

# Class composition and the theory of the party at the origin of the workers councils movement

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Highly specialized workers in the machine industry constituted a substantial part of the factory leaders in the German workers-councils movement. Since this professional figure took on a social and political dimension in 1918, it is legitimate to ask whether the structure of pre-war German industry generated this type of work-force, and whether these workers' position in production was directly linked to their political adherence to the workers-councils system.

Pre-war German machine industry had not reached yet a level of concentration and rationalization similar to that of mining, steel, and electric sectors. It consisted mainly of middle-size establishments employing between 1,000 and 5,000 workers distributed in the traditional centers of German industrialism: Rhineland-Westphalia, Wuerttemberg, Saxony, the Berlin region, the Hamburg region, Oldenburg and Bavaria. It was the newest German industrial sector. Its most important products were bikes, motorcycles, machine tools, office machines, sewing machines, tools, and automobiles. Specialization was not very advanced. In fact, almost all major manufacturers of bikes and later motorcycles also produced office machines and sewing machines. Only the German branch of Singer in Hamburg later became just a producer of sewing machines – and this came about because it was a subsidiary of a U.S. corporation which had already achieved a monopoly position. The auto industry had not yet attained its subsequent importance. (In the United States this happened around 1910-12 but, in Germany, it only came about in 1924 with Opel.) Auto production was carried out on a limited scale in small to middle size establishments. The auxiliary industry to the manufacturing of engines experienced a remarkable development and became autonomous by becoming rapidly concentrated and rationalized. It was in this sector, and specifically in the production of ignition devices, that Robert Bosch made his fortune. In 1913, he already employed 4,700 workers in Stuttgart and in other minor establishments. This sector, which allowed pre-war German machine industry to achieve a leading world position, had an exceptionally skilled labor force. It employed many specialized technicians, it had research and development expenditures higher than elsewhere, and developed an extremely dynamic marketing apparatus. Consequently, wages were higher. Bosch was the first German company to introduce the eight-hour work day in 1906 and the free Saturday in 1910 as employer's concessions. It was at this time that Germany witnessed the development of industrial sectors such as light machinery, precision tools, optics, and electro-mechanics. If we follow the history of the firms engaged in these sectors we see

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them making remarkable leaps forward: these are the same firms which built the international reputation for the extremely high quality of German products, and thus succeeded in meeting the financially stronger British and American competition. This was not necessarily due to the entrepreneurial ability of individual German capitalists. Rather, it was a result of the remarkable professional ability of a skilled labor force working with the most advanced technology and special tools, and directly concerned with the modification of work systems. *In this sector* the predominant figure was that of the worker-inventor, or even of the worker collaborating very closely with technicians and planning engineers. The result of this situation in Germany was the success of the tool and machine industry. Thus, whereas German agriculture and the textile industry were going through recession and crisis, Germany was producing the best agricultural and textile machinery in the world.

Let us examine the workers employed in these highly dynamic sectors: their metal work demanded utmost precision, they directly participated in changing the structure of the product and transforming their own techniques. This is what produced the success of sectors such as the German aircraft industry which in 1913 was considered the world's leader. Thus, it seems natural to find in those sectors a whole series of paternalistic initiatives and company policies such as higher wages, shorter working hours, and even profit-sharing (workers' claims Western German employers were to reintroduce between 1950 and 1965). Individual capitalists were forced to pay in order to maintain stable skilled and specialized work forces. They favored the crystallization of professional aristocracies and sought to reduce as much as possible the mobility of their labor force, especially within the same sector. Later, some of these industries were greatly stimulated by the war. Thus, e.g., Zeiss of Jena and the other great optic company, Leitz, grew as a result of government contracts for the production of all aiming instruments, while Bosch did the same in the production of generators and electromagnetic equipment needed by modern military gadgetry. Optical industries were mainly located in Wuerttemberg and in Saxony, while light machine tool and electromechanic industries concentrated gradually around Berlin.

It is no mere coincidence that the workers-councils movement acquired the most marked political and managerial characteristics precisely in those three regions where the machine tool, electromechanic and optical industries, were more concentrated, i.e., where highly specialized workers were predominant within the overall labor force.<sup>1</sup> These highly specialized workers of the machine and tool industry with a high level of professional ability, engaged in precision work, perfectly familiar with tools (both manual and mechanic) and working alongside technicians and engineers in modifying the working process, were *materially* most susceptible to a political-organizational project such as the workers-councils, i.e., workers' self-management of production. The concept of workers' self-management could not have had such a wide appeal in the German

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1. We must not forget the Hamburg region, the other focal center of the workers-councils movement, where the same type of worker predominated in the ship-building industry which later became a war industry.

workers-councils movement without the presence of a labor force inextricably linked to the technology of the working process, with high professional values and naturally inclined to stress their function as “producers”. The concept of self-management pictured the worker as an autonomous producer, and the factory’s labor-power as self-sufficient. It only saw the relation between the workers and individual employers or companies, and it distrusted “politics” in its broad sense, i.e., the relationship between organization and power, party and revolution. This relation between occupational structures and determining political-ideological attitudes is well-known. It has to be emphasized both because Germany provides the most substantial illustration, and as a reminder to those who love confused and inconclusive discussions of “class consciousness”, as if the latter were a spiritual or cultural fact. Also, although the self-managerial element was the most significant one, it does not exhaust the phenomenon of the German councils as revolutionary praxis and planning. It only constitutes its most typical feature.

Another feature of the German movement, directly linked to the first, was the nearly total adherence of technicians to it. In this case also the material position of the labor force within the machine industry led to a specific political choice. At that time, technicians and engineers were not yet the functionaries of the scientific organization of exploitation, since Taylorism was adopted in Germany only in the post-war period. Yet, German companies in general had a high-level administrative-bureaucratic form of organization. The German industrial boom preceding World War I was due primarily to two objective conditions: the employment of the most advanced technology and research (the number of patents accumulated was enormous), and the extreme efficiency of the bureaucratic-administrative apparatus. This was made possible by the existence of basic infrastructures such as the organization of professional education much more advanced and well-articulated than that of other countries, a close connection between university research and industrial applications, a tradition of administrative efficiency typical of Prussian bureaucracy – both before and after Bismarck – which during the pre-World War I period of the industrial boom spread to the company level. On the basis of reports written by engineers for the workers-councils movement and published in its press, we know that the administrative-bureaucratic organization of German companies was very efficient. During the same period there occurred a higher increase in the employment of white collar than blue collar workers.

Traditionally, German bureaucracy had always been a faithful executor of orders from above. This remained true in the executive position of the technically conditioned technico-clerical labor force. In addition to its material position, the machine industry of that time produced a kind of homogeneity of the whole labor force in the company which at the proper moment (and for a short time) transformed itself into a political unity. Within the described type of enterprise it is absurd to look for a managerial class with decision-making powers located between the owners and the working class. Although extremely dynamic, from this viewpoint German machine industry had a “backward” structure with respect to the stage of industrial and technological development represented by Fordism, i.e., by the mass-production industry of consumer

goods. That labor force characterized by high professional values and that advanced enterprise with its technical structure, did not constitute at all the vanguard of capitalist industrial organization. A remarkably authoritative testimony of this comes from Henry Ford himself, who, in his autobiography, scorns that type of machine enterprise claiming that, when he was about to introduce the conveyer-belt and the assembly line, the machine industry represented the sector most static, backward, and unresponsive to the changes taking place in the organization of productive process and in the organic composition of capital. By resisting Ford's innovations, the German machine industry expressed an all-out defense of a particular kind of labor force, and therefore of a particular kind of "labor aristocracy". This resistance was equally put up by individual employers, technicians as well as workers. This middle-size machine enterprise which kept coming up with new products and, after more or less long periods of experimentation and planning, was beginning to embark in serial production (but not mass production), was to be swept away by Fordism precisely in its fundamental labor-component. Ford's innovations did not amount to mere qualitative changes of machinery but, in the long run, they meant the progressive extinction of the type of worker bound to the machine, to the factory and to the craft. The highly skilled worker of the machine industry was to give way to the unskilled, uprooted, highly mobile and interchangeable modern assembly-line worker. Thus, it is important to keep in mind that before the German "labor aristocracy" became the "revolutionary vanguard", before it underwent the acid-test, it had already been objectively doomed to extinction by the capitalist vanguards.

