

Journal of the
Communist Workers'
Organisation

Summer/Autumn 2024

Revolutionary Perspectives 24

Internationalist Initiatives against War and Capitalism



In Memory of Olivier

**Capitalism's Economic
Foundations [Part Five]**

**The Murder of Giacomo
Matteotti 100 Years On**

**Anton Pannekoek as a
Revolutionary Marxist**

Revolutionary Perspectives

*Magazine of the Communist Workers' Organisation
Affiliate of the Internationalist Communist Tendency
Series 4, No 25, Summer-Autumn 2024*

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For correspondence write to:

CWO, BM CWO
London
WC1N 3XX
email: uk@leftcom.org

Or visit our website:
<http://www.leftcom.org>

Subscriptions to Revolutionary Perspectives (3 issues) and Aurora (at least 4 issues) are

UK £15 (€18)
Europe £20 (€24)
World £25 (€30, \$30)

How to pay:

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An “Age of Chaos” or of Deepening Capitalist Crisis?

Since we began preparing this issue, Russian missiles have struck a paediatric hospital and Israeli bombs have flattened yet another UNRWA school, this time in Nuseirat, Gaza; the news reminds us that, in this year of electoral distraction, war continues to devastate lives in at least fifty countries across the world. These don't get the prime time coverage of the Ukraine “meat-grinder” or the devastation in Gaza but they bring the same amount of misery to those in the firing line. In Sudan, for example, the war between the ruling factions, which began 15 months ago, rages on with the support of the local and not-so-local imperialist powers. No-one knows the real death toll (way over 15,000) but the cemeteries are now full. Here the particular humanitarian services targeted are health centres. According to the WHO, 60 attacks in a few months have disabled 70% of health services. Imperialist total warfare allows no “collateral damage”. They are cut-throat fights to the finish in which the annihilation of the “other” in terms of both variable and constant capital is the object of the exercise. As the Secretary General of the United Nations said last January, the world is now entering “an age of chaos” where war means “a dangerous and unpredictable free-for-all with total impunity”. He even went so far as to say that unlike during the Cold War, when “well-established mechanisms helped manage superpower relations”, those mechanisms are missing “in today's multipolar world”. His observations are incontestable but his solution, of course, was simply to suggest making the UN more effective, ignoring the fact that far

from being a body for peace it has always been just another forum for acting out inter-imperialist rivalry. To understand the current drift to a more generalised war we have to look elsewhere.

Namely, we need to go to the material basis of society and this means having an in-depth analysis of the economic situation. This means digging a little deeper than the UN Secretary-General. In the Cold War to which he refers, a “nuclear stand-off” was not the chief reason for preventing an all out world war. The fundamental point was that the two powers that emerged dominant from the Second World War were largely satisfied with the status quo. Moreover, the war had destroyed so much value that it was followed by the greatest boom in capitalist history. Both super-powers had more to lose than gain from all-out war. It was the end of that boom in the early 1970s, and the rise of working class resistance to the attempts by capitalist states everywhere to make us pay for the crisis, that gave birth to organisations like the CWO. Since our foundation almost fifty years ago, we have been attempting to understand the material basis of all the shifts and turns in capitalist development and the latest contribution to this is the fifth part of our series on capitalism's economic foundations in this issue.

This not only explains why globalisation occurred but what it has done to the world working class in the process. The old massive plants of the Fordist era in the “advanced” capitalist world have been replaced by smaller units as even the monopolies farm out services to ancillary companies. This new class composition means greater

challenges for revolutionaries. Some theories have been overtaken by events. The idea of syndicalists and council communists, that by simply taking over their production units workers can go on to destroy the capitalist state and its social order, has lost its force as we show in our review article on Anton Pannekoek. Pannekoek was right about one thing however – the key to the liberation of the working class lies in its consciousness. Capitalism won't simply be superseded by super-militancy. The overthrow of capitalism and the establishment of the foundations of a new communistic world can only come about through the conscious action of millions of workers across the world. More than ever that means we need a credible international political force to unify the class around a clear programme. Given the threats to human existence posed by capitalism's continuing destruction of the environment and the prospect of a generalised imperialist war emerging from any one of the wars going on across the planet today, this is more urgent than ever. Pannekoek lived through the disasters of the Second and Third Internationals which had both ended up betraying the working class. In the counter-revolutionary period of the 1930s with the fossilisation of a state capitalist 'Marxism' by the Stalinist regime in the USSR he came to see "the party" as a brake on the developing revolutionary consciousness of the class and put his trust more and more in "spontaneity". He was well aware that the elemental struggle of the working class had to involve the development of revolutionary ideas but did not explain how these could be retained through time. He also viewed the councils (soviets) in themselves as only arenas for the struggle between ideas, albeit often embodied by parties, but he did not see the party as a collective emanation of the

consciousness of the workers themselves before the revolution. Today we can see that an organised international political body with a clear revolutionary programme based on the acquisitions of the working class' own history of struggle are essential factors in the fight to overthrow the system. We are not talking here of a party which aspires to government (that is the task of the councils: the Russian workers' historically discovered form of how to operate a mass society whilst guaranteeing the maximum of participation of all its members). We are talking here of an International capable of taking on not only the false friends of the workers who peddle the reactionary ideologies of Stalinism and social democracy (today embraced by many Trotskyists), but new political dangers which will emerge to sidetrack and undermine the independent struggle of the working class.

It is in this framework that we are ready to cooperate in building workers' resistance to war by first of all rejecting nationalism and engaging with all those who recognise that the working class, which produces the wealth of nations everywhere, is the one global force that has the potential to halt the imperialist drive to world war. Even before the Russian invasion of Ukraine we knew that this would be no easy task. Identification with the nation has always been an easy option for the capitalists and in this sense preparations for a wider war are already well underway. Part of the preparation is ideological and this was reflected in the recent elections in the EU, the UK and France where the "choice" before electors was all about the best way to step up military preparations and stopping the immigration of the victims of war and economic crisis around the world from bringing in their "alien values". The role of identity politics was more obvious than ever in these elections. In France the rise of the

Rassemblement National gave a green light for racist attacks against French citizens with origins in North Africa or France's other former colonies. Today the party of Le Pen, which once was so anti-semitic that it dismissed the Holocaust as "a detail of history", now lines up with Israel as fellow fighters against Islamism. In the UK in seats like Batley and Dewsbury, supporters of the Palestinian national cause were elected by Muslim voters whilst thousands of white workers turned to the racist Reform Party. Such polarisation is a product of the decades old capitalist crisis which today finds almost half of UK adults, 20.3 million people, living hand to mouth on credit just to survive. In the sixth richest capitalist nation on the planet almost 3 million use food banks regularly. Throughout the richer OECD countries real wages have fallen since 2021 and this comes on top of the long decline of wages as a share of GDP since 1979. In these circumstances it is not immediately apparent to workers that their wretched quality of life is caused by some abstraction like "the capitalist system". How easy and cheap to blame migrants or Muslims or Jews or anyone else who can be made a scapegoat.

But that is not our only problem in building a class movement. There are also the divisions in the revolutionary movement that 100 years of counter-revolution have produced, as our article on Pannekoek shows. This not only produces fake or part-time internationalists like the Stalinists who will use "revolutionary defeatism" as cover for support for Russia in Ukraine but it also has left a legacy of suspicion amongst revolutionaries who see all attempts at political organisation as "rackets" (à la Camatte). Others simply do not see the seriousness of the current situation even when taking correct internationalist stances. At the Arezzo meeting every other

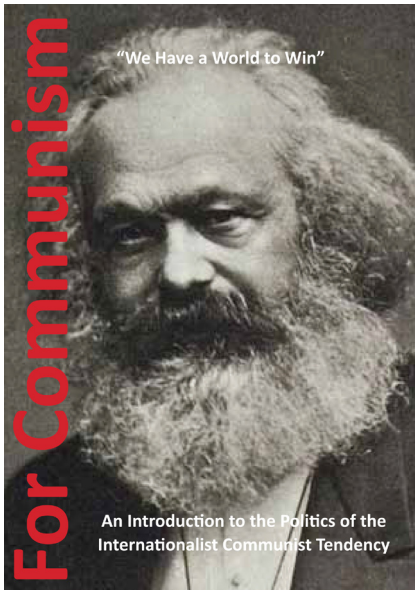
delegation argued that our concerns over generalised war were exaggerated or that "the working class is holding back war". In Prague the main difference was between those (primarily anarchists it has to be said) who argued that exemplary actions ("propaganda by the deed" in the nineteenth century) were the ways to fight militarism and those (like us) who argued that it was only the wider working class beyond the revolutionary minorities who could stop war by stopping capitalism. Our work has to be to spread propaganda about exactly where capitalism is taking us and this means building a widespread enough movement to reach the rest of the working class. It is in this spirit and with this motive that we have joined with others in the No War but the Class War committees to provide a concrete step towards a wider class resistance. It was in this spirit that we also attended the international gathering in Prague reported in this issue, as well as the smaller gathering in Arezzo.

And as a salutary warning of what playing political games instead of working in the wider class brings, we have translated an article by Onorato Damen on the murder of Giacomo Matteotti on its hundredth anniversary – a murder which led to a political crisis and the Fascist takeover of Italy. The Communist Party of Italy, with Gramsci by then installed at its head by the Comintern, neglected a seething class movement throughout the peninsula, and played parliamentary games with social democrats and liberals in the farcical so-called Aventine Secession. This allowed Mussolini to survive months of crisis and eventually declare the dictatorship in January 1925.

Finally, and sadly, this issue of *Revolutionary Perspectives* is slightly late as we only received news of the death of our comrade Olivier in the course of its

preparation. Olivier, despite suffering from prostate cancer for two years or so, and knowing he may not survive, devoted his last energies to the establishment of the Groupe Révolutionnaire Internationaliste (GRI), the French affiliate of the Internationalist

Communist Tendency. His dedication, determination and courage and dignity throughout his political life were unequalled, and our condolences go to his comrades in the GRI and his partner Françoise, and their family.



For Communism

*An introduction to the politics of the
Internationalist
Communist Tendency is now
available.*

*Only £3.00 + postage from the CWO
address.*

In Memory of Olivier

It is with great sadness that we announce the passing of our comrade Olivier, which took place on July 3rd.

Only mortal illness was able to crush the generosity, passion and tenacity of a true revolutionary militant, who for more than fifty years fought to radically change this world, the inhuman world of the bourgeoisie, a world which has long outlived its usefulness. He did so without sparing himself, ever since, at the age of twenty, he approached the positions of the international Communist Left, and participated in the foundation of the International Communist Current¹. There, due to his skills and dedication, he held roles of responsibility, until, at the beginning of the 2000s, he and other companions were thrown out – or forced to leave – with the most infamous but, of course, unfounded accusations. In reality, as always happens in these cases, the slander against Olivier and other comrades aimed at discrediting the criticisms of politically inconvenient elements who did not share, and opposed, the new political direction taken by the organisation they had helped to create.

Many comrades would have been so deeply demoralised and disappointed that they would have abandoned revolutionary militancy, but Olivier, amongst very few others, did not, and after having participated for a short time in the activity of the IFICC (Internal Fraction of the ICC), he embarked on the path which led him towards our Internationalist Communist Tendency.

For years, practically alone, he carried out with patience and determination a political work aimed at sowing the seeds of our organisation in France. He edited the

French editions of two books by Onorato Damen, one on Amadeo Bordiga, and the “*Selected Writings*”; at the same time, he resumed regular publication of the magazine “*Bilan et Perspectives*”, writing original articles and translating documents from the national sections of the ICT.

While he carried out his tenacious, more directly militant activity, making and intensifying contacts with comrades interested in our positions, he developed his work as a historian, always from the perspective of revolutionary militancy, never academia; this work materialised in the publication of texts on the Italian Fraction abroad in the 1930s; on the KAPD; on the Turkish left; in the publication in French of texts from the magazine “*Kommunist*”, the organ of the “left communists” of the Bolshevik party in 1918; and on the Russian Communist Left opposition in the 1920s. They are important works, which make a notable contribution to the knowledge of pages of history that are usually unknown or, worse, deliberately distorted by Stalinism and its political heirs.

His intense activity finally bore fruit with the formation of the Groupe Révolutionnaire Internationaliste (GRI), affiliated to the ICT, whose official foundation was in Paris in September 2023, during a meeting against imperialist war. At that meeting he astonished all of us who knew how many months of cancer treatment he had already survived, speaking for more than 45 minutes on the threat of war and our response, as well as dealing calmly with insulting attacks from the floor of the meeting. It was a final demonstration of his courage and integrity. Without taking

anything away from the other comrades, it can be said that Olivier made a decisive contribution to the presence of the ICT in France, and he did so knowing that perhaps he would not survive, so that in France there would be something, a revolutionary point of reference, to build from.

Olivier knew how to pass on to his comrades his passion for communism, which combined a deep knowledge of the history of left-wing fractions with a keen eye for world developments. His interest led him to take international relations into account, which he summarized and explained clearly. The worsening of imperialist tensions represented for him a source of grave danger, and confirmed his conviction that the threat of war had to be opposed by a revolutionary perspective. This has motivated his latest political interventions, and the search for forms of intervention through which this resolutely internationalist perspective might find its way.

He vigorously defended the lessons of historical experience, in which he saw inescapable class positions, and was equally attentive to the changing conditions of social struggles. The eruption of movements with sometimes unexpected forms was a constant source of interest for him, as were the material transformations of capitalism he had witnessed with the erosion of large working-class concentrations in a country like France. He had drawn from his own experience a distrust of the sclerotic,

sectarian practices of organizations that devitalize them while exhausting their militants.

His revolutionary spirit was less attached to the outward forms of the Communist movement, which he believed to be permanently polluted by Stalinism and its reactions, than to its living substance. “We’re not yes-men”, “we don’t have a mom or dad”, he liked to joke in his strong, warm and slightly provocative voice. By this he meant that all Communists must be capable of examining situations and using their own thinking to intervene in their development, rather than acting out of conformism or the recitation of a few agreed-upon formulas.

He also wanted us to question the answers he himself gave, to show that we were capable of playing a role in class movements. He challenged simplistic formulas and the excesses that justify them, pointing to the need to make a positive contribution to the resistance of the exploited. For him, it was important for communists to rise to the occasion, i.e. to be capable of making real progress in class struggles and consciousness.

With Olivier, a comrade who we are sorry to have lost, it would not be an exaggeration to point to him, as an example to those who remain.

With his passing, a real communist, one of us, has gone.

Au revoir, Olivier.

Notes

1. For more detailed information on this and other aspects of Olivier’s life, we refer readers to the obituary by comrade Juan of the IGCL,

who had shared the same political path and a common feeling of friendship with him for years.

Internationalist Initiatives against War and Capitalism

The world capitalist system has been in crisis for decades. The end of the post-war boom has led to all kinds of expedients in the richest capitalist countries as we have highlighted in our series on the economic foundations (the latest contribution to which can be found in this issue). Restructuring of capital - which produced the decimation of the industrial working class in the 'advanced' states of the West and the collapse of the old Soviet bloc (which was not "actually existing socialism" as Stalin called it) - and globalisation have led to a resurgent China, which is now much more than an exporter of cheap consumer goods. We have arrived at a situation of general sharpening of imperialist competition. National debts have never been so large outside of wartime. Capitalism is running out of tactics to prolong its existence. The war in Ukraine is grinding on; the massacres in Palestine are grinding on; wars continue in Sudan, Mali, Yemen, Congo and many other parts of the world. Meanwhile, the pillage of the natural world in the search for profit and securing of imperialist supply chains is creating increasingly bizarre weather events, as well as disasters like wildfires, floods and landslides that destroy thousands of lives. Possibly the 'end of history', but certainly not a world of peace and prosperity. While the likes of Elon Musk or Jeff Bezos claim wealth greater than some countries, the world working class, the people whose labour power is the source of all capitalism's wealth, is getting a smaller and smaller slice of the pie. We could elaborate on the dire state of health services in the richest countries in

the world, the ubiquity of food banks, people living in tents on the streets, derelict town centres adjacent to playgrounds for the rich ... the gap between capitalism's rich and capitalism's wage slaves is a yawning chasm. No reforms can fundamentally change this.

