

workers' councils: the red mole of revolution

by Sheila Cohen

The red mole may weave unexpected patterns and assume strange disguises; it is digging, digging fast, and moving in roughly the right direction...'

Daniel Singer, *The Road to Gdansk*.

The term 'Workers' Councils' can perhaps stand as a catch-all title for an unpremeditated, quasi-spontaneous, 'ground-up' organisational form reproduced over many periods and across many countries by groups of workers previously unaware of such a structure or of its historical precedents. Its highest form the Soviet, its 'lowest' the simple workplace representatives' committee, this formation recurs time and again in situations of major class struggle and even everyday industrial conflict.

Why do workers always, independently and apparently 'spontaneously', adopt the same mass meetings-based, delegate-generating, committee-constructed form for their most powerful expressions of resistance? The answer is simple, because the form is simple; the form is constructed from the requirements of the situation, not plucked from thin air. Workers in a situation of upsurge are unlikely to look around at a range of possible alternatives: the workers' council structure, at whatever level, immediately serves the necessities of the situation. As one account of the Hungarian revolution puts it: 'the Hungarian workers had instinctively grasped...that they must break completely with traditional organisational forms...' (Anderson 1964, p107).

Fully-fledged workers' councils exist, almost by definition, at times of heightened class struggle, times which generate not only these formations but all the vehicles of class struggle: mass strikes, occupations, sometimes riots. The analysis of this organisational form is therefore almost inseparable from other aspects of such periods and their key associated characteristics: dual power, direct democracy, self-activity from below, unofficial and extra-union forms of worker organisation, solidarity and class unity, and above all heightened class consciousness. In what follows, the historical account will be structured in terms of these key common aspects of the workers' council formation.

Perhaps most suggestively of all, classical comments on revolutionary change such as those of Marx and Lenin on the Paris Commune and Petrograd Soviet point to a crucial dynamic in which this worker-generated organisational form simultaneously challenges the character of the bourgeois state and constitutes itself as a vehicle for its transformation. In this sense a fusion between organisational form and political transition can also be glimpsed within the workers' council formation; an aspect of revolutionary *praxis* which perhaps overtakes what critics of Marx have denounced as a mechanistic distinction between base and superstructure.

This contribution will provide historical examples throughout capitalism to illustrate the constant regeneration of the highly specific workers' council-based organisational form, from 1840s Chartism to 21st century Argentina. At the same time it is recognised that the relevance of the workers' council 'model' to contemporary political and economic circumstances is beyond doubt. This can be summarised in two ways. Firstly, the twin factors of resurgence and unpredictability evident in the history of workers' councils are an indication that such formations can recur even in the apparently incongruous context of 21st-century neo-liberalism; and secondly, the power, poetry and inspiration emerging from these fundamentally working-class organisations stand as a reminder to the left of the continued relevance of class.

'Each delegate to be at all times revocable...'

Perhaps the most crucial feature of the workers' council formation is its inherent espousal of *direct democracy* exhibited in mass meetings, delegate structures, and accountable and revocable 'local leaders' (Fosh and Cohen 1990). Such characteristics are found in some of the earliest working-class upsurges under capitalism, such as Chartism, workers' fight for the vote in 1830s and 1840s Britain. Here a 'sizeable network of local leaders developed with astonishing rapidity...' (Charlton 1997, p23). This rank and file leadership came into its own during the historic General Strike of 1842 in a series of delegate conferences which reflected a still earlier tradition of 'cross-trade conferences' held as long ago as 1810.



the soviets of 1917 represented the height of participatory workers' democracy, in stark contrast to the bureaucratic state which would later assume their name

The same direct, participative forms of democracy recur throughout the series of struggles in the 19th, 20th and even 21st century in which workers' council formations are generated in the course of often extremely rapid upsurges of rank-and-file resistance. In the US Great Upheaval of the late 1870s, railroad workers embarking on mass strikes against wage cuts 'chose...delegates to a joint grievance committee, ignoring the leadership of their national unions' (Brecher 1997, p17). Within days, this form of organisation had spread to embrace a 'committee of safety' in Toledo, Ohio, 'composed of one member from every trade represented in the movement'; as the strike sped on to St Louis, railroad workers at a strike meeting 'set up a committee of one man from each railroad, and occupied the Relay Depot as their headquarters' (p32).

Such forms were reproduced almost identically almost 20 years later in a series of massive battles with railroad companies during the 1890s; workers on strike against Pullman in 1894 'held open meetings daily...a central strike committee with representatives of each local union directed the strike' (p99). While the newly-launched American Railway Union, led by Eugene Debs, lent strong support, '[o]perational control... rested in the strike committees that sprang up within each body of strikers'. In Debs' words, 'The committees came from all yards and from all roads to confer with us...and we would authorize that committee to act for that yard or that road...' (pp101-2). As shown below, such endorsement by established unions is rare; even Debs, not yet an explicit socialist, ultimately checked the 'mass direct action' in the Pullman strike for fear of 'insurrection' (Brecher 1997, p114).

