, finding new ways to develop collective knowledge."*

What does this really mean? The debate around this question on libcom is quite revealing. It shows that where the AWW are in a position to give a political lead to the working class by agitating for an extension to the strike and moving the

struggle beyond the limits of the occupation, they prefer to prevaricate and wait for the workers to achieve that perspective spontaneously. This kind of workerism, as well as failing to provide political leadership, can also lead to workers' confusion. To quote Fredo Corvo from the dialogue with the AWW, "*In the present situation in Manesar this implies agitation by these minority organisations for extension to other workers. I'm sorry to say that I have no indication that you are doing this now, and that you seem to wait until workers will do this 'spontaneously'. This is a point to clarify because this doesn't only concern Manesar or India but workers all over the world, a tiny minority is trying to follow what you are doing.*" They then ask the AWW the question, "*Is it possible that your efforts in creating a permanent organisation for larger numbers of workers, have made you reluctant to bring forward what you as a smaller minority see as necessary in struggle?*" This is a very pertinent question. We think the AWW's obsession with their industrial "strategy" is blinding them to the need for revolutionaries to give political leadership.

Conclusion

In the book's introduction, the AWW say, "we put ourselves on the communist left". This is a welcome announcement but a lot of disparate individuals, groups and tendencies are starting to adopt this label without really understanding its significance and it is beginning to lose its meaning.

The Communist Left spent the years following the defeat of the revolutionary wave that brought the First World War to an end analysing and drawing the lessons of that defeat. Many of the ICT's positions today derive from that analysis and form a significant part of our programme. We know the AWW are dismissive of the lessons of the communist programme; "*the programme doesn't exist on paper.*"⁴ It is ancient history they say and is no longer relevant to the modern world. But the content of *Class Power on Zero Hours* only confirms that what we now maintain in theory is based on actual experience. By ignoring what the Communist Left critique of the unions is, the AWW have been forced to relearn them in practice. Rejecting or failing to understand the hard won lessons of the programme means that you are condemned to repeating the mistakes of the past.

No group which is really part of the Communist Left would work within the IWW, or share a platform with the leftist AWL. In fact, the AWW share similar confusions with the defunct British group, Solidarity (a group they very much admire) which came out of Trotskyism and never completely broke with leftism or resolved their confusions on the union question⁵.

At the end of the book, the AWW reflect on the successes and failures during the 6 years of their existence: "*we ... try to encourage others by being a practical example and having a clear political line.*" We couldn't agree more that a clear political line is necessary but so far we have seen no evidence that the AWW have one.

The AWW haven't made much progress, they say, by operating on an informal

Class Organisation

level and hoping that people will simply join them. They now reluctantly concede that constituting a more formal organisation may be necessary and that this will, although *"traditional and tedious"*, involve building an *"organisation with a political platform."* Thus they want *"others to join and build chapters in their area. To lay down that this is not about 'joining' but about establishing roots within the class on similar lines (solidarity network, strategic workplace groups, newspapers). To develop a clear structure of 'self-education' with worker comrades who are interested in joining."*

In some ways this is to be welcomed by those of us who have been attempting the *"traditional and tedious"* for decades. Our aim has always been to establish nuclei of workplace groups but we have only succeeded in doing this in Italy. Even here these groups have risen and fallen with the rise and fall of local struggles. Our Italian comrades have been able to maintain a factory group in the FIAT factories of Turin and Asti for most, if not all, that time (the 1950s were as hard as today for organising in the workplace) but it has not been easy. Our experience of the victimisation of militants by both unions and bosses (often in cahoots, as AWW found out) means they do all they can to prevent us from functioning. And remember what we have been trying to do is establish ***political*** and not merely defensive or demand organisations in the workplace. This is a tougher task and like AWW we have more failures than successes to report. These include the best comrades being amongst the first to be laid off but also some being enticed by the siren calls of the unions (or pressure from their workmates) to enter the bottom rung of the union structure only for them to become demoralised. In reality none of us can transcend the actual level of consciousness of the struggle. And voluntarism is no substitute for the long and patient work of constant contact that is needed to build a revolutionary political organisation that is rooted in the working class. Until the class in general revives we have little water to swim in. Today the signs are that amongst younger workers there is a growing recognition that the working class has paid the price for 40 years of capitalist crisis but apart from the most deprived migrant workers (this is a global phenomenon) few sectors have as yet become openly combative.

This might be something we could fruitfully discuss with the AWW but since the publication of the book, they have announced on the web a *"founding conference"* to be held in Autumn this year in order to discuss *"working class strategy and organisation"* along the lines described above. There is a link to the AWW's platform, around which the new organisation will presumably develop. However, the platform contains many of the confusions criticised above. We doubt that this initiative to create a more formal organisation will be any more successful than their earlier efforts. But if it does get off the ground they can take this as our first contribution on the important questions of revolutionary strategy they have raised but not solved.

Ergosum

Notes

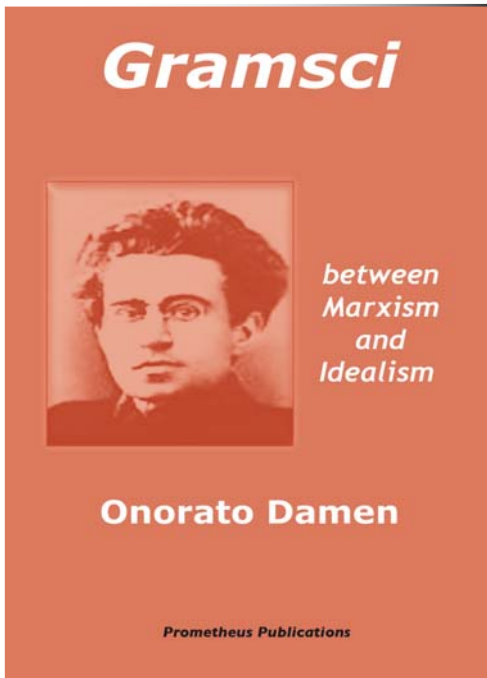
1. For details on SiCobas see <https://www.leftcom.org/en/articles/2017-03-21/two-comments-on-recent-events-around-sicobas-in-italy>
2. Presumably they mean IWW support for the Kurds in Rojava. They don't seem to know that

SiCobas (what some Bordigist groups call a “class union”) is also a supporter of national liberation for oppressed peoples. It helps to sell their message to the migrant workers they organise.

3. For more on our strategy in relation to workplaces see <https://www.leftcom.org/en/articles/2012-09-12/our-intervention-within-the-working-class>

4. “Class Power on Zero Hours” p.10

5. And which the bulk of the Communist Left in Britain emerged from, including the founders of Revolutionary Perspectives, the forerunner of the CWO.



Now in English with a CWO introduction. This collection of articles by Onorato Damen traces key aspects of the myths which developed about Gramsci both in his life-time and during the post-war years when the Italian Communist Party used him to advance its own political agenda. See the ICT website for details of how to order a copy through the post. Check out alternative bookshops.

Bukharin on State Capitalism and Imperialism

CWO Introduction

The latest in our series of translations from the journal *Kommunist* of 1918 goes under the unpromisingly dry title of “Some Fundamental Concepts of Modern Economics”. This though belies its importance and interest.

As we have noted previously, the contributors to *Kommunist* came together largely over two issues. They viewed the signing of the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk in March 1918 as an error which would set back the world revolution, and they feared that Russia was heading towards a new form of capitalism, state capitalism. The latter issue was raised in articles we translated earlier by Ossinsky¹ but this one by Bukharin is more substantial, and has the merit of linking the changes in the operation of the capitalist state in the economy to the rise of imperialism based on Bukharin’s own considerable research into the question.

