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1871-2021: Vive la Commune!



**Mythology About the Middle
Class and the Class Struggle**

**Class Consciousness and
Working Class Emancipation**

**Communist Work in a Covid
Crisis**

Revolutionary Perspectives

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Perspectives for the CWO as discussed in its AGM, November 2020

Communist Work in a Covid Crisis

A Framework

A pandemic is a test for any mode of production. It is a particular test for a system mired in economic, political and social crisis. SARS-CoV-2 has thus found the capitalist system wanting. Not only were most countries across the world slow to respond to the swiftly spreading contagion, but the last few decades of cuts and negligence due to the chronic crisis of accumulation prepared the environmental and sanitary conditions for a pandemic that epidemiologists have long predicted.

The Crisis Preceded the Pandemic

Still, there remains the ironic fact that the Covid crisis has provided capitalism with a new grand alibi for its failings. As we indicated in the Perspectives we adopted in November 2019¹, the entire global capitalist system, which has been at the end of a cycle of accumulation for almost half a century, was already heading for some new meltdown. And on top of this, episodes of popular resistance, if not outright class war across the planet, were on the increase as 2019 ended.² Even during the pandemic the unprecedented unity of young black and white workers over the state murder of George Floyd and the many strikes across the world calling for better protection have demonstrated that the working class has not vanished from the historical scene. In many countries, from France to Australia, the ruling class is aware of the social danger as evidenced by steps to extend police

powers and militarise police units.

So, even before all the expenditure (or issuing of money) by the world's states to meet the pandemic, global debt was already three times global GDP. In 2019 it hit a new record of \$255 trillion.³ By April 2020 it had reached 331% of global GDP.⁴ Thus across the leading capitalist economies debt has now reached levels "*not seen since the Second World War*".⁵ And this is not just due to the pandemic. Between 2012 and 2016 global debt increased by \$6 trillion but in the following 4 years (to September 2020) it increased by \$52 trillion of which only \$15 trillion has been added in the first 9 months of this year.⁶ It took the UK 40 years to pay off the bulk of its 1945 national debt. That was only possible thanks to two decades of the longest secular boom in capitalist history which was then followed by an inflationary surge which devalued much of that debt. Neither of these conditions are now in operation.

Does debt matter? It could to the 16% of global firms (including some banks) now considered zombies (up from 10% in November 2019). They exist only to pay the interest on their debt which never diminishes and only negative interest rates allow them to function at all. Any rise in interest rates would finish them off with all the consequences for jobs that would follow. Negative interest rates are themselves a reflection of an economy in which the low rate of profit means that profitable investment opportunities are scarce.

Another Failure of the System

Few capitalist states (and these are notable as exceptions) have understood how to handle a pandemic. The priorities of most governments have been to keep production and the economy going whatever the cost. This has only highlighted the inadequacy of the health care provision which exists after decades of cutbacks by governments of all parties. According to the Nuffield Trust Britain had 480,000 beds when the NHS was formed in 1948. In 1987-8 it was still 299,000 (according to the Kings' Fund) but in November this year the Guardian reported⁷ that this had fallen to 127,225 with one of the lowest levels of intensive care beds amongst the wealthier nations. The population has grown by 17 million in the same time period. No surprise then that fear of overwhelming these services has motivated more action than any concern to keep the death rate down.

It is not as if there were not plenty of exercises, studies and research which pointed to the inevitability of a pandemic (even one of the SARS type) but these were wilfully ignored by a ruling class already struggling with how to manage an economy in deep crisis. As we recently wrote in our broadsheet *Aurora*,

Capitalism's continuous plunder and destruction of the natural environment is forcing animals such as bats, rodents and other small creatures into our cities. They bring their diseases with them and pass them on to humans. We have no immunity to these new viruses and the result is epidemics like SARS, MERS and the present pandemic Covid-19. Capitalism is the real mother

of the virus! The effects of Covid-19 have been devastating. By November more than 50 million people worldwide had been infected and officially 1.2 million had died. These figures are certainly a big underestimation. In addition the IMF estimates the pandemic will plunge 90 million more people into extreme poverty, which means being forced to survive on less than \$1.90 per day.

Historical precedents suggest that the immediate fallout from the pandemic will continue into 2022. The social and economic costs, not to mention the increase in mental ill-health, will be enormous and last longer.

We cannot predict the precise consequences of the pandemic (the efficacy and speed of deployment of the vaccines now on their way into production will determine that) and we don't want to play the OECD/IMF/World Bank/etc. game of issuing predictions for growth (or the lack of it) which have to be revised every week. Currently they are saying that the global economy will contract by 4.4% but China's will record overall growth of over 3%. What we do know is that the consequences for the working class are already dire and are going to get worse.

They Will Try to Make the Working Class Pay

After a decade of austerity to pay for the bursting of the speculative bubble in 2008 the situation of many workers around the world was precarious in more than one sense. Obviously the Covid-19 pandemic has affected employment levels and working conditions even more. According

to the OECD,

... millions of people have been unable to go to work, resulting in an exceptionally stark drop in activity and unprecedented job losses. Up to 10 times fewer hours were worked in some countries, compared with the first few first months of the 2008 financial crisis. More than 25m people in the euro area and the US are officially unemployed, according to figures published at the end of September. But economists say the true number of people who have lost work because of the pandemic is far higher, after taking account of those whose jobs are temporarily protected by state- subsidised furlough schemes, those who have dropped out of the labour force and those who cannot work as many hours a week as they would like.⁸

The UK economy has contracted more than other major advanced economies. In the second quarter the UK economy shrank more than twice as rapidly as the US and Germany and was the biggest contraction since ONS records began. In the UK, under Sunak's furlough scheme, workers have had several months where they have either received only benefits or 80% of their wages when they were already struggling to pay their bills on 100% of the wages they had. This, and the fact that UK sick pay is "currently one of the poorest in the OECD",⁹ means that many have been forced to work when showing symptoms. The government has now reluctantly extended the scheme into next year but for many it will not be enough. It is likely that even after the pandemic ends millions of jobs in hospitality, retail and the motor industry will

simply vanish.¹⁰

Meanwhile, redundancies have already risen at a proverbial "record rate". The figures, released in October by the ONS, apply to the 3 months up to August.

...the number of redundancies increased by 114,000 on the quarter, the biggest jump since such statistics were first published in 1995, while the number of people claiming out-of-work benefits rose to 2.7m — more than double the level in March, before the coronavirus lockdown. The unemployment rate rose to 4.5 per cent, up from 4.1 per cent in the previous quarter and 3.9 per cent a year earlier. This was driven by a fall in male self-employment.¹¹

For 18-24 year olds the rate is over 16%. This is not likely to be reversed (and is more likely to get worse) so the working class will thus be further divided up between those who are unemployed, those with "secure" jobs and those working for agencies on zero hour contracts, etc. Those in "secure" jobs will be under pressure to accept a decline in living conditions from the fear factor of falling into the even worse position of the other two conditions. The problem for the precarious (as comrades found in the Deliveroo strikes last year¹²) is how to come together effectively. Meanwhile, mass unemployment has never been a good basis from which workers could fight.

Students are also now having to fight. They have been notable victims of the attempt to keep the economy going come what may. Told to go back to university in order to get in further debt to keep their landlords (the universities) afloat, they have found themselves experiencing conditions

of confinement that convicted felons would not accept. Small wonder there are protests from Bristol and Glasgow to Manchester and London.

In short, the pandemic has accelerated trends that were already discernible to us in our perspectives document of 2019 cited at the start of these points. The fundamental issue of the need for capitalism to devalue a sufficient mass of capital to allow a new cycle of profitable accumulation to begin has not been resolved. Instead, state intervention (one of the great features of the decay of the system) has avoided the massive crash that is required. The Schumpeterian moment of “creative destruction” (in Marxist terms, the usual devaluation at the end of a cycle of accumulation) has not happened. Policies such as Quantitative Easing have been applied to avert systemic failure after it was discovered the financial sector was “too big to fail” in 2008. Now as a *Financial Times* editorial recently, and rather obviously, recognised,

with the state cushioning the economic blow of the pandemic in most countries, the public realm has seldom been so important... and they go on to call for the state to once again save capitalism. ... the best case for state intervention has not been to abolish the market, but to preserve public support for it. An unchecked capitalism would not survive the electorate's judgment. Sure enough, there have been times since the 2008 crash when popular resentment of inequality, especially among the young, has threatened to spill over into demands for total systemic change. If implemented, Bidenomics (i.e. taxes on big companies and the rich – CWO) would make life

*more burdensome for business and for high-earners. But it might also avert a larger reckoning further down the line.*¹³

Could there be a clearer expression of the failure of the system? No defence of any of its supposed merits – just keep it going on behalf of the profits system. This will not revive accumulation but condemn the global system, where corporate debt is already a record 102% of world GDP,¹⁴ to continuing the same “secular stagnation” we identified in previous perspectives documents.

In the UK there is also the added problem of Brexit. Even its fans accept it will lead to a decline in economic growth in the short term (anything from 0.3 to 5% in 2021 depending on the pundit). The current government appears more than usually incompetent since it has arrived in power because the British ruling class (like so many others around the world) have no solution to the economic stagnation of the system. Thus the fantasy that Brexit will stimulate the economy, once Britain shakes off an EU that was holding it back, was born. It was partly the fear of what the pandemic would do to the plans for Brexit that induced the Johnson government to pretend that “herd immunity” could be established rather than prepare for the cataclysm to come. And when it did come they have handed over billions for the task of tackling the issues like PPE, making masks and track and trace to private consultants who have no health experience, but do have personal connections, or make donations, to the Tory Party. The corruption, waste and incompetence has led to millions of PPE items being thrown away as unfit for purpose, although the government was a

lot better at supplying “*Do Not Resuscitate*” Notices to care homes! Now at the last minute they have forged a damage limitation deal with the EU. It has been greeted by relief by most British capitalists since a no deal exit would have been even worse. As it stands, Brexit is a massive own goal for UK capital and its consequences are still dreaded by most business organisations. As the economy stalls in 2021 the pandemic will give the Little England brigade a face-saving excuse.

Imperialist Rivalry

Under lockdown time for many seems to drag, but history never stands still, even in pandemics and it certainly has not been standing still on the imperialist front. Imperialist tensions have been increasing rapidly throughout the pandemic with ongoing wars and minor skirmishes (India/China, Syria, Yemen), military threats (Taiwan) and new upsurges in military violence (Nagorno-Karabakh, Tigray). What is becoming apparent though is the acceleration of the creation of blocs with the Shanghai Cooperation Council (which brings together China, Russia and Iran with the likes of Pakistan)¹⁵ beginning to take on a military dimension for the first time and the US actively trying to build an anti-China bloc around the “*defence of democracy*” with countries like the UK and Australia. US hegemony continues to be challenged even though it remains comfortably the world’s strongest power and, like the British with sterling in the past, it is far from ready to relinquish defending the dollar’s role as the global currency. Nevertheless China’s imperialist march continues, both through “*soft power*” in Africa and outright aggression

in Asia. The recent issue of a government bond in renminbi for the first time turned out to be another minor triumph for Beijing as it was heavily oversubscribed. China’s influence has also increased with the 15 November signing of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) with 14 other Pacific and Asian countries, including US allies, Australia and Japan.

The capitalist powers do not go to war on a whim and only do so when they see that they can destroy “*the other’s*” capital at the minimum of cost or when they feel that all the other options have been ruled out. For the moment proxy wars, and largely unseen cyberwars are the substitute, but these too pose their dangers. Aside from the possibility of China miscalculating the significance of the (very real) divisions inside the US ruling class, China itself, despite its continued (albeit slowing) growth, is not without its problems. The much vaunted “*Belt and Road*” initiative which envisaged a \$1 trillion investment (seven times bigger than the US Marshall Plan in the 1940s) in infrastructure across Eurasia is now in trouble. China’s state banks were lending \$75 billion to client states in 2016. This had fallen to a mere \$4 billion in 2019. States like Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Malaysia are in discussions to defer debt payments whilst China was sucked into Venezuela’s economic meltdown having lent it \$60 billion of the \$150 of debt it has now defaulted on.¹⁶ Both imperialist giants have serious problems at home and abroad but the ruling elites in both are united in recognising the danger posed by the other. Expect nationalist ideology in all sorts of forms to be racked up from the usual demonisation of “*the other*” to competition to acquire the vaccine first and blame

the rival powers for causing the pandemic. These will be part of the preparations for generalised war.

Environmental Crisis

And in the longer (but ever shorter) term, the environmental crisis has not gone away. Despite some initial lowering of emissions in the light of the collapse of air flights and people working from home/going out less, the increased energy use of the internet has meant that any gains have been nullified. 2020 has gone down as the hottest year on record. The Covid crisis is promoting all kinds of ideas about new ways of working and a Green New Deal but they still don't grasp the essence of the problem which is that the drive for profits and constant growth is at the heart of the capitalist mode of production. No meaningful changes that could curb climate change can be achieved under capitalism. This is borne out by Johnson's green energy investment plan of £12 billion pounds which already compares feebly with the £12 billion¹⁷ they have wasted on a test and trace programme that has not been fit for purpose. It pales into insignificance when at least a third and possibly two thirds of the promised investment turns out not to be new money. Political hot air will not save a heating planet. If the planet's ecosystems as we know them — along with any semblance of human civilisation — are to survive, the working class of all countries must overthrow the planet-killing capitalist regimes and establish a world society based on the production for human need instead of profit. For humanity the threats remain all out imperialist war in the short term and ecological disaster in the longer term.