While the 19th-century strike waves documented by Brecher are thrilling in their quasi-insurrectionary character, workers' struggles during the First World War period posed a far more alarming level of revolutionary potential to an nervous ruling class. Apart from the Russian soviets, documented further below, the heart of direct democracy and the 'workers' council movement' was to be found in Germany, where the potential for a revolution to build on and support the Soviet example was as strong as its failure was tragic. One account written by a participant in the events (Appel 2008) documents how, in November 1918, mutinying sailors 'elected delegates who, ship by ship, formed a Council' while 'during the war similar organisations had made their appearance in the factories. They were formed in the course of strikes, by elected representatives.' Appel comments that 'The independent activity of the workers and soldiers adopted the organisational form of councils as a matter of expediency; these were the new forms of class organisation.' While factory councils, according to this ac-

count, were seen by the KPD (the early German Communist Party) as 'a mere form of organisation, nothing more, subject to directives from outside', the workers saw it as 'a vastly different matter – a means of control from the bottom up' (p4).

The Italian factory councils movement, particularly in its historic flowering in the Turin of 1920, again unmistakably raised the possibility, though not actuality, of workers' power. Such movements, based in the workplace 'internal commissions' originally nurtured by the official union federation FIOM but taken over by insurgent workers, again embodied patterns of direct democracy. In the words of one participant in the first-ever factory council, set up in August 1919: 'The key characteristic of the councils was the ability of the rank and file to recall any delegate immediately.' By October 1919 the factory councils movement was able to call a conference of delegates from thirty factories representing 50,000 workers (Mason 2007, pp246-7). As Gramsci noted just before the Turin events, 'Trapped in the pincers of capitalist conflicts...the masses break away from the forms of bourgeois democracy...' (Williams 1975, p163).

Even in relatively 'moderate' Britain, soldiers' mutinies in 1919 over delayed demobilisation displayed identical features of direct democracy. One of the most highly organised mutinies took place in Calais, where 'strike committees [were] functioning in all the camps...A soldiers' council was elected, called the "Calais Area Soldiers' and Sailors' Association", with four or more delegates from the larger camps and two each from the smaller.' Government officials warned the Prime Minister that he 'should not confer with soldiers' delegates...The soldiers' delegation bore a dangerous resemblance to a *Soviet*' (quoted in Rosenberg 1987, p12, emphasis in original). In fact, according to "alarmist" reports by Bonar Law, 'a certain section of the workers [was] only too ready and eager...to inveigle the soldiers into an alliance with themselves, on the lines of the Soviet Committees' (p16).

Parallel structures of direct democracy can also be detected in the various worker upsurges of Eastern Europe during the post- Second World War period. Here, a number of moving accounts of the 1956 confrontation in Hungary, as well as those in Czechoslovakia, Poland etc, provide rich examples of such grass-roots democracy as part of the workers' council formation.

Writing of the outbreak of workers' council organisation during the Hungarian revolution, Nagy (2006) documents how the council delegates 'were merely those with the responsibility of carrying out the will of the working class'. For this writer, workers' councils 'arose quite naturally out of direct

workers' democracy. The essential component of *accountability* is confirmed in another historian's comment that 'As far as we have been able to discover, no one ever questioned the principle that delegates to the Central Councils should be revocable, at all times. The principle became an immediate reality...' (Anderson 1964, p108).

Daniel Singer's compelling account of workers' council organisation in Poland in the early 1970s and '80s tells of how, in the Szczecin shipyards, 'Each section had five delegates but also elected directly one member of the strike committee. The latter was no longer dominated by party cardholders but led by the workers... Surrounded by troops, threatened, the Warski Shipyards paralyzed by the strike was a school for democracy' (Singer 1982, p173).

Nor are such manifestations of direct democracy confined to early 20th century revolutionary upsurges or to rebellions against the repressive regimes of the 'Soviet' era. The 1968-74 upsurge in the US, UK and parts of western Europe generated forms of workplace organisation which, if not classical expressions of the workers' councils formation, nevertheless demonstrated parallel forms of democracy and accountability: 'At the strongest point of union organisation during the upsurge period, multi-union joint shop steward committees in the plants, cross-company combine committees and industry committees exhibited a form of direct democracy rooted in members' concrete interests... Their delegate-based committee structure... ensured a closeness and accountability to the membership lacking in "representative" democracy (Cohen 2006, p166).

Similarly, in the post-World War II United States a range of oppositional rank-and-file trade union caucuses, based in concrete issues of pay and workplace conditions while simultaneously challenging an often stifling bureaucracy, offered a challenge to the status quo. By the 1960s, a widespread 'revolt from below' saw a range of rank-and-file groups 'rebell[ing]... against both company and union.' Such workplace-based groups were 'the power base for the insurgencies from below that in the last three years have ended or threatened official careers of long standing ... Almost without exception the revolts were conducted primarily to improve the conditions of life-on-the-job' (Weir 1967).