Bukharin changed his position on many issues over his career at the centre of the Russian Revolution and the Soviet state. Even before the German Revolution broke out in November 1918 he (along with another “left communist” Radek²) abandoned his opposition to the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk. He subsequently also abandoned the *Kommunist* idea that socialism could only be built from below and was beginning to endorse Party rule as a substitute for class rule by 1920. And, after the Kronstadt Rebellion of March 1921 (where he rejected the official line of it being “a White plot”, instead seeing it as a revolt of “our erring proletarian brothers”), he would go on to write that the contemporary adoption of the New Economic Policy (NEP) represented “the collapse of all our illusions”.

From this time on he became the leading defender of NEP as a “path to socialism” and even supported Stalin’s “socialism in one country”. In his role as leader of the Comintern from 1926-9 he abandoned his former opposition to support for national liberation struggles and thought the anti-colonial struggle of local bourgeois factions would aid the world proletarian revolution (a disastrous policy which contributed to the Shanghai Massacre of Chinese communist workers in April, 1927). However his insistence on maintaining NEP as the gradual build up of Russian capitalism (passing as “socialism”) meant that he opposed all “super-industrialisers” like his former friend and collaborator Preobrazhensky who supported the Left Opposition in the years immediately after Lenin’s death. In alliance with Stalin, Bukharin voted for his expulsion from the party along with Trotsky and many of his former comrades amongst the Left Communists of 1918.

It was with this attachment to continuing NEP that he also became the leader of the Right Opposition against Stalin’s plans for collectivisation. As a result, he was

ousted from the Politburo in 1929, and put on trial in 1937. Found guilty, he was executed in 1938. Bukharin was thus no revolutionary hero. He too succumbed to the reality of the counter-revolution and unsuccessfully attempted to ride it. This though does not nullify his theoretical contribution in the period before 1920. Despite all his political contortions, the consequences of which we can see all too clearly today, the one thing Bukharin always stuck with was his analysis of imperialism and state capitalism which he reiterated even as late as 1927.

Although Lenin criticised him as “scholastic” in his so-called “Testament” (presumably over such issues as Brest-Litovsk) he also considered him “a most valuable and major theorist of the Party” in the same document. He could hardly have done otherwise given that he had not only come round to Bukharin’s view on the state (as evidenced in *The State and Revolution*³) but had also borrowed extensively from Bukharin’s *Imperialism and World Economy* (1915) for his own work on *Imperialism – The Highest Stage of Capitalism* written a year later.

The issue they fundamentally disagreed on was the significance of state capitalism and the article which follows is a direct polemic against Lenin’s conception that it was “a step forward” for the Russian Revolution.

Bukharin’s views on the nature of state capitalism were the product of serious work. His 1915 book *Imperialism and World Economy*⁴ laid the groundwork. In it he begins by noting that the tendencies Marx had identified in *Capital* had now produced new contradictions.

The process of the formation of capitalist monopolies is, logically and historically, a continuation of the process of concentration and centralisation of capital ... free competition inside of the class of capitalists is being more and more limited by restrictions and by the formation of giant economies monopolising the entire “national” market. (op cit, p. 65)

Monopoly producers were so dominant that they became more and more intertwined with the political power – the state.

... the bourgeoisie as a whole is more tolerant regarding monopolistic interference of the state power. The basic reason for this change is the ever growing closeness between state power and the leading spheres of finance capital ... a maximum of centralisation and a maximum of state power are required by the fierce competitive struggle on the world market ... The bourgeoisie loses nothing from shifting production from one of its hands into another, since present-day state power is nothing but an entrepreneurs’ company of tremendous power, headed even by the same persons that occupy the leading positions in the banking and syndicate offices. (op.cit. p. 155)

Thus

With the growth of the importance of state power, its inner structure also changes. The state becomes more than ever before an "executive committee of the ruling classes." ... The state apparatus not only embodies the interests of the ruling classes in general, but also their collectively expressed will. (op.cit p.127-8)

With fewer small capitalists to fall by the wayside this heavy concentration of capital transfers competition from the level of individual firms to that between national "champions" backed by their respective states. This was what Bukharin now identified as the era of world economy, that is the springboard for imperialism. And this capitalist imperialism eventually leads to world war:

Capitalism has attempted to overcome its own anarchy by pressing it into the iron ring of state organisation. But having eliminated competition within the state, it let loose all the devils of a world scuffle. (op.cit. p.169)

Writing in the middle of the First World War he could also see that in this new epoch it was no one off event.

A series of wars is unavoidable ... Once the present war is over new problems will have to be solved by the sword. (op. cit. p.139)

The coherence of Bukharin's view with the essential mainspring of Marxism, and the way it links all the observable phenomena of his time, is thus one of its greatest strengths. The second strength lies in his refusal to accept that state control is "socialism" in any form. In the First World War the fact that the whole of social and economic life was subject to the domination of the militarised state meant that amongst the capitalists there were many who claimed that this was "state socialism". One such, Max Krahman, quoted by Bukharin in his 1915 work tells us that

The present powerful effect of all the measures in support of the state and in defence of the country ... because of military considerations brings us ... considerably nearer to State Socialism ... This is not internationally diluted but nationally consolidated socialism. (op.cit. p.156-7)

It is thus no accident that the great fans of imperialism, Mussolini and Hitler, should also advertise themselves as "national socialists", something Bukharin himself noted as early as 1927. Mussolini, the one time leader of the Left of the Socialist Party, editor of the Party paper *Avanti!*, became a fervent supporter of Italian imperialism as soon as the war began. Fascism was the logical outcome of his marriage of imperialism and state direction of capital. Workers' loyalty was to be to the nation, not the class. Imperialist war was the answer to class struggle. And if you look at the actual political composition of the great German Social Democratic Party you see that it was riddled with racist supporters of imperialism, especially in its trade unions led by the likes of Legien and David. Little wonder that some disgruntled socialists after the "shame of Versailles" should form

groups like the National Socialist German Workers Party of Anton Drexler. This was the vehicle which Hitler took over to promote the same “national socialism” as Mussolini. The key common feature for Bukharin was “the trustification of state power” reflecting “a peculiar form of *state capitalism*, where the state power controls and develops capitalism”.⁵

Bukharin stresses, again and again, both in the article below, and in his other writings, like *The ABC of Communism*, that the term “socialism” was continually misused and abused. The key factor was which class controlled the state and society. “Nationalisation of the economy” cannot be socialism if it is still the capitalists who control both. And it still resonates today. From 2008 on the leading capitalist states have continued to absorb the debt acquired by the banking system’s failed speculations. They were considered too big to fail and thus too central to the survival of the system to be subject to some “creative destruction”. At the time it was commented that this was “socialism for the rich”. And today, faced with a global pandemic, every sector of the economy from airlines and builders to restaurants and pubs demand the right to a state bailout. Enough for the *Daily Telegraph* to announce “we are all socialists now”⁶. The right wing ideologues of course take their conception of “socialism” from the left wing of capitalism as proposed by the likes of Bernie Sanders, Jeremy Corbyn and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez.⁷ What they call “socialism” is merely the nationalisation of the means of production. It does not do away with the essential component of capitalism – the exploitation of wage labour – and it leaves the class organisation of society intact. Bukharin takes issue with this idea here using examples from his own time to argue that nationalisation is not socialism if the state is still dominated by the interests of finance capital. State capitalism is thus “the highest power of the bourgeoisie”.

There is however a glaring weakness in Bukharin’s view. After 1921 he does not apply his analysis to the USSR. There are two reasons for this. The first is that, having expelled the capitalists, he believed that the working class, “the proletarian dictatorship”, ruled the USSR through the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, a view he seems to have arrived at by 1920 if the evidence of his book *Economics of the Transformation Period* is anything to go by. Abandoning his earlier views about the fact that socialism can only be built through working class initiative itself, he writes at length on the need for the compulsion of labour in the Soviet state. He justifies it thus:

In the capitalist regime, compulsion was defended in the name of “the interests of the totality”, while in reality it was in the interest of capitalist groups. Under proletarian dictatorship, compulsion is for the first time really the tool of the majority in the interests of the majority” [Lenin wrote in the margin “True!”] (op. cit. p.158)

But this is the nub of the matter. Bukharin does not question the fact that the Party apparatus and the state now rules over the working class not through it. A

new ruling class was in process of formation which, after 1928, would go in for the oxymoronic “socialist primitive accumulation” which his friend Preobrazhensky was calling for.