Fordism not only replaced the craftsman, or the "labor aristocracy", with the mass-production worker by profoundly transforming the internal structure of the labor force: it has also considerably altered both the structure and the labor (and capitalist) conception of wages. Whereas for Taylor wages were incentives directly linked to the position of the single worker in the enterprise according to the individualistic and atomistic approach typical of Taylorian philosophy, for Ford wages became the general rate of income to be used in conjunction with the dynamics of the system. It became the general rate of capital to be injected within a framework of planned development. In 1911, Ford's ideas were the bright innovations of a single entrepreneur. It took the threat of a general overthrow of factory power relations, i.e., the threat of the workers-councils to collective capital, for them to become the strategy of collective capital, or the Keynesian "income revolution". This threat was not a result of the fact that the concrete projects of a new industrial order were particularly advanced, or that the workers-council movement was based primarily on the labor aristocracy, i.e., provoked the failure of planned class integration into the system. The threat was due to the fact that it was an international class movement. It was due to the fact that the working class as a whole attempted for the first time in history to reverse the trend in the process of capitalist development in the backward as well as in the advanced sectors, at the plant as well as the social level. It was not its organizational, political-ideological, or sociological character, but its international nature that constituted the revolutionary feature of the workers-councils movement. It was a world-wide 1905 in which only the weakest link

broke.

In order to politically reconstruct the workers-councils movement, we must follow the cycles of international labor struggles as well as the class composition within capitalism. Let us return to the German illustration. The discussion concerning the structure of the technically skilled work force and its geographical distribution is absolutely inadequate and runs the risk of becoming incorrect and misleading unless we first investigate the political class composition in Germany. Capital backwardness does not necessarily mean backwardness in the working class. If in analyzing political struggles we retain the usual distinction between advanced (U.S., England, Germany) and backward capitalist countries (Russia, Italy), we run the risk of generating confusion and schematism. From the viewpoint of subjective organization, the nature of the struggles in Russia are as advanced as elsewhere – if not more. While in the periods 1904-06, 1911-13, and 1917-20, we face a highly unbalanced capital in advanced and backward areas, we witness an extremely homogeneous political class activity in all countries. Thus, we can speak of a series of international *cycles of struggle* beginning in the 1904-06 period. The specific traits of this first cycle are very clear, even if it is difficult to chronologically locate it. It is the mass strike resulting in violent and insurrectional actions. This is best exemplified in the U.S. Starting in 1901, a series of violent mass strikes shakes the whole U.S. industrial structure. With its center, its class pole, located with the Rocky Mountain miners, these struggles spread primarily among steel, textile, and transportation workers, but, above all, construction workers. In 1905, at the peak of the cycle, while the Soviets were coming into being in Russia, in the U.S. the International Workers of the World (IWW) was formed: the most radical proletarian organization ever in the U.S., the only revolutionary class organization before the rise of the Afro-American movement. Today, there is much to be said and learned from the IWW. Although many of its militants were anarchists and anarcho-syndicalists who had migrated from Eastern and Western Europe, the IWW cannot be liquidated as the American parallel of French anarcho-syndicalism.

What was so extraordinarily modern in the IWW? Although it was based on an old class nucleus, the Western Federation of Miners, the merit of the IWW was that it attempted to organize the American proletariat in terms of its intrinsic characteristics. It was primarily an immigrant proletariat and, therefore, a mixture of ethnic groups which could only be organized in a certain way. Secondly, it was a mobile proletariat: thus, it was not only completely against identification with any specific task or skill but it was also against any link with individual factories (even if only to take them over). The IWW succeeded in concretely individuating the concept of social factory, and thus it sought to exploit the extraordinary level of communication and coordination allowed by a mobility-based struggle. The IWW succeeded in creating an absolutely original type of agitator: not the mole digging for decades within the single establishment or proletarian neighborhood, but a type of agitator who swims within the stream of proletarian struggles, moves from one end to the other of the enormous American continent and calculates the seismic wave of the struggle, thus succeeding in overcoming state boundaries and sailing the oceans before

organizing conventions to found sister organizations. The Wobblies' concern with transportation workers and longshoremen, their constant determination to strike at capital as an international market, their perceiving of the mobile proletariat — today employed, tomorrow unemployed — as a virus of social insubordination, as the agent of the "social wildcat": all these things make the IWW a class organization anticipating present forms of struggle, and yet completely independent from the traditions of both the Second and the Third International. The IWW is the direct link from Marx's First International to the post-communist era.

The violence and continuity of the American strikes during the first two decades of the century show how politically correct Marx's intuition was thirty years earlier to move the headquarters of 'his' International to New York. It is difficult to locate the culmination point of these struggles. Yet, the trajectory of this cycle is roughly analogous to the European one and to that of the Russian proletariat. Memorable remains the 1905 struggle of 5,000 teamsters in Chicago resulting in clashes with the police and the cost of 20 deaths and 400 wounded. In 1904, Italy's first general strike also took place.<sup>2</sup> On January 3, 1905, the Putilov factory workers struck and the Russian revolution of 1905 began.<sup>3</sup> During the first months of that year the great strike of the German miners broke out in the Bruchstrasse mine and spread throughout the Ruhr. Prior to this struggle in Germany there had been the strikes of textile and paper workers during 1903 and 1904. These involved workers laboring under the worst conditions and receiving the worst wages. In the paper industry there had been the highest percentage of disability owing to work accidents and the famous German labor unions were nearly absent from among paper and textile workers: these workers obtained their first contract only in 1919, after the overthrow of the monarchy. The strike had broken out spontaneously, in the same way as with the miners' strike of 1905.

In the class composition of pre-war Germany the Ruhr miners represented the most advanced sector. This working class nucleus was perhaps the only one able to set in motion the whole social fabric when it entered into struggle. Typical, in this respect, had been the spontaneous and sudden 1889 strike which immediately turned into a mass strike. Already then the unions had moved in at the last moment. The Kaiser and Bismarck had to intervene directly in order to put an end to the struggle in the face of the unions' contractual and organizational inability, and the stubborn resistance put up by the coal barons. The miners had forced the employers to accept all of their demands, except the most important one, i.e., the eight-hour day including the time to and from the

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2. For an excellent account of this, see Giuliano Procacci's article in *Rivista Storica del Socialismo*, n. 17.

3. For a masterful analysis of this struggle, see Rosa Luxemburg, "The Mass Strike, the Political Party, and the Trade Unions", in Mary Alice Waters, ed., *Rosa Luxemburg Speaks* (New York, 1970), pp. 155-218; and Lenin's 1917 Zurich commemorative address, "Lecture on the Russian Revolution of 1905", in *Collected Works* (Moscow, 1964), vol. 23, pp. 236-253, in addition to contemporary writings and those immediately following the events, with the first notes concerning urban guerilla warfare.

tunnels. In fact, the 1905 struggle started precisely with this demand. As a result of constant extraction, the mines had become deeper and the time needed to go down and come up had doubled.