In the more dramatic context of the French 'May Events', Singer (2002, p314f) notes the forms of direct democracy which characterised the *comites d'action*; in Italy's 'Hot Autumn' strike wave of 1969, which created both factory councils and cross-union 'Comitati Unitari di Base', a 'key slogan' was 'We are all delegates' (Wright 2002). The *empresas* (factory councils) which sprang up within days of the 1974 coup against Salazar in Portugal are described as 'highly democratic', not to mention participative: 'The commission at Plessey included 118 workers – all of whom insisted on going to the first meeting with the management' (Robinson 1987 p91). Most recently of all, the 21st-century upsurge in Argentina generated 'new movements... outside the old traditional trade union organisations, with direct democracy from below and new leaders' (Harman 2002, p31).

'The Same Curious Irritation...'

As this comment suggests, a related and equally defining characteristic of such delegate-based, accountable workers' organisations was their freedom from official and institutional structures, in particular, of course, the established trade unions. Such *independence* and *autonomy* continually recurs as a feature of the workers' council formation.

Writing of strike committees among Welsh miners during the 1910-14 'Great Unrest' in Britain, Dangerfield (1961) comments that the different South Wales pits 'had no specific grievance in common – they simply shared a distrust for the Miners' Federation of Great Britain and a scorn for their own Executive' (p242).

Other areas affected by the Great Unrest saw similar disdain for officialdom; in response to an employer lockout of striking workers in Dublin in 1913, workers across England staged solidarity action 'clearly unofficial in character, conducted by local strike committees acting entirely independently of union officials' (Holton 1976, p191). As Dangerfield puts it, the strikes of the Great Unrest 'all showed the same curious irritation, the same disposition to disregard Union authority' (p237).

In First World War Germany also, workers' councils were seen as 'the front line in a workers' offensive which the traditional forces of labour were unwilling to lead' (Gluckstein 1985 pp106-7). In fact such independence was a central aspect of the success, at least initially, of such mobilisations: "Free from experience of the "usual and right way" of conducting class struggle under normal circumstances, it was the sailors who were to act boldly and nudge the vanguard workers into action' (p112). The workers' councils movement had been preceded in 1917 by 'a flood of unofficial strikes [which] suddenly swept over the country. No official organisation led it' (Appel 2008).

Hinton's study of British workers' committees during the first world war shop stewards' movement notes that 'because of

their delegatory character these committees were capable of initiating and carrying through strike action independent of the trade union officials. It is this independence that primarily defines the rank-and-file movement' (p296). Perhaps one of the most historically significant statements of working-class democracy in terms of its essential independence from institutional trade unionism is that contained in an obscure Clyde Workers' Committee leaflet of an unspecified date in 1915:

'We will support the officials just so long as they rightly represent the workers, but we will act independently immediately they misrepresent them. Being composed of Delegates from every shop and untrammelled by onsolete rule or law, we claim to represent the true feeling of the workers' (quoted in Hinton 1972, p119, n4).

This independence from official trade unionism was highly disturbing for the ruling class. In the British strike wave of 1919, Churchill remarked that 'The curse of trade unionism was that there was not enough of it...' while the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Bonar Law, went further: '...the Trade Union organisation was the only thing between us and anarchy' (Rosenberg 1987, p68).

Such distrust was echoed by apparently unimpeachably 'revolutionary' organisations; in the feverish atmosphere of Italy's *Biennio Rosso* the Turin workers' council movement was looked on with suspicion by the Italian trade union federation and main left parties, including the Communists, as 'anarchist'. This 'fundamental *denial* of the *anarchoid*... defined socialism in Italy' (Williams 1975, p28: emphasis in original).

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However, the roots of this dynamic of direct democracy in workers' historic class experience is affirmed in the solemn pledge of Balazs Nagy, writing of the Hungarian workers' councils: "We shall not forget that it was the workers themselves, without any organisation, party, group, trade union or whatever, who as it were re-learned the experiences of the whole history of the workers' movement, enriching it as they did so' (Nagy 2006).

'Spontaneity' and Self-Activity

The same issue of working-class autonomy and self-activity is evident in the almost entirely spontaneous character of workers' council generation. The concept of 'spontaneity' has long been subjected to critical scrutiny; most recently, Leopold's (2007) powerful biography of US oil worker activist Tony Mazzochi points to the indispensable role of leadership in working-class organisation and struggle, while contributions such as those of Kelly (1998), Darlington (2009), Gall (2009a, 2009b), and Atzeni (2009) take up these issues in the context of recent renewed interest in 'mobilisation theory'.

Nevertheless, it is unquestionable that in looking across the wide historical and geographical range of workers' council formation, the notion of spontaneity remains irresistible as a characterisation of the roots and motion of such formations. Workers' councils and parallel formations appear within numerous accounts to be generated spontaneously out of the concrete needs of workers, whether in the workplace or as part of broader workplace-based movements.

During the Chartist movement, upsurges in which 'workers temporarily ruled the town' were produced by 'spontaneous crowd alliances in which trade boundaries and unskilled/skilled boundaries melted into the air' (Charlton 1997, p6). Writing on the Paris Commune, also an overtly political struggle, Lenin remarked, 'The Commune sprang up spontaneously. No one consciously prepared it in an organised way' (Marx and Lenin 1968, p100). Lynd (2003) argues that 'It now appears that the Russian revolution of 1905', in which, of course, soviets *per se* made their first appearance – 'was far more spontaneous than Lenin had thought possible...' (p51).