What, in this situation, can we do?

Our perspective is that world capitalism is so mired in crisis that the only way out for it is through war: a war to devalue capital just as with the First and Second World Wars. The war between Russia and Ukraine is the signal that capital has entered this new and dangerous preliminary period, a period of more than sabre rattling and serious realignment of the forces in play. This is the situation across the world. It is only going to worsen, and at the moment there is little sign of the working class fighting back. We are not in a position to alter the world situation, and we cannot have much impact on the consciousness of the working class as a whole, but we can have an effect on what communist militants 'do'.

We are absolutely convinced that world capitalism is shepherding humanity to disaster. War and environmental destruction, the consequences of capitalist society, are heaping misery after misery on our class. However, the working class as a whole has been slow to respond.

In this situation, revolutionaries need to find ways of working together, even outside of periods of widespread class militancy, and especially now. A fundamental lesson of the history of our class is that revolutionaries who wait for events to propel them act too

late. Luxemburg's failure to break with the SPD and form a clearly revolutionary group in opposition to it, the revolutionary left in Britain's failure to clearly break with the class-collaboration of the BSP and cohere around a revolutionary alternative, even the example of the Zimmerwald Left who came together from 1915, well after the war had started, are not examples to be emulated. We do not know how long we have, but we know it is better for revolutionaries to be working together before generalised war breaks out, rather than begin the process afterwards. In other words, given the severity of the world situation, we maintain it is imperative that revolutionaries try to work together. It is in this spirit that we welcome the initiatives taken against the future capitalism is preparing for us all.

From our perspective therefore, given the gravity of the global situation, we are ready to listen to all proposals of consistent internationalists who don't erect artificial barriers against the participation of all. We are not talking today about wholesale political regroupment. We have to concentrate on the issues of the day, not on debating our differences about how the counter-revolution ended our ancestors' hopes the last time around. Of course it would be easier if there were a grassroots movement already stemming from the class, opposing all the horror capitalism is heaping on us, but for now, without such a movement, we think those who accept this perspective have to talk to each other, and not just take part in stunts, to actually seriously discuss perspectives and the possibility of working together - even if all we can do at the moment is propagandise towards the working class and hope that some of what we are saying finds an audience. This is why the ICT sent delegations (composed of CWO comrades) to the 'Prague Week

of Action Against War' in May and to the conference of internationalists in Arezzo, in June (comrades of the Internationalist Communist Party (*Battaglia Comunista*) and the Groupe Revolutionnaire Internationaliste attended).

We will have more to say on the Arezzo conference later; it has just finished as *Revolutionary Perspectives* is going to press. We will concentrate more on the week of action and the conference that were organised in Prague.

From an organisational point of view, it was a disaster. Participants may disagree about who's to blame but the fact is some events didn't take place at all, others were poorly attended, people were promised accommodation and weren't provided any, and ultimately on Friday the congress venue pulled out. In the absence of any communication from the organisers, around 50 participants met up and self-organised their own congress. The discussions carried on for many hours, and though eventually the original organisers found some other venue, the self-organised congress had already made plans for the next day. So on Saturday two separate events took place: the official congress and the self-organised congress (though some participants visited both throughout the day).

From a political point of view, the real divide that emerged was between the activists who were looking for immediate solutions on how to stop the war, and those with a class struggle orientation who had a more long term perspective and understood wars, as a product of the capitalist system, can only be ended by the mass struggle of workers.

However, it wasn't all a waste of time. Over the week, many good conversations were had (particularly in smaller groups, in pubs, cafes, etc.). Experiences were shared

and links were made between organisations and individuals from many different countries. Above all, seeing internationalists of various tendencies join forces to basically improvise their own congress was heartening. We all tried to make the best of a bad situation and it drew us closer together. In that sense, we are glad we went.

More discussion will be needed with any and all of these groups before we can even approach the question of joint work. We do not know where any of the conversations will lead — perhaps in some cases they will lead nowhere. But we think these discussions are vital. The geo-political situation is sharpening and capitalism's warmongers are changing the game. National flags are flying everywhere. Too much is at stake not to attempt talking to others who share some of our perspectives but not all. We do not know how long we have before capitalism embarks irrevocably into world war but, however long that is, the discussions between internationalists need to begin in earnest.

We are publishing two texts from this process: the first is the appeal we made before the 'week of action' to the internationalists attending it. The second, as a result of attending, represents the answers to some questions about our position on 'revolutionary defeatism' put to us by the *Péntek esti kisértetjárás* collective in Hungary.

Capitalism is leading us into ever-greater catastrophe, and only the mass action of the working class will be able to rescue humanity — not simply through pleas for 'peace', but ultimately by the great mass of the working class creating their own political bodies: organs within which the political offspring of the pre-war political scene will best be organised in a clear-speaking political party (or 'body' if we want to be mealy-mouthed), with a clear programme to put forward to the working class. The ICT is not that party, though we hope to be one of the components that will make it up. We urge all those who see the catastrophe that is approaching, and agree that the working class is the only force that can prevent it, to open up a dialogue with us, in an attempt to bring that revolutionary perspective to the working class. We cannot afford to think there will be time later. We cannot afford to let opportunities for dialogue now slip away. We think complacency in the face of what capitalism is unleashing on the world is a huge mistake. We think underestimation of the ferocity of the attacks that are coming will be a recipe for disaster. We urge all revolutionaries to seriously consider the dynamics of the current situation and where we are headed, and begin the task now of creating the political organisation that the working class will need in the future.

To the Internationalists Attending the Prague Week of Action

Capitalism is past its sell by date and is dragging the planet and humanity towards an existential crisis. The system has been lurching from one expedient to the next to avert the consequences of the crisis that emerged with the end of the

post-war boom in the early 1970s. But each expedient, whether it be de-localisation of production to low wage areas, the concomitant globalisation of trade that followed, or the increasing financialisation of economic activity which has widened the

gulf between rich and poor across the planet, has only added to the contradictions of the system. The fictitious capital of the financial institutions led to massive speculation which mortgaged the future. Predictably this ended in tears in 2007-8 and the system has only survived through the state converting private bankruptcy into sovereign debt to save those “too big to fail”. Now such debt is so large that the mere repayment of interest paralyses the same governments from real investment. Instead they have continually cut the social services they created to buy off workers in the post-war boom thus adding to the misery of the lowest paid. Meanwhile those “too big to fail” continue to make their billions which they use to ensure that state policies favour their interests. This is why there never will be a capitalist plan to really deal with the looming existential crisis posed by climate change. After almost 30 years of feeble schemes agreed in climate conferences the planet is continuing to warm at a rate even faster than originally predicted. Capitalism unchecked means the end of all planetary life within decades rather than the three and a half billion years astronomers predict before the sun expands so much we all become toast. And in the very short term it means misery for millions from environmental disasters which are themselves the cause of wars around the world.

Global capitalism has now gone through almost six decades of declining growth rates and the consequence is the rise of imperialist tensions to a level not seen since 1939. And history never stands still. With the start of the Ukraine War it took a new turn towards generalised war. It did not come out of the blue. For years the USA has been playing up the danger of the rise of China (which originally came about due to US investment in its “Special Economic Zones” which

brought cheap Chinese goods to mitigate lower wages in the USA) whilst its hubris after the collapse of the USSR has not created a “new world order” but advanced its alliance system to encircle the Russian rump of the old USSR. By its sanctions regime (itself an act of war) it has created an alliance of convenience in Eurasia between Russia, China and Iran who are not only putting their differences aside but are helping each other avoid the effects of US sanctions (which it can also bully its allies to impose). With Sweden and Finland joining NATO there is no sign of a pause in US policy. And with the same coming from the Kremlin there is also no prospect of any armistice any time soon. Like the two previous world wars, the next will demand the “unconditional surrender” of one of the contending parties first. Total war is the fruit of the imperialist stage of capitalism and the populations of Ukraine and Gaza are already feeling the consequences.

We have long argued that the one force that can allow humanity to avoid the black hole into which capitalist rivalries will drive us is the world working class. As the universally exploited class we share with our class sisters and brothers everywhere a common condition. We have no property to defend and we are only linked to the present system by “radical chains”. In other words, we are the concrete expression of the whole of humanity. Our class interests embody the interests of humankind as a whole. But currently we are not in a great shape to organise the fight back.

Impending imperialist war comes at a time when the working class has been in retreat in the face of four decades of capitalist attacks on living standards. On top of that we have been faced with a battery of ideological weapons from identity politics to the biggest identity con of all – nationalism.

This is the banner under which workers will be recruited to be cannon fodder to slaughter each other to defend the “nation”, or rather, the property of those who actually own the nation’s wealth – our exploiters. After such a long period of retreat workers have to reacquire the confidence to struggle, not only against wage cuts, unemployment and austerity but now against the greater danger which capitalism poses to us all. It cannot be under-estimated that building class unity is the most important task facing revolutionaries.

We thus welcome the Prague Week of Action and all other serious attempts to bring genuine internationalists together to fight the growing drive of the world capitalist system towards barbarism. These conferences and initiatives could be a first step, provided that we all recognise the extreme danger of the situation and as a consequence concentrate on what unites us rather than what has divided us. In this respect the call of the Prague Action Week is not different in essence from the five basic points which those of us in the No War but the Class War (NWBCW) initiative adhere to. These are:

- Against capitalism, imperialism and all nationalisms. No support for any national capitals, “lesser evils”, or states in formation.
- For a society where states, wage-labour, private property, money and production for profit are replaced by a world of freely associated producers.
- Against the economic and political attacks that the current war, and the ones to come, will unleash on the working class.
- For the self-organised struggle of the working class, for the formation of independent strike committees, mass

assemblies and workers’ councils.

- Against oppression and exploitation, for the unity of the working class and the coming together of genuine internationalists.

None of the eight points in the description of who the Prague call is aimed at contradicts the basic aims of NWBCW. Indeed we could quite happily expand those five points to encapsulate the Prague eight (see below) as they both define the framework of genuine working class internationalism. NWBCW already includes comrades from the anarchist and anarcho-syndicalist tradition plus different groups of the communist left as well as individuals who belong to no specific organisation. It is present in several countries from South Korea and the US to the UK and Europe. It has no central body and each local committee decides on the basis of its local situation how best to carry out the five basic points which were originally adopted by the first committee to be formed (in Liverpool in the UK). It is still in its infancy and, like all the other initiatives, its weakness is that it is composed solely of those who are already politically committed in their opposition to capitalism and the state. Unless we can reach the wider working class — which is only now beginning to stir from the onslaught of the last forty years — then we will achieve nothing. This can only be done if we reach some “critical mass” which enables us to organise to combat both imperialist propaganda and the fake schemes of the “part-time internationalists” who always support some existing state or want to create another.

Some organisations who are in NWBCW, like members of the AnarCom Network (ACN) and the Anarchist Communist Group (ACG), have been specifically invited

to Prague. Others have not, including the Internationalist Communist Tendency (ICT), yet we shall be present alongside the other comrades as we accept all eight points of the invitation. It is in this spirit that we attend the Prague Week of Action which we

hope will be a success and open out to other internationalist initiatives in an attempt to draw us all closer together.

Internationalist Communist Tendency
April 2024

Prague Week of Action (20-26 May 2024)

This call is addressed to:

- To anyone in the world who is struggling against the attacks of capital, against all wars and against all bourgeois states with the aim of destroying capital and all social relations resulting from it, as well as all forms of exploitation.
- To all those who are aware that there is no such thing as a just war or a defensive war. There is no camp that represents barbarism while the other represents civilization, there is no camp that is more aggressive than the other, and there is no democratic camp against a dictatorial or fascist camp. All wars are capitalist wars, where different bourgeois factions are pitted against each other. Every war is a war of the bourgeoisie against the proletariat!
- To those who do not support either faction of the bourgeoisie against the other, but fight against each of them. Those who do not defend or participate in inter-class fronts.
- To those individuals, and groups, who fight against the policy of “defense of the national economy”, and “sacrifice in favor of the war economy”, to those who do not accept the expansionist tactics of their own bourgeoisie, even if it faces an economic, political or military attack.
- To all those who do not consider themselves pacifists but revolutionaries. To all those who do not aspire to a bourgeois peace where the exploitation of our labor force can continue in slightly different conditions.
- To all those who want to turn the inter-bourgeois war into a revolutionary war, the war between states into a struggle for the destruction of all states.
- To all those who recognize in their practice that the proletariat has no fatherland to defend. Our enemy is not the proletarians driven into the trenches on the other side of the front, but the bourgeoisie – in practice, above all, the bourgeoisie “in our own country”, “our own” bourgeoisie, the one that directly organizes our exploitation.
- And finally, to those who, according to their strength and situation, fight against the bourgeoisie by promoting the development of the proletariat as a revolutionary class and contributing to the building and development of proletarian internationalism.

Wednesday 1st May 2024

Revolutionary Defeatism Today: Some Questions Answered

In preparation for a public debate they are organising, the *Péntek esti kísértetjárás* collective in Hungary has sent us a set of question about revolutionary defeatism. We share our answers here, as they are a concise elaboration of our perspectives for today.

1. According to you, what is the relevance of revolutionary defeatism today?

The war in Ukraine, and now the war in Gaza, has brought the question of how revolutionaries respond to war to the foreground. To us, the answer is clear: proletarian internationalism, revolutionary defeatism, no war but the class war!

We live in the epoch of imperialism. Capitalism is now a global system and wars are a means for the re-division of the world and its resources among the great powers. In times of economic crisis, as competition between capitalist states intensifies, military solutions become the preferred approach. The destruction of capital that wars bring also has the potential to restore profitability to the system. 50 years after the end of the economic boom that followed the Second World War, the ruling class is running out of options and capitalism needs a new lifeline. It is in this context that we are seeing the formation of alliances of convenience, behind which plays out the clash between the USA and China for world supremacy.

No national project can escape this framework. “The small nations, the ruling classes of which are the accomplices of their partners in the big states, constitute only the pawns on the imperialist chessboard of the great powers, and are used by them, just

like their own working masses, in wartime, as instruments, to be sacrificed to capitalist interests after the war.” (R. Luxemburg) As such, any talk of national liberation, of the right of nations to self-determination, is now a historical oxymoron. Revolutionary defeatism, by which we mean opposing imperialist war with class war, is as relevant today as it was a century ago.

2. How can we apply it in the countries of capitalist war and peace?

Internationalist activity – agitation, propaganda, intervention in the class struggle, etc. – is, for obvious reasons, much more difficult in times of war than in times of peace. This is why internationalists need to get organised in the here and now and not wait until it is too late.

There are different constraints in terms of what is possible in times of war and in times of peace, but the need for an internationalist organisation to exist as a revolutionary reference point to the wider working class is a constant. The history of our political tendency provides some examples. In the darkest period of the Second World War, in exile and in prisons, our political ancestors remained in touch, and when the time was right, they were able to form the Internationalist Communist Party (PCInt) and intervene in the mass strikes that broke out in Italy in 1943. It was the only organisation formed in the war to oppose both imperialist blocs and certainly among the few that did not betray working class interests.