The mining crisis had forced about 9,000 miners to leave the district, mining illness had greatly increased but, most of all, the miners did not tolerate the presence of bosses. After the great blows of 1889 which had been especially costly at the organizational level (only 40% of the miners were union members), the union initially sought to localize the struggle. But the strike spread rapidly: after 10 days 220,000 miners were striking, out of a total of 270,000 in that district. The demands had been rejected by the barons with their usual arrogance. What was not tolerated was the questioning of the principle "here I am the boss" (*Herr-im-Hause Standpunkt*). The German miners' strike set the pace for the great struggles of the workers-councils' period. Two things stand out: the non-violence of the struggle (even the bourgeois press praised the orderly behavior of the workers), and the demands regarding power relations in the work place. The extreme sociality of the struggle in Russia, Italy, and the U.S. corresponded to demands still directed to individual capitalists or groups of capitalists in a given sector. What this meant was that the German miners had to challenge class power first and foremost at the place of production, i.e., even in the most advanced class-pole we encounter the same characteristic of anchoring subversive activity to the place of production. It is interesting to notice that, once again, the real counterpart was the government represented by the secretary of state Count von Posadowsky. A faithful follower of Bismarck and of his 'state socialism', the Count immediately enacted legislative measures which substantially met the miners' demands concerning working hours, and instituted "Labor Committees" in mines employing more than 100 people. This institution preceded by a very short time similar "Internal Committees" in Italy. In the Government's whole behavior it is easy to discern characteristics which reappear later. In Germany the interests of collective capital were protected by the state or, in 1918, by social-democracy. In 1905 the initiative of introducing labor representation in the factory came from capital. It was a far cry from anything like co-management: they were merely organisms meant to deal with local disputes to prevent them from erupting in overt struggles which may have eventually led to a general struggle. Similarly under revolutionary pressures, the social-democratic coalition government in 1920 was to intervene against projects of socialization meant to yield all power in the factories to the workers-councils with the law of the *Betriebsraete*.<sup>4</sup>

The Ruhr strike did not close the period of the mass strikes in Germany: in January 1906 a general political strike paralyzed Hamburg's factories and harbor — a strike which Luxemburg defined as the "general test of the insurrection".<sup>5</sup> In the years following 1905, however, a whole series of sectors

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4. The prerogatives of the *Betriebsraete* can be compared to the *comitati paritetici* introduced in the Italian machine industry after the 1966 contracts.

5. We have dealt at some length with the miners' strike to indicate the most advanced class pole in pre-war Germany. Unfortunately, we have not been able to use statistics dealing with specific industrial sectors in order to reconstruct the whole German class composition in relation to the movements in struggle. Some

underwent expansion and the overwhelming presence of the 200,000 miners from the Ruhr was balanced primarily through the creation of massive industrial centers in the Berlin region, in the Leipzig-Dresden-Chemnitz triangle, in Wuerttemberg, as well as in the proximity of the ports of Hamburg, Kiel, and Bremen. Thus, in the third crucial cycle of struggles of the 1917-20 period, these other class-poles would begin the struggle, first Berlin and the ports, then Saxony, and finally the Ruhr.

Turning again from the political class composition to the structure of the labor force, it must be emphasized that the Ruhr miners and the skilled machine workers shared a very important common element, especially in terms of the problems of the modification of the organic composition of capital and in the innovative process necessary to capitalist development. Mine labor was not easily mechanizable. It was unthinkable that in a brief period a technical solution such as mechanization could drastically transform the occupational structure of mining both in the short and in the long run. In other words, the coal-steel barons realized that they *had* to live with those workers for, given the situation of full employment, they could not replace them with workers of a different type: thus, a Fordist solution in the mine and in the steel industry was not easily applicable. Similarly, the machine industry employers *wanted* to keep their own workers and were inclined towards paternalistic solutions, in order to create islands of privilege, both from normative and a wage viewpoint. Both the authoritarian and arrogant barons of the coal-steel sector, and the enlightened and paternalistic employers of the machine sector, could not plan on a short or long run labor policy different from the one they were following. In other words, the particular level of development of the two sectors posed very rigid

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absolute figures on the strikes can at least confirm the statement that the 1904-06 period represents a distinct cycle of struggles: in 1903 there were 1,347 strikes, 86,000 strikers, with 7,000 factories involved; in 1904 there were 1,870 strikes, with 113,000 strikers, and 10,000 factories involved. In 1905 there were 2,400 strikes, with 400,000 strikers, affecting 14,000 factories; in 1906 the number of strikes was 3,000, the number of strikers was 270,000, and the factories involved 16,000; in 1907 there were 2,200 strikes, with 190,000 strikers, and with 13,000 factories involved. The following year all these figures are reduced by two thirds. It is interesting to note how things went in the 1905-06 years: compared to 1905, 1906 does not include the solid mass of 200,000 strikers from the Ruhr; yet, the number of strikes increases by 30% and the number of factories involved by approximately 13%. Similarly, in 1907: while compared to 1905 the number of strikers has decreased by approximately 52%, the number of strikes decreased only 8% and the number of factories involved also decreased by 8-9%. What this means is that the struggle had spread from the great class pole represented by the Ruhr miners into middle-size factories, thus affecting the whole social fabric of German capital. It was the initial thrust generated by the miners which put in motion the mechanism of struggle even in the machine factories of the labor aristocracy and of golden paternalism. The overwhelming presence of 200,000 Ruhr miners in the German political class-composition and the overwhelming presence of the coal-steel sector within Germany's industrial geography can be compared to FIAT's position in Italy.



limitations which severely conditioned the capitalists' freedom to maneuver. These employers could have modified all other aspects of capitalist politics such as improve the financial structure of their enterprises, accelerate concentration, improve the technical structure and the technologies used, find new markets, create new products, cooperate with unions and the government, show more entrepreneurial dynamism, favor or oppose an external social-democratic collaboration with the government, etc. Even if they had done all of this, however, they could not have made any substantial alterations in the structural nature of the labor power. This is very important because it shows how the rigidity of the German industrial system was one of the elements which rendered the overall labor power an independent variable such as to constitute, through its mere objective permanence, serious threat to further capitalist development in Germany.

The above is meant to correct the interpretation which, starting from the reformist character of the self-management project of the councils, seeks to deny the struggles' real revolutionary import, except in terms of a revival of capitalist development. If the argument is theoretically correct, and it is possible to draw conclusions from it concerning workers' struggles, the historical corrections or, better, the historical determination of that argument leads us to conclude that the post-war movement was of a subversive character. A labor organization which merely reiterated the structure of the collective labor force in the factory, dealt with workers only in their position and function as producers, merely sought to keep workers as they were within the factory in its global demands, would have turned out to be a deadly organization for German capital: ultimately it would have blocked its possibility of maneuver by taking away from the system the element of flexibility so crucially needed for rescuing capitalist development through a modification of the organic composition of capital. This type of bottle-neck was precisely what confronted Italian capitalism before fascism in almost the same terms. Thus, the revolutionary import of a movement must be calculated on the basis of the historically determined stage of development in a specific situation. German capital's impossibility to change in a short period of ten or twenty years the structure of the labor-force, the wage structure and the organic composition of capital, confronted it with a lack of choices and alternatives which translated into an inability to find alternative political solutions even before the 1918 revolutionary wave or, better, of solutions obtained through mere economic means of development, or through a reformist outcome of the labor struggle. Why did even a social-democratic organizational outcome such as the workers-councils turn out to be impossible in Germany? Why was German social-democracy unable to find a reformist solution to the political crisis of the system and had to present itself as a mere tool of repression of the struggles and of the workers-councils organizations? Why in 1918 did German social-democracy have to abandon Kautsky and choose Noske? The pair of social-democracy and repression, i.e., the social-Fascist solution, was the adequate answer to such a high level of subversive struggle. To clarify things, let us examine the solutions adopted by the American ruling class after the crisis generated by the 1904-05 struggles. One of the elements which greatly favored the victorious capitalist answer in the U.S. was the radical transformation in the occupational and labor-force structure. From 1905 to