As Brecher's vivid history of the 1870s Great Upheaval recounts, '[t]his "insurrection" was spontaneous and unplanned' (Brecher 1997, p16). Spontaneity is related to the equally central feature of worker self-activity: '[T]he St Martinsburg strike broke out because the B&O workers had discovered that they had no alternative but to act on their own initiative...' (p19).

These are, of course, examples of strikes rather than of workers' councils, but the uneven, unpredictable, explosive

character of the Great Upheaval revolt is characteristic of all worker upsurges which to a greater or lesser extent embody the workers' council formation. Here strikes, occupations and other forms of direct action merge and demerge into organisational structures of which the archetypal form is the soviet (see below).

Consideration of the workers' councils created during the revolutionary period in Germany demonstrates how they appeared and reappeared spontaneously even after opposition and crushing by forces on both right and left. Appel (2008) comments that 'Perhaps some talk had been heard of Russian soviets (1917-18) but in view of the censorship, very little. At all events, no party or organisation had proposed this form of struggle. It was an entirely spontaneous movement' (p5). The workers' councils movement in Italy is traced back to 'spontaneous' workers' movements in the summer of 1917, 'when 'the factories exploded into an anti-war demonstration' after mass street protests over the shortage of bread: 'The immediate uprising seems to have been entirely spontaneous' (Williams 1975, p63).

In numerous other struggles which have thrown up workers' council formations in the 20th and even 21st centuries, the element of spontaneity is continually present, showing that workers repeatedly learn, in practice, the same class-based lessons. In his history of the May 1968 events in France, Singer (2002) writes: 'Spontaneous is the recurring adjective in all the descriptions of the movement... The May Movement was visibly spontaneous in the sense that the official parties and unions never took the initiative... ' In the same passage, Singer emphasises the crucial (and hope-inducing) characteristic of *resurgence*: 'After years of talk about the backwardness and apathy of the masses, the French crisis... was a natural vindication of spontaneity' in the sense of 'lay[ing] bare the apathy and backwardness of bureaucratic leaderships' (p315). The political crisis in Chile in the early '70s saw 'spontaneous and unorganised acts of resistance by the working class' (Gonzalez 1987, p64), while in turn-of-the-millennium Argentina 'the rising was spontaneous. It would be absurd to claim otherwise' (Harman 2002, p30).

In a sense this dynamic of spontaneity stands as a necessary condition for the political potential of such working-class uprisings and formations. 'Artificial' attempts to set up workers' council formations or soviets, as in the Leeds conference of June 1917, are seen to fail palpably; as Lloyd George commented with his usual perspicacity, those who partook in the largely rhetorical decision to set up Workers' and Soldiers' Councils across Britain 'were mostly men of the type which think something is actually done when you assert vociferously that it must be done' (quoted in Hinton 1972, p239). In fact the Soviets which these delegates sought to emulate had, during the period between the February and October revolutions, by now themselves become largely institutionalised, as shown below.

'Fused by their common adversity': Class unity in the Workers' Council Formation

The key characteristics of the workers' council formation so far defined – its delegate-based structures of direct democracy, its self-activity, class independence and spontaneity – do not (as suggested above) arise out of 'thin air'. Workers' constant reiteration of the specific workers' council formation reflects forms of shared experience rooted in the very nature of the capitalist labour process which, even during passive periods, generates a unity of response based in the intrinsically *collective* character of proletarian labour under capitalism.

As Williams puts it in his account of the Italian factory councils movement, by contrast with the 'sketchy unity' attained in organisations like trade unions and the *camarere* (a form of labour exchange), within the workplace 'unity is inherent in the very process of production, the creative activity which creates a common and fraternal will' (p115). Similarly, Hinton's analysis of independent rank and file organisation refers to 'the spontaneous unity of the workers in modern socially organised production' (Hinton 1972, p290).

The same point is echoed in Gluckstein's characterisation of the Berlin workers' council of November 1918: 'The central workers' and soldiers' council was not seen as an institution high above the masses, but simply the summit of a pyramid whose base was found in the combined strength of workers in production. Whether in the factory, community or city, the different types of council were called "*Arbeiterate*" (p124).

Such production-based class unity marks the collective and 'interchangeable' nature of workers' participation in workers' council activity. At strike committee meetings during the Great Upheaval, different workers 'assumed the lead briefly at one point or another, but only because they happened to be foremost in nerve or vehemence'; a local Ohio newspaper reported that at strike committee meetings, workers 'proceeded with notable coherence, as though fused by their common adversity' (Brecher 1997 p33).

Along the same lines, Hungarian workers' council delegate Ferenc Toke noted how during the key central meeting of

the councils on November 14th 1956, 'everybody, although they came from different factories, wanted exactly the same thing, just as if they had agreed their views in advance.' Nagy comments that 'in this way the councils really put the unity of the working class into practice' (p31).