Humanity's Last Hope – the World Working Class

The only hope for humanity remains the collective struggle of the world working class. At the end of 2019 there were already signs that after 4 decades of retreat it was beginning to rediscover itself in strikes and demonstrations from Latin America to the Levant as we outlined a year ago.¹⁸ In these low and middle ranking or so-called “*emerging*” economies, from the likes of Zimbabwe to Turkey and Argentina, which have borrowed heavily in dollars but generate the bulk of the income used for interest and maturity payments in currencies that depreciate relative to the dollar, inflation will grow. It is the same for those states like Iran which don't have access to dollar loans. Starved of credit they resort to the printing press as well. Whatever the reason, the resulting inflations will add to economic collapse and life will become even more unbearable and millions around the world will face real starvation. The Covid crisis brought the 2019 resistance to a halt but since then we have seen literally hundreds, if not thousands, of strikes right across the planet both on the theme of “*we won't die for your profits*” and against wage cuts. As the emergency measures to combat Covid are phased out many workers are already finding out that we are not “*all in it together*” and that they will be asked to pay the price either in unemployment or lower wages. There are currently strikes going on around the world, many led by migrant workers who have not been paid in months. Closer to home we are already seeing Heathrow workers having their contracts terminated with the “*offer*” that they can re-sign for work on worse pay and conditions. They are on strike as we write

but this is a very modest legal protest which as long as it is controlled by the union has no chance of victory. Workers will have to take struggles into their own hands if they are to minimally defend themselves, but ultimately what is needed is a global revolt against the capitalist system.

We are not talking here of the “*revolts*” in some European countries of the petty bourgeoisie, shopkeepers, etc., against the lockdowns. Aided by the ultra-right and neo-fascist groups (and in Italy even the Mafia – you cannot make a dishonest buck if there is nothing to extort!) the Covid-denying petty bourgeoisie have only a reactionary, racist and regressive agenda which would be more than enough to make workers lives a misery. The working class agenda is entirely different. But here sectional responses based on this or that firm or union will not be enough. The crying need is for workers to come together in a wider organisation which goes beyond the present resistance against the attempts to make us pay yet again for the failures of the system. The capitalists are already aware of a coming backlash. It is not just in China, Russia or Iran that the state is giving itself increased powers. The French government, for example, tried to make it illegal to film the police doing their dirty work (no more George Floyd?) whilst in other countries like Australia the police are being militarised in preparation for what they expect to be a new phase in the class war. The key question is not whether new social convulsions will arrive but about how well prepared the working class is to meet all the flak that the system will throw at us.

Already many young people are coming to recognise that this system increasingly offers humanity no future. Some are

coming to the Communist Left and the ICT has never enjoyed such growth as it is now experiencing. This is a matter of some encouragement after such a long period of class retreat, yet it is only a small beginning, and presents us with enormous challenges. The first of these is to make clear what the struggle for communism is really about. Briefly, this has to include more than the habitual work of exposing the various false friends who emerged from the failure of the last revolutionary wave, i.e. those who defend one or other form of state capitalism (here we think first of so-called Marxist-Leninists – Stalinists, Maoists – as well as Trotskyists who cling to the idea that the USSR was somehow still worth defending). There are also those “*left communists*” principally inhabiting social media who have not grasped that the struggle against capitalism is not simply about an individual discovering the truth and then holding to a certain position. The way forward has to be made in the real world by a flesh and blood working class. It is the role of revolutionary militants to organise and argue for how that is to be done. Capitalism may provide the contradictions which make life unbearable but socialism will not arise automatically within capitalism. It has to be a conscious act of the one class which is capable of ridding itself of “*the muck of ages*” in a revolution against the current system and its mores. And, given that consciousness arises unevenly in the working class: now here, now there and over historical time, the only way that consciousness can be retained is via an international revolutionary organisation which defends all that we have politically learned as a class in our various struggles against capital in all its forms. We call it the communist programme. This is not fixed or invariant,

much less the product of one or two ‘*great minds*’, but is built on every experience, both positive and negative, of working class struggle across the planet.

We never cease to repeat that the Internationalist Communist Tendency makes no claims to be the future world party but we do intend to be part of the process of creating it. We are well aware that many self-proclaimed “*left communists*” do not share our understanding that the existence of an international political organisation is a necessary though not sufficient condition for the success of the future world revolution. We understand their hesitation, given the fact that the Russian Revolution, in its isolation, gave birth to a state capitalist and not a socialist regime. In the end this led to the most bestial of totalitarian dictatorships under Stalin. The fact that the same party that led the onslaught of the working class on the capitalist state also ended up ruling in place of the working class is a lesson indelibly etched on all our minds. Nevertheless, the lesson is not that “*all political parties are bourgeois*” but that the working class itself must run society through its historically-discovered class-wide organs. The party can guide the class in the anti-capitalist revolution but the social transformation can only be carried out by the class as a whole. “*The class does not give away its power to anyone, not even its class party*”¹⁹. After all, socialism is not just about a new distribution of wealth but about an entirely different society where the self-activity of its members replaces the passive acceptance of state bureaucracy. But, to get to that point the working class has to organise itself as the revolutionary antithesis and in this the role of the party is indispensable. To argue otherwise is to throw the communist baby out with the

counter-revolutionary bathwater.

Even so, the task of communists does not stop with arguing the case for communism. It must also involve participating in all the struggles of the class to widen the base of the organisation and learn with other workers as we move into a new period of history, a history which we have yet to write. Without revolutionary theory there is no revolutionary practice but without that practice there is no test of the theory’s validity. Whilst avoiding the excesses of headless chicken activism, communists participate in the struggles of the class not to put forward this or that demand but to link the immediate struggle with the future communist society – the only real victory that the working class will ever win for itself. Our aim has to be to win over more to our ranks in order to widen that work and thus create the basis for the future international as a key tool of proletarian emancipation.

CWO

December 2020

Notes

1. <https://www.leftcom.org/en/articles/2020-02-07/the-current-crisis-and-the-tasks-of-communists>
2. See <http://www.leftcom.org/en/articles/2019-11-20/perspectives-for-the-coming-period>
3. https://www.iif.com/Portals/0/Files/content/Research/Global%20Debt%20Monitor_April2020.pdf
4. <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/international/business/global-debt-hits-record-high-of-331-of-gdp-in-q1-iif/article-show/77000231.cms>
5. *Financial Times Datawatch 19 October 2020*
6. *Financial Times 19 November 2020*
7. <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2019/nov/25/hospital-beds-at-record-low-in-england-as-nhs-struggles-with-demand>
8. Delphine Strauss in the *Financial Times* 7

October 2020

9. Sara O'Connor "Punitive sick leave rules make us all pay", *Financial Times* 15 December 2020

10. *Financial Times* 15 December 2020

11. <https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/employmentandemployeetypes/bulletins/uklabourmarket/december2020>

12. <http://www.leftcom.org/en/articles/2019-12-02/the-self-organised-struggle-of-liverpool-couriers-highlights-the-difficulties-of>

13. *Financial Times* 22 October 2020

14. <https://www.ft.com/content/168e908a-03a5-4a0c-b993-355e88afee41>

15. See <https://militarywatchmagazine.com/article/putin-says-formal-russia-china-military-alliance-possible-amid-mounting-western-threats>

16. See "Rethinking Xi's "project of the century" *Financial Times* 12/13 December 2020

17. *Financial Times* 15 October 20

18. <http://www.leftcom.org/en/articles/2019-11-20/perspectives-for-the-coming-period>

19. <https://www.leftcom.org/en/articles/2020-03-16/political-platform-of-the-internationalist-communist-party-1952>

Gramsci



*between
Marxism
and
Idealism*

Onorato Damen

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Mythology About the Middle Class and the Class Struggle

CWO Preamble

The following article is translated from the current edition of *Prometeo*, the political magazine published by our ICT affiliate in Italy. As well as a valuable investigation in itself, it gives us an opportunity to add a few comments on the vexed question of the middle class from, as it were, an Anglo-Saxon perspective. Here, the notion that there exists a growing middle class whose livelihood rests neither on wage labour nor manufacturing or industrial profits has long been used to challenge Marx's revolutionary perspective that ultimately the future of capitalism will be decided by a struggle between the two great contending classes in modern society: the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, or if you prefer, the bosses and the workers. The issue has always been conflated with the fate of the small capitalist, the petty bourgeois who either works solely for himself or else employs a handful of employees. But if, at the start of the nineteenth century, Napoleon could stereotype England as a *nation of shopkeepers* (by incorrectly paraphrasing Adam Smith) by mid-century there was no question that Britain's empire of goods based on commercial capitalism had given way to industrial capitalism and a society of sharpening class conflict where (wage) labourers, not *vagrants* (much less, *shopkeepers* and *tradesmen*) were now the biggest social group on the census returns. Most lived in towns and growing cities in the appalling conditions meticulously

described by Engels in his *Condition of the Working Class*, first published in German in 1845 (though not in English until 1892!). In the same year Benjamin Disraeli's novel *Sybil* was published, a landmark in the history of *one nation* Toryism and the Conservatives' subsequent wooing of the *angels in marble*: members of the working class who vote Tory. Disraeli wanted to bridge the unbridgeable, the maximising profit interests of the capitalist (*the master*) and the workers (*hands*) who would never be paid the full value of their work since this was the source of the master's profit. Of course he didn't write in those terms. His idea was that the division between the *rich and the poor* should be bridged by getting to know each other better and a coming together of lifestyles:

Two nations; between whom there is no intercourse and no sympathy; who are as ignorant of each other's habits, thoughts, and feelings, as if they were dwellers in different zones, or inhabitants of different planets; who are formed by a different breeding, are fed by a different food, are ordered by different manners, and are not governed by the same laws. "You speak of... "THE RICH AND THE POOR."

It was a powerful force for propaganda, not just in novels, but more broadly. It lives with us today.

But propaganda alone is not enough to

disguise the material reality of conflicting class interests. For about half a century, from the 1860s, the situation of the working class in Britain gradually improved; not in a blanket manner and certainly not without class struggle. In Europe it was the heyday of social democracy. The biggest social democratic party was in Germany. It had always been more reformist than revolutionary, as Marx and Engels had made clear in their comments on the *Gotha Programme*. Until 1890 the biggest Social Democratic Party was still hamstrung by Bismarck's anti-socialist laws, and the SDP's attempts to work within the law encouraged the growing revisionist movement which argued that the working class should forget about revolution and concentrate instead on winning the battle for democracy, and in so doing, achieve emancipation. The foremost proponent of revisionism was, of course, Eduard Bernstein, whose book, *Evolutionary Socialism*, was written whilst he was exiled in England. What he chose to concentrate on was not so much the increasing affluence of the working class, much less the concentration of capital in fewer and fewer hands, but the expansion of the middle class which he defined, not as a group between capital and labour but as part of the *possessing classes*, the "increasing number of capitalists of all degrees". For him the middle class were not limited to fee-charging professionals, doctors, lawyers, architects, engineers and the like whose independence was being eroded. Bernstein's middle classes were *changing their character* and expanding, in line with the changing needs of capital, but ultimately he defined them as belonging to the capitalist class.

In this respect Bernstein's vision is remarkably like the Thatcher/Blair

doctrine of a property owning democracy and shareholder capitalism peddled to mollify working class resistance to the mass unemployment caused by industrial *restructuring* in the last decades of the 20th century. The majority of wage workers in the UK are now service workers. This does not mean they are middle class. Most do not have an independent source of income to live on, day in day out. For many of the sons and daughters of the UK's self-styled middle class, the myth of a property-owning democracy has given way to the reality of generation rent. The myth that getting up to your ears in debt to pay for a university degree will lead to a worthwhile, secure career is being challenged by the growing number of 'over-qualified' precarious, increasingly unemployed university graduates.

Just as Bernstein was arguing that the *Communist Manifesto* was outdated — that the scenario of a clash between the two fundamental classes of capitalist society shows "a real residue of Utopianism in the Marxist system"; "that the number of the wealthy increases and does not diminish is not an invention of bourgeois harmony economists"; that capitalism has no inbuilt tendency to economic crisis and "there is no urgent reason for concluding that such a crisis will come to pass for purely economic reasons" — the illusion that capitalism was gradually evolving into socialism came to a sudden halt. Within a couple of years of Bernstein's book appearing in Britain there came the Great Unrest: a series of massive and intense struggles against capital in which workers fought against declining real wages and came up against the fire-power of the bosses' state. (See our article: <https://www.leftcom.org/en/articles/2011-08-23/the-great-unrest-1910-1914-when-the->

working-class-shook-britain%E2%80%99s-capitalist.) Only the outbreak of the First World War — for Bernstein “*an unforeseen external event*” and nothing to do with the inner contradictions of capitalism — put a stop to this.

Over a century on there is no question that the structure of the working class has changed but to doubt that it still exists flies against the fact that in the world today most work is done by wage workers. There has been no great new dawn of post-industrial capitalism but a grinding out of a crisis which has lasted for decades and where the working class is paying the price. The swelling of the ranks of the *self-employed* is partly, if not mainly, due to a growing number of workers who are unable to find a *proper job* being obliged to fall back on their wits. Even before the pandemic average weekly earnings in the UK were 15% less than wage workers in general and in any case the vast majority are ‘solo businesses’ and employ nobody but themselves! Then suddenly there came Covid-19. In less than a year the number of self-employed has plummeted. (From nearly 12% of the workforce, or around 5 million people, to less than 1% within a year!). For many small businesses lockdowns which prevent them trading really are an existential threat. There are bound to be explosions of anger at the constant assault on livelihoods and conditions of existence. But the attacks are not limited to the self-employed. As the Covid crisis exacerbates capitalism’s existing profitability crisis, more and more boardrooms are deciding it’s time to restructure and cut the cost of their wages’ bill. Will there be an outburst of combined protests of wage workers and the precarious self-employed? We must wait and see. There is a world of difference

between the small business owner who has been refused a Sunak support payment because their annual income is above the £50,000 threshold and a solo self-employed person who is already claiming universal credit to supplement their earnings. There is growing evidence that these layers are susceptible to all sorts of irrational opinions, from denying the existence of the virus to blaming its existence on 5G internet networks. Clearly a mindset like this is ready to blame anything but capitalism itself.