He could also have argued (had the question ever been put to him!) that in Russia the Soviet Government had reneged on Tsarism’s debts to international capital. So what was going on in NEP Russia in the 1920s was thus unrelated to the process he described where the concentration and centralisation of capital tended to monopoly and this in turn brought out the need for state intervention. He did not grasp that in order to contest the power of finance capital the USSR would have to develop a new form of state capitalism.

There was one element in his theory though that was to be of relevance in regard to the USSR. As we have already noted, for Bukharin, imperialism and state capitalism were linked to militarism and the inevitability of more wars. As he says in the article which follows, *“Imperialism, militarism, state capitalism – this holy trinity of capitalist barbarism must be blown apart by the proletariat”*. In the USSR exactly the opposite was about to happen. The issue was complex but in the wake of the Shanghai massacre the Left Opposition revived accusing the Bukharin-Stalin duopoly of betraying the revolution both at home and abroad. Stalin now exaggerated threats from abroad (the British Government had cut off diplomatic relations after alleged USSR interference in the General Strike and the Soviet Ambassador to Poland was assassinated by a White Russian émigré) to declare “a war scare”. At the same time he raised the price of industrial goods whilst lowering that of agricultural goods so that the peasantry brought in less grain (a major source of export revenue at the time). This set the scene for both collectivisation and the Five Year Plans (to start the “primitive socialist accumulation” which basically was what Left Oppositionist economists like Preobrazhensky had been calling for from the earliest days of NEP).

Stalin was now a “super-industrialiser”, and a far more brutal one at that, but to justify it he invoked the military danger to the USSR from the hostile capitalist states surrounding it. In 1931 his speech to industrial managers justified this brutality thus:

One feature of the history of old Russia was the continual beatings she suffered because of her backwardness. She was beaten by the Mongol khans. She was beaten by the Turkish beys. She was beaten by the Swedish feudal lords. She was beaten by the Polish and Lithuanian gentry. She was beaten by the British and French capitalists. She was beaten by the Japanese barons. All beat her because of her backwardness, military backwardness, cultural backwardness, political backwardness, industrial backwardness, agricultural backwardness ... We are fifty or a hundred years behind the advanced countries. We must make good this distance in ten years. Either we do it, or we shall be crushed.⁸

What in fact Stalin was launching was a new form of state capitalism which would

be predicated on raising a surplus from the peasantry to invest in the massive exploitation of a class which still thought it was building a new socialist world, but which was creating surplus value for a state which had never really left the imperialist concert of nations (as the secret treaties made with Germany in the 1920s attest). This forced industrialisation of a command economy was the product of a state with huge national resources which had managed to expel those financial capitalists who had dominated Russia's industry until 1918. A revolution which had withered in its isolation in a single state would thus have to find its own way forward. In doing so, sheltered behind the walls of a non-convertible currency the USSR could become a model for a different form of state capitalism. Tragically it flew under the false flag of "really existing socialism" to its Stalinist supporters and "communism" to its Western opponents. Revolutionaries are still living with the consequences of those mutually reinforcing lies today.

The Stalinist command economy was a model which appealed to the leading elite in many ex-colonial states in Africa, Latin America and Asia. This was especially true after victory in the Second World War had conferred on the USSR the status of a "super-power". If the USSR had been able to achieve its own "take off" without the assistance of international finance capital they thought they could do the same. However none of them had the size or the natural resources of the USSR. In the Cold War of the next 45 years the USSR also could not match the capital investment that came from the West (mainly the USA). Its best exports were armaments (to foment the wars of "national liberation"). Even here the amount of the USSR's budget devoted to arms expenditure not only meant economic austerity for its workers but basically brought the system to its knees by 1982. The belated attempt at reform in the 1980s led to its implosion in 1990. Before then though states that had begun by looking to the USSR model were already gradually opening up to Western capital, including Vietnam and, after Mao's death, China.

Ironically China today provides yet another model of a type of state capitalism. It has abandoned its non-convertible currency for a semi-convertible currency. It opened up to Western finance capital (which could find few really profitable opportunities in the USA, Japan or Europe after 1971) at first via Special Economic Zones which gradually got extended to more of the territory. This combination of Western finance capital exploiting cheap itinerant labour under the direction of an authoritarian one party state is now baptised as "socialism with Chinese characteristics" but there is little doubt that it is yet another "socialism" flying under a false flag or in short, state capitalism.

Even in the West state capitalism has passed through many stages. These have gone from nationalisations in the post-war period and the first attempts to meet the crisis with deficit-financing, to the later restructuring of industry and deregulation of finance. The latter led Western capital to seek higher profits by investing in low wage economies creating the financialisation of the world economy which led to the speculative bubble that burst in 2007-8. Since that

time, capitalism everywhere has been on life support and even in this current Covid-19 crisis the capitalists look to the state to finance them. "State capitalism" may be infinitely variable and more complex than Bukharin's original analysis allowed but he did identify the general historical tendency of the capitalist system in the epoch of its decline.

And it is an irreversible tendency despite the attempts of so-called neo-liberals to reverse it in the 1980s and after. Today the capitalist system would have collapsed if it were not for the daily interventions of the state. However state capitalism cannot solve capitalism's recurring crisis of profitability. All it has done over the last 40 years is impoverish the working class whilst keeping the system afloat on a sea of debt and fictitious capital.

With no economic solution in sight who can deny that today's current capitalist competition is between nation-states rather than individual firms (just look at the fight over Huawei and 5G). In a system which has such an over-accumulation of capital that it needs some massive act of destruction in order to kick start its economy once again imperialist rivalries are rising. We are once again approaching a situation where "new problems will have to be solved by the sword" which will have disastrous consequences for humanity. Despite the passing of time, and the increasing complexity of the world capitalist system, Bukharin's notion that state capitalism is not a step forward for humanity is one that still resonates today.

Jock/Tinkotka

Notes

1. <https://www.leftcom.org/en/articles/2017-09-08/n-ossinsky%E2%80%99s-critique-of-state-capitalism-in-russia>
2. Radek also had a chequered, and not always distinguished career, eventually supporting "National Bolshevism" in Germany in 1923. A later supporter of Trotsky he capitulated to Stalin in 1929. He collaborated with Bukharin again on the writing of the 1936 Soviet Constitution. None of this saved him from the Show Trials which condemned him to ten years hard labour in 1937. In 1939 he was allegedly killed in the gulag by another prisoner. There are a number of articles by him in *Kommunist* and four are already on our site but the most telling of them is this one <https://www.leftcom.org/en/articles/2017-02-17/an-epitaph-for-the-october-revolution>
3. For Bukharin and the The State and Revolution see <https://www.leftcom.org/en/articles/2019-02-21/bukharin-s-review-of-lenin-s-the-state-and-revolution>
4. A version of which was also reviewed in *Kommunist*. See <http://www.leftcom.org/en/articles/2019-09-11/ossinsky-on-bukharin-s-imperialism-and-the-world-economy>
5. Quoted in S.A Cohen *Bukharin and the Bolshevik Revolution* p. 255
6. For an expansion of this theme see <http://www.leftcom.org/en/articles/2020-05-10/state-control-is-not-socialism>
7. See <https://www.leftcom.org/en/articles/2019-02-19/socialism-is-not-statism>
8. J. V. Stalin, *Problems of Leninism*, (Moscow, Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1953) pp. 457-8.