Such class-based solidarity is not confined to the more dramatic episodes of working-class history. Commenting on the burgeoning workgroup organisation of the post-WW2 period, Brecher notes that 'it is largely in these groups that the invisible, underlying process of the mass strike develops. They are communities within which workers come into opposition to the boss...and discover the collective power they develop in doing so...' (p277). For Brecher, this process highlights 'the two elements of labor struggles that carry the seeds of social transformation: self-directed action and solidarity' (p298).

The Issue is Not the Issue...

It is evident from these examples that the seeds and elemental structures of more potentially revolutionary moments are inherent in much lower and more 'everyday' levels of rank-and-file worker response and resistance. These parallels indicate that the type of *consciousness* evident in episodes of workers' council formation is inherently tied, even at insurrectionary levels, to workers' previous experience of and response to the 'ordinary' experience of the labour process within capitalist relations of production, with all its daily vicissitudes.

As Brecher again points out, disputes spurred by specific material issues and demands in 'normal times' represent the tip of an 'iceberg' of underlying class conflict which emerges as generalised class struggle gains momentum; in such circumstances, it can be said that often 'the issue is not the issue' (pp 278, 282). In other words, workers' underlying experience of exploitation and oppression engenders an ongoing resentment and class anger which rises to the surface and becomes generalised in situations of overt conflict. This 'dual' or hidden consciousness is evoked by Gramsci when he argues that worker resistance 'signifies that the social group in question may indeed have its own conception of the world, even if only embryonic; a conception which manifests itself in action, but occasionally and in flashes – when, that is, the group is acting as an organic totality' (Gramsci p327).

Dangerfield's nuanced account of the 1910-14 Great Unrest echoes this point; writing of the dockers' struggle, he notes '...it would be very difficult to state exactly what they wanted...But at the very heart of their grievances there stirred a rising anger at being indifferently paid...A strike about money is not at all the same as a strike about wages; [it] comes from a sense of injustice...It is a voice in the wilderness, crying for recognition, for solidarity, for power' (Dangerfield 1961, p249). This, in turn, can lead to a situation in which such demands become *transitional*: 'In periods of mass strike, workers think, speak, and act...as oppressed and exploited human beings in revolt. Their agenda is based on what they need, not on "what the market will bear"...' (Brecher p286).

The history of workers' council formation reveals that, perhaps by contrast to socialist orthodoxy, such transformation of consciousness is almost universally rooted in material issues which tend to spark often insurrectionary levels of revolt from an apparently trivial or 'economistic' base. Perhaps the most historic example of this is the Petrograd typographers' strike in 1905 which, in Trotsky's words, 'started over punctuation marks and ended by felling absolutism' – as well as, of course, generating the first Petrograd Soviet (Trotsky 1971 p85). The resurgence of soviet power in the February 1917 revolution was in its turn sparked by women textile workers' strikes and protests over bread shortages (Trotsky 1967 p110) as well as a strike against victimisation at the giant Putilov engineering works. In Italy, working-class women forced to queue for hours for meagre rations as well as working up to 12 hours a day in the factories launched a hunger riot which 'soon reached insurrectionary proportions when the women made [a] crucial link with workers' industrial power...' (Gluckstein pp169-70).

History provides many other examples of movements which, while ultimately challenging the system, are rooted in relatively mundane grievances. In the Chilean, Portuguese and Iranian upsurges of the mid to late 1970s emphasis was placed by workers, as always, on basic material needs; as one Chilean agricultural worker put it, 'We've people to feed and families to keep. And we've had it up to here' (Gonzalez 1987, p51). Yet out of these materially-based struggles 'there emerged a new form of *organisation* ...calling itself the 'industrial belt' – the *cordon*' (p51, emphasis in original).

In Portugal, even after quasi-revolutionary committees, CRTSMs, were established in the factories, 'Those who set [them] up saw the workers' commissions as being merely economic'. In Iran, the movement which led up to the 1979 'revolution' was preceded by '...strikes, sit-ins and other industrial protests [most of which] were confined to economic demands' (Poya 1987).



the 1968-1974 upsurge in struggle saw the 'sorbonne soviet' at the university of paris, and workers' council-type forms in portugal



Such 'economistic' considerations, often dismissed by the intellectual left, are shown over and over not to preclude an explosion of consciousness which rapidly races towards overarching class and political considerations in a dynamic which, crucially, is not *dependent* in pre-existing 'socialist' awareness. As one organizer in 1930s America noted, 'the so much bewailed absence of a socialist ideology on the part of the workers, really does not prevent [them] from acting quite anti-capitalistically' (Brecher p165). Draper (1978) succinctly sums up this point: 'To engage in class struggle it is not necessary to "believe in" class struggle any more than it is necessary to believe in Newton in order to fall from an airplane' (p42).

Yet the 'leap' to class independence and consciousness is often experienced as transformational; participants in the 21st century uprising in Argentina claimed, 'We have done things which we never even thought of and we still don't know what else we'll have to do' (Harman 2002, p23). During the same period as the 'economistic' workers' councils were developing in Portugal, 'Workers and soldiers were hungry for ideas...Lenin's *State and Revolution* was a best-seller in the shops' (Robinson 1987, p97). Repeating this theme of an awakening to ideas not previously considered by apparently 'apathetic' workers, Singer (2002) notes how during mass waves of strikes and occupations, '[w]ith the dominant ideology shaken...the workers gathered in their strangely idle factories can learn in weeks more than they had grasped in years gone by. The general strike can be a school of class consciousness...attended by eager millions who in normal times are not within reach...' (pp161-2).