Yet, behind Covid-19, behind climate change and the wider environmental crisis is global capitalism, in the throes of an even more fundamental threat: its profitability. Even without the current pandemic, even without the urgent need to combat global warming, for decades now capitalism has been making the working class pay for its declining profit rates: work harder and longer for less money. Just as wages’ share of national income fell in Britain and elsewhere in the run-up to the First World War, total wages today are falling as a share of **global** GDP (from 53.7% in 2004 to 51.4% in 2017). As in the early years of the 20th century we are facing a crossroads: either capitalism will be allowed to run its disastrous course towards economic and political ruin or the working class will join forces across local and national boundaries to impose a revolutionary reconstitution of society. But capitalism cannot be overthrown until wage workers in general recognise their common interests and can see the prospect of a better alternative to it. If the capitalist myth that we are all middle class is wearing a bit thin, there are always other smokescreens being raised to divide and rule; not least the rainbow of identity politics where now the latest campaign to

be taken up is ... the right not to be discriminated against because of your local accent! The onus is on the tiny, but growing, political forces for proletarian internationalism to extend their influence inside the working

class. As the article here concludes, "*In this sense, the problem is not the middle class, but a question of the political recomposition of the working class*".

Mythology About the Middle Class and the Class Struggle

Last October's much-publicised protests by some *business concerns* against government measures to contain the epidemic,¹ offer us an opportunity to return to a perennial question for the working class and its revolutionary political off-shoots. In short, how theoretically, and therefore politically, to explain the existence of the petty bourgeoisie and its role in the conflict between the two fundamental classes of society: bourgeoisie and proletariat. It is well known that the protests were animated by restaurateurs, bartenders, managers of various jobs and services, who have been hit hard by the new lockdown and some of whom will probably not survive. This is even more likely if so-called *smart working* (working from home) becomes permanent for many employees in clerical-type jobs. For a start, breakfasts and lunch breaks at home will have a serious impact on the balance sheets of retail businesses who depend on such custom for survival. On the other hand, *smart working* could be a big deal for some firms who would save on rent, electricity and employee insurance. Meanwhile for the latter, working at home would end up accentuating their isolation as individuals and emphasise which social group they really belong to: that of wage workers.

For the most part the recent clashes with the forces of law and order,² were not animated by the petty bourgeoisie, but by a variegated set of proletarians and sub-proletarians whose instinctive rebelliousness, the product of a life marginalised by the way capitalist society excludes them, has been mixed with anger and desperation at the prospect of losing earnings which, although part of the black economy and precarious, are their only source of income. It is no surprise that fascists and their near relatives (populists), perhaps even organised crime, tried to join the protests: if muddy waters can be created to fish in, those people are second to none.

For the time being the demonstrations have died down (because Prime Minister Conte approved the decree to reinstate previous Covid support measures.) However, there is undoubtedly widespread fear and resentment among the ranks of a social stratum whose boundaries are not always easy to define, especially towards its lower end.

The age-old question of the middle class

Middle class, middle classes, intermediate classes, essentially they are all terms

to describe a social stratum which neither belongs to the bourgeoisie (who really have power) nor to the proletariat, on whose exploitation capitalist production depends. This is a (semi) class which encompasses the self-employed, tradesmen, the petty bourgeoisie:

*They are not a class, but if anything classes, which would be more accurately called strata, because they do not have an unequivocal position, a defined social existence. The only connective element in them is the fact that they are averages.*³

This concept of a social aggregate was used — and still is used — against revolutionaries who recognised wage workers as a class. No sooner had Marx died than the idea became part of the *proof* of the alleged errors in his analysis of the evolution of bourgeois society. The underlying aim was to impose a policy of collaboration with the bourgeoisie on the workers' movement. In other words, a hidden agenda of acquiescence to the status quo. The method? Always the same. Portray capitalism as having taken a different direction from the one predicted by Marx, a path where class distinctions were being systematically reduced as a gradual expansion of well-being encompassed wider and wider sectors of the working class itself (or wage labour in general). The working class should then renounce impossible revolutionary dreams and realistically accept the reformist policy of progressive improvements within bourgeois society. The expansion of the middle classes, not their extinction, as indicated in the *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, was supposed to be the proof that Marx and Engels were wrong — especially their

insistence on revolution. Yet today, only those who read the pages of the *Manifesto* in bad faith or superficially cannot understand (or do not want to understand) that the founding document of communism refers to a middle class — small agricultural property holders, crafts, etc. — of the pre-capitalist era, who disappeared long ago due to the evolution of capitalism. Where remnants survive,⁴ they lead a very stunted existence and in any case are subject to the laws of capital, so much so that even with the best of good will one cannot truly speak of a middle class. The supposed short-sightedness of the two German revolutionaries is simply an invention of prejudiced critics, or else of disciples who understood little of the masters. (Those who did partially understand pretended nothing had changed, because their arguments in favour of reformism would have been demolished from the start.) At the end of the nineteenth century, Rosa Luxemburg's sharp criticism of Bernstein, father of all reformist movements, also touched on the *middle class* question, framing it in terms of the development of capitalism.⁵

Nonetheless, the methodological tools and the conceptual approach towards the emerging middle class are already there, in Marx's works where he dismantles bourgeois political economy piece by piece. Certain mass phenomena of the twentieth century are already grasped on their first appearance, when they did not yet constitute, as it were, a theoretical and therefore political problem for proletarian revolutionary organisations. Whole pages of *Capital* could be quoted, but here we can only limit ourselves to a few passages. Speaking of what will come to be called the *new white-collar middle class*, Marx observes that,

*The commercial worker proper belongs to the class of the better-paid class of wage labourer; [but] The expansion of popular education allows the recruitment of this variety of labour from classes who were previously excluded and who were used to a lower standard of living. In this way it increases the supply, and with it competition [...] with few exceptions the labour power of these people is devalued with the advance of capitalist production: their wages fall while their productivity increases. The capitalist increases the number of these workers when there is more value and profit to be made. The increase in this work is always the consequence, never the cause, of the increase in surplus value.*⁶

Incidentally, Marx also broaches the role of the mass education of the future, destined to churn out technicians and graduate employees in quantities and at costs appropriate to the accumulation process. At the same time he emphasises that the growth of the *new* unproductive middle classes depends on the growth of surplus value extorted in the production process, not the other way around. Yet Marx does not refer directly to the proletariat in this context, even if the meaning and direction is clear. But Engels, thirty years later, when the phenomenon has already taken shape, describes the *commercial proletariat* as those,

German clerks who, despite their knowing thoroughly all commercial operations and three or four languages, offer their services in vain in the City of London at the rate of 25 shillings

*per week —well below the salary of a skilled mechanic.*⁷

Finally, just to give one more of the many examples of Marx's extraordinary critical-analytical skills, in the same period that he was writing the passage quoted earlier, he noted:

*... the continuous growth of the middle classes who find themselves in the middle, between the workers on the one hand and the capitalists and landlords on the other, largely maintained directly by revenues, and who weigh like a burden on the underlying working base and increase the security and social power of the ten thousand above.*⁸

In short, not only has the Marxian criticism not ignored the formation of a new or renewed middle class (autonomous or dependent), but it has framed it as a necessary element of the laws of development and process of the capital accumulation process. The more it expands, the more the increase in social strata who, as Braverman says when referring to Marx, help it "*in the realisation or appropriation of surplus value*".⁹

Depending on the level of *maturity* of capitalism, certain characteristics of these strata resemble the traditional middle class, but these are destined to be lost and superseded by more and more aspects of wage labour. For example, in the US large-scale distribution established itself by sweeping away thousands of small businesses, whilst in Italy *department stores* were a rarity, a cinematographic curiosity. Today, one of the largest companies in the world is WalMart, while in Italy the large super-market chains dominate entire sectors of

commerce; not to mention Amazon and e-commerce.

Okay, it will be said, shops and shopkeepers of various sizes are declining and the voice of the petty bourgeoisie is fading, but the fact remains that the majority of occupations no longer belong to the working class because the workforce is largely clerical. Thus, reading between the lines, they are petty bourgeois — and have grown continuously for over a century, outnumbering manual workers, hence their political weight.

As mentioned earlier, bourgeois ideologues, not least those in the world of reformism,¹⁰ used the expansion of *white collar* jobs to announce the end of the class struggle and the advent of a society, if not completely harmonious, at least freed from irreconcilable social clashes. Having been neutralised by the broad mass of the new middle classes, the *ugly, dirty and bad* proletariat would become a minority, objectively unable to do any (political) harm. Legend, of course, but like every legend it contains a grain of truth since, in fact, the number of jobs regarded as non-working class, it is trivial to say, has gone up a lot since the end of the nineteenth century. Nevertheless, the point is, as Marx and Engels had glimpsed, that clerks began to more and more resemble *workers*, not because of their dirty and calloused hands, but because of their relationship to the *employer*, to capital. Ultimately, most office workers are in the same position as every other worker. Even if the role of some of them is to act as *officer and non-commissioned officer* of the exploitation process, most of them are not supervisors, foremen, managers, or even directors, i.e. figures who, to a greater or lesser extent, benefit from the surplus value extorted in production. It was not only

revolutionary militants who detected this, who recognised in the *new middle class* of white-collar workers — at least in large sectors of it — a new form of proletariat and not of the petty bourgeoisie, a *proletariat in black coats or starched collars*,¹¹ the most lucid minds of bourgeois sociology also saw what was happening. Their sharp analyses of the *white collar worker* resembled, we do not know how consciously, part of the Marxian analytical toolbox.¹² Of course, the reduction of the employee, indeed, very often female employee, to a mechanism in the valorisation of capital does not automatically turn them into a revolutionary. On the contrary, the specific working conditions and family ties of the petty bourgeois often made him a *kind of bodyguard*¹³ of the bourgeoisie, although this is much less the case today. Working side by side with *company officers and non-commissioned officers*, their different and often physically better working conditions, a slightly higher salary (although this is far from an iron rule), such conditions have always nurtured illusions in the likes of office workers: Illusions that their status is a few steps higher — much higher than it was or really is — than the working class narrowly understood. Thus they did not join its struggles even when they were not sabotaging them: capital's bodyguards, in fact. Historically, the middle class — even if several individuals thus classified have slipped down the social ladder — has always been the most solid prop of the bourgeois system and the mass base of fascism. This, it goes without saying, has never saved them from the knock-on effects of the capital accumulation process. At the most it may have temporarily slowed down their downgrading or reduction, for purely political reasons, but in the end they are

inevitably sacrificed to the needs of profit.

To give an example, the *Forty Thousand* (in reality they were less than half that number) who exactly forty years ago marched in Turin against embattled Fiat workers, did not escape industrial restructuring and little by little many of them were laid off and ultimately dismissed, just like the *blue collars* they had demonstrated against¹⁴ It must be said that the impact of the strikebreakers hired by Romiti, then CEO of the company, was inconsequential compared to the role of the union. Strictly speaking this cannot be defined as treason since the union's role is precisely to contain the struggle and prevent it from breaking out of capitalism's infamous framework, even at the cost of leading the working class to defeat through the usual deleterious agreements. But in the case of Turin in 1980 there was an epochal catastrophe.¹⁵ For anyone who understood the anti-worker, counter-revolutionary role of trade unions and the parties of the capitalist left this came as a largely predictable defeat. So it is today, with the difference that the counter-revolutionary role of the unions has adapted somewhat to new situations, turning itself into trade unionist radicalism whilst always remaining within the confines of the system. Witness the whole Cobas archipelago which, beyond the anti-capitalist verbiage, ends up only dividing those relatively few proletarians who are ready to organise — usually the most combative — into self-referential churches.

The tenacious mythology of the middle class

Bourgeois intellectuals have written a lot on the middle class (real or presumed),

almost always, as we have said, in a mystifying way, to envelop the structure of society in ideological smoke and justify its division into classes. The fact that today many bourgeois analysts fear that a possible weakening of the middle class will have negative repercussions on institutions, giving way to nationalism and confused rebellion, shows that the *thinking* bourgeoisie are worried about the situation: the result of the structural crisis which, with alternating trends, has been dragging on since the 70s of the last century. To use a metaphor, the petty bourgeoisie, the praetorian guard of the bourgeois order, could turn against a particular *emperor* of the moment, could destabilise the political situation and complicate the life of the *good* bourgeoisie — the so-called establishment — even if, of course, it leaves the capitalist mode of production intact. Moreover, they are not aiming to subvert the *empire* itself. If anything, they help to prolong it by trying to improve their position within this society. (With variable success, depending on the state of the economy, especially the phase of the accumulation cycle and, it goes without saying, on the state of the struggle between the two fundamental classes.) The genetic make-up of the petty bourgeoisie, identified by Marx in his very acute analysis of an *improbable* character like Louis Bonaparte,¹⁶ remains essentially the same and, we still find it in action today. Its voice appears all the louder, the weaker that of the proletariat, which at present has almost disappeared.

But what does the infamous middle class consist of, and what is its state of health? It is difficult or, rather, complex to answer the first question, a little less so to answer the second, precisely for the reasons already mentioned.