3. How can it get out from the “bubble” of the milieu of the movement groups? How can it be a common practice of the proletariat today?

We can't wave a magic wand and suddenly attract the masses, especially after almost a century of Stalinist counter-revolution and four decades of class retreat in the face of capitalist restructuring. In the recent strikes against austerity around the world there are signs that the worm is beginning to turn. However, revolutionary workers scattered around the world in tiny organisations who oppose the social democratic lies of the left wing of capitalism (from Stalinists, Maoists and Trotskyists) still have a mountain to climb. Our message may largely fall on deaf ears now, just as the anti-war message of the Zimmerwald Left did in 1915 but the direct and indirect consequences of imperialist war and capitalist crisis will over time make it relevant to wider and wider layers of workers.

In the meantime we need to draw together all genuine proletarian forces who understand the lesson that only the working class by its own efforts can save humanity from devastation whether via imperialist war or climate change (whatever other differences they have historically had). The situation is too critical for useless polemics. We need to organise together to be ready to present to the future class movement a coherent response to both declining living standards and the threat to life on Earth itself. This is why the ICT has launched the No War but the Class War (NWBCW) initiative, which seeks to encourage the formation of local committees of internationalists from different political tendencies. The hope is to set a precedent now for how we can relate positively both to each other and to the working class at large. We have suggested

the following five principles as a starting point for joint activity:

- Against capitalism, imperialism and all nationalisms. No support for any national capitals, “lesser evils”, or states in formation.
- For a society where states, wage-labour, private property, money and production for profit are replaced by a world of freely associated producers.
- Against the economic and political attacks that the current war, and the ones to come, will unleash on the working class.
- For the self-organised struggle of the working class, for the formation of independent strike committees, mass assemblies and workers' councils.
- Against oppression and exploitation, for the unity of the working class and the coming together of genuine internationalists.

These committees, where they already exist, have attempted to bring the internationalist message to protests and picket lines, wherever the working class takes up the struggle. We don't expect immediate success, the road ahead is long and there will be many setbacks. But the message has already reached those beyond the narrow confines of our own political tendency, and that's a start.

4. Shall we deliver the message to the proletariat as something “coming from the outside”? Or shall we instead map and investigate ourselves as part of the proletariat, this way creating mutual relationships and organizing ourselves?

Revolutionaries don't come from Mars. Most of us emerge from the ranks

of the working class, and it is our lived experience which initially starts us off on our search for an alternative to capitalism. But, of course, “the ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas” (K. Marx). As such, in our workplaces and communities at first we inevitably find ourselves in a minority. This makes it all the more important that those of us who have rejected capitalist ideology don’t withdraw into isolation. We have to come together in a political organisation, in which we can critically reflect on class struggles of the past and present, and then work towards making revolutionary perspectives more known among wider layers of our class. And that means intervening in all its struggles, trying to link immediate demands to the historical programme of communism. In this sense, communists are the revolutionary element within the class, not “outside” it.

On a historical note, the articulation of communist ideas required the ability to read and write. As such, in capitalism’s early days, when working class literacy was very low, that task often (but not always) fell down to

individuals coming over from other social layers, who embraced the workers’ cause as their own. Today, in much of the world, this is less of a barrier.

5. Can we speak about revolutionary defeatism without communism?

No. We have to be clear that, as long as capitalism exists, wars will continue. Only working class revolution, which completely transforms the international social and economic order, will be able to bring about a world without war. Revolutionary defeatism implies the fight for communism, and it is opposition to imperialist war today – bringing the revolutionary perspective to the wider working class, exposing the links between the drive to war and the economic and political attacks on workers, encouraging the self-organisation of the class struggle, etc. – that helps to create the conditions for the eventual overthrow of the capitalist system.

Internationalist Communist Tendency
10 June 2024

Capitalism's Economic Foundations Part V

Globalisation and its Discontents

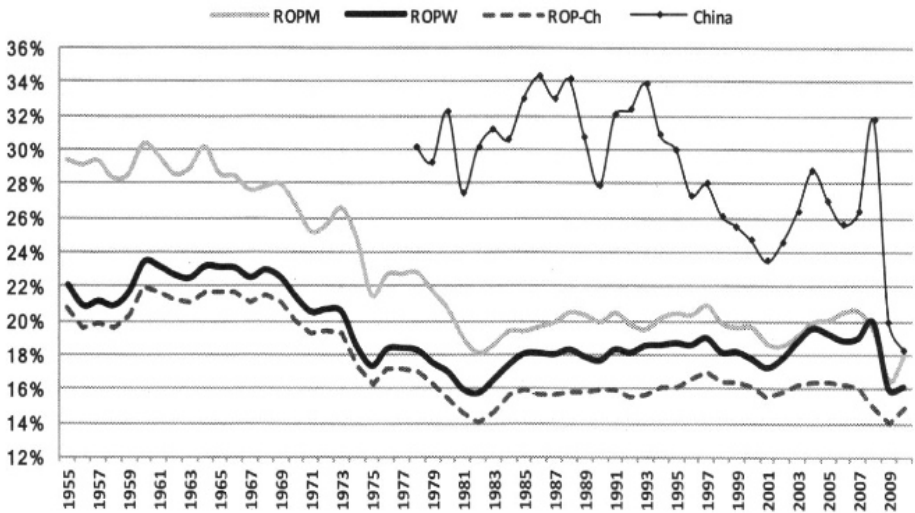
Before continuing with this section which brings us closer to our contemporary world, it is worth summarising the key elements in this necessarily truncated analysis of almost fifty years of capitalism's profitability crisis. Indeed, it is worth explaining first of all, why we hold to the term 'crisis' to describe a period of almost five decades. The simple response is that, despite the undeniable fact that capitalism survived the first great economic crisis that put an end to the post-war boom and has gone on to further entrench itself in what were once peripheral areas of the world economy, the problem of diminishing returns on capital invested in the production of new value remains, and indeed is worse today. With the notable exception of Paul Mattick, in the 1970s and '80s, the majority of academic Marxists wittingly or otherwise, based themselves on Rosa Luxemburg's saturated markets theory to equate the crisis of capitalism with capitalist 'imperialism' defined simply as the decline of pre-capitalist markets. In recent decades, a number of more or less academic scholars have returned to Marx and the labour theory of value and provided us with ample evidence to confirm the tendency for the rate of profit to fall, both in monetary and (approximate) value terms.¹

Their calculations generally confirm the tendency for the rate of profit to fall, in both the richest 'core' countries and peripheral economies and this is reflected in Esteban Ezequiel Maito's graph illustrating the fall in the global rate of profit below.² Though the calculations appear precise enough, it is worth noting they are based on data from only fourteen countries. More worryingly,

"given the difficulty of calculating the constant and variable circulating capital" (p.137), instead of using Marx's formula of $s/c + v$, Maito's calculations are based on "the rate of return on fixed constant capital" (s/c) which he argues *"tends to converge with the Marxian rate of profit in the long run"*. In terms of the graph here, he points out that the weighted rate of profit in bold reflects the *"return on total social capital"* and is thus closer to Marx's rate. Clearly we are dealing with approximations. In any case Maito's calculations in the graphic below are roughly borne out by others. More fundamentally, however, it is worth noting that Andrew Kliman's equivalent graph for the US rate of profit, based on calculations which **do** take account of wages, describes a much lower rate of profit.³ For our purpose we can simply note that they all confirm the same post-war trend of a general **decline** in the post-war profit rate which, despite subsequent dips and recoveries, has never regained its post-war highs.

Maito, à la Henryk Grossman, has even calculated how long it will take before the fall in the rate of profit becomes a fall in actual profits and eventually no profit at all and thus the collapse of capitalism, *"which now seems to remain fixed to the middle of this century"*.⁴ To give him his due, he does acknowledge that the *"move towards the 'end point' should be understood ... as a particular historical period that poses significant challenges for the working class."* It is one thing to acknowledge the inherent transience of capitalism, it is another to translate this into historical and political context and, above all, recognise the significance of the capitalist mode of production continuing to

World rate of profit 1955-2010



World rate of profit as simple mean [ROPM], weighted [RPOW] including and excluding China [RPO-Ch] and rate of profit in China [%]. Source: Maito's chapter, 'The Tendency of the Rate of Profit to Fall Since the Nineteenth Century and a World Rate of Profit', in Carchedi and Roberts *op.cit.*

dominate the whole globe. As we explained in part two of this series, competition is no longer a purely economic battle between firms but imperialist rivalry between 'great powers'; where, in short, the massive devaluation of capital required to assuage the crisis of low profitability and achieve a new round of accumulation is achieved by the destruction of capital values via war. Capitalism itself developed within feudal society but — potential world war, global warming and wider environmental damage notwithstanding — contemporary capitalism is not nurturing an alternative mode of production within its crumbling frame even if its existence depends on the continued appropriation of new value created by the "collective producer class" whose labour is the basis of all capitalism's wealth. The decline of capitalism does not

mechanically lead to communism. It is a reformist illusion to anticipate a natural 'winding down' of the capitalist mode of production while the working class gradually builds up 'oases' of socialism in the old society. In fact the opposite is the case. Capitalism still has to be challenged politically and the majority of the working class will need to become involved in creating the organs of working class democracy, ranging from the local to global, that will accompany the revolutionary overthrow of the capitalist state by the proletariat and the immediate turn towards production to directly meet human needs.

The last fifty years of unresolved economic crisis have shown that 'revolutionary action' is not a natural outcome of capitalist decadence. While there have been significant class battles, especially

during the first two decades, the period has been defined above all by extensive write-offs and restructuring of capital at the expense of the working class. The collapse of the Russian bloc was not simply a political triumph for 'free market capitalism'. It entailed a massive devaluation of capital (unprecedented outside of war) as whole sectors of industry were shut down leaving the working class facing unemployment, without the means to live and embroiled in a disastrous struggle to survive. In the Western bloc too unemployment shot up in the mid-Seventies and Eighties following wholesale write-offs of unprofitable enterprises and abandonment of once key national security industries associated with the *Industrial North* in the UK and the *Rust Belt* in the USA. (The region stretching from New York through the Midwest dominated by manufacturing, coal and steel production.)

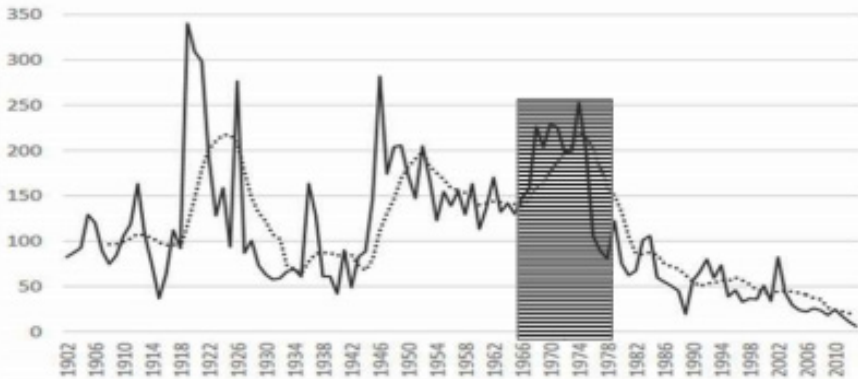
The effects of the capitalist crisis and restructuring did meet resistance from workers. The number of strikes during the 1970s mounted to a post-war high. But

if it is true that the intensity of the class struggle inspired a revival of revolutionary political groups, their influence on the wider class struggle was minimal while redundancy payments and state support for the unemployed in the main secured 'social peace'.

Thus the working class was decimated and the ground prepared for a revival of accumulation, albeit at a lower rate of profit, and in the changed context of fewer barriers to global trade, where China, with its vastly cheaper labour force, attracted investment from the West (indeed, no less than a third of all global foreign investment) and took on the role of workshop of the world, particularly in consumer goods. At the same time the productivity rate of what remained of the manufacturing/industrial workforce in the old capitalist 'heartlands' increased with the introduction of new technology, primarily based on the microchip.

But while the volume of manufactured goods has increased the portion of the world's workers engaged in manufacturing has declined.

Strike index for sixteen Western countries, averaged over 7 years, 1902-2012



Source: <https://iassc2018.sinteseeventos.com>

According to McKinsey⁵, between 1996 and 2006 there was a 24% decline in the number of global manufacturing workers while they contributed 20% of the new 'value added' to a world economy where manufacturing accounted for approximately 16 percent of global GDP and 14 percent of employment. Since then (up until 2021), according to the UN, employment in manufacturing has remained around 14%.⁶

The World Bank's calculations, based on the overall global workforce in 2021, i.e. including those unemployed and not just the number of people in paid employment, is even lower. Out of a global workforce of 3.5bn it reckons manufacturing jobs as % of world employment = just over 11% (11.025%).⁷ The ILO's figures are higher "*the share of employment in the industry sector has remained stable throughout this period, at 22%*".⁸ The mismatch between the two employment figures is probably due to the fact that the ILO includes mining, forestry and so on in the 'manufacturing' category.

In any case, the picture is clear: the portion of the global workforce who produce new value has declined. Incidentally the share of employment in agriculture has also decreased, from 44% to 27%. Meanwhile, again according to the ILO for the same period, "*the share of service jobs in all global employment has increased ... from 34% in 1991 to 51% in 2019*". While not all service work is devoid of producing a certain level of surplus value,⁹ the vast bulk does not, including the world's burgeoning financial sphere. The fact is that capitalist accumulation depends for the most part on the surplus value extorted from workers involved in the production of manufactured goods, including the extraction of raw materials.

By contrast the 'financial services sector' produces no new value and although

banks, brokers and investment advisers no doubt still serve a useful function in the garnering of surplus value for investment in a new round of accumulation, this 'service' comes at the price of a financial rake-off (interest) from expected profits. In short, the vast panoply of 'financial services' from banking, investing (including stock broking and derivative trading), real estate, insurance, accounting, to 'debt resolution' and credit payment 'providers' (the likes of Visa or PayPal): they are all a drain on the new value produced in any given round of the capital accumulation process. Of course, this is not how the representatives of the financial services industry describe their role. Let's allow one of them to present their case.

The financial services industry is worth \$20.49 trillion worldwide. This was true as of 2020, and it was estimated that the industry would reach \$22.52 trillion in value in 2021.

If these numbers sound massive, they are because this sector makes up approximately 20-25% of the global economy as a whole. It's hard to nail down an exact percentage, but most experts agree that financial services account for about one-fifth to one-quarter of the world's economy.

The industry is only expected to continue growing at a CAGR [compound annual growth rate, CWO] of 6% from 2020 to 2025, reaching \$28.53 trillion in value at the end of that time period. ...

Western Europe accounts for the largest share of the global financial services market at 40%.

North America comes in second place, making up 27% of the world's financial services market.

The market capitalization of the

global banking sector is €7.5 trillion as of Q3 2021.

Meanwhile, despite the interruption of the Covid lockdowns,

“The number of Americans employed by the U.S. financial industry grew from 6.09 million in 2016 to 6.55 million in 2022.”¹⁰

What’s not to like about this miraculous ability of financial services to conjure up more money from money (M-M¹) simply by buying and selling “*promissory notes which were issued for a capital originally borrowed but long since spent ... paper duplicates of annihilated capital*”¹¹ ad infinitum, without the need for any effort from the owners of the certificates (whether actual or virtual, they are all a fiction).

With the blossoming of an inter-continental ‘financial services’ sector since the early days of capitalism’s crisis in the 1970s the frequency, intensity and scope of financial crashes has increased. Here we must mention three of the most significant prior to the great global financial crash of 2007/8. The first is the deflating of Japan’s stock market bubble which occurred between 1986 and 1992, largely a consequence of speculation in real estate, itself a consequence of a low rate of profit on capital invested in manufacturing. Not only was the eventual Nikkei crash the biggest in post-war history, Japanese stocks never regained anywhere near their previous values (and fell even more dramatically after the great global crash). The once pace making economy stagnated despite the Bank of Japan implementing a 0% interest rate policy from the late 1990s until very recently.