'The stilled soul of a whole industry...'

Simultaneously with the explosion of political consciousness which characterises such dynamics, the issue of class *power* is irresistibly posed whatever the consciousness of the participants. Appel's analysis of the revolutionary movement in Germany remarks that the workers' councils formation 'showed itself to be the only form of organisation that allowed the outline of workers' power, and therefore...it alarmed the bourgeoisie and the Social Democrats' (p5).

While the key issues of the 'dual power' and indeed state power posed by the workers' council formation are discussed further below, the above examples indicate the enormous *economic* power signified by the withdrawal of labour. As Dangerfield puts it with his usual felicity: '...a spontaneous and impulsive strike, begun by a handful of Welshmen against the advice of leaders...ultimately sounded its alarm in the stilled soul of a whole industry' (p247).

During the Hungarian revolution, 'Intellectuals, peasants and other non-industrial workers who had not hitherto fully appreciated [the workers' councils' importance...recognised that *here* was the heart of real power in the country. Kadar knew it too...' (Anderson 1964, p87). Singer (1982) sums up the point in his account of the founding of Solidarnosc: 'Whatever some experts might have thought or hoped, the power of Solidarity ultimately rested on...the capacity of the working class to bring industry to a standstill and to paralyze the country' (p255).

Even in today's relatively modest worker mobilisations, the forces of the state and indeed official trade unionism are promptly organised in determined opposition to any potential stranglehold on ownership and profitability; recent stymied worker occupations at Vestas and Visteon in Britain provide poignant evidence of this (Smith 2009, Wilson 2009).

'Are you ready?' Dual Power and the Soviet

However, it is in the historic occasions in which workers' councils emerged in their full revolutionary or quasi-revolutionary form that the nature and meaning of dual power and the fully-fledged *soviet* form are most clear.

What is meant by *dual* power? The above section has attempted to place the nature and importance of workers' power, potential or actual, firmly at the centre of the argument. As suggested, this power is intrinsically tied up with the role of workers in production and the impact, always threatening to capital, of the withdrawal of labour. While linked to this central production-related dynamic, the concept of dual power indicates a further and distinct dimension; the association of withdrawal of labour with forms of worker-led domination over the organisation of capital and the economic system. The workers' council, general strike committee, etc, in a sense *shares* power with a reluctant and alarmed bourgeois state. The 'balance of power' is fundamentally contested, with associated political and often revolutionary implications.

History provides numerous examples of dual power situations with an unquestionably revolutionary trajectory, if not always result. During strikes which raged across Liverpool in the Great Unrest, a transport permit system run by the cross-city strike committee 'clearly challenged, and was perceived to challenge, the legitimacy of civil power...' (Holton 1976, p102). In a more classically revolutionary trajectory, the workers' council movement in 1918 Germany briefly saw a direct clash of potential power between the 'masses of armed workers and soldiers' and Social Democratic politicians like the teacherous Ebert: 'Bourgeois republic or proletarian socialist state – these were the choices of a classic dual power situation' (Gluckstein 1985, p115).

In the revolutionary year of 1919, a mass strike in the US, centred in Seattle, based its organisation in a General Strike Committee which 'form[ed] virtually a counter-government for the city' (Brecher).

In the same year, the ever-devious Lloyd George challenged British trade union leaders with the political implications of threatened cross-union action: 'The strike...will precipitate a constitutional crisis of the first importance. For, if a force arises in the State which is stronger than the State itself, then it must be ready to take on the functions of the State...Gentlemen, have you considered, and...are you ready?' Needless to say, union leaders jibbed at the challenge (Rosenberg 1987, p74). The last major British upsurge of the period, the 1926 General Strike, saw both 'Councils of Action' and some experience of dual power for the strikers; as one put it, 'Employers of labour were coming, cap in hand, begging for permission...to allow their workers to perform certain operations' (Postgate et al, p35).

However, by that time the revolutionary wave had crested. Mass confrontations with capital were not seen again until the 1930s, but the balancing-act with the capitalist state signalled by the concept of 'dual power' had not disappeared. In the post-war turmoil of 1945, when 'all that really stood between the French workers and effective power were a few shaky bayonets', French Communist Party leader Thorez declared, with predictable results, that 'Local Committees of Liberation should not substitute themselves for the local governments' (Anderson 1964, p9).

Indeed, the CP-backed soviet state was also to be challenged in the wave of worker protests in eastern Europe. In Hungary, the workers' council of Miskolc had 'formed workers' militias...and organised itself as a local government independent of the central power...It was only ready to support Nagy if he applied a revolutionary programme'. By November, almost all radio stations were controlled by the Revolutionary Councils; 'workers...remained armed and solidly behind their own organisations. A classical situation of "dual power" existed' (Anderson 1964 pp69, 78-9).