Bourgeois sociology produces a mountain of data. Yet, instead of illuminating the picture, it becomes more confused, partly because of the inconsistent criteria for collecting data but, above all, because the information itself is distorted by the perspective of the researcher. In any case, sociologists basically refer to income, never to the relationship with the means of production which the individuals classified as middle class find themselves in. According to the OECD, the middle class comprises all those whose income lies between 75% and 200% of the median. Now, aside from the fact that this range is far too wide, even if we accept this criterion it is clear that a significant (or very significant) part of the *working class* (in a broad sense) falls into the *middle class*. But it is also clear that many of the middle class, the real middle class, are close to the lower end of the range or even below it, due to tax evasion/avoidance. Just to give a widely known example, according to the tax return for 2018,

... the average income declared by entrepreneurs who are sole proprietors is €20,940. About €120 more than the average income declared to the tax authorities by employees [who, together with retirees] represent 82% of declared income.¹⁷

An OECD dossier of 2019¹⁸ sets the boundaries of the middle class in Italy from a minimum of €12,206 to a maximum of €32,549 per year; even if a different study (*Il Sole 24 ore* [Italian equivalent of the *Financial Times*, CWO] of 6 May 2019) establishes the lower limit of €15,000 (gross), the situation does not substantially change. Does a gross salary of €1250 per

month (for twelve months; for thirteen it is obviously less) make us middle class? This is not just a bizarre Italian — let's call it — *experience*. It is true for every country, because the survey criteria are always the same. In the United States, home *par excellence* of the middle class (so they say ...), it is enough to have an annual income of \$25,000 to enter the narrow-gauge paradise of the middle class. Now, \$25,000 in the US cannot be equated with €25,000, say, in the European Union, since, among other things, that sum includes the portion of indirect and deferred salary (pension, health, school) which is withheld from the pay cheque here. Moreover,

... a huge part of the people defined as belonging to the middle class consisted of single parents with two children and an income [in fact] of about \$25,000 a year.¹⁹

It is difficult to believe that a single mother on that income (19 years old with two children) can enjoy the same sort of secure, almost wealthy economic existence, as someone belonging to the true middle class.

Here's another example from the OECD. Before the 2007/8 subprime crisis 51% of the US population were categorised as middle class, a percentage which had fallen by ten points by 2015. Just a year earlier Janet Yellen, then governor of the Fed, had declared that,

*... an unexpected financial outlay of just \$400 would induce the **majority** [our emphasis, ed] of American families to borrow money, sell something or simply not pay.²⁰*

Today, with the ongoing pandemic, those figures are bound to be worse as thousands of small businesses, sole proprietors, self-employed workers are *inactive* or are about to be so; not to mention the tens of millions of applications for unemployment benefit last Spring, which only partially declined during the Summer.

The attempt to pin down the middle class in a less random way becomes even more difficult if the territory and the institution promoting the research are changed. For example, a study dated 2019 by ECLA (Economic Commission for Latin America, UN agency),

*estimates that the middle class — that is the broad spectrum of people whose incomes are between 1.8 and 10 times above the poverty threshold — represents 41% of the population.*²¹

It is therefore useful to remember that the poverty threshold set by the World Bank, in 2018, is \$1.9 a day.²² So it is enough to live (?) on \$3.5 a day to be considered middle class. If that wasn't so outrageous it would be laughable. On the other hand, it is thanks to a specific interpretation of similar data — so to speak — that bourgeois sociology can triumphantly declare, at least before the pandemic, that global inequalities have been reduced along with absolute poverty. This is partly true, but only because millions of workers, often female, have moved to cities where they earn an income that is somehow statistically detectable and which, although low, is above the absolute poverty threshold set by the World Bank. So unlike before, they are no longer classified as *very poor peasants* or *self-employed workers* in the so-called informal sector. This is the only

way to conceptualise the three hundred million middle class people hypothesised for China.²³ But it's a stretch of the imagination to get them all in ...

Apparently — and it's largely only apparent! — the growth of the middle class in so-called emerging countries, corresponds to increased uncertainty for the middle class in the *West* as documented by numerous analyses (such as the OECD one mentioned above), all driven by the same concern: to find ways to stop and if possible reverse a trend which has been going on for decades; a trend which is making increasingly wider layers of (real) petty bourgeois poorer and obliging them to approach the world of wage labour, sometimes on its lowest rungs, with a view to earning an income. Here it is worth mentioning briefly that many activities classified as self-employed and undertaken by people of petty bourgeois family origin, often graduates, are in reality disguised forms of dependent work, where low-pay and precariousness dominate. Apparently a degree, in itself, does not protect against sliding downwards, not even when its holder occupies a post commensurate with their qualification.

*Even graduates, who in the past held typically middle class jobs, are experiencing a significant reduction in income (25% from 1993 to 2012).*²⁴

Of course the bourgeois intellectuals' search for the miraculous cure will not end, because the tendency to proletarianisation — or downgrading or loss of status, if you prefer — as foretold by the laws of capital, speeds up in the crisis periods of the accumulation cycle and accelerates even more if the crisis is strongly aggravated by an

unexpected element such as an epidemic.

Staying with Italy, that long-standing *little Eden* of autonomous and independent work (also a means for maintaining political stability) with a middle class *par excellence*: since at least the 1990s this social stratum has been shrinking and the trend was accelerating even before the sub-prime bubble burst. In 2004 it included about 6,300,000 employees, equivalent to 25.3% of total employment (against an EU average of 14.5-15%). By 2016 they had suffered a decline of over 800,000, dropping to 22.4%. The biggest decline was amongst small traders (bars, restaurants, corner shops, etc.) and artisans. Yet the decline would have been even more marked if, in the meantime, tens of thousands of immigrants had not taken over or opened their own businesses.²⁵ By October 2020 there were 5.1 million, but the haemorrhaging continues, especially in the *under 40* age group. Here, within a year, i.e. between the second quarter of 2019 and that of 2020, 110,000 employees have disappeared, amounting to a drop of 30% from 2010 to today.²⁶ Since the decline mainly involves those self-employed with employees, there are those who, again in the bourgeois environment, manage to see the glass as half full, in the sense that they interpret this as a trend towards an increase in the size of companies (centralisation of capital, we would say) and therefore of the overall competitiveness of the Italian economy.²⁷ Maybe the much-vaunted *small is beautiful* of thirty years ago, where the adaptability of small businesses (where a surplus of exploitation is often the norm) has come up against limits which the ideological smoke-screen had tried to hide. This does not mean that the small business is destined to completely disappear, of course, but only

that the laws of capital cannot be circumvented indefinitely, especially when the rate of profit falls and struggles to recover. The pandemic is certainly intensifying the decades-long trend that was already underway. In fact,

*... the ECB has sounded the alarm about an upcoming spiral of bankruptcies for businesses. This is a "particularly high risk" ... and according to the forecasts made yesterday by the second Censis-Commercialisti [Business Census] barometer in Italy 460,000 small businesses with less than 10 employees and with a turnover of less than €500,000 are at risk. The crisis could wipe out double the number of micro-enterprises compared to the economic crisis of twelve years ago.*²⁸

Naturally, this has hit employment hard and, consequently, that celebrated factor: consumption, the supposed driving force of economic growth.

The mountain of money that governments are dishing out may plug the losses, but certainly does not raise the rate of profit in a decisive way nor can it revive a social sector which, as we have seen, has been suffering for many years. The pandemic is certainly a factor, but this is only the tip of an enormous iceberg. The self-employed are well aware of this, and, despite having received over €4 million in benefits²⁹ between April and October (as well as being in line for more), are still fuming and thus take to the streets. They are determined to get more out of that state which takes back with one hand what it has just given them with the other, thus earmarking for themselves the services financed by taxes on pay

and pensions. This is also the reason why an alliance between the middle class and wage labour would be an unnatural union: the former just want to survive or thrive within a system that periodically has to sacrifice them, and in the attempt they can do nothing but shift the costs of this struggle for life onto the proletariat. For their part, the proletariat, if they want to emancipate themselves, can only go beyond the system. The anti-capitalism of the *middle class*, if it can be called that, is only the resentment of those who fear falling off the steps of the social ladder inherited from their family or on which they have climbed, often with difficulty and frequently with few legal scruples. The *ladder* itself is never questioned: it is always the bourgeois one.

If today these protests steal the show from the proletariat³⁰ it is only because, to use a term associated with *white collar work*, the working class is *spiritually homeless*,³¹ crushed by the social war which the bourgeoisie has been waging on it for decades; blackmailed, impoverished, above all deprived of the sense of an alternative to capitalism, remaining under the rubble produced first by Stalinism, and then by its collapse. Shaking off that rubble is not easy, for sure, but it is not impossible, and it will only be possible if the *working class*, once torn from its torpor by material conditions, resumes the fight, gets rid of the false friends of the right and the left who poison our minds, paralyse us and sometimes even drive us to self-destruct. In a nutshell, the working class needs to break out of the capitalist cages which imprison us, including trade unionism, and to which we are constantly being led back, as soon as we step out even for a moment. Only in this way will the small advance guard, who have been forced to survive almost

ignored by the proletariat as a result of the Stalinist counter-revolution and decades of setbacks and defeats of our class,³² be able to re-establish deep roots inside the class, thus restoring the dialectical unity of the communist revolution: struggling proletariat and revolutionary party. In this sense, the problem is not the middle class, but the question of the political recomposition of the *working class*.

Celso Beltrami

Notes

1. On the details of these and their class implications, we refer readers to our already published articles.
2. Those episodes are also mentioned in other articles in this issue of the magazine and we refer readers to them.
3. Lucio Luzzatto and Bruno Maffi, *La politica delle classi medie e il planismo, 1935/1938*, in Stefano Merli, *Fronte antifascista e politica di classe. Socialisti e comunisti in Italia 1923–1939*. De Donato, 1975, p. 85. This document, although from the far-off past, remains substantially valid and generally sound, as regards the judgment on the petty bourgeoisie. The authors belonged to the left of the Socialist Party, but one of them, Bruno Maffi, met Onorato Damen whilst in confinement together and took on the positions of the communist left. He went on to make a very important contribution to the foundation of our party. Later, however, he was also the main protagonist of the Bordigist split of 1952.
4. In the so-called emerging countries one can find social strata who resemble the middle classes mentioned in the *Manifesto*.
5. Rosa Luxemburg, *Social Reform or Revolution*, in Selected Writings, Einaudi editions, 1975 or in *Political Writings*, Editori Riuniti, 1974, but also available on the web.
6. Karl Marx, *Capital, Volume III*, chap. 17°, Einaudi, p. 418-19. (For the same passage in English, see the Penguin 1981 edition of *Capital Vol. III*.) Today, the inadequate level of surplus value pushes capital to make not only the workers directly productive of

surplus value precarious, but also workers in commerce, services and a lot of petty bourgeoisie in the same sectors, in order to save costs and thus increase the surplus value — of that specific sector — or, better, to consume less in unproductive expenses.

7. Note from Engels to the pages cited from *Capital*.

8. Karl Marx, *Storia delle teorie economiche [Theories of Surplus Value]*, Einaudi, II, 1977, p.634. On page 131 of the same volume, mention is made of the importance of the “new” classes with regard to the consumption of commodities and the repercussions on the accumulation of capital, proving that Marx’s schematicity is only an invention of malevolent critics and ignorant learned.

9. Harry Braverman, *Lavoro e capitale monopolistico. La degradazione del lavoro nel XX secolo, [Labour and Monopoly Capital]*. The degradation of work in the twentieth century, Einaudi, 1978, p. 424.

10. Falling into that category are not only the parliamentary left, indeed, its *extreme* fringes, but also the great part of what was once called *movementism* (leftist activism is the closest in English) and today antagonism; in addition to the remnants of Stalinism and Trotskyism: in short, of the degenerate Third International.

11. Luzzatto and Maffi, cit., p. 80.

12. The reference is to two classics of sociology: Siegfried Kracauer, *Inpiegati, Meltemi*, 2020 (original edition 1930) and Charles Wright Mills, *Colletti bianchi. La classe media americana [White Collar Workers, The American Middle Class]*, Einaudi, 1974 (original edition 1951).

13. Siegfried Kracauer, op. cit., p. 25.

14. In the autumn of 1980 Fiat Group boss, Cesare Romiti, laid off 23,000 workers as part of management restructuring and the workers responded with a 35-day strike. Romiti is notorious for organising a counter-protest of workers and managers who marched through the streets of Turin to demand the right to return to work!

15. On the role of the trade unions we could refer to our innumerable documents, but,

for once, we report the considerations of a bourgeois, certainly not a communist, whose intellectual honesty, however, allowed him to see what almost everyone on the “left” does not and cannot see, because they wear the glasses of ideology, because they reason with the theoretical tools of another era of the class struggle: “Unions, after all, are the surest tools for taming and channeling the aspirations of the lower classes, for framing workers without internal shocks in times of war, and to control their onset in times of peace and depression”, C. Wright Mills, op. cit., p. 415.

16. See Karl Marx, *The Class Struggles in France and The 18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*.

17. *Il Sole 24 ore*, 23 April 2020. Income is gross, of course.

18. *Sous pression: the moyenne class en perte de vitesse*, 2019 [*Under pressure: the middle class is slowing down*].

19. It is almost always mothers who are single parents, which says a lot about the condition of women, especially proletarians.

20. Quoted in Mario Deaglio, *Un mondo più disuguale, anche quando cresce [A more unequal world, even when it grows]*, *Aspenia* n.74, 2016, p.90. Deaglio reports that, according to the OECD, the middle class comprises incomes between 75% and 125% of the median. We note the difference between this criterion and the other already mentioned and accepted in some more recent documents.

21. Frédéric Thomas, *La morale des soulèvements? Classes moyennes, économie morale et révoltes populaires*, *www.contretemps.eu*, 7 April 2020. [*The consequence of upheavals? Middle class, moral economy and popular uprisings*]

22. Oxfam’s poverty line is different and is set at \$5.5 a day.

23. Marco Bertorello, *Disuguaglianza, dalle maree ai naufragi, [Inequality, from tides to shipwrecks]*, *Attac Italia*, 21 November 2016.

24. Enrico Comini [https://www.pandorarivista.it/articoli/saggio-sulle-classi-sociali-paolo-sylos-labini-recensione/27 July 2016](https://www.pandorarivista.it/articoli/saggio-sulle-classi-sociali-paolo-sylos-labini-recensione/27%20July%202016).