The second notable crash occurred on Monday, 19th October, 1987 and is remembered as Black Monday — the day when a 20% or so drop in Standard & Poor’s

500 Index and the Dow Jones Industrial Average in the United States triggered a plunge in world markets which lost them the previous year’s gains more or less overnight. However, it is not the losses that are of significance. It is the reaction of the US Federal Reserve which, under Republican appointee, Alan Greenspan, delivered its first public promise of support for financial markets, proceeded to cut interest rates and called upon banks to flood the system with liquidity. Over the next decade the Fed continued with its constant stimulus project, including interest rate cuts to aid recovery.

The third sign of things to come was the bursting of what came to be known as the dot.com bubble: the spectacular crash of the New York based NASDAQ stock exchange dealing mainly in internet company shares which lost 95% of their nominal value when the bubble burst in September 2002. Inevitably bankruptcies ensued and the US economy went into recession.

Overall, the financial consequence of these stock market explosions was a net loss of more than \$2.5 trillion. Then came the big one: the so-called ‘Subprime mortgage crisis’, the biggest financial crash so far in capitalism’s history that was triggered by the first run on a British bank in 150 years. The repercussions of this worldwide crash extended far beyond the financial domain and way beyond mortgages and housing. The US itself entered a deep recession, with nearly 9 million jobs lost during 2008 and 2009, roughly 6% of the workforce. The plight of homeless people sleeping on the streets was one of the triggers of the ‘Occupy’ movement, an amorphous political protest movement of ‘tent cities’ in and beyond the United States. Meanwhile, the US’s ‘stand on your own feet’ approach to manufacturing industry gave way to a state \$25bn bailout for General Motors: still only a tiny fraction

of the \$1.7+ trillion doled out to the likes of Bear Stearns, Freddie Mac and Fannie Mae, Citi Group, AIG, Bank of America and TARP (the Troubled Asset Relief Programme).

Europe also felt the effects with a slowdown in industrial production, increased unemployment and banking losses running to an estimated €940 billion between 2008 and 2012. In the UK the crash provoked a five year recession and a whole series of state spending cuts, primarily impacting working class lives and whose effects are still with us today. At the time, however, they were pedalled by the then PM David Cameron as the necessary sacrifices everyone must make because “we’re all in this together”.

As for China, it was not immune from the effects of the crash. While it was a surprise to some that China held \$8 billion of US subprime loans on which it took a ‘haircut’, the initial impact on the economy, not least due to loss of markets for the manufactured goods it exports, was huge. As elsewhere, the Chinese state resorted to a massive monetary stimulus and tax reductions for businesses. A spectacular building boom ensued. The local governments who had largely funded it became mired in debt while China’s GDP growth rate plummeted from 13% in 2007 to 9.7% a year later and 9.4% in 2009. It has never again got near to 13%.¹²

In the wider world, the economic recession triggered the uprisings and anti-government protests of the Arab Spring, unforgettably inspired by Mohamed Bouazizi, a Tunisian fruit vendor who burned himself to death in January 2011 as a protest against unemployment and the difficulties of even surviving. After several weeks of protests the 24 year rule of President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali came to an abrupt end. From Tunisia, the protests spread to Libya, Egypt, Yemen, Syria

and Bahrain. Rulers were deposed, civil wars have occurred, millions more have become seriously impoverished. Capitalism remained standing.

Since the crash the spectacular interest rates which encouraged the working class to speculate with their own houses and allowed them to get up to their necks in debt have disappeared and the financial services sector is more tightly regulated. Yet this has only given way to an increase in ‘shadow banking’ — that ‘complex adventure playground’ whose share of global financial assets rose from 25 per cent after the 2007-08 crisis to 47.2 per cent in 2022, higher than the 39.7 per cent of conventional banks.¹³ Finance capital still dominates the world economy. By far the most part of the trillions of dollars which were pumped into the financial system remain ... in the financial system, whose chief purpose is to refinance existing debts! Moreover,

*Including equity and debt, the size of financial markets grew from slightly larger than the global economy in 1980 to almost four times larger today.*¹⁴

Since the IMF’s estimate for global GDP at the end of 2023 was \$105 trillion this means that the nominal value of global financial capital = approximately \$420 trillion. This, despite the inestimable losses incurred by the global financial crash of 2008. Those losses eclipsed all previous financial crises, including the 1929 Wall St. Crash. The multi-trillion dollar cost of propping up the global financial architecture was far more than its estimated \$20.49 trillion value by our financial spokesperson above. Yet this is the shape of things to come. A capitalist world, where the fragility of the world’s enormous financial services industry is a reflection of its insuperable crisis of low profit rates in the

‘real economy’: insuperable, that is without colossal devaluation of real capital values.

What About the Real, or is it the Surreal, Economy?

The 2007/8 crash appears to have briefly spurred a sense of we’re all in this together on the part of the representatives of national capitalist states. At any rate Russia was finally accepted into the WTO in 2011, almost twenty years since it applied to join. It had taken until the mid-1970s for the volume of world trade to pass its mid-19th century peak but import and export and other restrictions remained. Now, though, nearly all the world’s large economies (with the inauspicious exception of Iran) shared the same access to each other’s markets.

Significantly too, by 2007 China had overtaken the United States to become the world’s largest producer of manufactured goods. Even despite the great financial crash, China’s huge manufacturing capacity helped double the country’s GDP per capita between 2003-2013. Meanwhile the manufacturing capacity (machinery and plant) of the United States has become progressively under-utilised. Not counting

the 2008 slump, the average utilisation rate over the last twenty years is 75%, ten per cent lower than in the three post-war decades.¹⁵

Nevertheless,

- According to the WTO, the volume of world trade today is roughly 45 times the level recorded in the early days of the GATT (4500% growth from 1950 to 2022).
- World trade values, as a percentage of GDP, have ballooned by almost 400 times from 1950 levels. [See graph]

The overall global picture is that merchandise trade increased steadily as a proportion of world GDP until 2008 (financial crash), diminished until 2016 and then began to increase again. By 2022 merchandise trade as a portion of global GDP had just about returned to the pre-crash level. (Global average = 45.22% in 1992; 62.08% in 2008; dropped to 50.56% in 2016 and latest, 2022 figure is 61.86% of global GDP is accounted for by trade in goods.) This seems straightforward enough and is borne out by the above graph.

And yet ... the actual movement of global merchandise is anything but

International Trade [per cent of global GDP]



Source: Edward Price in *Financial Times* 21.2.23

straightforward. More often than not, the production of commodities today notoriously involves the toing and froing of partially finished goods, often from country to country, with firms at every step in the chain claiming their share of ‘added value’ until the final finishing step can claim the profit on the finished good. Without the development of container shipping in the 1980s, and the subsequent expansion of freight rail networks, the explosion of cheap consumer goods imports from China which offset the impact of the economic crisis on the working class in the old capitalist heartlands would not have occurred. The enormous cheapening of the cost of freight transport since then has dramatically changed the shape of manufacturing industry and supply chains so that not only the component parts but the manufacture of any single commodity is more than likely to have taken place in more than one country. And, if it is true that:

Most of the world’s manufacturing takes place in one of three cross-border manufacturing networks centered on the United States, Germany and China (previously Japan until about 2007) while cross-border trade of finished goods and services accounts for only one third ...¹⁶

it is also true that the complexity of supply chains makes national trade figures something of a fiction.

Gadgets assembled in China (or, nowadays, Vietnam) and shipped to North America or Europe are filled with imported components, including components made in the United States, just as German cars are built with East European parts and American trucks

are filled with Mexican content. Yet the statistics produced by customs officers attribute all of the value of the imported inputs to whichever country happens to ship the finished product.¹⁷

With this qualifying situation in mind we can consider the evolution of world trade patterns. Thus, China remains the top merchandise exporter but by 2022 its share in world exports had declined to 14%. The United States, in second place, accounted for 8% of world merchandise trade and third ranked Germany, 7%.

Meanwhile, the percentage of China’s GDP stemming from trade in goods has fluctuated during the same two decades, from 31.61% in 1992, to a peak of 63.97% in 2006 prior to the global financial crash, then declining steadily to 35.13% of GDP in 2022. As for the United States, merchandise trade since the early Nineties has not significantly grown (15.3% in 1992) and, financial crash notwithstanding, has remained at around 21% of GDP since 2007. In other words, the more ‘advanced’ an economy becomes, the less it is reliant on commodity manufacture and trade.

Which brings us back full circle to the fact that the global manufacturing workforce now accounts for not much more than 11% of the overall number of wage workers. It is the surplus value produced by the sweat of these workers that will increasingly provide the cheap consumer items for workers in the ‘advanced countries’ that have been the bedrock of capitalism’s survival mechanism ever since the 1970’s: workers, for example who toil in the garment industry in Bangladesh making clothes that are shipped across the world. The sector employs as many as four million people, but the average worker earns less in a month than a U.S. worker earns in a day.

Coincidentally, the world's fifty largest companies by 'market capitalisation' employ slightly more workers (approximately 25,600,000, about 11.7% of the global workforce). Apart from Saudi Aramco, they all happen to be based in the United States. Seven of the top ten companies are currently 'cash hoarders', i.e. they are not ploughing profits back into production. They are all based in the United States and have been dubbed the Magnificent Seven: the technology giants that have driven the rise in US equities over the past year or so — Amazon, Alphabet, Nvidia, Tesla, Meta, Apple and Microsoft.

Their savings in 2023 are reckoned to have exceeded \$300bn. The ultimate owners of these savings are the rich households that, directly or indirectly,

Notes

1. Three works in particular have been consulted for this section on the falling rate of profit: *World in Crisis, A Global Analysis of Marx's Law of Profitability*: a collection of essays edited by Guglielmo Carchedi and Michael Roberts (pub. Haymarket Books); *The Long Depression*, Michael Roberts (also Haymarket Books) and Andrew Kliman, *The Failure of Capitalist Production* (pub.Pluto Press).
2. *The Tendency of the Rate of Profit to Fall Since the Nineteenth Century and a World Rate of Profit*, Esteban Ezequiel Maito in Carchedi and Roberts loc cit.
3. Kliman, *op.cit.* p.84
4. Maito *op.cit.* p.147
5. The so-called McKinsey Global Institute, *Manufacturing the Future, The Next Era of Global Growth and Innovation*, 2012
6. <https://ourworldindata.org/grapher/manufacturing-share-of-total-employment?tab=chart>
7. data.worldbank.org
8. See *International Labour Organization World Employment and Social Outlook, Trends 2024*
9. For a more extensive analysis of service work see our five part series on Capitalism's New

*hold shares in such companies. The share of disposable income going to the very rich has been rising consistently since 1980, increasing inequality within many of the world's largest countries. Since the rich save more of their income, this has led to the accumulation of a large savings surplus among wealthy individuals which has risen in tandem with corporate earnings.*¹⁸

So there it is: the fruit of capitalist globalisation. Not a peaceful world of plenty where everyone can enjoy the bounties of the wealth they help to create but an increasingly fractured world where the rich are squabbling over how to get a bigger slice of the pie. For sure it is a pie of dubious value but one they are already telling us it is worth our fighting over.

Economy, notably on our website, notably *Part 3: The Booming Financial Sector*

10. Abby McCain, 25+ trending financial services industry statistics [2023] <https://www.zippia.com/advice/author/amccain/>

11. Karl Marx, *Capital Vol 3* Penguin edition, p.608, part of the illuminating chapter on money capital and real capital.

12. See for example, *China's Policy Responses to the 2008 Financial Crisis*, Jiawen Yang, available online.

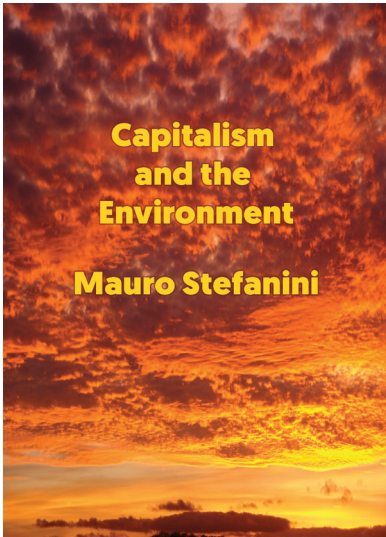
13. John Plender: *The overlooked threats to the global financial system* in the *Financial Times*, 16.4.24

14. Ruchir Sharma, *What Went Wrong With Capitalism*, article in the *Financial Times* 25.5.24 [Sharma has just published a book under the same name.]

15. Matthew C Klein and Michael Pettis, *Trade Wars Are Class Wars* (Yale University Press)p.77
16. *op.cit.* p.27-8. *ibid* p.29

17. See, for example, *Bangladesh: Workers Struggle for a Living Wage 2011* or *Garment Workers Struggle Against Vicious Exploitation, 2006* on our website

18. John Plender *loc cit*



Capitalism and the Environment New Edition

... the central nub is that a system based on alienated labour, devoted to growth (increased profits) and subject to periodic crises which exacerbate the drive to cut costs whatever the human or environmental price, cannot find an effective way of combating global warming. In short, these articles are as relevant today as when they were first written. They remain relevant because they provide a framework and give body to our argument that only when capitalist relations of production are eliminated, when money is a thing of the past and a world-wide human community produces for need instead of commodities for profit, can the environmental problems which capital daily exacerbates be seriously tackled

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The Murder of Giacomo Matteotti

100 Years On

History has a way of coming back to haunt the present. For Giorgia Meloni and her neo-fascist Brothers of Italy party whose logo contains a flame symbolising “the spirit of Mussolini”, the centenary of the murder of socialist parliamentary deputy, Giacomo Matteotti, by fascist thugs has brought some particularly uncomfortable moments. But, like her political forebear, she has the gall to face down criticism, even referring to Matteotti as “*a free and courageous man, killed by fascist squads for his ideas*” during a commemorative ceremony in parliament. She did not intervene, however, when the worthy Romans of the block of flats Matteotti had lived in, refused to allow a commemorative plaque in his name.

Matteotti was a convinced social democrat and therefore had done all he could to undermine the revolutionary working class in the political and social turmoil that followed the First World War. He believed in the parliamentary road to socialism and wanted no truck with communism and the Third International. Thus he and others had split from the Italian Socialist Party (PSI), which still tolerated a Third Internationalist faction, and founded the Socialist Unity Party less than two years earlier. The party put up candidates in the general election called by Mussolini in April 1924. Needless to say, like all the other opposition candidates, they faced more than verbal criticism from Fascist blackshirts. On 30th May Matteotti bravely stood up in parliament and denounced the fascist violence that had accompanied the election campaign. He wound up by saying: “I have

made my speech. Now you can prepare the funeral address for me.”

Sure enough, less than a fortnight later, Matteotti disappeared. He had been kidnapped by a group of fascist thugs and beaten and stabbed to death. His body turned up several weeks later in a wood on the outskirts of Rome. Although not known at the time Onorato Damen wrote the article which follows, there is now no doubt that Mussolini was fully aware of what was going on, and more than enough evidence that he had a personal interest in silencing the man who was conducting his own enquiry into the kickbacks that Mussolini’s brother Arnaldo had received from a United States oil company, Sinclair Oil.¹

But the concern of the article here, written by Onorato Damen reflecting on a crucial political situation which he himself had lived through as a revolutionary militant, is not so much the details of the Matteotti affair itself, but rather its repercussions in terms of missed opportunities for a revival of the working class political struggle in Italy. In the event, the errors of political judgment and outright confusion shown by the Comintern’s newly-installed Gramscian leadership of the Communist Party, locked it in parliamentary games and paralysed it from taking the political initiative amongst the working class in the wider struggle that was seething in the world outside parliament. After surviving six months of crisis, Mussolini’s regime regained control and from 1925 through ‘26 increased its political hold, eventually banning any political opposition whatsoever.