In the insurgent Poland of the early 1970s, as a general strike spread out from the shipyards, 'striking bakers or printers...work[ed] only with the strike committee's permission'; the rulers of Warsaw 'began to perceive the nightmarish vision of Lenin's "dual power".' When workers' council-based struggles once again erupted in 1980, 'The interfactory committees acted and appeared as an organ of parallel power...Calm, confident, determined, the workers stayed in their plants as if these were impregnable fortresses' (Singer 2002, p221).

As noted more than once, such quasi-revolutionary patterns of struggle often surface in less than revolutionary situations. During the much-maligned 'Winter of Discontent' in Britain, often described as irretrievably 'economist' and 'sectional' (Kelly 1988), 'elements of dual power began to characterise the dispute: 'Within a short time strike committees were deciding what moved in and out of many of the ports and factories. Passes were issued for essential materials... In some cases strike committees controlled the public services of whole cities.' One minister referred to the local strike committees of lorry drivers, train drivers and

other groups organising the transport of essential supplies as 'little Soviets', while, echoing the 'dual power' theme, Thatcher recorded in her memoirs that 'the Labour government had handed over the running of the country to local committees of trade unionists' (Cohen 2006, p50).

Again in Britain, a 21st-century episode of conflict took place which earned the unexpected sobriquet 'Seven Days That Shook New Labour' from the press. During one surreal week in September 2000, a 'leaderless revolt' against exorbitant fuel taxes catapulted road haulage workers into the headlines when they blockaded oil depots and refineries in a desperate protest against rising fuel taxes. Within a few days supermarkets were running out of food, ambulance services had imposed speed limits, and funeral directors were reporting that they had enough petrol to pick up bodies, but not to bury them.

“This contribution is a plea to today's left to note the transformational potential of the grass-roots, directly democratic, resurgent organisational formations”

Whatever the consciousness of its participants, the dispute had a clear 'dual power' character; 'pickets are voting on a case-by-case basis whether to let the tankers out of the refinery ... the driver presents his case to the picket-line and awaits their decision'. The parallels with the 'Winter of Discontent' were clear, and were duly made by Labour politicians with 'deep fears...about the political implications of this crisis' (Cohen 2006 pp133-4).

As a number of writers note, during periods and incidents featuring forms of dual power, workers' councils generated out of mass strikes, occupations and similar waves of struggle display an identical structure and trajectory to those archetypal organisations of revolutionary power, the Russian soviets. As shown above, 'dual power situations' have occurred in many less than revolutionary situations, as invoked in the politician's ironic reference to 'little Soviets' during the British Winter of Discontent. In fact 'the soviet can arise only during a situation of dual power', according to Gluckstein (1985, p218). As history shows, many such situations and formations can evoke the soviet form even without, ultimately, a revolutionary outcome. Nevertheless, historically the soviet form invokes more than any other the trajectory of a fundamental challenge to capitalist economic and political order, a point more fully explored in our penultimate section.

'A Peculiar Sort of State...'

What were the soviets?

Trotsky's description of the 1905 revolution, in which soviets played an initiating and pivotal role, makes it overwhelmingly clear that these were 'workers' organisations, rather than the creation of the 'social-democratic organisation' (revolutionary party). As he wrote of the Petersburg Soviet: 'This purely class-founded, proletarian organization was the organization of the revolution as such...' Describing its structure, Trotsky evokes the production-based logic of the workers' council formation: 'Since the production process was the sole link between the proletarian masses... representation had to be adapted to the factories and plants...One delegate was elected for every 500 workers... [although] in some cases delegates represented only a hundred...workers, or even fewer' (Trotsky 1971, p 104) In other words, a classic workers' council.

It was not, then, the organisational form of the soviet which marked it out from its historical predecessors – quite the reverse; not was its nature as a distinctively *proletarian* organization (Trotsky *op cit*). What is distinctive about the Russian soviets is their role – however brief – as organisations of actual, rather than potential, working-class power. It is in this sense that the Soviets, in their revolutionary moment, express the unity signalled by both Marx and Lenin between this form of organisation and the form of what is, potentially, both workers' government and workers' state.

It was the crucial connection between the soviet *form* and the structures of a workers' state in which all top-down institutions would necessarily 'wither away' which so excited Lenin when making connections with Marx's analysis of the Paris Commune. As he wrote in *The State and Revolution*, '...the Commune would appear to have replaced the shattered state machinery "only" by fuller democracy: [for example] all officials to be fully elective and subject to recall. But...the "only" signifies a gigantic replacement of one type of institution by others of a fundamentally different order.

Here we observe a case of "transformation of quantity into quality": democracy...is transformed from capitalist democracy into proletarian democracy: from the state (i.e., a special force for the oppression of a particular class) into something which is no longer really the state in the accepted form of the word' (Marx and Lenin, pp110-11).