25. Emilio Reyneri, *Lavoro indipendente sul viale del tramonto*, [Independent work on sunset boulevard], *lavoce.info*, 31 October 2017.

26. M. Pri, *Il Covid fa chiudere i lavoratori autonomi under 40* [Covid shuts out self-employed workers under 40], *Il Sole 24 ore*, 17 October 2020.

27. Nicolò Bertoncello and Andrea Garnerò, *Il lavoro autonomo non è più quello di una volta*, [Self-employment is no longer what it used to be], *La voce, info*, 10 March 2020.

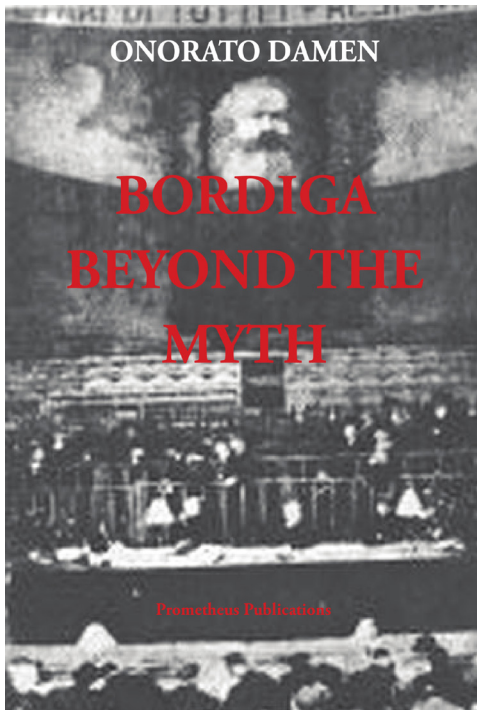
28. Roberto Ciccarelli, *Pandemia economica: 460 mila piccole imprese a rischio*, [Economic pandemic: 460 thousand small businesses at risk], *Il Manifesto*, 13 November 2020.

29. *Il Sole 24 ore*, 17 October 2020, cit. We are talking about Italy, but many countries are experiencing the same sort of protests.

30. Even when the proletariat does participate in struggles alongside angry middle class elements who are scared of being downgraded, its demands not only do not go beyond economic issues, above all they are confused with the inter-class ones of the protest movement itself and die there. The most emblematic case of recent times is that of the French *gilets jaunes*.

31. S. Kracauer, op.cit. p.105.

32. Defeats and setbacks in which Stalinism, first, and then its descendants, played a leading role.



Bordiga Beyond the Myth by Onorato Damen is now available in English translation (it already exists in Italian, French and Spanish). It contains 168 pages and includes 114 footnotes to guide English readers plus 4 appendices, one of which is the first full translation in English of Bordiga's famous letter to Karl Korsch.

Discussion with the Angry Workers of the World

Class Consciousness and Working Class Emancipation

This article originally began as a response to the Angry Workers of the World's reply to our review of their book *Class Power on Zero Hours in Revolutionary Perspectives* 16. However as we were writing it the AWW published another blog article entitled "*The necessity of a revolutionary working class program in times of coup and civil war scenarios*"¹ in which we can see that the promised move towards organisation and an escape from reformist demand struggles mentioned at the end of *Class Power on Zero Hours* has indeed taken some shape.

The Central Issue

We always intended our review of the AWW book, entitled "*Learning the Hard Way*" in *Revolutionary Perspectives* 16 to be an opener to a discussion of what we consider the central issue for revolutionaries, and that is the relationship between ourselves and the wider working class. This is why we concluded our review

The AWW haven't made much progress, they say, by operating on an informal 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 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. ... 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 is an invitation to serious discussion. We can see now that this could have been misinterpreted. In their reply, instead of relating to our common recognition of the problems in getting a wider audience in the working class despite all our best efforts, they chose to ignore that issue, and instead to defend their own practice with a series of diversionary arguments. It's only natural that they would defend their past but it would be easier to take it more seriously if they cut out their presumptive comments about other groups and individuals whose practice they admit they know nothing about. The constant "prolier than thou" attitude and littering their responses with complete red herrings does not help to clarify anything. We learned from bitter experience long ago that there are no winners in empty polemics between organisations desperate to prove that there is only one true road.

We don't want to dwell on these but just for the record we note that the AWW say we labelled them as "syndicalists" in our *Revolutionary Perspectives* 16 piece. Anyone reading the original review can see this is not true. We made no attempt to pigeon hole them in order to dismiss them. Had we seen them as simply syndicalist we would probably not even have reviewed the book since it would have little new to say. From the very start of our review we located them as a mixture of things coming from both *operaismo* and syndicalist traditions. We tried to treat each of their experiences as different in detail but also demonstrate that there is a tendency throughout

the book for them to abandon informal ways of organising and turn to more traditional forms such as unions, and then rank and file unions.

Having accused us of attaching labels they feel free to throw out their own by focussing on our supposed "Leninist origins". There is no agreed definition of "Leninism" today. Some use it (as here) as a term of dismissal or even abuse. Others wear it with pride. But few actually ever analyse what lies behind the label. Today it has lost all meaning, if indeed it had any in the first place. Lenin made an enormous contribution to the working class revolution from 1914-18 but in an isolated Russia he also later became the chief architect of a "workers' state without the workers" as he admitted, or rather a state capitalist economy which continued to exploit the working class. The AWW's version of Leninism is taken almost verbatim from the defunct German *operaist* group Kolinko:

Lenin's understanding of political organisation was a product of its time. He saw the necessity of forming a tightly knit, clandestine organisation to survive the surveillance of the Czarist police state. This meant that the 'political organisation' tended to be relatively sealed off from day-to-day struggles of the class. 'Workers develop trade union consciousness, political consciousness comes from without'. The necessity of a sealed off political organisation fused with his rather mechanistic view of 'materialist philosophy', which failed to grasp the 'practical' interrelationship between the material world and our representation and reflection on it.²

This passage only applies to the Lenin of 1902-5. When he quoted Kautsky in *What is to be Done* about workers only developing trades union consciousness, he was expressing not “Leninism” (i.e. his own view) but what he thought was still social democratic orthodoxy. As Lars Lih, Hal Draper and others have long shown³, the 1905 revolution changed both the situation of the Russian working class, and Lenin’s own views. He last refers to *What is to be Done* in 1907 but only to say that it was now no longer valid as it “belonged to a different period”. At this point the Bolsheviks had 46,000 members, the overwhelming majority of them workers.⁴ A “sealed-off political organisation”? They were neither self-referent nor monolithic (as even the capitalist commentator Leonard Shapiro had to admit).⁵ They lost almost three quarters of these members in the reaction that followed 1905 but never lost a base in the class, and in 1917 the Russian working class rebuilt the Party as an expression of its revolutionary and internationalist demands because it had been the most established force agitating in the class for opposition to the war and capitalism. The AWW at this point tell readers that they do not want “to go deep into history” but it seems they need to get more acquainted with it instead of repeating Cold War propaganda.⁶ And the whole point of our review of their experiences was that they were simply re-learning the lessons from the past “the hard way” even if they dressed them up in the language of novelty. There is a certain irony here as they have since been forced to reply to their critics of their own article “*The necessity of a revolutionary working class program in times of coup and civil war scenarios*” with the riposte that they

... find it tedious to respond to people whose knee-jerk reaction to ‘organisation’ is ‘Leninism’.

To which we can only say “amen”. Whatever their six years in Greenford taught the AWW, it has confirmed just how far the working class is from rediscovering its capacities to fight on its own terms. Despite the mounting evidence that the capitalist system is a threat to humanity, in both the immediate and long term, the working class response has been, to say the least, muted. We still see episodic evidence that the old mole is burrowing away but, at the moment, two generations of retreat have left many workers thinking that they are too isolated from collective action to even think of fighting back, and the AWW have proved it. Despite their obvious propaganda skills they could not even engender much of a resistance in fights over basic conditions.

When the AWW patronisingly ask us if we are “courageous [sic! Are we being asked to die in the factory?] enough to follow [them] into the contradictory nature of everyday working class lives” we can only respond that we don’t see our lives as distinct from the rest of the class. Indeed for most of us, no section of the working class holds our revolutionary ideas in more contempt than some of our own family members. Such is the “contradictory nature” of working class lives today.

Behind the condescending ouvriermism of the AWW response though there is also an incredible arrogance in pronouncing about what the CWO (or sometimes “groups like it”) does, or does not do. We have never blown our own trumpet about our activity because it is nothing great to boast about given that we have operated

for almost our entire existence in a period of class retreat. This did not stop us from agitating in the various struggles of the class from the steel strike in 1980 to the anti-poll tax campaign in 1990, via the miners' strike and Wapping, etc. In these fights we agitated for the adoption of proletarian forms that the working class discovered in the past, but which are not always readily recalled. Control by mass assemblies, election of revocable strike committees and passing resolutions to ensure that those committees cannot be browbeaten in smoke-filled rooms by the class enemy posing as our friends from "the Labour movement" have all been part of our work.⁷ In everything we have been involved with we try to demonstrate that, as revolutionary internationalists, we can be trusted not to betray the struggle. Sometimes it took 15 or more years to win the right to be listened to by our fellow workers and in the course of that process the listening was not all on one side. We learned what not to do as well as when to do things.

Through it all we have survived and somehow grown, first of all "by seriously engaging with, for example, the rediscovery of Marx" which the AWW, with some gall, cheerfully announces we have not done. Indeed it was the end of the post-war boom that compelled us to make a serious study of Capital (and led us to break from the confused swamp of ex-Trotskyist, so-called libertarian groups like Solidarity which ended up accepting the anti-Marxist analysis of Paul Cardan and Socialisme ou Barbarie). Understanding the operation of the laws of capitalism became the bedrock of our perspectives. It enabled us to understand the restructuring of manufacturing, the collapse of the USSR, the failure of the "New World Order" after

the collapse of Bretton Woods, as well as globalisation and financialisation. This even allowed us to predict the bursting of the speculative bubble in 2007-8. It also allowed us to see the constant mutation of the working class in the face of capitalist restructuring brought about by the crisis of accumulation. This brought about a change in our practical orientation. Whereas our focus had been on the factory alone to start with, by the 1990s we could see that the composition of the class was changing (and has continued to change).⁸ The most obvious change was to recognise that in the old capitalist heartlands the class was no longer concentrated in the vast fortresses of industry we had begun with in the 1970s. Now we had to focus as much on the territory, the working class community on which the workplaces were based, as on the workplace itself. However, our aim is to win over other workers to the political programme of working class emancipation, and this is what divided us from the AWW for whom, until recently, the struggle was everything and the goal vague.

The "Ideological Washer" of the Communist Left

Before we get on to the more recent document of the AWW we want to just clarify a couple of points which if not answered can leave a confused idea about our political framework particularly on the union question, past and present. The AWW's cavalier approach to history allows them to make some statements that have not a vestige of truth. Take this example:

Bordiga was very involved in trade union struggles during the 1910s and 1920s, while maintaining the necessity

of political leadership by a communist organisation. He rejected a united front with bourgeois political parties, but spoke in favour of a 'trade union united front'. "The party must participate in every action to which the proletariat is driven by its economic condition". Only during the leaden years of the 1930s and 1940s did the left-communist position introduce an ideological washer between 'economic' and 'political struggle'. The CWO carries this baggage.

It is ironic that after accusing the CWO of "Leninism" the AWW should bring in as witness for the prosecution the self-confessed "Leninist", Bordiga. But then they give a meaningless quote by Bordiga to support the punchline accusation of an "ideological washer" introduced by the Communist Left sometime during the two decades in which Bordiga retired from the political scene. It is, of course, utter nonsense. Bordiga's seminal document at the time of the foundation of the Communist Party of Italy (PCd'I) had already (for analytical purposes) made the heuristic distinction between the economic and political struggle of the working class:

The bourgeoisie feels that, as long as the proletariat's action can be limited to the immediate economic demands that are raised trade by trade, it helps to safeguard the status-quo and to avoid the formation of the perilous "political" consciousness – that is, the only consciousness which is revolutionary for it aims at the enemy's vulnerable point, the possession of power. Past and present syndicalists, however, have always been conscious

of the fact that most trade unions are controlled by right wing elements and that the dictatorship of the petty bourgeois leaders over the masses is based on the union bureaucracy even more than on the electoral mechanism of the social-democratic pseudo-parties. Therefore the syndicalists, along with very numerous elements who were merely acting in reaction to the reformist practice, devoted themselves to the study of new forms of union organisation and created new unions independent from the traditional ones. Such an expedient was theoretically wrong for it did not go beyond the fundamental criterion of the economic organisation: that is, the automatic admission of all those who are placed in given conditions by the part they play in production, without demanding special political convictions or special pledges of actions which may require even the sacrifice of their lives. Moreover, in looking for the "producer" it could not go beyond the limits of the "trade", whereas the class party, by considering the "proletarian" in the vast range of his conditions and activities, is alone able to awaken the revolutionary spirit of the class

The article concludes:

... the class originates from an immediate homogeneity of economic conditions which appear to us as the primary motive force of the tendency to destroy and go beyond the present mode of production. But in order to assume this great task, the class must have its own thought, its own critical method, its own will bent on the precise

*ends defined by research and criticism, and its own organisation of struggle channelling and utilising with the utmost efficiency its collective efforts and sacrifices. All this constitutes the party.*⁹

And when the Internationalist Communist Party was founded in 1943 it still adhered to this position. Indeed its militants were killed by Stalinists when they were elected by workers to the Factory Commissions.¹⁰ What was debated in the Party's early Congresses (1945 and 1948) was how to deal with the situation where the destruction of the Fascist unions would lead to the re-establishment of the old union federations linked to the Socialist, Communist (i.e. Stalinist), and Christian Democratic Parties. It was recognised that they were now linked to the state in the management of the sale of labour power but the comrades who had founded the Party recognised that members of the organisation would have to be where the workers were (the unions) but that something had to be organised to give the most revolutionary workers something to rally round. Thus the idea of factory groups (originally entitled "union factory groups") which would link the economic struggle in the factories to the longer term political interests of the class. So much for the insertion of a "washer" between the two aspects of the struggle.