E. Rayner

Before and After the Assassination of Matteotti

How an entire revolutionary strategy was dissolved into a series of insignificant episodes of parliamentary tactics

We're back in 1924-25. Two years full of key events for the workers' movement. With the removal — imposed from above — of the Italian Left from the leadership of the Italian communist movement, new, more flexible leaders who are more willing to compromise have come forward: individuals like Gramsci, Togliatti, Terracini, Scoccimarro who had also been with the Left in the formative phase of the Communist Party of Italy. However, when it comes to the new leadership we are simply describing positions and policies that are above all the work and thought of comrade Gramsci. Let's be clear, not a mythical Gramsci, not a made-up Gramsci, but the real Gramsci: a man just like us who lived the same experiences as us, even if observed from his completely personal perspective. Which does not exempt Gramsci from the specific charge of having submitted the party to the imperatives, not of an authentic revolutionary International, but to the immediate political needs of the Russian State, even if it was considered a workers' state.²

The first symptom of the new Gramscian orientation appeared in the first editorial of the second series of *l'Ordine Nuovo*. Here, Gramsci, critically reviewing the outcome of Imola and Livorno, came to the conclusion that the split at Livorno had been too far to the Left, an incredible judgment to say the least from a man who had participated responsibly in Livorno and Imola and who had added his signature to the *Rome Theses*. This conclusion, therefore, was based on

opportunism since it was not the result of an in-depth re-think or a substantial re-examination of events leading up to Livorno.³ And speaking of Livorno, it should be remembered that the Left thought the split had been too far to the Right. This already suggests a difference in tactical-strategic vision, one that was running through the Party right at the beginning. But are we simply dealing with the return of the woeful tactics of the social democratic parties? Or is this step backward dictated by a wider theoretical retreat by a Comintern facing worsening objective conditions where the immediate aim was to establish the united front policy?

The Third Internationalists [terzini]

For the new leadership of the Party and therefore for the Executive of the International, the problem of the moment was how to gain recruits on the Right. How to strengthen the Party, first of all by widening its influence within that nebulous political entity which had turned into a Third Internationalist faction inside the Socialist Party in order to create a bridge towards the Communist International and, consequently, towards our Party. Thus, the Gramscian objective of preventing a move 'too far to the Left' — a move desired by the left-wing current that was dominant in the Party at the time — was about to be realised.

The 'fraction' led by Serrati, Maffi,

Riboldi, Malatesta, etc., was essentially a large group of generals without soldiers, with no serious organisation. The so-called Third Internationalists did not, and could not, provide their own specific and complete theoretical treatment of the problems of the revolution. They had no appreciable following. They were reduced to a few parliamentary deputies and resorting to the political and trade union apparatus of the Socialist Party. Overall it was a grouping without history, of little ideological importance, above all of little organisational significance. However, it is significant that the main concern of the Third Internationalists was to assert their right to representation in the PSI's governing bodies. The energy and covert manoeuvring by which Fabrizio Maffi, one of the exponents of the movement, launched Malatesta's candidacy for the party secretariat is typical in this respect. They evidently aimed very high, and managed to secure a presence in the federal bodies of the entire party organisation as well as in the leadership of the trade union movement.

When organisational ruptures such as this are artificially manufactured then they almost always reveal themselves as fruitless splits which are no asset to the group to which they are heading. Thus it was with the entry of the Third Internationalists into our party. The policy advocated by the Left on the general question of membership of a revolutionary party is still relevant today. It can be summarised as follows: selective process; decantation of residual ideological differences; absolute adherence to revolutionary discipline; and above all, the need to prevent any given grouping which is aiming at joining the revolutionary party from forming an organisation within the organisation.

Gramsci, however, became a faithful

executor of a policy either inspired or dictated by the Comintern and assumed the responsibility of imposing it on the Party.⁴ Even so, it must be noted that the PCd'I in the two-year period in question did have a wider governing body, even if by virtue of Comintern investiture. But it had no base, above all without a base that understood the meaning of the new leadership imposed at the top of the movement. In fact the base was still linked, in its vast majority, to the tradition of the Left.

The Apparatus

Let us now examine the problem of the apparatus. It is common political practice to try to take control over a party through control of its organisational apparatus. Thus, for Gramsci and the new leadership the immediate and fundamental problem was taking possession of the party's upper bodies and thereby branch out to the base of the organisation. However, the decisions taken at the conference in Como (Pian del Tivano) and our political success in the 1924 elections indicated that the Party was still functioning within its original structure, on the platform developed by the Italian Left. And Gramsci understood this perfectly. He had a very keen sense of what was realistically possible. Here was a very clear warning of the urgent need to get control of the apparatus. And how to achieve this? Either by using the ideological weapon — and this in any case involves a very long process of persuasion, an open political debate with the people you are operating against, and, finally, gaining their trust; or there is the other way — the administrative one. This consisted of making the comrades in the party's administration assume the weight of permanent political responsibility which, while ensuring organisational continuity,

removes the danger for a professional revolutionary of having to find a new way of surviving economically from one moment to the next. We will soon see the importance Gramsci placed on this second aspect of the problem.

The apparatus thus became an elusive economic-political organisation, almost always hidden behind the smoke screen of caste privilege; a body of political labourers that never takes on a specific physiognomy but which spreads and extends its tentacles like an octopus until it takes on its own independent existence, distinct from the rest of the party organisation.

The omniscient, omnipresent and omnipotent setup that we recognise today had its origins precisely then, in 1924. The professional revolutionary is most often a comrade who has had a hard experience of struggle, who has been shaped by a harsh ideological and political discipline, a comrade who has known personal sacrifice. However this is precisely the sort of person destined to become part of the apparatus, and as such, forced to obey professionally and therefore blindly all the orders issued by the Party centre, whatever they may be. The upper echelons of the Party make use of this powerful instrument to influence the base and to move it according to the subjective and objective needs of its policy. Meanwhile, the new leadership continued its work of undermining the traditional organisation of the Party. At this juncture, in the middle of 1924, the Matteotti episode exploded.

The violent elimination of Matteotti revealed the profound crisis that had hit the vital core of Italian capitalism and since there was no real possibility of operating openly in the country, political discussion and debate was limited to the parliamentary scene. So it is on this level that we must observe and judge the action of the political elements

shaken by the crisis. It was a crisis arising from within the great masses where aversion to fascism, the profound economic distress and the anxiety for a general and radical reversal of the situation were reaching breaking point. The snake of reaction was turning on the enchanter, hitting fascism itself at the top, so much so that Mussolini considered that the Dumini operation had been inspired by forces within the regime who were aiming at its own liquidation.⁵ In reality, the Matteotti episode was part of a situation where episodes of this kind could occur at any time and to the detriment of anyone who was not a fascist, such was the precarious state of confusion looming over the organs of the regime.

The Aventine Secession and Us

It was logical that the anti-fascists, democrats, liberals, socialists, who were in fact more alive at the level of the parliamentary struggle than in the country as a whole, should take the path of the Aventine secession.⁶ These parliamentary deputies considered their further presence in parliament to be incompatible with a government which was personally identified with Mussolini, who in turn bore the moral responsibility for Matteotti's assassination. With the Aventine secession a state within the state was thus created, at least on a constitutional level: a kind of political separatism with a consequent power vacuum in which our party could have injected and developed a class initiative — that is, if the prime focus had not been on the Aventine secession, and the indecision about what to do had not then prevented it.

But the secession proved to be what it was and had to be by its very nature: a gathering of oppositionists. It met, discussed, decided on a policy of fierce denunciation but

consciously refused to take to the streets because, if things got out of control, they could pass into the hands of the communists. Thus, instead of turning to the working masses the parliamentary opposition turned to the army and the police. The strategists of the Aventine secession placed the Crown at the centre of their politics. The police and army would have moved if the Crown had moved. But the Crown didn't move and so the army didn't move, the police didn't move. The Aventine secessionists were left claiming control of the hypothetically liberal State aside from the harsh reality of the fascist State.

What was the Communist Party doing in the meantime? The parliamentary group, in obedience to the Party leadership, initially also took refuge on the Aventine Hill. Faced with an unexpected situation, the leaders chose the standard tactical response: to join the Aventine secession as we would a united front meeting. For them, joining the Aventine secessionists was tantamount to a united front policy. But at a certain point, even here political differences were bound to explode. The social democratic, liberal and socialist Aventine could not tolerate the communist pawn operating within it because it was not in line with the methods and constitutional aims of the parliamentary secessionists.

In this rapid succession of events, it must be acknowledged that while the coalition forces of the Aventine secession had, if nothing else, understood that their political fortune resided solely in the use of the legal means offered to them by a possible convergence of interest between the democratic-liberal and monarchical traditions and acted accordingly, the Communist Party floundered between parliamentary legalitarianism and maximalist phraseology. On the one hand

the Gramsci leadership suggested that the 'moral issues' posed by the secessionists were sufficient to liquidate Mussolini and thus fascism itself. On the other hand it passively submitted to the initiative of the Left of the Party which dissociated itself from the politics of participation on the Aventine Hill and effectively dismissed the 'moral question' with Ruggero Grieco's speech: a speech which was not sanctioned by the Party leadership, but drafted in Bordiga's home and under his direct inspiration.

Meanwhile, pressure from below was increasing, especially inside the Party where members were demanding a clear, responsible position. Still, the idea of an anti-parliament also began to insinuate itself into our parliamentary group. Above all it was good old Riboldi⁷ who worked hard to support the legal and political legitimacy of an anti-parliament, intending to make it a platform for parliamentary struggle to which he could call on the forces of the Aventine opposition.

However, by then if anyone was still thinking in terms of parliamentary solutions, it meant they had not felt the pressure coming from wider society. Both within the parliamentary group and within the enlarged Central Committee, the Left upheld a diametrically opposed tactic and strategy which involved moving the axis of the Party's activity away from parliament, from the centre, that is, of official political life, to the country, to the working masses — a prospect of struggle which aroused indifference and incomprehension, if not irony. According to the men of the new leadership and of the parliamentary group itself, the comrades of the Left were presumptuous, barricade men, who always saw Red, who deluded themselves into thinking they could move the political agenda by basing their perspective not on

the concrete, not on objective possibilities, but on nothing.

In a meeting of the enlarged Central Committee Gramsci concluded a broad and detailed investigation by saying that the situation was not immediately revolutionary and that if we had launched a revolutionary slogan and action even the healthiest part of the proletariat would not have listened to us. To prove his thesis he recalled that after the war millions of rifles had remained in the hands of Italians and if the rifles had not been fired this meant that there was no prospect of revolution. We leave it to readers to consider the doctrinal and strategic depth of this statement. Oh if only rifles could fire themselves!

Anyone who was in touch with the party base in this period knows that from every part of the country, particularly from the southern areas, news was coming in of a situation that was worsening day by day, so that there was enormous scope to give the party's activity a new revolutionary immediacy. What was lacking was the courage to put the Party into the situation in order to see first-hand how far its analysis of the situation coincided with the response of the Italian masses. But no one had the far sightedness and courage to try.

The group's return to parliament was finally decided with another "discovered" tactic. This consisted of sending Repossi into the lion's den, entrusted with the task of reading a prepared declaration of a demagogic and partly provocative tone.⁸ When a general strike was then attempted that was supported neither by C.G.I.L. nor the rest of the Aventine secessionists, in particular the Socialist Party, it was clear that we would face an inevitable failure.

Gramsci and the politics of the united front

In this way the much vaunted tactic of the united front from below was in crisis. Working people who are tied to a trade union and political party are generally not willing to accept calls for direct action coming from other organisations unless it is clear to them that their union organisation and their party are openly outside the class divide and in fundamental conflict with the aims of their struggle. To this end, no work of persuasion, no critical study had been seriously undertaken by the Communist Party among the majority of trade union members and the more politicised masses of the Socialist Party. Above all, no slogan had been launched that would identify the true nature of the crisis that had practically locked the regime in a state of impotence, incapable even of mobilising sufficient numbers of its own armed forces if an armed attack had been initiated, at that moment, anywhere in the country.

Such situations cannot be seriously developed via pre-existing top-level agreements, typical of united front politics. They must be faced up to promptly and assessed in terms of quality and clarity of purpose, regardless of entirely numerical calculations which almost always have a delaying function and clip the wings of revolutionary action. In fact, a quick initial response would open up the revolutionary strategy and pave the way to a broadening of the battle front, bringing new layers of fighters to the fore and firing up a fresh will to fight that collides with the calculations of parliamentary strategists and certain party leaders who await ... for the rifles to fire themselves.

By contrast with the very homogeneous current of the Left and the one that was

formed in a somewhat extemporaneous way and devoid of any serious ideological unity around the personality of Gramsci, there were many tactical manoeuvres, apparently made without rhyme or reason, whose theoretical basis is to be found in the law of spontaneity rather than in a constant Marxist methodology.

In this context, the problem in reality was how to construe a revolutionary strategy (Marxist or not) towards the fascist phenomenon. In other words, whether fascism should be considered an excrescence of capitalism which should be eliminated by making use of all the political means that capitalism itself offered in terms of an umbrella anti-fascist political struggle, notwithstanding the diversity of its components (Gramsci et al.). Or, as the Left argued, should fascism be considered the safest ideological-political cover, in the specific Italian situation, to guarantee the preservation of capitalism as a whole? In which case, striking out against fascism, violently breaking its structures, meant hitting capitalism in the heart and wiping out both its economic and political structures.

Translated into concrete political policies, it was otherwise for Gramsci and co. For Gramsci this meant breaking with the fixed and too rigid formulations of the revolutionary theme of class against class. The situation was turned into a tactical moment in the anti-fascist struggle within a broader capitalist experience, a Gramscian theory which considered fascism in terms of an episode of peasant folklore: something that should be eradicated like a weed which had accidentally germinated on the terrain of capitalism.

Only by understanding these goings-on and the various elements that are so little-known, because they have been deliberately

kept silent, is it possible to follow the common thread of the united front policy with its inconclusive and contradictory tactic of first supporting the Aventine secessionists and subsequent distancing; with the PCd'I deputies' exit from parliament and their subsequent return, and finally with Repossi's solitary attempt to test the waters, a tactic designed principally to save face for a disappointing, weak and even unimaginative policy. If this is Gramsci's tactical line, it was not dissimilar in essence, from the one that would later be adopted by Togliatti on his (post-war) return to Italy and which still guides the fate of the PCI. However, their underlying difference is enormous. Gramsci, who in his role as party leader had more or less openly and opportunistically abandoned the ideological and political perspective of the "councils", was nevertheless led to revive them with the new tactical direction he gave to the Party which included typically, the original conception of a civilisation of "councils" to be realised within the body of capitalist civilisation itself. At least this was an explanation with some theory behind it, even if idealistic and therefore very questionable from a Marxist point of view, but nevertheless a theoretical framework that placed it far above the national-communist and clerical-monarchist tactical rubbish that the party of Livorno was turned into by today's parliamentary swamp that is following a chimerical, democratic, peaceful, electoral Italian path to socialism. In this respect, half a century after those events, it is really time to rediscover a truer Gramsci, more in line with the reality than historiography, or rather the party and cultural hagiography in fashion today, which has so ignobly disfigured Gramsci by exploiting the emotional and sentimental aspects of his painful human story for their

own purposes.