Some Fundamental Concepts of Modern Economics

In recent times Russian and European economic life has developed many new and complex forms that require a “work of analysis and synthesis” as well as proper classification in the first place. Naturally, here “practice” precedes “theory” and theoretical work can only be carried out after the accumulation of sufficient material. It is also understandable that the preliminary approaches suffer inevitably from serious errors. “Confusion of concepts” is the inevitable sin of human thought when it seeks new paths. Therefore these errors are expressed logically with a bias and a deviation which are owed to a specific social position. In this case, a “tendency” is formed which can be qualified according to its social content. Lenin’s recent speeches, on the one hand, and the series of declarations, articles etc., all very symptomatic, emerge from the workers’ milieu; on the other hand, they show the need for a critical analysis of some fundamental concepts of modern economics.

I

In the current discussions between the Right and the Left of our Party, the question of state capitalism has been put forward. On this subject, Comrade Lenin proposed a series of formulations: “to learn socialism from the organisers of the trusts” (first slogan); “state capitalism [under soviet power] would be a step forward” (second thesis); “state capitalism under Kerensky’s democracy would have been a step towards socialism” – is Comrade Lenin’s third thesis, which he put forward in opposition to the author of this article at one of the most recent meetings of the VtsIK.¹

We now cite two excerpts from the journal *Vestnik Metallista*.² Here is what Comrade Ya. Boyarkov³ writes in his article “The Problems of the Demobilisation of Industry”:

“The young workers’ unions, which do not have much experience of class struggle and are not used to organisational economic activity, must take all responsibility for the State regulation of the economy. Given their astonishing lack of intellectual and industrial forces, without cooperating with the entrepreneurs, the Russian proletariat is alone in imposing a system of control over economic forces, a control characteristic of developed capitalism (my emphasis – NB) in Western Europe.”

And further:

“It is not socialism or the exclusively bourgeois order that we must set up in Russia. Against the backwards Russian bourgeoisie, we must set up a system of developed capitalism (my emphasis – NB), with State control over production.”

Then the author declares that he is under “no illusion that socialism illuminates the East.” Let us compare Comrade Lenin’s declarations with the articles of *Vestnik Metallista*. Let us also remember Comrade Lenin’s words on the ideology of the metalworkers’ union, which is an example of proletarian ideology. We thus understand that this correlation is not accidental. Obviously, it is in the process of forming a “tendency” which is actually present in the working masses.

Let us now analyse the logical aspect of the above mentioned theses. We see that Comrade Lenin’s “state capitalism” is the same as the “developed capitalism” of *Vestnik*. Therefore we must first analyse this concept.

What is state capitalism? From the perspective of the *techniques of production*, it means production controlled by the State, the liquidation of the anarchy of the free market in this domain, and “strict control” exercised by authorities. Production and distribution are organised. Not only are the general conditions of the production process knowingly made part of the general plan of organisation, but so too are the technical details thereof.

From a *social and economic* perspective, this characteristic is not sufficient, because we must moreover analyse the relations between persons in the production process. State capitalism (“developed capitalism”) is one of the forms of capitalism, a certain form of the *power* of capital. Therefore, there is no change in the *principles* of the “economic structure”. The principal relations of production of the capitalist system are those that exist between the capitalist who owns the means of production and the worker who sells his labour power to the capitalist. Under *finance* capitalism, these relations are maintained, but unlike under industrial capitalism, the individual property of each capitalist is replaced by the collective capitalist ownership of the means of production. *State* capitalism is the outcome of finance capitalism. Therefore, the principal relations (the domination of capital over the working class) remain entirely intact. But unlike finance capitalism, these *multiple* bourgeois organisations that concentrate production in their hands (private trusts, cartels, unions of “employers” etc.) give way to a *single* organisation of the bourgeoisie – the bourgeois, financial, capitalist and imperialist *State*.

If we are to characterise state capitalist society from the perspective of the *relations of social forces*, state capitalism is the highest power of the bourgeoisie. Here the domination of capital becomes extremely and monstrously powerful, it tears down all of its enemies, in the first place the proletariat which is enslaved by the plunderous State.

Finally, if we analyse the question from the perspective of *relations between countries*, state capitalism means the aggravation of capitalist competition, the economic preparation for future destructive wars (“the militarisation of the economy”), significant development of protectionism and the heightened danger of war.

Let us now analyse state capitalism in *relation to socialism*. The social patriots of all varieties have declared that state capitalism is a type of socialism. Once the famous German revisionist Edmund Fischer⁴ believed he had found numerous types of socialism following the example of the Prussian or Bavarian kingdoms, which were introducing monopolies: the planning by the State of the monopoly of electricity – here we have electric socialism! The force of water being monopolised – here we had water socialism, etc. In view of the declaration of war and the militarisation of industry, the social patriots declared that it was necessary to support the existing government solely because the bourgeois State was in the process of degenerating into a classless “state socialism”.

After all that, we can understand that this characteristic of state capitalism is a bloody joke for the working class. For state capitalism means the immense strengthening of the domination of capital and the military class as well as the merciless exploitation of the working class. It is not socialism but a *slave* economy. And in order to build socialism, we must first and foremost *destroy* the monstrous apparatus of violence and oppression.

This is why the extreme Left of the Zimmerwald International⁵ proposed the slogan considered essential to the era: “*Down with state capitalism!*” (Gegen den Staatskapitalismus!). This is why this wing refused to support all the measures that were competing to strengthen state capitalism (like the customs Union of Austria-Hungary and Germany).

In this case, the progressive character – from a *technical* perspective – of this form does not and cannot serve as a tactical criticism. Without a shadow of a doubt, state capitalism is a step forward in terms of the centralisation and concentration of capital. These are the contradictions of capitalist development. This “step forward” simultaneously means a rise in militarism, in the danger of war, in the oppression of the working class, and in the growing threat of socialist revolution; thus, in short, the aggravation of the risk of colossal and barbaric elimination of the productive forces of society. This is why the current epoch imposes on the working class the task, not of supporting state capitalism, but of destroying it. Imperialism, militarism, state capitalism – this holy trinity of capitalist barbarism must be blown apart by the proletariat.

And our party understands this well. Let us recall the debate between the journal *Novaya Zhizn*⁶ and our press. While *Novaya Zhizn*, represented by the Bazarovs⁷, the Azilovs⁸, etc., were in favour of state control, we proposed the slogan of workers’ control from below. And it was not because we were opposed to a central plan and a general organisation from the bottom up. From our point of view, *since the imperialist bourgeoisie possesses power*, state control means the rise of state capitalism, inevitably accompanied by the enslavement of the working class. At the time, we did not at all share Lenin’s current idea that “*state capitalism under Kerensky’s democracy would have been a step towards socialism*”. We understood that finance capital, which had “utilised” the leaders of the petty

bourgeoisie very well, would have found itself another prop at a time when it was losing all support.

But that which was so clear then has now become obscure for a number of people. When Comrade Boyarkov writes, "*It is neither socialism nor the exclusively bourgeois order that we (that is, we the working class) must build in Russia*". And when he admits that this order must be "a developed capitalism", in this truly classic phrase is concentrated such an abyss of confusion, contradictions and the most unbridled opportunism that reveal themselves here and there in the fragments of the speeches and declarations of many of our comrades.

In fact, "*developed capitalism*" is represented as some kind of in-between society of transition from capitalism to socialism. And Comrade Boyarkov, a naïve soul, says that capitalism, especially developed capitalism, is not an exclusively bourgeois society. We permit ourselves to reassure Comrade Boyarkov here that state capitalism is bourgeois society par excellence and in its purest form, for in this type of capitalism the power of capitalist organisations is pushed to a limit never seen before. And it is this society that *Vestnik Metallista* proposes that the workers "build in Russia"! What can we say? What a great task for socialist workers! Until now the Marxists always scornfully turned their backs on the Populists who invited them to "draw the conclusion from it", that is, to open shops "peddling capitalism"⁹ themselves. The Marxists thought that their task was not the "dissemination of capitalism", but the organisation of the gravediggers of capitalism. Now, it turns out that this old point of view is obsolete; we have arrived at a caricature of Populism; the fact that we are not "disseminating" it now but "building" it is of little consolation to us.