1914 the U.S. received no less than 10 million immigrants. It is easy to imagine what this mass of subproletarians meant in terms of labor reserves and occupational structures. The half-million foreign workers present in Germany (mostly Italian and Polish) is very little compared to this amount. Here, we can see the import of Ford's genius as well as the strategic result of his projects on advanced mechanization and on the organization of wages in relation to consumption. But the Fordist solution merely rendered violent counter-revolution unnecessary in the U.S. as the only way out. Through a massive modification in the organic composition of capital, Fordism was also able to bring about a major change in the occupational structure of the labor-power. The assembly-line worker at Ford was very different from the skilled worker in the German machine industry. His very interchangeability (he could have been an Italian just landed and still unable to say "wage" in English) led him to despise that attachment to the individual factory still typical of the social figure that in Germany gave life to the workers-councils movement under the assumption that self-management was sufficient to create the socialist society. Thus, in Germany the situation was different. The rigidity of the system reduced the margins of maneuver and even Bernsteinian social-democracy represented an objective danger before the war. The latter, rather than the Kaiser's "authoritarianism", was the reason why it was not coopted by the government before the war. These bottle-necks within the system forced German capital to intensify the already inherent tendency toward aggressive expansion in foreign markets in order to overcome the crisis, thus giving rise to those intercapitalist conflicts so well described by Lenin in his pamphlet on imperialism. If the SPD wanted to join the government it had to reject any intermediate solution and totally accept social-imperialism. This occurred in 1914, with the approval of the war credits by the social-democratic group. But even in this, things are not as simple as they are made out by the official historiography of the labor movement with its theme on the social-democratic "betrayal".<sup>6</sup>

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6 After this summary analysis of 1905 with reference to the key aspects of the international working class, little remains to be said about the cycle of struggles of the 1911-13 period. The same nuclei initiate the struggle and put into motion the working class in the various countries. Just to recall a few dates: 1911, strike of the coal miners in West Virginia, and the memorable struggle of the textile workers in Lawrence (even then there was a repressive wave against IWW militants); April 4, 1912, massacre of the precious metal miners of Lena, in Russia; in June of that year, Lenin wrote his article on the Russian "revolutionary renewal"; in 1912, the third mass strike of the Ruhr miners in Germany.

This time the struggle took place in a moment of great activity and after the steel and coal barons had signed an agreement committing the individual capitalist to refuse employment for four years to any worker who had been fired for politico-disciplinary reasons by other employers in the same sector. In Germany, from 155,000 strikers in 1910, we have 400,000 in 1912, and 250,000 in 1913. This is the period when workers make the utmost use of labor unions. Trade union membership jumps from 1,800,000 in 1910 to 2,300,000 in 1912. It was the highest figure since the turn of the century. But the workers

### *The Theoretical Discussion in the International Labor Movement*

The decade at the turn of the century was a period of intense and passionate theoretical debate within the international labor movement. Obviously, it is impossible here to deal with every central theme. We will only isolate a few, and particularly those connected with the discussion and political planning of the workers-council movement: the relationship between spontaneity and leadership, between tactics and strategy, and the relationship between labor unions and the party. These are the themes around which the battle raged among the three great currents of the labor movement: the revisionist, the revolutionary, and the anarcho-syndicalist. Having dealt mainly with the struggles in Russia, Germany, and the U.S., we will only touch upon the thought of Bernstein, Rosa Luxemburg, Daniel DeLeon and Lenin. It is to be remembered that almost all the fundamental works on these problems were written *before* the Russian revolution of 1905.

In a series of articles in *Neue Zeit* and in his main work *Evolutionary Socialism*, Bernstein touched upon a very important point. He maintained that the clash between capital and labor had to be seen in terms of relationship between wages and profits. From this correct observation he drew a series of consequences which led the labor movement to lose the class perspective concerning the seizure of power. It is impossible to understand why his works generated so much turmoil unless we recall that his starting point was correct. From it Bernstein drew two consequences: 1) that labor struggles, conceived as economic struggles, dominated political struggles so that unions were above the party and the forms of struggle had to exclude mass demonstration in order to operate within the domain of concrete bargaining disputes; and 2) that the political struggle had to deal exclusively with the growth of the economic power of the labor-force and was to be restricted to creating an institutional framework for this growth. Bernstein's position lost sight of the final goal of socialism and left untouched existing power structures. Yet, it went beyond the fatalism, determinism and mechanism typical of previous Second International positions. Bernstein's position was "economism" as a general theory of the class movement. Precisely because of this, however, it entailed a dynamism and a possibility for immediate application which were immediately seen by the leaders of the large German labor organizations who appropriated them by side-stepping the hesitations of the party's high priests (Kautsky) and their

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used the union without making any fetish out of the organization. By way of illustration, in 1911, the number of steel workers that were members of the socialist union was 133,000; an increase of 40,000 from 1910. But the number of members who in 1912 left the union was as high as 67,000, i.e., a negative mobility of 75%. Three fourths of the members were new members. These figures must be quoted in order to demystify the legend of the fetishism of the German workers toward organization: for each member who remained, three left. Moreover, with 133,000 members, the steel-workers' union organized only 25% of the labor force employed in that sector, while in 1905, it organized 7%. If we look at the large number of strikes in those same years, we soon realize that the great majority of these struggles were spontaneous.

reservations with departures from the orthodoxy. Because of the weight that German organizations carried within the Second International, this immediate acceptance by trade unionists gave Bernstein's doctrines an immediate popularity and diffusion, even if in some countries the unions were strongly influenced by anarcho-syndicalist theories which, at any rate, shared with Bernsteinism the rejection of "party" organization, or its overcoming. The official separation of the German unions from social-democracy occurred in 1903. Actually, it was nothing but a matter of the unions declaring themselves autonomous from the party. Clearly, for the revolutionaries, the political element or the importance of the "politicizing" factor in labor struggles became fundamental in challenging Bernstein. It was necessary to reintroduce a strategic vision and at the same time formulate a type of organization or a center of decision which could firmly hold together tactics and strategy. This, however, had to emphasize spontaneity as a challenge to the trade unions' institutional possibilities of controlling the struggling process in individual actions (daily tactics) and in its overall line. But to mention spontaneity was tantamount to appeal to a term which had been the battle-cry of anarcho-syndicalism. It was necessary to free the term "spontaneity" of its anarchic content, and the term "politics" of its bureaucratic and unmilitant connotation. By then, not only union leaders but also social-democratic party leaders were beginning to accept Bernstein's perspective. Above all, it was necessary to talk about the workers not as labor power, but as an autonomous political class. It was difficult to win this theoretical-political debate in terms of majorities in party organizations or in terms of better polemical argumentations. What was needed was a crucial political event (*Fatto di classe*) to throw on the scale, and for all revolutionaries 1905 was precisely that: the perspective of victory over revisionism.