In any case, Mussolini's speech on January 3 came and with it the politics of de-Matteotisation and our return to semi-illegality. Yet the gravity of the situation and of the lived experience necessitates a critical rethink: when situations like the Matteotti crisis arise, with obvious possibilities for revolutionary developments, and we are incapable of becoming part of the ascending movement of the crisis and the expectations of the masses, i.e. unable to obey the imperatives that every profound crisis of society brings with it, we must openly recognise that we were not up to our modest tasks. We were not the guiding light in the situation, but in its tow, its tail light, and ended up with a mockery of a policy in the most serious phase of the crisis that had hit the fascist regime, a regime which was about conserving capitalism.

But in the meantime the Gramscian leadership continued the dull work of penetrating and conquering the party apparatus; in fact, those who do not know how or do not want to move in the heat of the struggle are always masters of political intrigue. The physiognomy of the Party in the Matteotti phase and immediately after Matteotti practically did not change. The leading bodies are always separated from the base. They are more and more openly controlled by Moscow and the International while the base of the party is still under the ideological and political influence of the Italian Left. The apparatus on the ground is still partially inoperative. Some left-wing comrades are removed from the

Notes

1. Our Italian comrades were able to clarify this in a subsequent article. See <https://www.leftcom.org/it/articles/2004-07-01/ottant-anni-fa-l-assassinio-di-matteotti-ma-il-mandante-fu-il-petrolio>
2. For more on Gramsci see Onorato Damen

organisation's governing bodies. All this coincides with the opening of the debate for the Lyon congress.

But this is our birthplace, this is the home of the Italian Left and there is something to be criticised, objected to, and to be removed: we do not leave an organisational base like that of the Left, who are above all firmly formed cadres, at the mercy of events without direction, without organisational support.

Comrade Bordiga, having been defenestrated from the leadership of the Party, had practically defenestrated himself from active political life and no longer assumed any official responsibility, not even within his own current. In a situation like this, anyone with a sense of responsibility knows what he must do ...

Bordiga would go to Lyon. Lyon confirmed the "electoral" defeat of the Left, but the Italian Left still needed to defend itself. Above all it would need to defend its heritage of ideas and experiences, its organisational base and above all it had to defend the powerful identity given to the movement from Imola and Livorno until 1924.

In this serious situation the Committee of Intesa was formed, with the precise task of saving what was still salvageable in the Livorno party.

From the essay: *1919-1926 — A lost battle*

Translated from *Prima dell'assassinio di Matteotti e dopo* by Onorato Damen in *Prometeo 11-12 Year XXI Series III* (1968)

Gramsci between Marxism and Idealism (£7.50 plus postage from our address).

3. For a fuller history of the origins of the Communist Party of Italy see the pdf <https://www.leftcom.org/en/articles/2012-01-15/the-italian-left-and-the-formation-of-the-communist-party-of->

Italy

4. For more on Gramsci's manoeuvres see our pamphlet *Platform of the Committee of Intesa 1925*. (£3.00 from our address).

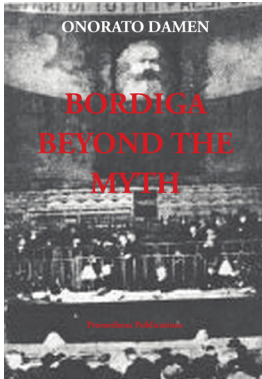
5. Amerigo Dumini (1894-1967) styled himself “*il sicario del Duce*” (the Duce's hitman) headed the gang of five who murdered Matteotti. Three years earlier the same gang had kidnapped Onorato Damen in an unsuccessful bid to force him to abandon political activity. He was sentenced to 5 years imprisonment for his part in the murder in 1925 but amnestied by Mussolini after only 11 months.

6. Named after the series of protests by the plebs

in Ancient Rome in protest at the patricians' refusal to meet their demands for debt reduction. They removed themselves to the nearby Monte Sacer (Sacred Mountain) outside the city limits (today the Aventine Hill is well inside the city limits).

7. Ezio Riboldi (1878 – 1965) law professor in the University of Milan who had participated in the Livorno Congress.

8. Even if the drafters of the document knew very well that it would have been madness to assume responsibility for a second Matteotti episode, Repossi was roughed up in the Chamber which, of course, now consisted only of Fascist deputies.

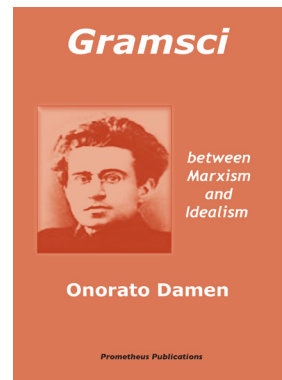


Bordiga Beyond the Myth £5

Amadeo Bordiga led the fight to form the Communist Party of Italy as a “section of the Third International” in 1921. No sooner was this achieved than he found himself leading the fight of the Communist Left in Italy against the same International's abandonment of revolutionary politics. Arrested and imprisoned whilst awaiting trial in 1923, Bordiga opted to stand aside from the party's leadership in Italy allowing free reign for Comintern manoeuvres to introduce a ‘centrist’ leadership under Gramsci. Even so, as Fascism took hold the Communist Left—in both exile and fascist gaols— did not disappear. Bordiga however did. He retreated from political activity for almost 2 decades. The significance of this volume is that it demonstrates that the “Italian Left” was not just Bordiga but a living movement that has responded to the

Gramsci between Marxism and Idealism £7.50

Antonio Gramsci was to become the tool of the Comintern in manoeuvring the Communist Party of Italy out of the hands of the revolutionaries who had founded it. His tragic death in Fascist custody has made him a martyr to many of the reformist left. Damen's considerations on Gramsci's shortcomings as an analytical and practical Marxist are an antidote to that. This volume also contains the Platform of the Committee of Intesa (Alliance) of 1925 which Gramsci had condemned.



Anton Pannekoek as a Revolutionary Marxist

A Review Article

Anton Pannekoek *The Workers' Way to Freedom & Other Council Communist Writings* (1935-1954)

Edited and introduced by Robyn K. Winters (PM Press/Working Class History), 2024 (303 pp. \$24.95)

The future belongs to the workers, but most of them still do not know it.

Anton Pannekoek, 1907

We concluded our book on the Russian Revolution¹ by contrasting two erroneous, but opposing views, drawn from that working class experience. The first was Bordiga's view that the working class only exists through the Party, and this will not only be a weapon of the working class, guiding the revolutionary assault on capitalism, but will also be a government-in-waiting and go on to rule after that assault. By way of contrast, we also quoted the councilist, Otto Rühle² who argued that the party form itself is inherently bourgeois and thus is the very antithesis of proletarian revolution. A reader later asked us why we had chosen to highlight Rühle's contribution rather than those of the more famous councilist, Anton Pannekoek. Our reply was simple enough. We were highlighting the extremes of the discussion on the party and class question that had emerged from the last revolutionary wave. Pannekoek's views were much more nuanced than Rühle's although both had shared similar experiences in the German Revolution.

Antonie (or Anton) Pannekoek (1873-1960) lived through an epoch of tremendous highs and lows in the workers' movement but especially the revolutionary wave that brought an end to the First World War. The consequences of its subsequent defeat still live with us today. One was to alert the

capitalists of the danger to their existence should the international working class ever get so organised again. The second has been the monstrous rise of totalitarian states along Stalinist lines claiming to be "socialist". Their very existence has been enough to discredit the original liberating aim of Marxism and thus make the prospects for the appearance of a new class movement all the more difficult. As the capitalist system is once again leading the world down the road towards a new imperialist war, an attempt to draw what we can from that revolutionary past is as urgent as ever.

Pannekoek's direct involvement in those events lasted a comparatively short time, but having lived through this turbulent period in working class history Pannekoek remained a Marxist all his life, convinced that the key to revolutionary transformation lay in the development of the class consciousness of the mass of the working class itself. A review of this recent publication of some of his writings gives us the opportunity to look more closely (albeit briefly) at his contribution to the fight for a classless society.

Pannekoek was not driven to socialism through exploitation, poverty or oppression. He began political life as a supporter of the Dutch Liberal Party, like his upwardly mobile liberal businessman father. He only came to Marxism in his late twenties when

he had already begun to make his mark as an astronomer, when he came across Edward Bellamy's utopian novel, *Equality*. It was a decisive turning point for him or, as he put it, "For the first time it dawned on me that all theories have a social basis and significance and develop in response to real material interests rather than abstract reasoning".³ However Pannekoek found Marxist economic theory "too determinist"⁴ which made him look for a more "spiritual"⁵ Marxism. He thought he had found it in the work of Joseph Dietzgen, a rare worker theorist in the nineteenth century, and one praised by both Marx and Engels. Dietzgen, a tanner by trade, was credited by Engels with being the first to describe the method of Marx as "historical materialism", even before Plekhanov made the phrase more famous.

Dietzgen's influence on Pannekoek's thinking was profound and endured through all the phases of his political evolution. Such was his admiration for Dietzgen that he even went so far as to say that "it is doubtful whether (Marx and Engels) ever understood the essence of his arguments".⁶ Pannekoek considered that Dietzgen completed the Marxist idea of historical materialism.

*Marx stated that realities determine thought; Dietzgen established the relation between reality and thought. Or in the words of Herman Gorter, Marx pointed out what the world does to the mind, Dietzgen pointed out what the mind does to itself.*⁷

This seems a step away from Marx's famous statement that, "It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness."⁸

Pannekoek however counters with another famous quotation from Marx.

*.... but theory also becomes a material force as soon as it has gripped the masses. Theory is capable of gripping the masses as soon as it demonstrates **ad hominem**, and it demonstrates **ad hominem** as soon as it becomes radical.*⁹

Pannekoek refers to this quotation several times in his writings but even in his days as a left communist, as in his 1920 essay on *World Revolution and Communist Tactics*¹⁰ he uses a cut version of the quote above omitting this preceding "material" part of the passage. "The weapon of criticism cannot, of course, replace criticism by weapons, material force must be overthrown by material force ..."

For Pannekoek "the marxist view as a whole" has to take into account both premises that "the actions of men are entirely determined by their material relations" and "Men must make their own history themselves through their own actions."¹¹ Only in this way can the twin dangers of voluntarism and fatalism be avoided. Pannekoek however was well aware that, as a result,

*"Two marxists ... will therefore express themselves differently, the one primarily emphasising the determinate nature of the mind, the other its active role, they will both lead their respective truths into battle against each other, although they both pay homage to the same marxian theory".*¹²

Where the balance lay between ideas and the material circumstances that produced them was to be central to Pannekoek's activity all his life but he would always tend towards the idealist side of the question.

Having broken with his liberal bourgeois past, Pannekoek soon became a major force in the Leiden branch of the Social

Democratic Workers' Party. From there, he would become one of the major intellectual figures of the international Marxist radical left in the social democratic movement. This was at a time when mass strikes in the Low Countries, and the 1905 revolution in the Russian Empire, were throwing up new challenges to the increasingly reformist Social Democracy of the Second International. In the Netherlands itself, Pannekoek had seen the pathetic performance of his own Sociaal-Demokratische Arbeiderspartij (SDAP) in the mass strike wave of 1903, "*which still represents the greatest labour dispute in the history of the Netherlands*".¹³ The SDAP had at first supported the strikes but the leadership had later sabotaged them for fear that they were becoming too "*political*" ("politics" was something the Party leader, Troelstra, reserved for their Parliamentary group). Pannekoek led the denunciation of Troelstra for this betrayal: "*Your flabby and hesitant conduct cannot but serve the possessing class and the government*".¹⁴ It was his first concrete experience of the failure of a supposedly Socialist Party to support class action. It was an experience which would inform his position in his later debate with Kautsky.

Nevertheless, in 1904 it was Kautsky himself who invited him to Germany to work in the SDP Party school in Berlin. He was soon forced to quit (like Karl Radek and Rudolf Hilferding) on the grounds that the police were threatening to deport them as "foreigners". The Party, however, still paid for his writing and speaking activities, and he became very active in the Bremen Left, alongside Johann Knief and Paul Fröhlich in writing weekly for the *Bremer Bürger-Zeitung*. His promising career as an astronomer was put on hold whilst he became a professional revolutionary. In this period Pannekoek wrote regularly for *De Nieuwe Tijd* and *Die Neue Zeit*, the latter edited by Karl Kautsky,

with whom he and his friend, the poet Herman Gorter, remained on good personal and political terms until 1910. By this time the Dutch Left around Gorter and Pannekoek had already been expelled from the SDAP in the Netherlands, and were making common cause with the "Radical Left" in German Social Democracy.

The argument with Kautsky had begun in 1909 when the latter published his *The Road to Power*. Kautsky had earlier won the admiration of the Radical Left in the SDP for his defence of Marxist orthodoxy against the revisionism of Eduard Bernstein. But the "Marxist orthodoxy" of the SDP was now becoming a fossilised dogma which postponed the idea of socialism to some distant future, and demanded no more of the working class than votes for its parliamentary candidates. The German SDP may have been the biggest socialist party in the world, with enormous resources from millions of workers, but it increasingly stood in the way of a genuine and active working class response to the new turn that capitalism was taking. Pannekoek shared with Rosa Luxemburg the realisation that the capitalism in the age of imperialism was more dangerous than ever.¹⁵ Both saw that the working class was entering into more direct conflict with capitalism. They both saw in the mass strikes, which had developed in the early years of the twentieth century, the elemental and organised expression of working class consciousness. Curiously at this point, neither, as yet, saw the workers' councils (soviets) established across the Russian Empire as anything significant, but they both put an emphasis on workers' self-activity as an expression of the real and revolutionary movement of the class. And, at this point, both thought the role of the party was to give revolutionary expression to the mass movement. On the other hand, Kautsky, in *The Road to Power*,

sought to combat the danger as he saw it of “disorganised action”. Like Troelstra, he put the emphasis on the Party and its ability to lead, discipline and control the class movement. There was a fatalist sense that socialism would come about simply through capitalism collapsing under the weight of its own contradictions. In the meantime all that was required of the working class was to vote the SDP into parliament and join its trade unions. Pannekoek rejected all of these assumptions in his 1912 polemic against Kautsky in *Die Neue Zeit*, “*Marxist Theory and Revolutionary Tactics*”.

He did not reject the role of the Party in this debate. On the contrary, like Lenin of that epoch, he argued that it should live up to the revolutionary essence of Marxism. Starting from his understanding of historical materialism as developed by Dietzgen, Pannekoek defended his idea on the significant role of class consciousness in the coming social revolution. As it was central to his thinking throughout his life, it is worth quoting in some detail.

Marxism explains all the historical and political actions of men in terms of their material relations, and in particular their economic relations. A recurrent bourgeois misconception accuses us of ignoring the role of the human mind in this, and making man a dead instrument, a puppet of economic forces. We insist in turn that Marxism does not eliminate the mind. Everything which motivates the actions of men does so through the mind. Their actions are determined by their will, and by all the ideals, principles and motives that exist in the mind. But Marxism maintains that the content of the human mind is nothing other than a product of the material world in which man lives, and that economic relations

therefore only determine his actions by their effects upon his mind and influence upon his will. Social revolution only succeeds the development of capitalism because the economic upheaval first transforms the mind of the proletariat, endowing it with a new content and directing the will in this sense. Just as Social-Democratic activity is the expression of a new perspective and new determination instilling themselves in the mind of the proletariat, so organisation is an expression and consequence of a profound mental transformation in the proletariat. This mental transformation is the term of mediation by which economic development leads to the act of social revolution. There can surely be no disagreement between Kautsky and ourselves that this is the role which Marxism attributes to the mind.¹⁶

He continues with the argument we quoted above that the material basis of ideas and the ideas themselves are of equal significance before concluding with his other key argument that with a proletariat now taking mass action the situation was changing and so were the demands on socialists. The determinist idea that the proletariat would come to power “when conditions mature” was now making the Social Democratic Party a brake on the movement at a time when “Marxism now becomes the theory of proletarian action”. Kautsky quite openly talked of the need for the Party to “hold back the masses” until the day it would come to power through the ballot box.