II

The reader must not think that the comrade metalworkers and Comrade Lenin are preparing themselves without further ado for the actual construction of the same relations built by the Lloyd Georges, the Helfferichs¹⁰, the Rathenaus¹¹ and other oligarchs in Europe and America. This would be truly catastrophic, if after the bloody war against the imperialist bourgeoisie and its agents, the triumphant proletariat built for itself a state capitalist society in Russia... In fact, having read the formulations proposed by Comrade Lenin and the "qualified workers" of *Vestnik Metallista*, one could easily note that comrades are using words without properly understanding their meaning. Thus Comrade Lenin speaks of "*state capitalism under the conditions of the dictatorship of the proletariat*" and the author of *Vestnik* speaks naïvely of the construction of capitalism "without entrepreneurs" (!). The two are equivalent. State capitalism under the dictatorship of the proletariat is an absurdity, a nonsense. For state capitalism presupposes the *dictatorship of finance capital*, which means the submission of production to the dictatorial state. "Non-capitalist capitalism" – it is the greatest confusion imaginable.

From this we see that the comrades confuse state capitalism with control over

production by the proletarian (or proletarian and peasant) socialist State. State control can have two forms that contradict each other in their social meaning and significance: socialism and state capitalism, and their different meanings depend entirely on the *class in power*.

But there is no smoke without fire. And in reality, this is not just a confusion of words or terms. Unfortunately this discussion does not only concern ideas. The domination of every class and its power must be analysed not just as a static phenomenon, but in its dynamics, its development or its regression. It is from this perspective that we must analyse the current situation.

Class power consists fundamentally of two elements: its political power and its economic influence, and in the end, the decisive factor is its degree of influence over production. From this perspective, it can be understood that a workers' and peasants' dictatorship that did not lead to the expropriation of expropriators and the abolition of the power of capital in enterprise could not be but a passing phenomenon. Inevitably, it would give way to a bourgeois political regime and its historical meaning would be limited to the destruction of the vestiges of feudalism. It is thus that we posed the question, in the era of the previous Revolution of 1905-1907, when bourgeois democracy and not socialism was the order of the day. We considered the "dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry" as a radical step in the history, sweeping away the last remnants of feudalism and objectively clearing the way for a rapid development of capitalist relations.

It is *this* question that remains to be answered today. There can be a certain mismatch between the political and economic regimes when the pressure of the "economy" contributes to "political" transformation. Concretely: suppose that the soviet power (the dictatorship of the proletariat supported by the poor peasants), which organises state control *in words*, bequeaths *in practice* its management to "trust organisers". What happens? The real power of capital grows and *closes in on the economy*. And either the political shell transforms little by little until it becomes despicable, or it "explodes" at some point, because *in the long run*, "the power of management" of capital over the economy is incompatible with that of the proletariat over the political sphere.

A similar situation is in the process of being formed here. If the tendency towards gradual conciliation with capital prevails (fortunately this is not yet the case) in the economy, it would be the creation of a strong power led by the capitalists that would sooner or later overthrow a political superstructure that would be absolutely intolerable for it. Thus a complete *state capitalism* would be established and the political dictatorship of capital would hatch from the egg of the economic power of the leadership of "trust organisers". This real internal danger is precisely what we spoke about in our *Theses*.¹² This danger to soviet power is revealed in the political line of Gukovsky, in the negotiations with Meshchersky (which in the end fortunately were fruitless), etc., and in the articles of *Vestnik Metallista*.

This signifies an orientation towards foreign capital that wishes to establish state capitalism. Unfortunately, the comrades have forgotten that as state capitalism grows, the soul of the dictatorship of the proletariat leaves it.

III

Lack of clarity when we pose the essential question of state capitalism leads to a series of obscurities and errors in almost all questions relating to state control over production. Let us note here those concerning *obligation to work* and *work discipline*. According to the analysis above, these concepts can have two completely different and indeed opposite meanings.

Obligatory work service expresses solidarity with the socialist dictatorship. It could equally be the total enslavement of the working class by state capitalism. Work discipline represents fraternal discipline under the socialist dictatorship. However, it is the murder of the soul and misery under state capitalism. As long as the tendency towards state capitalism persists, the first meanings of these concepts will always be transformed into the second ones, which would inevitably detach the working class from the party that leads the masses to state capitalism.

In discussions with the Left Communists, Comrade Lenin claims in particular that the former do not understand the critical character of the current phase of the revolution which confronts the proletariat with the necessity of everyday work. But we are *completely* agreed on the need for such work and in particular the consequences thereof. Our real disagreements are totally different, they concern the line dividing state capitalism and the socialist commune State. It would not be difficult to show that the current conception of abandoning collective decision making, based on misgivings in the strength of workers' organisations, fundamentally contradicts the great slogan once formulated by Comrade Lenin: "*every cook can learn to administer the state*"¹³. Nor would it be difficult to show that the "trust organisers" (not the technical staff, but the capitalists *as such*) have nothing to do with the old slogans which raised the level of activity of the proletariat. But all of this is outside the scope of this article.

Let us return to our analysis of the "fundamental concepts of modern economics". It seems that that word so typical of our era – "*nationalisation*" – is in fact responsible for the confusion of ideas.

Nationalisation means statification. But there are two kinds of statification, since the social essence of the State depends on the class on which it rests. "Nationalisation" is a formal concept from a certain perspective, because it says nothing at all about the social content of statification. When American capital takes the railways back into the hands of the plundering State, this is nationalisation. When the Prussian State monopolises the production of electrical energy, this is nationalisation. But the transfer of the sugar industry into the hands of the

workers' and peasants' State (from the hands of the entrepreneurs), this is also nationalisation. Clearly, in the first two cases, there is no "expropriation of the expropriators"; they simply transfer the exploitation machine from one hand to the other: from the hands of their trusts to those of their State. In the third case, the expropriation is obvious.

Clearly, under the socialist dictatorship, complete nationalisation means socialisation and the transfer of a branch of production into the hands of socialist power.

The word "socialisation" is distorted by certain SRs who use it with a specific nuance (equal plots of land, work quotas, etc.). This does not at all prevent us from so calling nationalisation under the regime of the dictatorship of the proletariat. The distinction must be made between socialisation and *occupation* of isolated enterprises by the workers of *those* enterprises. During the revolutionary ascent, such an occupation transforms inevitably into socialisation; if the revolution decays, either the phenomenon ceases (because the workers "are not capable of doing it"), or (improbably) other workers form "artels" ¹⁴ which are doomed to become (like most productive associations) a capitalist enterprise.

Socialisation of production is the antithesis of state capitalism. It is the step in the transition from socialism to communism where the dictatorship of the proletariat withers away and when classes dissolve into stateless communist society, which has become unified and harmonious. Our slogan, like that of the Communist Party, is not state capitalism. It is "towards the socialisation of production – towards socialism!"

N. Bukharin

Notes to the article

1. Session of the VTsIK [All-Russian Executive Committee of the Soviets] held on 29 April 1918. cf Lenin, *Collected Works*. Volume 27, pp. 279-313 [see "Reply to the Debate on the Report on the Immediate Tasks", pp. 306-313] <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/cw/pdf/lenin-cw-vol-27.pdf>
2. *Vestnik Metallista*, Issue 2, January 1918 - *The Metalworkers' Messenger*, organ of the Central Committee of the All-Russian Union of Metalworkers (editor's note).
3. Ya. Boyarkov was the pseudonym of Abraham Z. Goltsman (1894-1933): leader of the metalworkers and a supporter of the Meshchersky project developing state capitalism [for details see <https://www.leftcom.org/en/articles/2017-09-08/n-ossinsky%E2%80%99s-critique-of-state-capitalism-in-russia> Footnote 11]. President of the metalworkers' union following Shlyapanikov being sent on a mission to Norway, he would be one of the rare syndicalist leaders to support Trotsky in a debate on the unions in 1920. In opposition for a while since he signed the "Declaration of the 46" in 1923, he was later responsible for civil aviation from 1932. He met his death in an aeroplane accident.
4. Georg Edmund Fischer (1864-1925): German wood sculptor, journalist and Social Democrat, he was one of the founding members of the SPD in Frankfurt am Main in 1890. From 1892 to 1893, he was the editor of the journal *Volksstimme*, and from 1893 to 1898 the editor of Dresden's *Sächsischen Arbeiterzeitung*. Regular contributor to the *Sozialistischen Monatshefte* from 1914 to 1922, he would have been a delegate at all congresses of the SPD between 1895 and 1916.