The first revolutionary answers to Bernstein come before 1905. They begin with Luxemburg and her 1898 pamphlet "Reform or Revolution?" which defines once and for all the unions' specific field of activity and its institutional domain. According to Rosa Luxemburg, such activity "is limited essentially to efforts [aiming] at regulating capitalist exploitation" according to market conditions and "can in no way influence the process of production itself".<sup>7</sup> Yet, she emphasizes how the unions' economic activity could lead to a choking of capitalist development, thus laying the premises for a crisis of the system. It is at this point that political and socialist class-struggle must be undertaken anew with fresh vigor. Concerning the relationship between wages and profits, this is what Luxemburg says: "The fact is that trade unions are least able to create an economic offensive against profit. Trade unions are nothing more than the organized *defense* of labor power against the attacks of profit. They express resistance offered by the working class to the oppression of capitalist economy."<sup>8</sup> The struggle between wages and profits "does not take place in the blue of the sky. It takes place within the well-defined framework of the law of wages. The law of wages is not shattered but applied by trade-union activity."<sup>9</sup>

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7. Mary Alice Waters, ed., *Rosa Luxemburg Speaks*, *op.cit.*, p. 50.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 71.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 71. The other important point touched upon by Luxemburg

As important as Luxemburg's argument was in demystifying and unmasking Bernstein's theories, like all purely demystificatory arguments, it left out too much: it was essentially negative and not reconstructive. Rosa understood that Bernsteinism had precipitated into a crisis both the revolutionary line as well as the theory of the party. One of Bernstein's most successful slogans was that "the party is nothing, the movement is everything". In the context in which it had been developed, this slogan meant the abandonment of a rigidly structured party to a party of opinions. Yet, this slogan had the merit of forcing the organization to face the problem of re-examining its relation to mass movements by abandoning fetishist deviations caused by internal party life. Bernstein introduced a dynamic element in party life and in the bureaucratic planning of a self-sufficient organizational growth. Another one of his favored slogans was "long live economics, down with politics", very reminiscent of the French anarcho-syndicalist slogan "*méfiez-vous des politiciens!*" Rosa Luxemburg felt that her criticism of the SPD line and of unions could lend support to theories aiming at eliminating the party, or any party, old or new. Although well masked, this would have added a revisionist version of the anarcho-syndicalist notion of spontaneism. On the other hand, she was unwilling to renounce either her critique of bureaucracy or her positive evaluation of spontaneity. But, wasn't it the case that her anti-bureaucratic polemics seemed to support those who criticized party organization and politics as such? Wasn't it the case that her positive evaluation of spontaneity seemed to support anarchic spontaneism?

Consideration of this type led Luxemburg to propose an intermediate solution, which led her to what Lenin defined as the theory of the "organization-as-a-process" and of "tactics-as-a-process". In fact, in her 1904 article "Organizational Problems of Russian Social-democracy", she reiterated the idea that the masses go beyond the party<sup>10</sup> while at the same time emphasizing how not everything of the old organization was to be thrown out.<sup>11</sup> In elaborating her politico-organizational line Luxemburg had to take into account the conditions within which a revolutionary current would have

concerns the relationship between political struggle and the struggle for democracy: "the socialist labor movement is the *only* support for that which is not the goal of the socialist movement – democracy . . . The socialist movement is not bound to bourgeois democracy, but on the contrary, the fate of democracy is bound with the socialist movement." *Ibid.*, p. 76.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 121: "the insignificant role played by the initiative of central party organs in the elaboration of actual tactical policy can be observed today in Germany and other countries. In general, the tactical policy of the social democracy is not something that may be 'invented'. It is the product of a series of great creative acts of the often spontaneous class struggle seeking its way forward. The unconscious comes before the conscious. The logic of the historical process comes before the subjective logic of the human being who participate in the historic process. The tendency is for the directing organs of the socialist party to play a conservative role."

11. *Ibid.*, p. 128: "social democracy already contains a strong, politically educated proletarian nucleus class conscious enough to be able, as up to now in Germany, to pull along in its path the declassed and petty bourgeois elements that join the party."

had to move in Germany, i.e., a “boring-from-within” approach inside the SPD. Thus, her sociological efforts aim at locating that stratum of grass-roots cadres in the party which, owing to their origin and their preparation, could better learn the lesson of spontaneity and understand trends and directions of the struggles taking place outside or independently of the organization. Only a new revolutionary explosion would have cleared the situation within the party. In fact, it is not accidental that some of the reservations in her 1904 position are dropped in 1906, the year in which she wrote “The Mass Strike, the Political Party and the Trade Unions” giving her analysis of the 1905 Russian-Polish mass strikes. There, she poses the most important problem concerning their direction and organization. Her proposals, however, are still too general.<sup>12</sup> They are essentially norms for the maintenance of a correct relation with spontaneity. They include no precise indications on how to organize and direct spontaneity. Once again, Rosa finds herself caught between the sociology of organization and the theory of the party.<sup>13</sup> The direction still remains with the factory-based party cadres. In fact, in her analysis of the Russian strikes, she quotes with emphasis the report of the Petersburg unions as a model of organization-direction. These limitations in Luxemburg’s thought must not obscure the fact that almost all the workers and youth cadres which gave life to the workers-councils movement had found their fundamental practical-theoretical orientation in her works. For the workers and intellectuals of the new generation who had just joined the party, the 1905 Russian experience was crucial. The SPD’s “left” exerted a strong influence on them, both through the leadership role played by Karl Liebknecht in the youth organization – which later became such a center of dissention that it had to be dissolved – and through Rosa’s prominent position in the central school for cadres.

Another important point in Luxemburg’s 1906 essays is the final analysis she gave of German class composition which, not ‘accidentally’, started with the miners, i.e., with what she calls *the misery of the miners*. In emphasizing the sociality of the struggle in the mass strikes, she points out the importance of the political unification between working class, poor proletariat, and sub-proletariat. Since for Lenin spontaneity was the lowest and not, as in Luxemburg’s case, the highest level of struggle from which to begin a discussion concerning political organization, the author of *What is to be Done?* found himself already beyond a whole series of problems in which Rosa had remained entangled. Without undertaking here a detailed analysis of Lenin’s pamphlet, we will merely outline some essential points necessary to understand the profound diversity between Bolshevism and the workers-councils movement.

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12. Thus, she writes: “the social democrats are called upon to assume *political* leadership in the midst of the revolutionary period.” In *Rosa Luxemburg Speaks, op.cit.*, p. 189. And: “the tactics of the social democrats are decided according to their resoluteness and acuteness and they never fall below the level demanded by the actual relations of forces, but rather rise above it – that is the most important task of the directing body in a period of mass strikes.”

13. Thus she writes: “the resolution and determination of the workers also play a part and indeed the initiative and the wider direction naturally fall to the share of the organized and most enlightened kernel of the proletariat.” *Ibid.*, p. 188.

A) Since every organizational discussion is subordinated to the political line, Lenin begins by requesting a re-evaluation of theory in order to sidestep the pitfalls of "empiricist activism". Thus, he underlines as precisely as possible the line of demarcation between Bernsteinism or economism and the revolutionary hypothesis. Finally, he tackles the problem of the relationship between leadership and spontaneity and accuses economism of submitting to spontaneous struggles.

B) Following Kautsky's formulation, he sees bourgeois intellectuals as having the task of bringing social-democratic consciousness from the outside since it does not arise spontaneously among the working masses, whose natural tendency is toward trade-unionism.<sup>14</sup>

Starting with Engels' definition of the economic and trade-union struggles as "resistance against capitalism", Lenin outlines the institutional boundaries between the union and the party. The union is to struggle against the individual capitalist in a given sector, while "Social-Democracy represents the working class not in its relation to a given group of employers, but in its relation to all classes in modern society, to the state as an organized political force."<sup>15</sup> Thus, the tasks of political agitation and denunciation must not only be extended to workers' economic struggle, but to all possible domains.

D) Terrorism is also a mistake since it does not contribute in any way to the political organization and direction of spontaneity but, rather, it explicitly renounces them.

E) Lenin seems to deal most extensively with the technical aspects of clandestine organization and with the "primitivism" of Russian Social-Democracy. He stresses primarily what he considers the specifically political aspect, in contraposition to agitation and intervention in labor struggles which are only parts of it – even if the most "essential" ones, and suggests a kind of articulated and multi-faceted party activity similar to that of German social-democracy.

F) The relevance of *What Is To Be Done?* resides in the extreme frankness with which Lenin tackled problems such as the function of intellectuals and workers.<sup>16</sup> Although Lenin does not explicitly state it in this

14. Thus, he writes: "we have become convinced that the fundamental error committed by the 'new tendency' in Russian Social-Democracy lies in its subservience to spontaneity . . . The spontaneous rise of the masses in Russia proceeded . . . with such rapidity that the young untrained Social-Democrats proved unfitted for the gigantic tasks that confronted them . . . Revolutionaries, however, lagged behind this rise of the masses in both their 'theories' and their practical activity; they failed to establish an uninterrupted organization having continuity with the past, and capable of leading the whole movement." Cf. Lenin, *What is to be Done?* (New York, 1943), p.52.