The relationship between masses and party cannot therefore be as Kautsky has presented it. If the party saw its function as restraining the masses from action for as long as it could do

so, then party discipline would mean a loss to the masses of their initiative and potential for spontaneous action, a real loss, and not a transformation of energy. The existence of the party would then reduce the revolutionary capacity of the proletariat rather than increase it. It cannot simply sit down and wait until the masses rise up spontaneously in spite of having entrusted it with part of their autonomy; the discipline and confidence in the party leadership which keep the masses calm place it under an obligation to intervene actively and itself give the masses the call for action at the right moment. Thus, as we have already argued, **the party actually has a duty to instigate revolutionary action**, because it is the bearer of an important part of the masses' capacity for action; but it cannot do so as and when it pleases, for it has not assimilated the entire will of the entire proletariat, and cannot therefore order it about like a troop of soldiers. It must wait for the right moment: not until the masses will wait no longer and are rising up of their own accord, but until the conditions arouse such feeling in the masses that large-scale action by the masses has a chance of success. This is the way in which the Marxist doctrine is realised that although men are determined and impelled by economic development, they make their own history. (our emphasis).¹⁷

Kautsky's reputation as "the Pope" of "orthodox Marxism" remained intact for a little while longer. However, the First World War was to further bring into question what that "orthodoxy" amounted to. Against all the anti-war resolutions adopted by the various Congresses of the Socialist International, the parliamentary faction of German Social Democracy voted unanimously (respecting

party discipline since about a sixth of the deputies were against it) for the Kaiser's war budget in August 1914. Their excuse was that it was for a war against "Russian despotism". Kautsky was not an MP but, asked to advise the Parliamentary group, he told them to abstain, on the very unmarxist premise that it would not just be a war against Tsarist despotism but also a war against "the democracies" of Britain and France. In fact Kautsky did not see war as intrinsic to advanced capitalism, so when the First World War broke out he regarded it as an annoying interruption of the peaceful conditions needed for the Social Democratic Party to lead the proletariat to take over state power via the ballot box. This was the only class war he counted on. His position on the war was thus ultimately pacifist, and not a class position, as Lenin was not slow to point out in a series of documents on the "renegade Kautsky". For Lenin the war would lead to a reappraisal of what Marxism meant in terms of recognising that imperialism was a new era in capitalism and that the state was not something to be captured but destroyed.

Pannekoek was in the Netherlands when the First World War broke out. However, alongside other members of the Dutch Tribune group, he denounced both defencism and pacifism. He collaborated with the Bremen Left and other internationalists like Borchartd's Lichtstrahlen (Rays of Light) who all left the SPD and agreed with Lenin and the Zimmerwald Left¹⁸ that the fight against war only had meaning as "part of a general struggle against capitalism".¹⁹ In the wake of the class betrayal of the Second International he too looked forward to the establishment of a new International. In January 1916 Pannekoek, thanks to Henrietta Roland-Holst who financed the first issue, was appointed an editor of the Zimmerwald Left's new but short-lived journal, *Vorbote*

(The Herald), alongside Lenin, Zinoviev and Radek. Pannekoek, like Lenin, saw the publication as not only opposing class war to imperialist war, but also the necessary first step towards the birth of a new and revolutionary International in place of the discredited Second International of social democracy. But when Radek published the theses against national self-determination of the Warsaw Committee of the Social Democratic Party of the Kingdom of Poland and Lithuania,²⁰ it provoked such a bitter argument with Lenin that Pannekoek and Roland-Holst demoted the others to “contributors”. The journal folded for lack of money after only two issues.²¹

This did not stop Lenin later praising Pannekoek in his debate with Kautsky in *The State and Revolution*. Lenin had been prompted in argument with Bukharin in 1916 to re-examine Marx and Engels’ earlier writings on the state and now concluded:

*In this controversy, it is not Kautsky but Pannekoek who represents Marxism, for it was Marx who taught that the proletariat cannot simply win state power in the sense that the old state apparatus passes into new hands, but must smash this apparatus, must break it and replace it by a new one.*²²

Pannekoek, for his part, enthusiastically welcomed the Bolshevik Revolution²³ as the first step in the world working class’s struggle to shake off the shackles of capitalism and, on return to Bremen, in 1919 took part in the establishment of workers’ councils in imitation of the Russian soviets. He also joined the newly-formed German Communist Party (KPD) but the loss of their leaders, Luxemburg and Liebknecht in the disaster of January 1919 opened up a debate about the value of working in parliament and

trades unions. For Pannekoek such activity was the “opportunism” at the core of the demise of German Social Democracy in 1914. Capitalism was now in a new period and these were no longer permissible tactics. The debate was to split the KPD and lead to the expulsion of its left wing who went on to form the Communist Workers’ Party of Germany (KAPD). The KPD then went on to join with the centrists of the USPD to form the United Communist Party of Germany as the German organisation of the Third International. The KAPD had originally been an associate member of the Third International but was now given an ultimatum to join the VKPD which it refused thus resulting in its leaving the Comintern.

It was in the course of this that Lenin’s famous denunciation of the entire international communist left in his *Left-wing Communism: An Infantile Disorder* was published. It was intended as an attack on all the “left communists” in every country in the run up to the Second Comintern Congress but it contained a particular form of abuse for “K. Horner” (Pannekoek), who within three years had gone from the real defender of Marxism to revealing his “failure to understand the ABC of Marxism”.²⁴ It was absolutely characteristic of Pannekoek that his response did not descend to the same level of personal abuse that Lenin had indulged in. Instead he related Lenin’s polemic to the increasingly difficult material situation of the revolution in Russia (referring to the material losses in the war against the Whites). He does not think it unreasonable for the Russian Communists to seek compromises for the immediate survival of the revolution but questions whether that should also become the policy of the Third International. He presciently argued that:

The Third International, as the association of communist parties

*preparing proletarian revolution in every country, is not formally bound by the policies of the Russian government ... We can see now why the tactics of the Third International, laid down by Congress to apply homogeneously to all capitalist countries and to be directed by the centre, are determined not only by the needs of communist agitation in those countries, but also the political needs of Soviet Russia.*²⁵

From 1921 on, the Third International, increasingly acting as an agent of the new Russian State, forced the united front with the parties of the Second International (the same who had murdered so many communists). Eventually all the left elements would be driven out in a campaign of “bolshevisation”. For its part, the KAPD split into many fractions which resulted in its collapse by 1927. Throughout this period of the demise of the prospect of world revolution, Pannekoek was largely absent from the political scene as he resumed his distinguished career as an astronomer of international standing. Thus, 1921 marked the end of his full-time engagement in collective action in revolutionary politics, although he would cooperate with the Dutch Group of International Communists headed by Henk Canne-Meijer (which published versions of his books, *Lenin as Philosopher* and *Workers Councils*) in the 1930s and 1940s, as well as write for Paul Mattick’s *International Council Correspondence* and *Living Marxism*, among other journals. In the growing counter-revolution which reached its fullest expression in Stalinism, the German Left gave birth to council communism.

Which brings us to the book under review. It is only at this point that it starts to deal with Pannekoek’s contribution to revolutionary thinking. There is no reference

to the formative period of Pannekoek’s revolutionary experience. There is not even a single mention of Dietzgen and his critical role in the formation of Pannekoek’s thinking. The editor’s target audience is clearly anarchists as, for example, in the statement that the inspiration for the work comes from Daniel Guerin, an ex-marxist who tried to synthesise its revolutionary aspects with anarchism.²⁶ Talking of the future revolution, Guerin concluded his short essay *Towards a Libertarian Communism* with the words “it will not be authoritarian but libertarian and self-managing, or, if you like, councillist”.²⁷ Against the vagueness of Kropotkin’s mutualism, Guerin can see that the Russian workers’ councils were the historically discovered form of how workers could take over society and abolish class division and at the same time create a form of organisation which, as Pannekoek himself noted,²⁸ would lead to the abolition of the state.

But there is already an anarchist website²⁹ devoted to Pannekoek’s writings. It is much broader in scope, publishing his work against Kautsky in 1912 as well as his anti-war articles. Unfortunately the publishers’ claim for this “deft collection” is a little over the top. They claim that the first half of the book “is transcribed from a manuscript... never before published in full.” Yet, of the 24 chapters and 2 appendices, only 6 (amounting to 60 of the 303 pages) can really be described as unpublished previously. And no-one seems to have asked why Pannekoek did not publish these handwritten notes in English despite living for nearly three decades more. Pannekoek’s usual style of writing is to start a paragraph with a single statement as if it were a hypothesis and then elaborate on it at some length. The handwritten documents which the editor has found in the Pannekoek Archive³⁰ are written in a totally different way

with very short and staccato sentences and few qualifications. It is as if Pannekoek was practising expressing himself in English. And some of these sentences he perhaps did not want to be made public, such as his mistaken prediction that America and Europe would both emerge economically ruined from the coming (Second) World War.³¹ Indeed in his 1947 book, *Workers Councils* he wrote the opposite. The Second World War had created “the big opportunity that now faces American capitalism”.³²

Pannekoek has not generally been well treated in the publications of his works after his death. His book *Workers Councils* was reproduced as a pamphlet in 1970 by Paul Mattick jr’s *Root and Branch* group but only contained Part I and II (leaving out Pannekoek’s considerations of the war and post war situation in Parts III, IV and V). Merlin Press reproduced his *Lenin as Philosopher* but the supposed accompanying essay by Korsch is missing and the latest offering from PM Press is even more disappointing. Even his well-respected³³ *A History of Astronomy* was translated into English with the final paragraph omitted. It clearly states Pannekoek’s continuing commitment to historical materialism and the human future of “a free self-governing world community of productive labour”.³⁴

We have followed the growth of the astronomical world view from the first emergence of civilisation from the prehistoric stage of barbarism. In this growth of science we have before us the fascinating spectacle of a process of spiritual development, which accompanied the development of mankind throughout the period of civilisation. And however many wonders of knowledge and insight this science has brought, its task is far from complete.

At our nearest neighbouring world, the moon, we still face questions, until to passive observation can be added active experimentation. Of our immediate environment in the universe, the solar system, our knowledge has only recently emerged from the stage of general uncertainty and is still imperfect in all respects. Our knowledge of the galaxy and of the stars themselves is still in its beginnings and limited to the outside; of the endless space beyond and of the interior of the stars, of their development in past and future, there is hardly a first beginning of understanding; everything there is still a problem. In every part, every area, we face a series of exciting questions. It is time, that humanity, by establishing a free self-governing world community of productive labour to secure its material life in abundance, should free all spiritual forces for the perfection of its knowledge of nature, of the science of the universe.

The Workers’ Way to Freedom seems to be yet another instance of shoddy treatment of his legacy. The editor almost admits this by telling us this is an “early walk-through of council communist ideas” which “... often mirror points made in Pannekoek’s *Workers’ Councils* and his 1938 book *Lenin as a Philosopher*”.³⁵ In short, it adds nothing to Pannekoek’s legacy and in some ways detracts from it. The editor tells us more about how they came to transcribe Pannekoek’s notes than we ever learn about Pannekoek himself. Indeed, were it not for the addition of Appendix A which was Paul Mattick’s appreciation of Pannekoek two years after his death in 1960, “transcribed from the *Marxists Internet Archive*”,³⁶ we would have no background to Pannekoek’s Marxist view of the world at all. And, as we noted earlier,

you won't find a single reference to the critical influence of Joseph Dietzgen on Pannekoek anywhere in the book. In short, this is an opportunity wasted to discuss the relevance of Pannekoek's writings in the modern context. For this it is better to critically read the originals by Pannekoek, which are now all online on at least three sites.³⁷

We say "critically" because, aside from it being in the spirit of the man himself, we have to carefully examine a contribution which ended more than 60 years ago. Since that time much has changed in capitalism and in the composition of the working class. When Pannekoek died in 1960 that composition had not changed much from the day he entered political activity. It was still a largely Fordist industrial world with large factories employing thousands of workers, the likes of which are rarer today. Older workers will understand what Pannekoek is talking about when he argues that the representation of the councils will start in the "shops" or departments of each factory (and from where we get "shop steward") but Pannekoek died in the midst of the longest secular boom in capitalist history. He did not live to see the end of the post-war boom in the 1970s and the beginning of the crisis.

The attempt to make workers pay for it was initially met with strong resistance by the working class all over the world. Capitalist states in every continent sought to boost profits by cutting wages through inflation. There were wildcat strikes, takeovers of factories and attempts at workers' self-management (doomed to fail as long as capitalism existed) but the strangle-hold of the unions now integrated into the state kept the struggle from exploding into real revolution. And when that still was not enough the capitalists started to write off capital, bringing a return to unemployment levels not seen since the 1930s. Fighting

wage cuts is one thing, but fighting for jobs, when the capitalists don't care about them, is another. Class resistance heroically continued into the 1980s but it could not halt the brutal process of capitalist restructuring. By the 1990s most of the huge production units were either abandoned or cut, as heavy industry was shipped off with their capital to the new special economic (more accurately "special exploitation") zones in China and elsewhere. Add to this the technological shift to the microprocessor and the decline of the old industries and we find the working class in the richest capitalist countries today are more fragmented, working in smaller productive units. This throws up a different challenge for revolutionaries today which goes beyond what Pannekoek envisaged in *Workers Councils*. We'll conclude this review article by briefly looking at what these entail.

All real working class revolutionaries today are, in a certain sense, "councilists". As Pannekoek correctly noted, the great historical discovery of the Russian proletariat was the soviet. This is not only the organisational basis for the struggle to replace capitalist production for profit with a society in which production is solely to meet human need. As he was well aware, it is also the future form of a classless society without a state. The struggle for socialism is not only about changing the character of economic production but also the instrument through which the social transformation of humanity can take place, where the political participation of "citizens" is not restricted to voting once in five years but where delegates can be recalled or mandated in every aspect of social life in order to represent the real interests of those who work. However, Pannekoek considered that the workers' councils in Russia arose "spontaneously" and he assumes the same thing will happen again. In the first place, the idea of "spontaneity"

does not explain anything. We know that the elemental class struggle forces workers from time to time beyond the limits of capitalist order but there are always material reasons for this. And the assertion of spontaneity is not even historically accurate (although Pannekoek might not have known that). The first soviet in Ivanovo-Vosnesensk arose from the material needs of the workers in that Russian “Manchester” to unite all the strikes in their area to make them more effective. Months later the proposal for the first St Petersburg Soviet in 1905 almost certainly came from a Menshevik member of the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party, and the form of election was borrowed from a Tsarist commission of enquiry.³⁸ In the second place, we do not have the same concentration of workers today and this means that consciousness is more fragmented across the class than it was in Pannekoek’s time. This only increases the need for those who are already clear about capitalist exploitation to form some sort of political association which attempts to draw more and more workers into its way of thinking. In short, something like a party.

For most council communists descended from the Dutch and German Left this is an anathema.