The Oxymoron of "Class Unions" Today

Bordiga did not join the Internationalist Communist Party but wrote for its major publications after 1945. He had though not moved on from the time when he retired

from active political work and still considered the unions "non-constitutional voluntary organisations". He still shared Lenin's view that they were "transmission belts" between the class and the political party. Today some of his descendants still adhere to this idea but others like Il Partito (which split from Bordiga's original party in 1974) consider that this definition should only be for "red" or "class" trade unions. Today they, like the AWW, support the rank and file (base) unions like SiCobas which is,

able to organise dozens of offensive strikes with migrant logistics workers ... The CWO is not able to ignore the successes of SI Cobas (sic), but instead of looking deeper into the contradictions of rank-and-file unions, something which might have practical value and consequences, they chose to retreat into the political moral high ground.

We take that to mean that we have refused to suspend our critical faculties. The AWW qualify their remarks about the successes of SiCobas with the caution that the "trade union form sometimes runs into dead ends". For revolutionaries the trade union form is always a dead end but we do understand that even struggles which begin under the aegis of the unions sometimes run out of their control. That's why we are rank and file members of the unions wherever it seems that we have a chance of addressing other workers. However the first thing to note is how even these rank and file unions fragment the class. SiCobas is not the only rank and file union in Italy (there are many) and often they are splits from one another. At least Bordiga's early arguments for communist work in the

trade unions was that they represented the unity of the mass of the class whilst the party was a minority. The situation of the workers in base unions is really tragic.

For now, migrant workers (in logistics and elsewhere) have nothing else to protect them but organisations like SiCobas. SiCobas has grown because the traditional unions are not interested in organising migrants (and have even been known to send their goons against them). However, the AWW have swallowed what SiCobas organisers say about themselves. The truth is a little more complex. The SiCobas tactic is to find groups of migrant workers who are employed indirectly by so-called “cooperatives” (in reality job agencies). These cooperatives hold back the full nationally agreed wage for the job and many migrant workers don’t even know that they are being both exploited and robbed. Enter SiCobas, who find out which group is not being paid the full rate and offer to get it restored via the courts but first require the workers to take strike action to open the case. At a Peroni brewery near Rome in February CWO and PCInt members took part in the demonstration and picket in support of these workers. Talking to them for a long time they told us that the strike leader (the local SiCobas organiser) who spoke through a megaphone to the assembly was “our lawyer” and that SiCobas was their only hope. They advanced no slogans or demands of their own but repeated the standard “SiCobas, SiCobas” or “Touch one, touch all” chants as we marched down to the brewery gate. When we asked about solidarity from Italian workers, or even one of the other groups of migrants, who worked for other cooperatives, they said they understood why they were not at the picket because “they get paid the legal wage”. The good

news was that apparently the cooperative feared it would lose the Peroni contract and caved in by the middle of the next week.¹¹ The achievement here was to win what they were legally entitled to under capitalist law but from a revolutionary point of view this was a very limited action.

The hope is that it will encourage others to resist but the situation of isolation from the rest of the working class is leaving the workers more open to vicious and violent attacks by the police. There is no doubting the courage and determination of the workers who have been subject to lock-outs, beatings and arrest. Getting solidarity amongst the wider working class for the migrant workers is a key task but so far it has been met with indifference (when not outright hostility) from the “native” workforce. SiCobas may claim that it is different but it is like any other union when it comes to defending its own territory. Only last month (November 2020) they organised a demonstration outside the courthouse in Modena in support of some of their members who were on trial on trumped up police charges. Nearly 1,000 turned up including some of our comrades in the PCInt. About 100 were political activists of one sort or another and the bulk of the rest were SiCobas members. A small delegation of SolCobas (a split from SiCobas) also turned up with their banners. Instead of seeing this as an act of solidarity, adding to the weight of numbers, SiCobas members physically chased them out of the demo. Union thuggery it appears is not confined to the three big union federations in Italy.¹² Unions have always divided the class but today the competition for members is as important as the need to get better working and living conditions. Today what workers need for unity is a programme and a

political framework which escapes from the clutches not just of the traditional left wing of capitalism posing as “socialist”, but the entire reformist mentality, however radically posed.

Programme and Organisation

And this is why we welcome the AWW contribution “*The necessity of a revolutionary working class program in times of coup and civil war scenarios*” as a step forward. The strength of its analysis lies in trying to look beyond the current pandemic to envisage what the post-Covid world will look like for the working class. It deserves serious consideration and discussion. We only have space to make a few preliminary comments here.

The AWW can see that the consequences of the Covid crisis will lead to a heating up of the class struggle. Our document *Communist Work in a Covid Crisis: A Framework* which precedes this one broadly shares that perspective. More misery will be inflicted on workers by a system seeking to recover on their further exploitation. However, there is a more urgent tone to the AWW perspective as it focusses on the violence over the summer in the USA. We don’t share the optimistic presentation here. If it comes to armed conflict in the short term the working class has had it. AWW recognise this, and raise the question of Syria where a popular movement, which began only with the mass of the population on its side, put the Syrian regime in jeopardy in 2011. The moment though was lost because:

when those protests came under armed attack by the state’s thugs the protest movement was not prepared,

organisationally or politically, to control the armed fight back. The people who were ready to exploit the gun battles were gangsters, sectarian groups, foreign states and above all, the Syrian state itself.

All this is true but by presenting it just as a list the AWW aren’t analysing what weight to give to each factor. At first in Syria there was only the mass demonstrations in the street chanting “the people want the fall of the regime”. After some days a few parts of the armed forces started to side with the demonstrators (the comparison with February 1917 came to mind for a few hours) but this was a people’s movement not a class movement. It took several days (at least 5) for the Petrograd workers (led by women at first) to win over a significant section of the Petrograd garrison. And they had behind them an imperialist war which brought about widespread starvation. No such situation existed in Syria in 2011. In fact it was almost the opposite. Thus local imperialist rivals (Saudi Arabia and Qatar being first) were free to act. With money and weapons they completely turned the situation on its head by supporting not just the defectors from Assad’s army but also jihadi organisations. The chants on the streets turned to “God is Great” and the programme of imperialist intervention and a civil war irrelevant to the needs of the mass of the population was born. However, we agree with the AWW’s basic premises here that, as in other past movements the real problem was because “no revolutionary working class movement yet existed”. And only when it is embedded in the class will it have the strength to paralyse and win over sections of the old armed forces as the first step in the disintegrations of the state.

Revolutionaries though cannot voluntarily create a revolutionary working class movement. This depends on the coming together of a whole series of objective (the worsening material condition of workers everywhere) and subjective (the perception that we can no longer go on living like this) factors. However, revolutionaries don't come from Mars. We are part of the class and our very existence as revolutionaries is evidence that within the working class revolutionary ideas exist, however feebly. The issue which we all have to confront is why, until now, those ideas are limited to so few, especially in the face of a continuing capitalist crisis.

The AWW seeks to make a contribution to this in their analysis of where the class is. They basically argue that three sectors will be strategically critical. These are "tech workers" who "embody necessary productive knowledge", "mass workers" who embody "productive power" and the "marginalised working class" who "prove that they can turn desperation into collective emancipatory violence". They conclude that "the recent struggles of these three segments show their capacity and limitations". In view of our own experience and analysis this is very interesting. We have argued for some time that the professional classes in general are in process of proletarianisation. If this includes what the AWW call "tech workers" then we also agree with them that there is a danger that they "remain isolated from reality" and offer only abstract technological solutions for capitalism itself. What we have observed is that so far only a very few of this segment understand what is happening to them. The majority have the petty bourgeois mentality which seeks to try to regain the status they have lost. This is only one of

the problems of uniting the class but we can agree with the AWW that "It will be a hard political struggle" to unite the entire class around "a communist programme".¹³ This class analysis is worth deepening but we are only too happy to acknowledge that the AWW, albeit by a different route, have come to the conclusion that to unite the revolutionary class today requires a political fight. Or as they put it;

... we are at the point in time when steps towards a program and a pragmatic vision of revolutionary rupture, itself become a necessary propelling force for the movements of our class.

If we may say so this is a courageous step for the AWW and predictably brought them some hostility in the libertarian world. However, before we put on our party hats to celebrate (so to speak!) we need to be clear that we mean the same thing. We have always defended the communist programme but by that we have meant the acquisitions of the working class over the last two centuries of experience. It incorporates the lessons (more what is not to be done than what is to be done) of all the struggles, with some standout events like the Paris Commune and the Russian Revolution clarifying many of the issues around how a future society might operate. In short the historical communist programme is based on a vision of a future classless, stateless, moneyless and cooperative world, on what has happened in the past, not on making precise prescriptions for the future based only on what we can understand in the present.

In the past the various socialist parties all had programmes but they were largely

broad outlines about how they saw the working class coming to power. Towards the end of the *Communist Manifesto* Marx set out a sort of mini-programme for the working class but was forced to admit that it was made obsolete by the experience of the Paris Commune. The Bolsheviks had a programme forged after the 1905 revolution which put the “democratic revolution” before the proletarian revolution (with which they distinguished themselves by arguing that that it would come around faster than the Mensheviks said). In April-June 1917 this programme was first questioned and finally ditched for one which called for “All Power to the Soviets”. Even then it set out very few recommendations for what the proletariat might do with soviet power.

This is not the kind of programme which the AWW appear to have in mind. They say that: “*At this point we need to relate a pragmatic program to take over the means of production with the actual working class struggles.*”

The difficulty with that is that the “actual working class” struggles are few and scattered across the world. It looks a tad voluntarist at the moment to put forward any “pragmatic” programme in advance of a wider class movement. We can put forward slogans towards such a programme. The AWW favours “everyone works, everyone works less” (which has its problems) or we might propose that everyone has the right of residence wherever they live in perpetuity without rent or mortgage payments as a first step to “decommodifying” housing and abolishing money until local soviets work out an equitable solution to the housing crisis. But these and any other bright ideas will be stillborn if we have not paralysed,

neutralised or dismantled the capitalist state as a first step to guarantee real social change. In short, the precise “pragmatic” programme can be worked out only when the mass of the class are posing the question of where we go next, and we know the context of the social and economic crisis that struggle will operate in. In the meantime though that does not preclude the widest discussion of revolutionary strategy.

And this includes the creation of a political weapon of the working class. The AWW document finishes by saying we need “*organisation – a communist party, in the sense of a living strategy for the self-emancipation of the working class.*”

We are not entirely sure what the comrades mean here but we assume this will have to be global linking up the various sectors of the class who experience exploitation differently across the planet. Linking these experiences will be crucial to the formation of a real actionable programme. But for us the party (perhaps “international” is better) not only puts forward “a strategy” (revolution) but is also a body of flesh and blood workers who have to unite right across the world. We absolutely share the AWW view that this party will “*have to be rooted in the day-to-day struggles without losing sight of the program.*”

This is a long and patient work which has to be based on that revolutionary strategy we highlighted above. In the long distant 1920s, at a time of class retreat, when the Comintern was abandoning the revolutionary programme to artificially build a mass following, our ancestors wrote:

It is mistaken to think that in every situation expedients and tactical manoeuvres can widen the party base since relations between the party and

*the masses depend in large part on the objective situation.*¹⁴

Our tendency, in its various stages, has remained absolutely fixed on this principle in both the periods of expansion and retreat throughout its history. At the moment we seem to be in a situation of flux. Already, even in advance of a wider class movement, we are experiencing a growth of comrades we have not seen since the 1970s. The crisis is already blowing new life into our revolutionary sails. Not with enough power to be effective but enough to give us hope that this is in prospect. In the coming struggles ahead it will be important for revolutionaries from different legacies and places to maintain a dialogue in order to sharpen and expand our understanding of the course towards overthrowing this rotting system. This is why, whatever our disagreements, we broadly welcome the AWW article and look forward to deepening the debate.

Jock

Notes

1. <https://libcom.org/blog/necessity-revolutionary-working-class-program-times-coup-civil-war-scenarios-10102020>
2. See <https://libcom.org/library/discussion-paper-class-composition>
3. See Lars Lih *Lenin Rediscovered (2008)* and Hal Draper *The Myth of Lenin's "Concept of The Party" or What They Did to What Is To Be Done? (1990)*
4. According to Marcel Leibman *Leninism under Lenin (Merlin 1972)* p.47
5. *The Communist Party of the Soviet Union* (Methuen 1963) p.190
6. Apparently it was the US ex-Stalinist Bertram Wolfe who made the original connection between *What Is To Be Done* and the later counter-revolutionary role of the Bolsheviks during the Cold War. It has not stopped it being repeated by many anarchists, who think they have discovered

the "original sin" of the October Revolution, ever since. How the Bolsheviks who were an overwhelmingly working class party eventually under conditions of continuing isolation became the managers of the counter-revolution is an immensely more complex story.

7. We actually already addressed this a little in an article in response to the AWW here <http://www.leftcom.org/en/articles/2020-04-22/what-does-the-communist-left-do>. There is no evidence that they have read it.