15. V.I. Lenin, *op.cit.*, p. 56.

16. Cf. V.I. Lenin, *op.cit.*, pp. 122 and 124: "Not only revolutionists, in general, but even working-class revolutionists lag behind the spontaneous awakening of the working masses . . . Our very first and most imperative duty is to help to train working-class revolutionists who will be on the same level *in regard to party activity* as intellectual revolutionists . . . A workingman who is

work, what is most striking is the great theoretical gap and historical backwardness of the middle-European revolutionary currents in relation to the Russian experience. In the brief outline of the history of the Bolshevik party which Lenin wrote in 1920 in *Left-Wing Communism: An Infantile Disorder*, he indicates how already in 1902 both he and his friends watched with a certain detachment the first formulations of a new European left still entangled in questions which the Russian experience had already overcome. The tactical support given to Luxemburg cannot conceal the serious differences concerning primarily the conception of the party and the relationship between leadership and spontaneity. Up to 1918, Lenin restricted himself to reckoning with Bernsteinian opportunism. Later on, after the consolidation of Soviet power, he was able to deal with Pannekoek, Daeumig and, indirectly, with Rosa's theory of organization-as-a-process, which he once again regarded as a submission to spontaneity; as the identification of the party with spontaneous movements, and as the confusion between politicized workers, struggling workers, and professional revolutionary cadres.

G) One thing was particularly clear, i.e., that it was not sufficient for, e.g., a worker to have a correct view of the factory struggle or of the struggle that he materially organized, in order to make a professional revolutionary. It was not sufficient to reverse the social function the system assigns to the individual in production by becoming an acting minority and produce a Bolshevik cadre. On the other hand, the Luxemburgian organization represented a coordinated network of acting minorities eventually able to overthrow the reformist leadership in class organizations.

But is this all the difference between Lenin and Rosa? So far, we have reduced it to the most skeletal formal terms and we have not been able to grasp another key element of Lenin's position: i.e., that the distinction between a network of acting minorities and a network of professional revolutionaries is simply a question regarding *the historical stages of the class struggle* and therefore the different levels of development of spontaneity. It is not a question of denying the function of the acting minorities in order to favor that of the professional cadres. Rather, both must be seen as expressions of the movement's level of growth: the former as being more backward than the latter. If so, are there laws determining the movement's growth? Is it possible to formulate a scientific theory of the party? Lenin's answer to these questions was that the scientific nature of this theory is wholly a function of the degree of correctness in analyzing power relations between classes in a given historical moment. The point is not to prefer one organizational crystallization to another but of evaluating the exact level attained by the struggle and the stage of development of the party. The very distinction between mass strike, political strike, and

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at all talented and 'promising' *must not be left* to work eleven hours a day in a factory. We must arrange that he be maintained by the party . . . The *sin* we commit is that we do not sufficiently stimulate the workers to take this path 'common' to them and to the 'intellectuals' of professional revolutionary training, and that we too frequently drag them back by our silly speeches about what 'can be understood' by the masses of the workers, by the 'average worker', etc."



insurrectional strike is a practical example of three different levels of spontaneity, of organization of the struggle, and of power relations among classes. And if there are any laws, they are to be found in the historical experience of the proletariat: in unsuccessful revolutions. Like the construction of dikes which is always based on the highest levels reached by the tide, the science of the party must theoretically grasp all the levels of struggle and organization attained so far, in order to both regain and overcome them at the same time. Every new and more advanced level of struggle is matched by a re-organization of the capitalist system as a dialectical response to the class confrontation. Thus, the science of the party is always to be measured by means of the historical levels reached by capitalist organization. The revolutionary hypothesis seeks to theoretically anticipate those stages of the struggle which must be practically brought about. Yet, even the best hypotheses are surpassed by unforeseen levels of struggle. Such was the situation in which Lenin found himself in 1905 with the rise of the Soviets during *the soviet stage of party development* where the working class presented itself as "power". Much has been said about the polemics between Lenin and Luxemburg concerning the problem of centralization and the minority's right to dissent: in the historiography of the labor movement Luxemburg is accused of regressive democraticism, or she is exalted by anti-Stalinist groups for having anticipated the struggle against repressive and opportunistic bureaucracies. This polemic has been primarily used in a counterrevolutionary way by left-wing socialists. Perhaps, all this historiography should be thrown out in order to better grasp the meaning of Luxemburg's positions. Although strongly bound to the Russian-Polish experience, she found herself confronted with the problem of creating a revolutionary faction within a mass-based party full of possibilities such as the SPD. Rosa realized that it was impossible to wrestle the direction of labor struggles away from the opportunist politics of the SPD by merely relying on political and minority means without reversing the relationship between class and unions. She realized that within a conflictual society such as Kaiser Wilhelm's Germany, this could not be done with Lenin's means. Furthermore, she was perfectly aware of the increasingly wider gap developing between "workers and politics": between the struggling proletariat and professional politicians. This was not merely a phenomenon limited to French anarcho-sindicalism. In the IWW founding convention Heywood had shouted "Everyone in the IWW! Out with the politicians!" Rosa Luxemburg realized that political organization within the working class was brought about only by the party's workers' cadres and that, in the subversive struggle, only they could have prevented a total break between complete workers' control (*operaismo tout court*) and a political direction. Only those cadres could have defeated trade-union gradualism and the opportunism of parliamentarians and salaried functionaries. But probably she did not realize that, at that point, the problem would have been to break the trade-unions rather than the party.

Like Lenin and all European politicians at the time of the Second International, Rosa considered unions sacred and repeated *ad nauseam* that even the most opportunist European unions were nevertheless "working-class" organizations and not a bunch of gangsters as Gompers' union in the U.S. Thus,

the faction that Rosa wanted to create was essentially a network of political workers' cadres closely linked to factory struggles and related in an ambiguous way to the unions. To Lenin's motto "first the party and then the revolution", she answered "first the workers' control of the party, and then the revolution". What for Luxemburg was a problem of the social composition of the party, for Lenin was a problem of program or of the party's policy. For Lenin the workers' revolutionary direction was to be attained by tying militants to this program and thus disciplining them to centralization. Rosa and Lenin spoke to two different types of working class: they spoke against two different types of reformism.

The conditions for the organization of a political labor movement in the U.S. were markedly different. It is in this light that we must evaluate DeLeon's position and the practice of the IWW. The relation between DeLeon and the IWW, however, must be preliminarily clarified. Although he was considered the ideologist of the movement and to a certain extent the one who anticipated the workers-councils organization, DeLeon actually occupied a minority position within the IWW. In fact, three years after its foundation, he was expelled from the IWW as a leader of a political party. In Detroit he founded another IWW increasingly yielding to the realities of the movement — above all in regard to the problems of the political struggle — and gradually moving away from any type of electoral approach. His fame among European revolutionary leaders, which earned him Lenin's homage after the revolution, was probably due to his approach's greater affinity with the European situation. Yet, his major "theoretical" contributions were made precisely when he rejected the approach and traditions of the Second International in order to deal with the formidable reality of the class struggle in the U.S.