5. It was in the Swiss village of Zimmerwald that the 38 European internationalist militants met from 5 to 8 September 1915 to mark their opposition to the war and their rejection of the Sacred Union. Faced with a right wing satisfied with reaffirming its pacifist principles, the Zimmerwald Left called for the formation of a new international and a break from Social Democracy, whose bankruptcy was evident.
6. *Novaya Zhizn*, "New Life", central organ of the Menshevik Internationalists published in Petrograd by Maxim Gorky. Opposed to the Bolsheviks seizing power, the journal was suppressed in July 1918.
7. Vladimir Alexandrovich Bazarov (1874-1939): Russian economist and philosopher, he organised with Bogdanov, to whom he remained close, a circle of workers in his native city of Tula. Between 1907 and 1909 he translated Capital into Russian and joined the Mensheviks around 1911. Internationalist during the First World War, principal contributor to the journal *Novaya Zhizn*, very critical of the politics of Lenin, he would nevertheless later work on *Gosplan* at the time of the NEP and at the Marx-Engels Institute with Riazanov. Arrested in summer 1930, he was interrogated during the "Menshevik Trial" of 1931 and condemned to 18 months of exile.
8. Boris Vasilievich Avilov (1874-1938): lawyer, member of the Bolshevik party in 1904, remained so until April 1917 before joining the Menshevik Internationalists, where he was appointed to the Central Committee in August. He abandoned the politics of the party in 1918 and later worked at the Central Bureau of Statistics as well as at *Gosplan*.
9. Reference to the old discussion between the Marxists and the Populists. The Marxists claimed that capitalism was a progressive phase for Russia (socialism being impossible to build without this phase); the Populists consequently invited them to compete in the construction of capitalism.
10. Karl Theodor Helfferich (1872-1924): German economist, politician and banker, he was State Secretary of State of the Treasury from 1915 to 1916 and Secretary of State of the Interior from May 1916 to October 1917. In 1918, he was appointed German Ambassador to Russia, after the assassination of Count von Mirbach. He was also in charge of collecting funds and funnelling money from the Deutsche Bank to the extreme Right, notably the Anti-Bolshevik League in opposition to the November Revolution and the Spartacist League.
11. Walther Rathenau (1867-1922): German industrialist and politician, he was the son of the founder of AEG and became a faithful political supporter of the imperialist policy of the Second Reich. He nevertheless grew accustomed to the Weimar Republic, in which he became one of the major figures of the Right. Denounced equally by the extreme Right and the extreme Left, he was the one who negotiated the Treaty of Rapallo with the Russians, which earned him a particularly virulent attack in the Reichstag by Helfferich on 23 June 1922. The next day he was assassinated by the Organisation Consul, which had come out of the Freikorps following the failure of the Kapp Putsch.
12. cf. pp68
13. This idea can be found in the second part of the pamphlet "Can the Bolsheviks retain State power?", which came out in October 1917 in the journal *Prosveshcheniye no. 1-2*: *"We are not utopians. We know that an unskilled labourer or a cook cannot immediately get on with the job of state administration. In this we agree with the Cadets, with Breshkovskaya, and with Tsereteli. We differ, however, from these citizens in that we demand an immediate break with the prejudiced view that only the rich, or officials chosen from rich families, are capable of administering the state, of performing the ordinary, everyday work of administration. We demand that training in the work of state administration be conducted by class-conscious workers and soldiers and that this training be begun at once, i.e., that a beginning be made at once in training all the working people, all the poor, for this work."* See: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1917/oct/01.htm>
14. Or "brotherhood of artisans", The artel was traditional form of labour organisation under Tsarism in Russia. Bukharin here is referring to all cooperatives and small associations of workers where property was collectively owned.

The Battle of Warsaw and the Defeat of the Revolutionary Wave in Europe

August 2020 marks the centenary of the Battle of Warsaw, a turning point in the Polish–Soviet War. The failure of the Red Army to spur revolution among the Polish and European working class corresponded with the gradual closure of one chapter in the development of the revolutionary wave in Europe, and the opening of another: that of the reintegration of Soviet Russia into the imperialist world system.

Europe at a Crossroads

When in November 1917 the working class of Russia seized power, organised in its workers' councils and guided by its class party, it inspired a revolutionary wave that spread over much of the world. Soon it was not only the Russian Tsar that found himself deposed, but a whole sleuth of monarchs under the pressure of working class revolt had to give way to either soviet or parliamentary democracy. The ruling classes did everything in their power to ensure it was the latter. The First World War came to an end, and a new imperialist order was enforced by the victors. New nations were born and reborn, among them the Second Polish Republic which regained independence from the Austrian, Prussian, and Russian empires after 123 years of partition.¹

The Treaty of Versailles did not actually put an end to all military conflict in Europe. In Russia, a civil war broke out against the soviet experiment, with fourteen foreign armies assisting the reactionary Whites. Meanwhile, the Polish state, led by the ex-socialist Józef Piłsudski, found itself waging border disputes with Ukraine, Czechoslovakia, Germany, and Lithuania. Inevitably, the Polish Republic and Soviet Russia came head to head. The first clash took place in February 1919, near Bereza Kartuska (modern day Belarus), where Polish forces defeated a Bolshevik detachment. In April 1919, in their attempt to seize the city of Vilnius from the Lithuanian–Byelorussian Soviet Socialist Republic, the Polish army clashed with the Red Army again. It was not until the Kiev offensive of April 1920 however, during which Piłsudski, in alliance with the Ukrainian nationalist Symon Petliura, attempted to “liberate” Ukraine from Soviet control, that the Polish–Soviet War truly began.

War or Revolution?

By April 1920 the capitalist system had survived the first international challenge to its rule. Revolutionary uprisings were violently crushed in Finland (April 1918), Germany (January 1919, April 1920) and Hungary (August 1919). In Poland, the workers' councils movement had been defeated by July 1919. Only in Soviet Russia did the working class still hold onto power but isolation was starting to take its toll. The signing of the Brest-Litovsk Peace Treaty with the Central Powers, a desperate

measure to gain breathing space, forced a rupture between the Bolsheviks and their main allies, the Left SRs. The latter withdrew from the soviet government in March and launched an uprising in July 1918. Meanwhile, the workers' councils were hollowing out as the masses of workers, haunted by famine and disease, fled to the countryside, perished in the civil war or entered the state organisations. To fight off the threat of Allied intervention and White counter-revolution the Cheka and the Red Army were formed, initially understood to be provisional bodies but increasingly becoming powers unto themselves. In short, the Bolsheviks were gradually becoming a one-party state with a repressive apparatus of their own. After two years of civil war however, there was hope that the year 1920 might finally bring respite. In those months Lenin kept on repeating that now was the time to turn efforts towards the "bloodless front", to begin reconstruction and rebuild a working class base. By April 1920 the Kiev offensive had crushed these hopes:

"The attack of capitalist and landlord Poland on Soviet Russia has interrupted the work of peaceful construction to which the Russian workers and peasants turned once they had defeated Kolchak, Denikin, and Yudenich ... the Soviet Government was even ready to transfer for the time being to the Polish ruling classes territory which, by the composition of its population, should not belong to Poland ... Poland replied to the Soviet Government's peace proposals by a treacherous attack on the Ukraine ... It depends on you, workers of all countries, whether the war will stop as early as possible with the defeat of the Polish capitalists and landlords."
(Executive Committee of the Communist International, Manifesto on the Polish attack on Russia, 18 May 1920)

Communist Attitudes Towards the Polish-Soviet War

The Second Congress of the Communist International took place from 19 July to 7 August 1920, coinciding with the Polish-Soviet war. At the Congress it was understood that Poland's Kiev offensive was motivated by: 1) the interests of the Allies, particularly that of France which provided material and strategic support to Poland, which it saw as a bulwark against Russia and Germany, and 2) Poland's own imperialist aspirations, as it sought to regain its frontiers from 1772. Naturally, the parties of the Communist International, including the Communist Workers' Party of Poland (KPRP), rallied to the defence of Soviet Russia from Polish adventurism in the Ukraine. The Second Congress was filled with revolutionary enthusiasm, as by July the Red Army managed to rout Piłsudski's legions, the Biennio Rosso in Italy saw armed workers take over factories, and the Kapp Putsch in Germany collapsed thanks to a general strike. It all made the prospect of world revolution seem closer than ever.