8. This is the link to the first of a five part series on the new economy: <https://www.leftcom.org/en/articles/2019-07-02/capitalism-s-new-economy-the-case-of-the-uk>

9. Amadeo Bordiga *Party and Class (first published in Rassegna Comunista 2 (15 April 1921))*: <https://www.leftcom.org/en/articles/1921-04-15/party-and-class>

10. <http://www.leftcom.org/en/articles/2020-07-28/the-murders-of-fausto-atti-and-mario-acquaviva>

11. <http://www.leftcom.org/en/articles/2020-03-11/demonstration-and-strike-of-peroni-workers-at-tor-sapienza-rome>

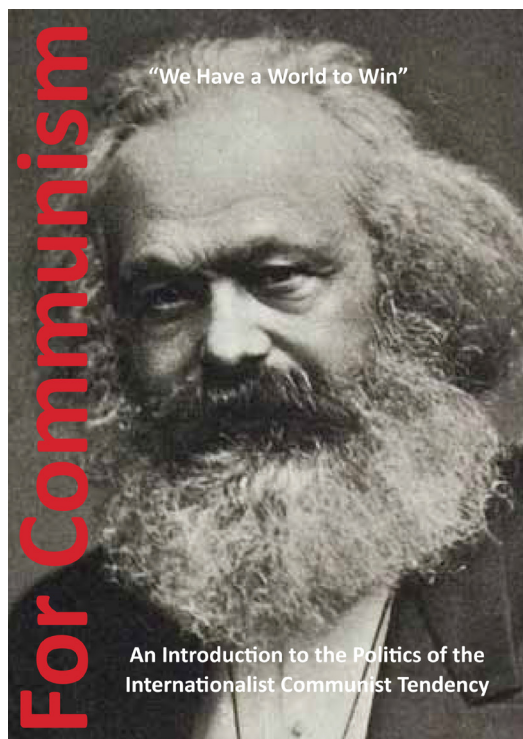
12. Since this was written the situation between the various of our radical reformist base unions in Italy has only worsened.

Amidst very serious mutual recriminations they are accusing each other of being police spies, making agreements with the bosses to exclude members to the competing "base" union, and organising strikes during strikes called by other unions to undermine the opposing base union, etc.

13. We have written many documents on class composition over the decades. The ones which follow are only a selection: <https://www.leftcom.org/en/articles/2018-05-13/new-class-composition-new-struggles> ; <https://www.leftcom.org/en/articles/2017-02-13/class-composition-in-the-crisis> ; <https://www.leftcom.org/en/articles/2003-03-01/on-class-composition-and-recomposition-in-the-globalisation-of-capital> There is also the five part series on the UK working class <https://www.leftcom.org/en/articles/2019-07-02/>

capitalism-s-new-economy-the-case-of-the-uk as well as the article on the middle class which appears in this issue.

14. <https://www.leftcom.org/en/articles/2011-11-01/platform-of-the-committee-of-intesa-1925>



For Communism

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1871-2021: Vive la Commune!

“And at dawn, armed with glowing patience, we will enter the cities of glory.”
(Rimbaud, 1873)

There are certain dates in working class history which have made a lasting and indispensable mark on the communist programme, which we understand as the acquisitions and lessons of previous struggles faced by our class. 1871 is one of those. On 18 March, 150 years ago, workers in Paris took over the city and for 72 days experimented with transforming society.

The Franco-Prussian War

The Europe of the second half of the 19th century was shaped by the spectre of the revolutions of 1848. In France, Napoleon III established his dictatorship upon the bodies of the proletariat that had risen during the June Days, pledging to restore the French Empire. In Germany, still divided into 39 states, the liberal revolutions of 1848 had failed. It would be the Prussian military junker caste led by Bismarck who would unify Germany to preserve the monarchy and their class position. The Franco-Prussian War which broke out in 1870, following Prussia's victories over Denmark and Austria, was the final act in Bismarck's policy of *realpolitik*, that he had been pursuing ever since becoming Minister President in 1862.

Napoleon III was manoeuvred into declaring war on Prussia when Bismarck published the Ems Telegram which seemed to show that the French Ambassador had been rudely rebuffed by the Prussian

King. Nationalists demonstrated in Paris chanting *À Berlin* (“to Berlin”) so that on 28 July Napoleon III led the French army towards the Rhine, while the Prussians and their allies in the lesser German states began massing on the French border. Over the next few weeks the French Army, badly organised and outmanoeuvred, suffered defeat after defeat, until on 2 September Napoleon III himself was captured at the Battle of Sedan. With Napoleon III's abdication the Second French Empire effectively collapsed. Panic broke out in Paris, and two days later a Provisional Government of National Defence was created by members of the National Assembly, including left and right republicans, who declared a Third Republic and committed themselves to the continuation of the war.

The events in Paris did not alter the ultimate course of the war. By 19 September Paris was under siege. On 31 October the Provisional Government decided to open negotiations with the Prussians, which was met with violent protest by the population. Various revolutionaries tried to take advantage of this volatile situation. In Lyon, Bakunin was at work concocting an insurrection – on 28 September he and his comrades seized the City Hall, proclaimed the state to have been abolished and announced the formation of a Revolutionary Convention for the Salvation of France. Finding little support, the revolutionaries were dispersed that same day, and Bakunin left for Marseilles,



where he tried to start another short-lived insurrection (before it broke out on 31 October, he had to flee to Switzerland). Meanwhile Blanqui, who had already been organising armed demonstrations back in January and August, launched a republican newspaper *La Patrie en danger* ("the fatherland in danger"), and on 31 October took a leading role in organising the revolutionary elements of the Parisian workers and the National Guard towards the overthrow of the Provisional Government for betraying the French cause. Blanqui and his comrades seized the City Hall (*Hôtel-de-Ville*), announced the formation of a Committee of Public Safety, only to be likewise arrested soon after. Blanqui himself went into hiding where he continued to scheme against the Provisional Government until on 17 March 1871 he was finally arrested in Bretenoux.

In Paris the Provisional Government

continued to weather the storms into the new year. On 18 January 1871, having whipped up German nationalism and having humiliated the French, Bismarck finally accomplished his aim – the unification of Germany. Meanwhile in Paris further attempts at insurrection, like the 22 January armed demonstration of Blanquists (in which Édouard Vaillant and Louise Michel, among others, participated), were staved off and resulted in more political repression. But the attempts of the Provisional Government to raise armies in the provinces were not enough to save Paris, and the siege continued (as did the peace negotiations with the Prussians). In the 8 February elections to the National Assembly in those departments not occupied by the Prussians, the monarchists gained a majority and a few days later the conservative Adolphe Thiers was appointed Chief Executive of the French Republic.

He signed the Treaty of Versailles on 26 February 1871 which ended the Franco-Prussian War.

Yet those who hoped this would be the end of the crisis were to be quickly disappointed. The victory march of (now) German troops through Paris and the order for the disarming of the National Guard was met with widespread discontent. By this point the National Guard, disillusioned with the Provisional Government, had been gathering cannons and arms in working class districts of Paris and had elected their own independent Central Committee. When Thiers sent the regular army to disarm them by force and bring back order in the city, many soldiers refused and turned their guns on their generals instead. The Provisional Government withdrew to Versailles. The life of the Paris Commune had begun.

The proletarians of Paris, amidst the failures and treasons of the ruling classes, have understood that the hour has struck for them to save the situation by taking into their own hands the direction of public affairs ... They have understood that it is their imperious duty, and their absolute right, to render themselves masters of their own destinies, by seizing upon the governmental power. (Central Committee of the National Guard, 18 March 1871)

The First International

At this point it is worth briefly outlining the political tendencies present within the working class movement of the time. Of course the prime mover here was the First International, founded in 1864, a

loose alliance of trade unionists, republicans, and various radicals, anarchists and communists among them, to which Marx provided a political lead. In fact, it was Marx's coverage of the Franco-Prussian War and the Paris Commune, delivered first as addresses to the General Council of the International and later published as the pamphlet *The Civil War in France* (1871), which served as the most prolific defence of the Commune in the eyes of the world and made Marx the "the best calumniated and the most menaced man of London." (Marx to Kugelmann, 18 June 1871)

In Germany, members of the International, Wilhelm Liebknecht and August Bebel, denounced the war in the Reichstag on behalf of German Social Democracy, abstained from voting on war loans, and expressed sympathy for the Commune. For this they were later found guilty of high treason. Mass meetings of workers took place across German towns and cities passing anti-war resolutions. In France, where the International was only a marginal force plagued as it was by constant repressions and trials, the Paris section nevertheless published a manifesto against the war and issued an appeal to German workers. After September 1870 – the collapse of the Second Empire and the creation of the Third Republic – the International in Paris was revitalised, and new committees were created in various districts of the city. That said, as Auguste Serraillier reported, there was much disorganisation and not all embraced internationalist positions (the Blanquists and Proudhonists refused to publish a translation of Marx's second address deeming it "too Prussian"). Overall however, the official policy of the International was that of peace and against the annexation

of Alsace-Lorraine by Germany. The International tried to rally workers towards that end not only in the two warring nations, but also in England and America.

In Paris, the republican legacy of 1789, 1830, 1832 and 1848 held a stronger sway over political life. It was the ideas of Proudhon and Blanqui, revolutionaries of the preceding generation, which still dominated the workers' movement. When the Commune, to which the Central Committee of the National Guard transferred power, held its first election on 26 March, members of the International received only seventeen of the ninety-two seats, while the majority went to Blanquists. Blanqui himself of course had been arrested only a few days before the Commune was established, but was elected its honorary president in absentia. All attempts by the Communards to trade hostages in exchange for the release of Blanqui were rebuffed. The Blanquists were essentially hoping for a military dictatorship which would replace the useless Provisional Government and continue the war with Prussia. The Proudhonists wanted a federation of communes where labour and capital could mutually coexist and eschewed participation in political and economic struggles. As Engels noted however, when faced with the real movement both currents were at times forced to do "the opposite of what the doctrines of their school proscribed."

Storming Heaven

[The Revolution of 18 March represents] the achievement of political power by the proletariat just as the Revolution of 1789 represented the achievement of political power by

the bourgeoisie. (Vermorel, L'ami du peuple, 24 April 1871)

... for total social revolution, for the abolition of all existing social and legal structures, for the elimination of all privileges and forms of exploitation, for the replacement of the rule of Capital by the rule of Labour ... in short, for the emancipation of the working class by the working class. (Women's Union for the Defence of Paris and for Aid to the Wounded, 8 May 1871)

So declared some of the Communards. But the Paris Commune had only limited time to put its disparate ideas into concrete action. In the 72 days of its existence, it passed a number of decrees. Although only twenty-four members of the Commune were working class, it is clear that the majority of its decrees, albeit limited, were aimed at easing the lives of the Parisian proletariat:

- 19 March: The Central Committee of the National Guard decreed elections to a new government body – the Paris Commune;

- 30 March: The Commune decreed a moratorium on payment of rents. The standing army and conscription were abolished;

- 2 April: The Commune decreed the separation of Church and State. Salaries for all members of the government and civil service were set at the level of wages of a skilled worker;

- 12 April: The Commune decreed a moratorium on payment of commercial bills;

- 16 April: The Commune decreed the confiscation of abandoned factories and

workshops and transferred their ownership to worker cooperatives;

- 25 April: The Commune decreed the requisitioning of vacant lodgings;
- 27 April: The Commune decreed that employers are forbidden from deducting penalties from wages;
- 28 April: The Commune decreed that bakery workers no longer have to work nights;
- 1 May: The Commune voted 45 to 23 to delegate its powers to a Committee of Public Safety;
- 7 May: The Commune decreed that objects held by pawnshops have to be liberated;
- 12 May: The Commune decreed that worker cooperatives will be given preference when it comes to contracts.

On the ground, countless committees, assemblies, unions, cooperatives, discussion clubs, demonstrations and mutual aid societies proliferated from district to district, animated by a working class base. At its best, the Commune interacted with these forms of self-organisation (an example: on 15 April some general meetings of workers already resolved to take over a few workplaces and run them cooperatively, on 16 April the commune passed a decree providing workers the necessary requisition orders). There were attempts to reform the education system and the arts. A number of symbolic actions were taken: on 6 April the guillotine outside the Paris prison was smashed to pieces and burned, while the Vendôme Column, a hated symbol of war, was brought down on 16 May. The internationalism of the Commune, which declared its red flag to be that of the Universal Republic, was also more than just lip service. Jarosław

Dąbrowski, a Polish military officer and participant of the January Uprising of 1863, was elected Commander-in-Chief of the Commune. Léo Fränkel, a Hungarian member of the International and contact of Marx, was elected the Minister of Labour. The Women's Union for the Defence of Paris and for Aid to the Wounded, led by Nathalie Lemel, French member of the International and militant bookbinder, and Elisabeth Dmitrieff, Russian member of the International and another contact of Marx, stressed the equality of the sexes and organised working women for the socialist cause. Prosper-Olivier Lissagaray described the scenes he observed surrounding the Commune elections on 26 March in the following way:

Those who had despaired a month before were now full of enthusiasm. Strangers addressed each other and shook hands. For indeed we were not strangers, but bound together by the same faith and the same aspirations ... The next day 200,000 'wretches' came to the Hôtel-de-Ville there to install their chosen representatives, the battalion drums beating, the banners surmounted by the Phrygian cap and with red fringe round the muskets; their ranks, swelled by soldiers of the line, artillerymen, and marines faithful to Paris, came down from all the streets to the Place de Grève like the thousand streams of a great river ... A thousandfold echo answered, "Vive la Commune!". Caps were flung up on the ends of bayonets, flags fluttered in the air. From the windows, on the roofs, thousands of hands waved handkerchiefs. The quick reports of the cannon, the bands, the drums, blended in one formidable vibration. All hearts

leaped with joy, all eyes filled with tears. Never since the great Federation had Paris been thus moved ... This lightning would have made the blind see. 187,000 voters. 200,000 men with the same watchword. This was not a secret committee, a handful of factious rioters and bandits, as had been said for ten days. Here was an immense force at the service of a definite idea – communal independence, the intellectual life of France – an invaluable force in this time of universal anaemia ... (Lissagaray, History of the Paris Commune of 1871, 1876)

This popular movement, to which the working class of Paris gave a practical lead, of which the International became the spiritual bearer, was an insult to Thiers and company. The old world regrouped while Paris rejoiced.