The likes of Paul Mattick, Otto Rühle and Anton Pannekoek all shared the same experience of seeing the workers’ revolution betrayed by not just one, but two, Internationals. The Social Democratic parties of the Second International not only betrayed the workers in 1914 by supporting imperialist war but went on to massacre revolutionary workers in defence of German capitalism in 1919 and the years that followed. 1919 saw the foundation of the Third Communist International but in less than two years it adopted the same Social Democratic ideas of using Parliament and the unions seen by

Pannekoek and his comrades in the KAPD as false “opportunist” steps to gain a mass following quickly. No surprise then that the German/Dutch Left came to see parties as simply machines for putting a minority in power however much they claimed to represent the class. But there were differences within the ranks of the council communists who appeared in the 1930s.

As the counter revolution developed into Stalinism, Paul Mattick senior eventually labelled everything to do with the Russian Revolution “Bolshevik”, and to put forward the conspiracy theory that the Bolsheviks had only supported the idea of workers’ councils to get hold of power for their party.³⁹ Otto Rühle, on the other hand, simply concluded that “all parties are bourgeois”.⁴⁰ As we have already seen, Pannekoek, ever the scientist, tended to avoid sterile and personal polemics. He made a greater attempt to understand what had materially brought about the counter-revolution in Russia. He recognised that the workers’ councils did broadly function under the Bolsheviks for “around six months” as did many other organs of workers’ self organisation (factory committees, cooperatives, etc). Pannekoek does not discuss the Revolution in precise detail so omits to say it was the Bolsheviks who actually made the soviets more like his own ideal model of the council system when they introduced the recall of delegates.⁴¹ Even when he uses the word “Leninism” it is a term of neither praise nor abuse, as it is for most commentators, but is linked specifically to the creation of the Marx-Engels Institute, initially headed by Riazanov and Debordin and reorganised by Stalin as a means of promoting the Lenin cult.⁴²

Pannekoek is different from the other councilists in that his whole outlook is based on the notion of the working class acquiring a consciousness of a new society. And

consciousness means nothing if it does not take organisational form. Pannekoek sees the councils as the ideal form but is also aware that revolutionary class consciousness cannot be arrived at without debate and discussion amongst workers hence the idea of “parties” based on that process is not excluded. He tells us that potentially revolutionary “great times will be full of the noise of party strife. Those who have the same ideas form groups to discuss them for their own and to propagate them for their comrades’ enlightenment. Such groups of common opinion may be called parties, though their character will be entirely different from the political parties of the previous world. Under parliamentarism these parties were the organs of different and opposite class interests. In the working class movement they were organizations taking the lead of the class, acting as its spokesmen and representatives and aspiring at guidance and dominance. Now their function will be spiritual fight only. The working class for its practical action has no use for them; it has created its new organs for action ... the council organization, it is the entirety of the workers itself that acts, that has to decide what must be done.”⁴³

The problem for Pannekoek is not so much “parties” but the issue of who holds power after the revolution. The descendants of the Dutch and German Communist Left are not the only victims of the last counter-revolution who have reflected on its lessons. In the tradition of the Italian Left the Internationalist Communist Party (PCInt) (founded in 1943 in Italy) also came to recognise that whilst a party was an essential weapon of the working class in the fight for communism it would also be “different from the political parties of the previous world”. Above all:

It would be a gross and dangerous error for the future to believe that the

*moment the working class creates their party, then they somehow relinquish – totally or even partially – those attributes which make them the gravedigger of capitalism, as if others could act as an alternative and have the same consciousness of the need to struggle against the class enemy and to overthrow it in revolution. At no time and for no reason does the proletariat abandon its combative role. It does not delegate to others its historical mission, and it does not give power away to anyone, not even to its political party.*⁴⁴

The difference here is that Pannekoek does not confront the issue that the road to revolutionary class consciousness before the revolution is an uneven one. The PCInt Platform recognises that the coming into existence of a party (a “part” of the class) is as necessary as it is inevitable in the process of the class coming to consciousness before a revolutionary period, given that workers experience capitalism differently in different places, and at different times. Holding on to the insights gained in the historic struggle is just one task of the party.⁴⁵ Its role will not just be confined to Pannekoek’s education and propaganda but also the organisation of the assault on power by the class as a whole. But as Pannekoek implies, this “new party” cannot be a government-in-waiting. It will not form a “workers’ government” separate from the soviets (as did the Bolsheviks in 1917 in Sovnarkom, (Council of People’s Commissars) which was only loosely supervised by the Soviet Executive before largely supplanting it), but its members will participate in the councils and whatever executive committee is established. And as Pannekoek is also well aware, the establishment of councils is not a complete victory in itself. To begin with they are simply

an arena where the struggle for socialism can take place. The party has to ideologically fight for it in that arena whilst at the same time focussing on the other task that it is equipped for – the promotion of world revolution to link with communist workers across the globe. As the councils gradually move towards the

Notes

1. J. Dominie, *Russia: Revolution and Counter-revolution 1905-24: A View from the Communist Left*, 276 pp. from www.leftcom.org
2. Although it was a view which originally had some attractions for the early *Revolutionary Perspectives* group (one of the predecessors of the Communist Workers' Organisation) and the English translation of Rühle's *From the Bourgeois to the Proletarian Revolution* was undertaken by DG Place, the founder of *Revolutionary Perspectives*. It was then posted on the old libcom site by the late Dave Graham (Graeme Imray, an ex-member of the CWO and *Workers' Voice* before that), and has now reappeared on marxists.org (see <https://www.marxists.org/archive/ruhle/1924/revolution.htm>).
3. Quoted in J. Gerber's introduction to Serge Bricianer's *Pannekoek and the Workers' Councils* <https://files.libcom.org/files/Serge%20Bricianer%20-%20Pannekoek%20and%20the%20Workers%27%20Councils%20ABBY.pdf>
4. This is Gerber's description in the work cited in note 3.
5. Pannekoek often used "spiritual" (which he took from Dietzgen) when referring to thought or consciousness.
6. *Lenin as Philosopher* (Merlin 1975) p.35. Although publicly praising Dietzgen as "our philosopher", Marx and Engels were also sceptical about his stress on the idea that thought in itself was a factor almost on a par with the material world. On 4 October 1868 Marx had written to Engels, Read through the manuscript. My view is that J. Dietzgen would do best if he condensed all his ideas into 2 printed sheets and had them printed in his name as a tanner. If he publishes them at the intended length, he will make a fool of himself because of the lack of dialectical development and the running in circles. Read it through and write your opinion.

abolition of classes and capitalist production they also change function from organs of struggle to organs of administration of the needs of society – in short, they are the key to the withering away of the state, historically discovered in the class struggle itself.

- https://web.archive.org/web/20150926191856/https://mecollectedworks.files.wordpress.com/2014/04/marx-engels-collected-works-volume-43_-1-karl-marx.pdf
7. *ibid.*
8. <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1859/critique-pol-economy/preface.htm>
9. Marx in *The Introduction to Contribution To The Critique Of Hegel's Philosophy Of Right*, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1843/critique-hpr/intro.htm>
10. See *Pannekoek and Gorter's Marxism* (edited by D.A Smart) Pluto Press, 1978 p.93
11. See *Marxist Theory and Revolutionary Tactics* in Smart p.71
12. *loc. cit.*
13. John Gerber *Anton Pannekoek and the Socialism of Workers' Self-emancipation* (1873-1960) p.36 (Kluwer Academic Publishers and International Institute of Social History, 1989) A good account of this is to be found in N. Harding *Lenin's Political Thought Volume 2* (Macmillan 1977) pp.92-110.
14. In *Het Volk* 26 March 1903. Quoted in *The Dutch and German Communist Left* (International Communist Current, 2001) p. 33. It can also be found on line by the original author, Philippe Bourrinet (with additional footnotes) at https://files.libcom.org/files/Philippe%20Bourrinet%20-%20The%20Dutch%20and%20German%20Communist%20Left%20%281900_1968%29.pdf
15. Although Pannekoek did not accept Luxemburg's economic theory in which explained the basis of imperialism and even criticised her *The Accumulation of Capital* in 1913. Luxemburg replied to him in her *Anti-Critique*. See K.J. Tarbuck (ed) *Imperialism and the Accumulation of Capital* (Penguin 1972) p 67 onwards.
16. See Smart p.70.

17. Smart p.73
18. For the Resolution of the Zimmerwald Left and its context see <https://www.leftcom.org/en/articles/2015-09-08/zimmerwald-lenin-leads-the-struggle-of-the-revolutionary-left-for-a-new>
19. See *The Dutch and German Communist Left* p. 108
20. <https://www.leftcom.org/en/articles/2023-10-29/radek-s-theses-on-imperialism-1915>
21. See Warren Lerner *Karl Radek – The Last Internationalist* (Stanford 1970) pp. 44-7 and R Craig *Nation in his War on War* (Haymarket 1989) pp.112-4.
22. *Lenin Collected Works* (Moscow 1974) Volume 25 p.489
23. In *World Revolution and Communist Tactics* (1920) he was still writing that “the new order in Russia is showing increasing strength” (see Smart p.94) as well as twice more in the same article.
24. “Left-wing” *Communism – and Infantile Disorder* in *Lenin Selected Works Volume 3* (Moscow 1977) p.309.
25. Afterword to *World Revolution and Communist Tactics* in Smart op. cit. p.144.
26. We have quoted him on this previously. See <https://www.leftcom.org/en/articles/2013-11-09/marxism-and-anarchism>
27. <https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/daniel-guerin-towards-a-libertarian-communism>
28. See *World Revolution and Communist Tactics* in Smart op. cit. p.117.
29. <https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/anton-pannekoek-essential-pannekoek>
30. <https://www.aaap.be//Pages/Pannekoek-Inventory.html#histastr>
31. *The Workers’ Way to Freedom* p.11.
32. <https://www.marxists.org/archive/pannekoek/1947/workers-councils.htm#h24>
33. In a rare Cold War cooperation, NASA translated a 1962 Russian review of *A History of Astronomy* which noted Pannekoek’s continued commitment to human emancipation. The Russian review noted that Pannekoek spent less time on Egyptian astronomy because its work was entirely at the service of theocracy and not society in general. https://articles.adsabs.harvard.edu/cgi-bin/nph-iarticle_query?bibcode=1962SvA.....6..293P
34. The last paragraph of Pannekoek’s *Een geschiedenis van de sterrekund* (*A History of Astronomy*). We are grateful to Vico of the Antonie Pannekoek Archives for both the original Dutch and translation.
35. *The Workers’ Way to Freedom* p.3.
36. *The Workers’ Way to Freedom* p.225. The link is <https://www.marxists.org/archive/mattick-paul/1960/pannekoek.htm>
37. There is a wide selection of his writings plus other articles on Pannekoek himself (including works by Bricianer and Gerber quoted here) on libcom.org.
38. See Oskar Anweiler *The Soviets* (Merlin 1974) p.53.
39. Mattick’s *Anti-Bolshevik Communism* is reviewed in *Revolutionary Perspectives* 14 (First Series). See <https://files.libcom.org/files/2022-07/revolutionary-perspectives-14.pdf>
40. See his *From the Bourgeois to the Proletarian Revolution* <https://www.marxists.org/archive/ruhe/1924/revolution.htm> and *The Revolution is not a Party Affair* <https://www.marxists.org/archive/ruhe/1920/ruhe02.htm>
41. See “Decree on the Right of Recall” in *First Decrees of Soviet Power* edited by Y. Akhaphkin (Lawrence and Wishart 1970) p.42.
42. See *Lenin as Philosopher* p.8. Space prevents us from an analysis of *Lenin as Philosopher* here but it is safe to note that in looking for the emergence of state capitalism in the USSR in 1938 by referring to a polemic Lenin indulged in before the First World War, Pannekoek again reveals a tendency to the idealist.
43. See *Workers Councils* in the section on “*The Workers’ Revolution*”
44. <https://www.leftcom.org/en/articles/2020-03-16/political-platform-of-the-internationalist-communist-party-1952>
45. For a fuller treatment of the relationship between class consciousness and revolutionary organisation see our pamphlet *Class Consciousness and Revolutionary Organisation* which is now in pdf format here <https://www.leftcom.org/files/2018-06-30-consciousness.pdf>

Russia

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The Russian Revolution remains a landmark event in history. For the bourgeois historians, the October Revolution is thought to be a tragedy that set back the achievements of the "democratic" February Revolution, and allowed the Bolsheviks to wreak havoc on their citizens and the world. For the Stalinists, the events of 1917 paved the way for the birth of the USSR, which they point to as a prototypical example of "socialism in one country". In reality, the February and October Revolutions were both part of the same proletarian revolution

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 win over 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 Affiliates of the Internationalist Communist Tendency No 61 Autumn/Winter 2022 Donations Welcome



Capitalist Crisis: Survival of the Richest

Months of soaring inflation and falling wages are the latest effects of the crisis inherent in the capitalist system. The ruling class attacks us not only and working conditions are just one more attempt to make us feel the pain of their economic crisis, revealed by the flames of the inflation (two to three times of letters to us).

Workers Getting the Worst of a Bad Deal

The rise in the prices of food, fuel and other items, has been intense and unrelenting. In the 12 months leading up to September 2022 there has been a rise of 8.4% in the average price paid with every single month seeing a new increase in the same period. The use of food has risen by 20.1%, while transport costs rose by 18.9%. Water, energy and housing related costs rose by 20.7% - although 'housing' can usually be taken into account as it is not a direct cost to most workers when according to the labourer. Cost, the value of energy used and cost of transport by up to a 30% rising against general household in January and February.

As most households face the choice to 'eat or fuel' the services, more than 90% of food banks across an increase in use. Homelessness is at its highest in 10 years. Homelessness is at its highest in 10 years. Homelessness is at its highest in 10 years. Homelessness is at its highest in 10 years.



A Crisis with a History

The so-called 'loss of living costs' is not new. In the early 1970s, inflation, the price rise, and the increase in the cost of living, led to a crisis of confidence in the ruling class. But ever since the 1970s we have been in a downward slide, with whole sectors of production and jobs dismantled and wages as a percentage of GDP dropping. More expensive means of manufacturing followed. Global, especially, 'spring and strong recovery' from the crisis of 2008/9 did for a big big financial system but 'methodical' state intervention, nationalisation and stimulus were used to prevent a depression. As it was, a small percentage of workers had their eyes opened to the fact that they had been exploited and created were a victim of their past. In fact it was one of a sign of things to come, since it was not for the first time that workers' resistance was a result of the crisis. Over the last 50 years, workers' resistance has been a result of the crisis. Over the last 50 years, workers' resistance has been a result of the crisis. Over the last 50 years, workers' resistance has been a result of the crisis.

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

Class Struggle is Back on the Agenda

The capitalist class is redefining the rules in the battle, this means a new set of rules. The ruling class is redefining the rules in the battle, this means a new set of rules. The ruling class is redefining the rules in the battle, this means a new set of rules.



that can level the playing field and act against the interests. Elements of the system (such as, we see during the Covid crisis, our transport and energy without even consulting the membership). The workers will need to be able to influence the system, which is a struggle to the government to gain as a goal, not to be a goal, not to be a goal, not to be a goal.

At the point where the establishment needs to begin to work of 'class war' and a whole, changing, to disrupted, striking workers. In July, if workers started their own, the first nationally active in the UK, the first nationally active in the UK, the first nationally active in the UK.

Workers Can Push Their Own Alternative At the moment, the capitalist class is redefining the rules in the battle, this means a new set of rules. The ruling class is redefining the rules in the battle, this means a new set of rules.

the current resistance is an important tactical point. But it is not the only one. The current resistance is an important tactical point. But it is not the only one. The current resistance is an important tactical point. But it is not the only one.

On January there were strikes by 100,000 workers in the UK. In February, there were strikes by 100,000 workers in the UK. In February, there were strikes by 100,000 workers in the UK.

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