However, different perspectives towards the Polish-Soviet war emerged. For the KPRP and Polish communists in Soviet Russia the interests of world revolution took priority, but they agreed it would be best if the working class of Poland managed

to overthrow their own ruling class by their own hand. The matter became more complicated however once the Red Army managed to repel the Polish attack and a counter-offensive was on the cards. Karl Radek and Julian Marchlewski warned Lenin that a march on Warsaw could have tragic consequences, and would actually undermine the chances of revolution in Poland. In fact, a number of ex-SDKPiL internationalists opposed it, in word if not in writing, with Henryk Stein-Domski, on the left of the KPRP, penning an article in *Die Rote Fahne* stating that “introducing socialism on the points of bayonets” would not work.² Ironically, it was those who came from the ex-PPS milieu, like Feliks Kon and Paweł Łapiński, who believed the Polish working class would welcome the Red Army with open arms. Józef Unszlicht, influential in Soviet military circles, stood somewhere in the middle: the Red Army should stop at the ethnographic border of Poland if a peace treaty is signed or if a revolutionary uprising breaks out in Poland, otherwise it should proceed, set up a Provisional Revolutionary Committee which would begin to nationalise industry and attempt to arm the Polish working class.

Among the Bolsheviks, similar differences of opinion emerged. Trotsky hoped for swift peace, as he recognised crossing the ethnographic border could rally the Polish masses around Piłsudski, and he knew first hand that the Red Army was in no state to successfully carry out a military drive to the West. Lenin, who initially favoured peace and was keen to defend the right of Poland to self-determination, now saw the chance to finally break Soviet Russia’s isolation and convinced the Politburo to go for it in the atmosphere of revolutionary enthusiasm. Trotsky had to toe the line. Bukharin, who in 1918 as one of the editors of the *Kommunist* journal advocated revolutionary war with Germany, hoped the military campaign could go beyond Warsaw “right up to London and Paris”.³

Behind the scenes, however, secret manoeuvres were contemplated. Victor Kopp, Soviet Russia’s diplomatic representative in Berlin, probed the German government whether there was any possibility of organising a “combination between the German and Red armies with a view to proceeding against Poland together”.⁴ Lenin asked Kopp to cease these talks, but unable to secure a peace with Poland a faction around Trotsky (which likely included Radek, Ephraim Sklyansky and Alexei Rykov) wanted to explore the possibility further, as they knew chances of military victory were otherwise slim. Paul Levi also offered communist support to any German government that would “support Russia in this conflict”, for which he was scolded by other Berlin communists.⁵

“Miracle on the Vistula”

As the Red Army pushed on to Warsaw conquering Polish territories, the difficulty of “spreading the revolution” unfolded. As was mentioned previously, by July 1919 the workers’ councils in Poland were no more, so there was no chance of linking up with them. In the lead up to the war, since mid-1919, the KPRP was able to organise anti-war rallies and demonstrations in Warsaw, Kalisz, Łódź, Lublin, etc., and strikes in the Dąbrowa Basin under anti-war slogans. It also carried

out clandestine activity within the rank and file of the Polish army. But with the official outbreak of war, the KPRP was now considered by the Polish government to be an agent of the Russian state and treated as such: between July and August 1920, about 2,000 of the 8,000 members of the KPRP had been arrested, including some of its leadership. In Warsaw alone about 600 communists were arrested. This effectively paralysed the party, and broke the link between communists in the west and east of Poland.⁶

As such, the Bolsheviks had to find some other way of fomenting revolution among the Polish working class. To this end, a Provisional Polish Revolutionary Committee (Polrewkom) was founded by Polish communists in Moscow to accompany the advance of the Red Army. It set up base in Białystok (the largest city in north-eastern Poland), and received millions of roubles to help organise local administration and spread propaganda. A counterpart Galician Revolutionary Committee (Galrewkom) was set up in Kiev to administer the area around the Polish-Ukrainian border.

“On the Polish territories liberated from the yoke of capital, the Polish Provisional Revolutionary Committee has been formed, made up of Julian Marchlewski, Felix Dzerzhinsky, Feliks Kon, Edward Próchniak and Józef Unszlicht. Until the creation of a permanent Workers’ and Peasants’ Government of Poland, the Provisional Revolutionary Committee is tasked with laying the foundation for the future Soviet Polish Socialist Republic of Councils. With this the aim of the Provisional Revolutionary Committee is:

- a) to deprive the authority up until now existing in the szlachta-bourgeois government,*
- b) to re-establish and again to organise factory committees in the towns and farm labourers’ committees in the villages,*
- c) to organise local revolutionary committees,*
- d) to hand over ownership of the nation’s factories, property and forests to the management of the town and village workers’ committees,*
- e) to guarantee the inviolability of the peasants’ lands,*
- f) to call to life organs of public safety, the economy and food supply,*
- g) to guarantee to citizens, loyally acting on the orders and directions of the revolutionary authorities, complete security.” (Provisional Polish Revolutionary Committee, 30 July 1920)*

More than 100 of these “revolutionary committees” were formed in localities with the help of KPRP members but also sympathising elements in the Poale Zion, the Bund, the trade unions and, unfortunately, some opportunist elements. They set about reorganising local life, creating workers’ militias, reforming the education system and confiscating large property. Though they managed to attract support from the oppressed minorities and the very poor, they had little success precipitating working class self-activity. Rather than an organic expression of

the class struggle, they were conceived by Polish communists in Moscow (e.g. Unszlicht) as a temporary solution until workers' councils could be re-established. Such an attempt to spur "revolution from above" could only go so far. Members of the Polrewkom were themselves disparaging of their limited ability to gather popular support, which they understood to be a consequence of coming across as representatives of a power which "came from the outside" rather than one actually "carried by a mass movement".

The largely rural population of eastern Poland mainly observed the Polish-Soviet war passively, finding neither the cause of Lenin nor Piłsudski particularly convincing (in fact, Piłsudski's adventurism was unpopular even in Polish parliamentary circles). At times however the Red Army found itself at odds not only with the local population, but also with Polish communists: instances of pillaging and plunder, of overriding the decisions of local revolutionary committees, of enforcing Russian and Yiddish as the official language, and even proposals to deport Polish populations from areas near the front, all did little to convince apprehensive Polish workers that this was not just a disguised attempt to rebuild the Russian Empire (as Polish propaganda had claimed). The Polrewkom tried to moderate Red Army excesses. But, as Victor Serge also noted, "the Russians had made a psychological error by including Dzerzhinsky, the man of the Terror, side by side with Marchlewski on the Revolutionary Committee that was to govern Poland ... far from firing the popular enthusiasm, the name of Dzerzhinsky would freeze it altogether."⁷

Ultimately the link between revolutionaries and the masses was never strong enough and the march on Warsaw did not trigger any Polish Revolution. The strikes that occurred in Germany, Czechoslovakia and Britain, against the loading of munitions for Poland, were not enough to destabilise the Polish military either. And repeated attempts at trying to strike peace deals, some offering Piłsudski more than what he eventually got, failed. So when the Red Army reached Warsaw, it could only count on its military might and strategy. Dzerzhinsky wrote at the time: "the fate of the world is being decided."