In the same way, the Soviets endorsed by Lenin served as a *transitional* form both embodying features of a potential workers' state and leading to the conquest of power towards that form of state – or rather, its 'withering away'. Hammering home the point, Lenin lamented in his April Theses, written in 1917, that the Soviets were 'not understood...in the sense that they constitute a new form or, rather, a new *type of state*'. This was the type of state which the Russian revolution *began* to create in 1905 and 1917. In this sense the 'withering away of the state' under socialism and communism along with workers' production-based forms of self-management, are *fused* in the form – the soviet – which workers spontaneously adopt as vehicle to fight for their own class demands.

That this is a fundamentally contested process is made evident in John Reed's historic *Ten Days...*, which vividly portrays the fanatical resistance of the ruling class and indeed 'soft left' to any real rather than symbolic seizure of power by those 'shabby soldiers [and] grimy workmen... poor men, bent and scarred in the brute struggle for existence' who had seized and made their own the now-institutionalised Soviets (Reed 1977, p123). It was the unceasing endorsement of the Soviet form of organisation and potentially revolutionary power which the Bolsheviks, alone amongst the socialist groups of the period, consistently adopted which gained them, at least for this brief and magical period, the passionate loyalty of the Russian working class.

It was not, of course to last; as suggested above, there is nothing sustainable about the soviet form *per se* outside the context, as yet unattained, of international working-class rule and thus state dissolution. The etymology and history of the word 'soviet' illustrates this point; its literal meaning is 'council'. As Reed (1997) notes, 'Under the Tsar the Imperial Council of State was called *Gosudarstvenniyi Soviet*' (p23). A term which for a brief time signified revolutionary glory was thus, before 1905, used in the mundane sense of 'town council', while under Stalinism 'Soviet rule' became merely a term for iron-clad repression.

Even the soviets of 1905, revived and re-established in the run-up to the February 1917 revolution, were not beyond corruption. As Lenin noted bitterly in *The State and Revolution*, 'Such heroes of rotten philistinism as the Skobelovs and the Tseretelis...have managed to pollute even the Soviets, after the model of the most despicable petty-bourgeois parliamentarianism, by turning them into hollow talking shops' (Marx and Lenin 1967, pp114-5). Singer drives the point home: 'It was...difficult to conceive that in [the] distant future the soviets would be a fiction, the...dictatorship a parody of socialist democracy, and the so-called workers' state a mighty organ of coercion' (Singer 2002, p339). It is perhaps logical that, during the Solidarnosc uprising, leading CP bureaucrat Ruwelski 'vituperated against the workers' councils, the soviets – a diabolical invention of the Bolsheviks' (Singer 1982 p270).

This potential bureaucratisation of once dynamically revolutionary workers' organisations points to an essential lesson to be learnt from studying the workers' council formation. The inherent characteristics of direct democracy, independence from officialdom, spontaneity and self-activity listed above are in fact essential to this formation's potential success in achieving and sustaining social transformation. Rather than 'anarchistic', as the suspicious Communist and Socialist parties of Italy labelled the factory councils, their characteristics of spontaneity, self-activity and class antagonism were what could, with different political leadership, have carried them to the political barricades and thus to the aid of the increasingly fragile soviet regime in Russia.

I was, I am, I will always be...'

The above analysis has not sought to address the question of the historic *failure* of the workers' council formation to achieve a lasting regime of workers' power and ownership, participative democracy and freedom from the oppressions under which the world currently labours. While this question is clearly crucial, the argument here has sought to emphasise the always renewed and extraordinary *potential* of these (to paraphrase Luxemburg) 'fresh, young, powerful, buoyant' organisations. As suggested throughout, the same workplace-based, directly democratic, 'spontaneous' formations constantly surface and resurface in often entirely unpredictable surges of working-class struggle. It is this that provides us with the only hope available in a 'new world order' dominated by the greed, immorality and violence of neo-liberalism.

Much current (and indeed past) socialist analysis would question whether working-class activity is the 'only hope available'. Many left perspectives place considerable weight on 'new social movements' involving youth, radicalised women, oppressed ethnic minorities and other identity-based groups for reviving an 'anti-capitalist movement'. Again, movements rooted in causes some way from the point of production, most notably the environmental crisis, gain considerable credence for a left urgently seeking panaceas which appear in some way to accord with 21st-century culture and *mores*.

The current argument in no way denies these urgent priorities. What is attempted here is a reassertion of the historic, if often discounted, role of working class struggle, in all its diverse 21st-century manifestations. As implied, this is not a fashionable or popular perspective. However, the history summarised above demonstrates beyond doubt the insurrectionary potential of grass-roots workplace-based resistance which, in instances from the earliest stages of industrial organisation to today's globalised waves of unionisation and strike action (Moody 1997, Mason 2007), has 'stormed heaven' to challenge the existing order in ways which its rulers, at least, take with the utmost seriousness. This contribution is a plea to today's left to note the transformational potential of the grass-roots, directly democratic, resurgent organisational formations chronicled above, and to take equally seriously that continuing potential.

It seems appropriate to conclude, then, on the note of revolutionary optimism sounded by Rosa Luxemburg in her last defiant shout to the bourgeoisie: 'Your order is built on sand. Tomorrow the revolution will raise its head again and proclaim to your horror, amid a brass of trumpets: I was, I am, I will always be.'

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