It is impossible to compare the maturity of the American entrepreneurial class and its stage of productive organization with the corresponding European ones. The U.S. was faced with a gigantic input of labor power into directly productive labor. The greatest efforts were concentrated on the organization of work: all the technical tools for an efficient apparatus were already available. Humanitarian pretenses and authoritarian arrogance were altogether alien to the American capitalist class. It was a mass process not merely limited to a few industrial islands. Such a society seemed to be free of any residue of either productive or institutional backwardness. Unlike the European situation, the struggle between workers and owners, between working class and social owners, was not separated by a barrier of political institutions. An extremely high level of social cooperation, a global approach to the social division of labor, an inexhaustible ability to turn conflict into rationalization and development, a control over the labor force exerted directly by the productive apparatus free from the mediation of unionism, a political use of mass mobility: all of these things conferred upon the American system striking characteristics such as to relegate Europe to the role of an annoying province. All political and civil liberties having been reduced to the one and only capitalist freedom — the freedom to work — led to a total identification between factory and society. Consequently, there was a major reduction of the political space understood in the traditional sense of representation and mediation. And all this took place under the pressure of a frontal workers' struggle.

The primitivism, superficiality, or obviousness of DeLeon's writings, so different from the pretentious chatter of so many European leaders, is a European distortion. DeLeon, and, before him, the 'labor' agitators who led the IWW, understood very well how in that situation a revolutionary political line and organization must take on specific mass characteristics and that therefore, the institutionalization of a vanguard was something altogether questionable. Even less practical was a centralized direction understood as a military organization issuing orders through hierarchical channels. In fact, the relationship between direction and spontaneity was reversed since it was a question of enabling the collective worker to act automatically or, rather, autonomously. This explains the great stress on the struggle, and the contempt for ideology. This explains the program concerning the struggle as the only collective organizer engaged in a gigantic cultural revolution based on a few principles: wage and working hours, wildcat strikes, no bargaining, direct violent mass action, no tie to agitation or to the mobility of the agitators and egalitarianism.

Perhaps the difference between DeLeon's Europeanism and the IWW leaders lies entirely in his desperate search for a "political" level above and beyond the pure mass struggle. This was probably where he was beyond the others. Along with all socialist intellectuals, he had begun by conceiving of that level in terms of elections. But the bum or Wobbly answered him that that was bourgeois stuff for people with glasses and goatees. For him, who was nothing but a proletarian, politics was a power relation with the boss. No Wobbly ever bothered to think about what the future society would be like. This, however, was of great interest to DeLeon — an intellectual who wanted to know what his office would look like after taking power: this is why he fantasized so much about the future society based on the unions. This is why Gramsci mistook him for a forerunner of the workers-councils.

Terms such as party, ideology, and utopia, which were the pass-words of the Second and later the Third International, are entirely foreign to the American class struggle. They surface in DeLeon only as secondary elements, squashed by a reality of social struggle, imposed and willed by the innumerable nameless agitators who set into motion all strata of the American proletariat. In DeLeon one witnesses this gradual loss of the autonomy of theory: the extinction of a certain political level. This is an instance where the analysis of a theoretician's writings gives us less than the description of the IWW struggles.

In addition to the refusal to bargain, what is most striking in the IWW experience is the rejection of any institutionalization of the conflict, the refusal to sign contracts so to periodicize the struggle, and the refusal to consider the struggle as a factory affair seeking primarily to develop the struggle's possibilities of social communication. What it resulted in was an organization which, similar to the Italian *Camere del Lavoro*, was based on territorial principles. Yet, all this is fundamentally similar to European struggles and the workers-councils approach. This common principle is in the fact that the struggle and the organization find their base by overturning the material condition in which capital places the proletariat: in Europe by overturning workers' aristocracies into political vanguards, and in the U.S. by overturning mobility into a vector of workers' organization. Why was vagrancy the main charge through which IWW

cadres were thrown in jail? Why was the Wobbly agitator's work-style modelled on the existence of a mobile proletariat, today working in construction, tomorrow unemployed, the day after a seasonal picker, then a textile worker, or a waiter on trains? The organizers of the seasonal workers followed them in their migrations from the Mexican border to Canada. Thus, Ford's notion of a social wage originates from this proletarian approach to income which does not crystallize sectorial divisions, but has an egalitarian approach to income.

Therefore, the two pillars of the IWW organization are internationalism and egalitarianism. What is completely foreign is what we call factory-power precisely because a factory which was not the social factory was foreign to the Wobblies' world. Also foreign is any relation to skills. Thus, *before* the massification of labor was introduced by the assembly line, the mass worker was subjective reality shaped by Wobbly agitators. It was a program of total confrontation with the social factory and social capital. Unlike all European examples, the history of American struggles is probably the only one in which the workers' movement does not seek either a remodernization of productive structures nor an organization of the productive forces more backward than that of capital itself in a given stage of development. Probably, the workers' power projected by the Wobblies sought to leave the management of business to the bosses and let the working class determine socially necessary labor and income. This is why, rather than laying down a list of grievances to be dealt with at the bargaining table, they onesidedly fixed wages and working hours, write them down on a piece of paper at the factory gates, and left it to the bosses to come down and take note in order to respect it, thereby executing workers' orders. How many European workers, advised by intellectuals who claimed to be their friends and enticed by the idea of sitting behind a desk and of sending clerical workers (*impiegati*) to the benches, afterwards found themselves sitting in night-school desks after eight hours in the factory regretful for not having picked up a gun or for letting it be taken away from their hands by those very intellectuals? Besides the antiegalitarian ideology of labor, the main differences between the Wobbly's world and that of the European Bolshevik cadres lie precisely in the relationship between struggle, revolution, and power. What was missing in the IWW is precisely the conception of the revolution as an act of management of power: the substitution of a state machine by another one. In other words, it is the dictatorship of the proletariat and of the proletarian party over society.

When did the communist model gain the upper hand over the Wobbly organization? It should be pointed out that men like Foster, future secretary of the American Communist Party, came out of the IWW and that there he began his factional struggle in connection with the discussion over centralization. But this was not yet the key point: the essential question was whether the IWW should have continued its anti-institutional practice, or whether it should have accepted the specific ground of bargaining, contractual norms, and, therefore, a more static and stable organization. In other words, the issue was whether the IWW should have become a traditional union as the first step toward a convergence with the AFL, thus creating the premise for a unified labor organization in the U.S., and leaving the door open for a specific party

organization. As the cycle of struggles weakened, there arose problems of defense from repression so that resistance took priority over attack and the communist model appeared as the only possible alternative. The American Communist Party succeeded in taking over a good part of the Wobbly's legacy and to integrate it in the great CIO operation of Roosevelt's period.

A final but extremely important problem is that of the relationship between the IWW and American blacks. Probably it is necessary here to go back to the period between the plantation era and the end of the Civil War in search of the vanguard which brought about the first struggles in the U.S. The social figure at the center of this first cycle of insubordination is the black run-away and later the southern black miner and the black worker in the first large steel mills in Birmingham, along with the white convict laborers. Neither the Knights of Labor nor the AFL approached these proletarian strata, much less the black masses reduced to peonage by the crisis of the plantation. Capitalist repression at the turn of the century unleashed precisely against these strata. The IWW never contacted these masses precisely because the black labor power had never been free social labor power. It remained trapped in the poverty of the South and until WWII it was not allowed to flow into the great northern and eastern industrial arteries. If a black worked in a coal mine in Pennsylvania, Alabama, or Kentucky he joined the United Mine Workers. The Western Federation of Labor, from which the IWW grew, was made out of the copper and iron miners of Utah, Arizona, and Montana. Therefore, the ten million immigrants the IWW attempted to successfully organize represent for American capital the river of human flesh which separated, and had to keep separated, the Southern blacks from the northern factories. A dike of ten million white proletarians prevented the Blacks from assaulting metropolitan exploitation. The IWW is historically bound to this colossal defense effort on the part of white capital. This explains the function of the IWW revolutionary initiative within this tactical-strategic plan of U.S. capital.