The final result was a victory for Piłsudski, which up to this day serves as an asset in Polish nationalist propaganda, being celebrated as the "miracle on the Vistula", the "war that saved the world from communism". Stalin's personal role in the defeat has been particularly criticised, but the Red Army commanders in general failed to coordinate, struggled to organise reinforcements, and the Polish army decoded their communications. The Battle of Warsaw lasted almost two weeks and ended on 25 August 1920 with the Red Army having to retreat, the short-lived Polrewkom and many communists and sympathisers going back with it. Those who stayed behind, or did not flee in time, faced repression for collaboration with the enemy. Jews in particular were targeted, fuelled by "Judeo-Bolshevik" conspiracies. On 18 October a cease-fire was agreed. The march on Warsaw had failed to revive the revolutionary movement in Europe.

Lessons for Today

“The error in the strategic calculations in the Polish war had great historical consequences. The Poland of Piłsudski came out of the war unexpectedly strengthened. On the contrary, the development of the Polish revolution received a crushing blow. The frontier established by the Riga treaty cut off the Soviet Republic from Germany, a fact that later was of great importance in the lives of both countries.” (Trotsky, My Life)

1921 was a highly significant year in the degeneration of both the Russian and international revolution.⁸ The infamous 10th Congress of the Russian Communist Party, which adopted the NEP and introduced the ban on factions, finished on 16 March. On 18 March, the Kronstadt revolt was bloodily suppressed. The Peace of Riga, which officially ended the Polish-Soviet War, was signed on that same day. Reflecting on the failure of the counter-offensive, Lenin would later admit that “in the Red Army the Poles saw enemies, not brothers and liberators.”⁹ But with the conclusion of a preliminary peace with Poland, he tried to put a positive spin on it:

“Without having gained an international victory, which we consider the only sure victory, we are in a position of having won conditions enabling us to exist side by side with capitalist powers, who are now compelled to enter into trade relations with us. In the course of this struggle we have won the right to an independent existence.” (Lenin, Our Foreign and Domestic Position and Party Tasks, November 1920)

Over the next few months, Lenin essentially came around to Trotsky’s and Radek’s views on German-Russian cooperation as the best bet for ensuring Soviet Russia’s future survival. After the defeat of the March Action in Germany in 1921, the Bolshevik leadership settled on the principle “if you can’t beat them, join them”. A German-Soviet treaty was signed in May 1921, recognising the Bolshevik government as the legitimate government of Russia, and then the Treaty of Rapallo was signed in April 1922. Soon secret military provisions followed, which allowed Germany to train their troops on Russian soil and circumvent the military restrictions forced on it by the Treaty of Versailles. The same troops it used to crush the communist movement. This political and military reintegration of what now became the Soviet Union into the international imperialist system was more of a curse than a blessing. It put the revolutionary bastion on a course which under Stalin came to its logical conclusion: admittance into the League of Nations. The invasion of Xinjiang in 1934, the intervention in Spain in 1936, and finally the invasion of Poland in 1939, established the Soviet Union as an imperialist bloc of its own.¹⁰ Stalin’s regime perfected the politics of “revolution from above” introduced “on the points of bayonets”: first with the implementation of the five-year plan in 1928, and then with the creation of numerous people’s republics on the same model in the aftermath of the Second World War. This legacy – by which communism became synonymous with state repression, forced collectivisation,

industrialisation, and a planned economy, in other words, state capitalist development – haunts us to this day.

The only thing that could have turned things around in 1920 was the self-activity of the working class. No amount of tactical manoeuvres on the military front could replace it. World revolution and working class self-activity were the principles guiding the Bolsheviks, but ones which they increasingly abandoned, both on the domestic as well as international front, as circumstances became more and more desperate. The march on Warsaw was a shot in the dark, with only two potential outcomes: it would either be the spark that lit the fire of revolution in Europe, or a miscalculation that would only reinforce Soviet Russia's isolation. Today, with the benefit of hindsight, we can see that those internationalists who warned against the march on Warsaw were right. And indeed, Lenin himself came to acknowledge it as an error not to be repeated.¹¹

"It would be unpardonable opportunism if ... we ourselves lapse, even if only in trifles, into imperialist attitudes towards oppressed nationalities, thus undermining all our principled sincerity, all our principled defence of the struggle against imperialism." (Lenin, *The Question of Nationalities or "Autonomisation"*, December 1922)

Dyjbas

Notes

1. For more on Polish independence, see: <https://www.leftcom.org/en/articles/2018-11-08/poland-one-hundred-years-of-bourgeois-dictatorship>
2. An opinion for which he would be later reprimanded by the degenerating Communist International, see: <https://www.leftcom.org/en/articles/2017-07-16/grzech-and-domski-at-the-fourth-congress-of-the-communist-international-1922>
3. Stephen F. Cohen, Bukharin and the Bolshevik Revolution, p.101. For our translations of Kommunist, see: <http://www.leftcom.org/en/articles/russian-communist-left>
4. John Erickson, *The Soviet High Command: A Military-political History 1918-1941*, p.148
5. Ruth Fischer, *Stalin and German Communism: A Study in the Origins of the State Party*, p.197
6. The KPRP came about as the result of a merger in December 1918 between the Social Democracy of the Kingdom of Poland and Lithuania (SDKPiL), a sister party of the RSDRP, and the PPS-Left, a split from the social-patriotic Polish Socialist Party (PPS), see: <https://www.leftcom.org/en/articles/2015-12-19/a-brief-history-of-the-communist-workers%E2%80%99-party-of-poland>
7. Victor Serge, *Memoirs of a Revolutionary*, p.109
8. For more on the counter-revolution, see: <https://www.leftcom.org/en/articles/2001-08-01/1921-beginning-of-the-counter-revolution>
9. Clara Zetkin, *Reminiscences of Lenin*
10. The border agreed upon between Poland and Ukraine at the Peace of Riga in 1921 remained in place until 1939, when the Soviet Union invaded Poland hand in hand with Hitler's Germany. See: <https://www.leftcom.org/en/articles/2014-09-17/75-years-since-the-soviet-invasion-of-poland-the-nightmare-of-imperialist>
11. After the defeat in Poland, Lenin saw that he could not let temporary military success blind him from political reality again. To this end, he tried to prevent a repeat of history in the East, where Stalin and Ordzhonikidze tried to carve out their own fiefdom, see: <https://www.leftcom.org/en/articles/2008-09-01/georgia-on-his-mind-lenin%E2%80%99s-final-fight-against-%E2%80%9Cgreat-russian-chauvinism%E2%80%9D>

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The CWO stands for a global society where production is for need and not profit (and is therefore sustainable), where the state, national frontiers and money have been abolished, where collective power is exercised through class-wide organisations like workers' councils. This has to mean the active, daily participation of the majority aiming for the interests of all. Only then can the world be rid of the capitalist offspring of poverty, hunger, oppression and war: we call it communism but this vision has nothing in common with Stalinist state capitalism and the old USSR.

In order to get there we are working to create a world working class political organisation - a 'party' for want of a better word - not a government in waiting but a guide in the struggle for a new world. We by no means claim to be that party but we do aim to be one of the elements which will need to come together in its formation. As the working class is more and more faced with the consequences of a crumbling capitalist system it will have to unite and confront capitalist power. We are not in competition with other organisations but seek to unite on a clearly agreed political programme to prepare the way for the majority of the world's population, the exploited of the earth, to overthrow the capitalist system and its bloody imperialist appetites.

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Italy: Il Partito Comunista Internazionale produces *Battaglia Comunista* (a monthly paper) and *Prometeo* (a quarterly theoretical journal)

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produces *Socialismus oder Barbarei* and *Germinal*

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