The “Semaine Sanglante”

When the news of the Paris Commune spread in the provinces, attempts at establishing similar communes were made all across France: in Lyon, Marseilles, Toulouse, Narbonne, Saint-Etienne, Le Creusot and Limoges. None of these survived long. Paris was soon to face an even bigger tragedy. Criticising the mistakes of our forebears is always easier with the benefit of hindsight, however some of these were already obvious to contemporary observers and participants.

The Commune could not abolish the labour-capital relationship or eliminate all oppression. It would be absurd to expect it to introduce socialism in one city. But the dominant ideas of the movement (Proudhonism and Blanquism) held it back

more than necessary. Often it took pressure from below for the Commune to actually encroach on the right to private property (hence the reluctance to take over the State Bank). Many of the new cooperatives in practice functioned just like the capitalist businesses they had to compete with (hence wages remained low and working hours long). And although working women were highly involved on the ground, they were not allowed to vote and had no direct representation on the higher bodies of the Commune (though the likes of Fränkel and Vaillant championed their cause).

But the eventual downfall of the Commune is often blamed on indecision, wasted time and lack of direction. The Central Committee of the National Guard did not consider itself authoritative enough to act, and as such went about organising the elections to the Commune. The Commune, split between a majority and a minority (over the Committee of Public Safety), debated and passed decrees. Meanwhile, Versailles was given the opportunity to rally its forces. And once it did, the Commune had no diplomatic leverage, except a bunch of hostages. Marx would later comment:

[The Paris Commune was] merely the rising of a town under exceptional conditions, the majority of the Commune was in no sense socialist, nor could it be. With a small amount of sound common sense, however, they could have reached a compromise with Versailles useful to the whole mass of the people – the only thing that could be reached at the time. The appropriation of the Bank of France alone would have been enough to dissolve all the pretensions of the Versailles people

in terror, etc., etc. (Marx to Domela Nieuwenhuis, 22 February 1881)

This sentiment was also echoed by participants of the Commune. The Commune only had a fighting chance if it struck early, while Versailles was still rattled. After that it could only hope for a negotiated compromise. By early April, Thiers had the military upper hand. His troops were reinforced when Bismarck promptly returned French prisoners of war and with recruits from the provinces. Under Napoleon III Paris had been transformed from a city of narrow streets, perfect for the setting up of barricades, to a city of wide avenues and boulevards more fitted for the movement of troops. Unlike on 18 March, the attempt to fraternise with troops proved futile. Despite the brave stand of many Communards, they could not hold out. Thiers' army was ruthless – as they conquered they executed the vanquished. Out of desperation, the Communards executed 63 hostages and set sections of Paris on fire. This was the “red terror”. The full scale of the “white terror” was yet to be unleashed:

The massacre was thus carried on, methodically organized, at the Caserne Dupleix, the Lycée Bonaparte, the Northern and Eastern Railway Stations, the Jardin des Plantes, in many mairies and barracks, at the same time as in the abattoirs. Large open vans came to fetch the corpses, and went to empty them in the square or any open space in the neighbourhood. The victims died simply, without fanfaronade. Many crossed their arms before the muskets, and themselves commanded the fire. Women and children followed their

husbands and their fathers, crying to the soldiers, ‘Shoot us with them!’ And they were shot ... The army, having neither police nor precise information, killed at random. Any passer-by calling a man by a revolutionary name caused him to be shot by soldiers eager to get the premium. (Lissagaray, History of the Paris Commune of 1871, 1876)

The massacre culminated in the *semaine sanglante* (“bloody week”) of 21-28 May. More than 20,000 Communards, and those assumed to be, were butchered on the streets of Paris by Thiers' troops. Some 40,000 were taken prisoner; of these thousands more were executed, deported, imprisoned or condemned to forced labour. The bourgeoisie showed no mercy. The workers' movement in France was crushed by brute force. It would take decades for it to recover. It was towards unified Germany that proletarian hopes would now turn, where conditions for the development of a mass workers' party opened up. This, though, would later pose its own problems.

Revolutionary Marxism and the Paris Commune

Marx himself was originally pessimistic about the prospects of an uprising in Paris. When it broke out, he of course threw his weight behind it. What made the Commune exceptional was not the limited reforms it passed, it was its character as “essentially a working class government”. It showed that workers can take their destiny into their own hands. In this it gave the international working class a banner to rally around.

One of the distinguishing features of

the Marxist method is that, rather than set up eternal principles or map out utopian schemes, we learn from and with the real movement. The awareness that social transformation towards “free association” would eventually have to involve the abolition of the state was there in the works of Marx even before the Paris Commune. Here we only need to quote *The German Ideology* (1845), where Marx recognised that proletarians “will have to abolish the very condition of their existence”, which also meant “they must overthrow the State”, or *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (1852), where Marx observed how since the French Revolution of 1798 “all revolutions perfected this [state] machine instead of breaking it”, how the contending parties simply “regarded the possession of this huge state structure as the chief spoils of the victor.” The Paris Commune was the first practical example of “breaking” that state machine – it abolished the standing army, it swept aside the bourgeois parliament. In its place it set up something qualitatively different (even if born with the birthmarks of the old society). The Paris Commune helped Marx come to the conclusion that:

the working class cannot simply lay hold of the ready-made state machinery, and wield it for its own purposes.” (Marx, The Civil War in France, 1871)

This insight was so important that the infamous ten points proposed back in the *Communist Manifesto* (1848), calling for various immediate measures towards state centralisation, were now deemed to be antiquated “in view of the practical experience gained, first in the February Revolution (1848), and then, still more, in the Paris

Commune (1871).” Engels would further comment:

Of late, the Social-Democratic philistine has once more been filled with wholesome terror at the words: Dictatorship of the Proletariat. Well and good, gentlemen, do you want to know what this dictatorship looks like? Look at the Paris Commune. That was the Dictatorship of the Proletariat. (Engels, Introduction to The Civil War in France, 1891)

This was written in the context of the revisionist debates within German Social Democracy at the time. After Marx died in 1883, the road was cleared for reformist elements to gradually strip Marxism of its revolutionary kernel. In his last months of life, even Engels himself was being censored by the party apparatus. The lessons learned in Paris were soon forgotten or obscured – on purpose. It would be up to a new generation of revolutionaries who, on the wave of new working class upheavals, would rescue Marxism from so-called Marxists.

This tendency found its expression in the Russian Revolutions of 1905 and 1917. In 1905 Russian workers discovered the councils of workers’ delegates (i.e. soviets) recallable by the workers who elected them. This was an enormous advance on bourgeois representative democracy where elected representatives serve for fixed periods while electors have no control over them. When soviets reappeared in 1917 the Bolsheviks gave the most vocal support to the idea that they should take over the running of society as an alternative power to the bourgeois Provisional Government. On 7 November the slogan “all power to the soviets” was realised in the October

Revolution. With the repressive apparatus of the old regime effectively paralysed, the Red Guards did not wait to strike against their Versailles – government offices were occupied and the Winter Palace captured. Furthermore, they occupied not only railway stations, the telephone exchange and the main bridges in the city, but also the State Bank. It was Minister President Kerensky who had to flee abroad. This course of action was no accident – revolutionary Marxists like Lenin had spent the previous years carefully preserving the red thread running from 1848 through 1871 to 1917:

“The Commune taught the European proletariat to pose concretely the tasks of the socialist revolution. The lesson learnt by the proletariat will not be forgotten. The working class will make use of it, as it has already done in Russia during the December uprising (1905).” (Lenin, Lessons of the Commune, 1908)

For the next few months the Bolsheviks actively encouraged the setting up of workers’ and soldiers’ councils all over Russia. If the Paris Commune was the first time the working class rose up to overthrow the ruling class in one city, then the Russian Revolution was the first and so far only time the working class rose up to overthrow the ruling class in a major imperialist country. This was not its intention however. The Bolsheviks were internationalists, and knew that in order to endure, the revolution had to spread to other countries. One by one however revolutions failed and were crushed in Germany, Hungary, Finland, China, etc. The Communards lost honourably, being crushed by the

counter-revolution. The Bolsheviks did not, as they found themselves administering a state capitalist monster which eventually devoured them.

Today, we keep alive the lessons of 1871 and 1917. The working class, now larger than ever, still has the potential to uproot the capitalist system and pave the way to a truly human future. Since the days of the Communards capitalism has produced all kinds of social misery and lurched from crisis to crisis. The ruling class has no solution to the current economic crisis other than to further destroy the planet or take us down the road to generalised war. The only hope for humanity lies in the working class which has to rediscover its own forms of self-organisation as demonstrated by Russian workers in 1905 and 1917 and by those of Paris in 1871.

*Dyjbias
December 2020*

Some Further Reading:

1. *The Civil War in France* (1871) by Karl Marx
2. *History of the Paris Commune of 1871* (1876) by Prosper-Olivier Lissagaray
3. *The Paris Commune of 1871* (1937) by Frank Jellinek
4. *The Paris Commune of 1871* (1972) by Eugene Schulkind
5. *The Communards of Paris, 1871* (1973) by Stewart Edwards
6. *Massacre: The Life and Death of the Paris Commune* (2014) by John Merriman
7. *Voices of the Paris Commune* (2015) by Mitchell Abidor

The Internationalist Communist Tendency

UK: The Communist Workers' Organisation produces *Revolutionary Perspectives* (a six monthly magazine) and *Aurora* (an agitational paper)

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Italy: Il Partito Comunista Internazionalista

produces *Battaglia Comunista* (a monthly paper) and *Prometeo* (a quarterly theoretical journal)

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USA: The Internationalist Workers Group

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Germany: Gruppe Internationalistischer KommunistInnen

produces *Socialismus oder Barbarei* and *Germinal*

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France: *Bilan&Perspectives*

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produces *Mutiny/Mutinerie*, a broadsheet in English and French

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Platform of The Internationalist Communist Tendency

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About the Communist Workers' Organisation

The Communist Workers' Organisation is part of the Internationalist Communist Tendency which was inspired by the Internationalist Communist Party (Battaglia Comunista). Formed during the Second World War in 1943, the PCInt. condemned both sides as imperialist. Its roots go back to the Italian Communist Left which had fought the degeneration of the Communist International and the Stalinisation imposed on all its member parties. Today there are ICT affiliates in several countries.

We are internationalists. We believe that the interests of the exploited are the same all over the world, and that communism cannot be achieved in one country, a myth peddled by Stalinism. Stalinism was never communism but a particular form of capitalism, state capitalism. After 1917 the economic blockade of the Soviet Union and the failure of the world revolution in the West meant that the revolution was transformed into its opposite, eventually becoming an imperialist bloc that would collapse after only seventy years. We are opposed to all (Trotskyists, Maoists) claims that state capitalism in whatever form is socialism.

We aim to be a political reference point for the working class, first of all for those who are tired of the unions, all unions. This does not mean giving up on the fight to defend immediate interests (wages, hours, work rates, etc.). But the

unions are now a tool to control the class struggle and manage the labour force on behalf of capital. Today, any 'self-organised struggle', has to go outside of and against the unions. However, rank and file unions are a blunt instrument for workers. Even when they win a particular battle if they settle into a permanent existence they must accept the legal and economic framework imposed by the state. Any attempt to maintain a permanent body to defend workers' immediate economic interests will fail.

The only permanent body the working class can establish today is the political organisation, which is not only possible but essential. The starting point for this must be recognising that the general interest of the class lies in getting rid of capitalism. This is only possible through a revolution, i.e. the overthrow of the existing state and establishment of a new form of political power by the proletariat. The road to revolution does not mean the futile attempt to win control of the existing state via elections to parliaments or local governments which are means for the capitalist class to exercise its rule. History has shown us that the forum of our "democracy", the bodies of power of the revolution, will be the workers' councils, (or soviets) – mass meetings in which delegates will be entrusted with specific mandates and will be recallable at any time. But these potentially revolutionary organisations will be undermined by capitalist forces from within if they do not have a clear programme aimed

at the abolition of exploitation and, therefore, the elimination of classes, for a society of "freely associated producers" who work together to directly meet human needs.

The programme is not the creation of any single theorist or one organisation. It is the outcome of the key lessons learned from past and present struggles and as such defines the practical way forward for the working class as a whole. Without a clear political compass the working class movement will be prey to all kinds of capitalist tricks and illusions. Thus political clarification and reorganisation today are vital for a revolutionary party to come

into being which is in a position to overthrow the working class to the revolutionary programme. This is not a party of government that would replace the class and its class-wide organs of power, but a party of agitation and political guidance on the basis of that programme.

We are for the party, but we are not that party or its only embryo. Our task is to participate in its construction, trying to link immediate demands to the historical programme; communism.

Join us! Support the Internationalist Communist Tendency

Free Bulletin of the Communist Workers' Organisation
Affiliate of the Internationalist Communist Tendency
No 53 Autumn 2020
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Coronavirus – Axe Falls on the Working Class

125000 workers were not allowed to fulfil their contracts in the month ending in November 2020. The number of workers who were not allowed to fulfil their contracts in the month ending in November 2020 was 125,000. This is a record for the number of workers who were not allowed to fulfil their contracts in any month since the start of the coronavirus pandemic. The number of workers who were not allowed to fulfil their contracts in the month ending in November 2020 was 125,000. This is a record for the number of workers who were not allowed to fulfil their contracts in any month since the start of the coronavirus pandemic.

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The carbon emissions reduction plans of the 2015 Paris Climate Conference have been shown to be a complete failure. The world has not reduced its carbon emissions and the world is now facing a global climate crisis. The world has not reduced its carbon emissions and the world is now facing a global climate crisis.

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