### *War and Revolution*

In August 1914, the imperialist war broke the workers' movement into three large currents: the social-democrats who advocated patriotism and class collaboration as a tactical passage towards the eventual management of society in the period of reconstruction; the revolutionary pacifist including the whole Zimmerwald movement who closed ranks on the issues of class resistance to war and superexploitation; and the Bolsheviks or, rather, Lenin and a few others, who foresaw the possibility of turning the imperialist war into a civil war. Here the Bolshevik militant took on his specific military role in the insurrection. There has always been talk about the social-democratic betrayal. Actually, it was a lucid and cynical plan of co-management between capital and unions, between the bourgeois state and the social-democratic party. Soon after having voted for war credits, the "workers representatives" in Germany created a series of joint organs, both at the plant as well as at more general levels as a first link of that chain which with the *Arbeitsgemeinschaft* of 1918, was to reach for the throat of the working class in order to choke the workers-councils movement. The war

needed the workers' collaboration and the social-democrats became all the more patriotic and insistent in order to present themselves as an alternative political group (*ceto*). Otherwise, it is impossible to explain the rush and the determination with which employers and the social-democratic party acted after 1918, nor the violent anti-union resentment of the working-councils cadres: during the war the unions had managed and guaranteed superexploitation in the factories and had reported insubordinate workers to the police. In the post-war period, the traditional organization is assailed by a violent workers' revenge precisely in its role of political group of functionaries. The ideology of the workers-councils movement, its generic accusation of the "professional politician", the juxtaposition of the social figure of those on salaries and of the party functionary, i.e., of the intellectual in politics, ended up by engulfing both the right as well as the left, Rosa Luxemburg was not even able to participate in the first workers' councils convention: only after long battle was she allowed in as an observer. Workers' autonomy has posed the problem of the relationship between them and the committed group of professional revolutionaries. We do not know whether the destiny of Luxemburg – expelled from the convention of those workers' cadres which her writings had to a great extent helped bring about – and Lenin was to be tied to the question of the relation between direction and spontaneity, or how much it was tied to the fact that Lenin and his group had armed the workers, while the Spartachist group had continued to view the organization as coordination and resistance, and the refusal to work as the only adequate workers' weapon. The essence of Leninism shifts from the relationship between spontaneity and the party to the relationship between the party and insurrection.

In Germany the key point is constituted by the presence of that ambiguous and contradictory formation which was the USPD: the independent social-democratic party which included Kautskians and workers-councils leaders, both Centrists and Spartachists. Unlike Liebknecht claimed, the ambiguity of the USPD did not lie in its participation in parliament (already in 1915 the Spartachist leader had insisted on the need for "extraparliamentary mass action" in the *Spartakusbriefe*), but in its mystification of workers' autonomy. The union cadres of the metal workers who organized the first strikes against the war in January 1918 were under the USPD umbrella, and it was within the USPD that the ideological battle concerning the councils movement took place.

The program is well known: the transformation of workers' autonomy into counterpower, i.e., into the democratic organization of wage workers, and the conception of the workers-councils as organs of workers democratic power founded on direct representation. This was precisely the meaning of Kautsky's socialization: the formal scheme of bourgeois democracy applied to workers' autonomy. It was essentially Daeumig's conception: workers' control of production, self-management, the building of alternate power which would *de facto* deprive the state of its power, a conception of working class power only in terms of acceptance or refusal to labor, i.e., only in terms of workers' blackmail. Lenin attacked Daeumig very harshly precisely as the theorist of mere workers' autonomy. Actually, Daeumig was the only one among the councils' leaders who wanted to reintroduce a political perspective, i.e., a tactic aiming at determining the specific passage of power relations.

It is a mistake to view the workers-councils movement as a workers' critique of the forms of bourgeois institutional power. This may have been its form or its ideological aspect. The true revolutionary character of the workers-councils phase in Germany lies in the workers' power to provoke the crisis and to freeze capitalist development. This was understood very well by the old foxes in Versailles. The imposition of "that" treaty on Germany was practically dictated by the need to deprive the working class of the material bases of its very existence. Those who drafted the punitive clauses toward Germany operated precisely within the domain of the dual existence of the working class, i.e., as labor power inextricably bound to the material process of accumulation and as a class irreducibly antagonistic to that development. At that time Keynes, with his "grieved" appeals, was the strategist who looked much farther and not the tactical politician who wanted above all to settle the score with the working class in the offensive. In Versailles, international capital ran on a razor's edge, and risked halting the process of accumulation in its weakest zone: Germany. It blocked the process of development of its organic composition in order to halt the growth of the labor component: it accepted the challenge of the dual character of the labor power commodity. It is in this sense that it entered the battlefield of the workers' struggle that the workers-councils movement had helped to bring about.

Capital itself destroyed the monetary form of exchange-relations: German inflation took away power in the form of wages from the hands of the class. It was the first time in history that the capitalist crisis did not take on the cyclic character but froze general development. This was the first capitalist crisis determined by the workers' impact on the process of value-creation (*valorizzazione*). The future possibilities (*futuribili*) of the workers-councils movement were all here. Versailles and the NEP were ultimately two parallel movements: the first was a decision of the capitalist brain meant to halt development in order to choke the growth of the class; the second was a decision of the workers' brain to stimulate development in order to reconstitute the material bases for class-growth.

Hence the defense of the institution of workers-councils was the veil that covered this deadly struggle between capital and labor. It was not difficult for the union bureaucracy to manage this defense in terms of democratization of unions. Union democracy was as much against workers' autonomy as it was a part of it. The social-democratic professional politicians' ability to "manage" was impressive. Thus, Noske, for instance, first headed Kiel's military-worker insubordination movement by accepting the workers-councils ideology, and then he went to Berlin to organize the White Guards. The councils movement immediately found itself on the defensive from December 1918 on. No sooner were they created than the councils had to be "defended": the workers' power thrust (*carica operaistica*) and the mass critique against "politics" were essentially defensive attitudes. The SPD threw into the councils movement – the movement of new representations – all its union and party functionaries, expert in motions, conventions, and the parliamentary game. The councils picked up once again the theme of direct action after they lost the battle of majorities. Reformist politics won over the refusal to work. Old theoretical party brains such as Kautsky, Hilferding and Bernstein, were left in the USPD to sow

confusion in the field of workers' autonomy. They were quietly left to construct the utopia of labor democracy in the same way that capital let Rathenau fantasize about similar utopias. What was missing throughout the councils period was the armed power of the working class which was not merely self-defense since during the war the revolutionary cadres in the army had simply preached resistance to the war or pacifism against militarism, and at the end of the war had merely demanded the abolition of hierarchies. In Russia, on the other hand, the Bolsheviks had undertaken the task of forming a Red Army.

When union leaders and large employers formed an alliance at the end of 1918, they already had before them the complete picture of the mechanics of revolution in Russia. Thus, their first concern was organizing and managing demobilization. The worker had to leave the guns – they said – and return as soon as possible to his job. A specific program of counterrevolutionary disarmament was managed with the same pacifist ideology, on the same anti-militarist ground of the Second International and to a great extent by the Zimmerwald participants. Mass strikes were admitted but insurrection was not.

Thus, the workers-councils movement failed not on the ground of workers' management of productive labor, but on that of the relation between mass strikes and insurrection, or between refusal to work and insurrection. We keep hearing that the workers' determination of the crisis from 1918 to 1923 prolonged the refusal to work as an ongoing crawling movement, without creating the party. Yet, without its determination of the crisis and its struggle against development, the party is not revolutionary. Thus, the failure of the workers-councils movements did not postpone the problem of the relationship between autonomy and the party of professionals, but rather that of the relationship between struggle against development and insurrection, on the one hand, and armed workers' power on the other. We have seen in more recent history how many times insurrection has been, instead, the premise for a resumption of development. Leninism is perhaps the extreme limit reached by the insurrectional level and by the class as autonomy where the party is still an acting minority.

Maoist thought has gone farther, by conceiving of the class as the party, the party as the majority of the people, the party as social majority, and by moving the ground of insurrection from the brief *coup d'état* to long-range war. With Maoism, insurrection has become a spontaneist term.