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Class composition and the theory of the party at the origins of the workers' council movement

Structure of the labour force and political class composition in Germany before World War I

A substantial and significant part of the factory-level leadership in the German workers' council movement was made up of highly specialised workers in the engineering industry.

Since this section of workers took on a social and political dimension in 1918, it is legitimate to ask whether it was the structure of German industry pre-World War I that contributed to the predominance of this type of workforce, and whether there was any relationship between these workers' position in production and their political adherence to the workers' council system.

The pre-War German engineering industry had not yet reached a level of concentration and rationalisation to match that in the mining, steel and electrical sectors. It consisted mainly of middle-size establishments employing between 1,000 and 5,000 workers distributed in the traditional centres of German industrialism: Rhineland-Westphalia, Wirttenberg, Saxony, the Berlin region, the Hamburg region, Oldenburg and Bavaria. It was the newest German industrial sector. Its principal

products were bicycles, motorcycles, machine tools, office machines, sewing machines, tools and automobiles. Specialisation was not yet very advanced. In fact almost all major manufacturers of bicycles and later motorcycles also produced office machines and sewing machines. Only the German branch of Singer in Hamburg actually began life as purely a producer of sewing machines - and this came about because it was a subsidiary of a US corporation which already had a monopoly in the market. The auto industry had not yet assumed the importance it was to achieve later. (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 medium-size establishments. What did develop very fast, and with its own autonomy, was the industry supplying auxiliary products to the motor industry; this sector was characterised by rapid concentration and rationalisation. It was in this sector, and specifically in the production of ignition equipment, that Robert Bosch made his fortune. In 1913 he already employed 4,700 workers in his plant in Stuttgart and in other smaller minor establishments. This kind of sector - which enabled the German engineering industry to achieve a leading world position prior to World War I, had a particularly skilled labour force. It employed a very large number of specialised

technicians; its research and development spending was higher than in other sectors, and it developed an extremely dynamic marketing apparatus. Consequently, wages too were higher. Bosch was the first German employer to introduce the eight-hour working day in 1906, as an employer's concession, and then the free Saturday in 1910. It was at this time that Germany witnessed the development of industrial sectors such as light engineering, precision tools, optics and electromechanics. If we follow the history of the firms engaged in these sectors, we see them making remarkable leaps forward: these are the same firms which imposed on the world market the very high quality characteristic of German products, thereby enabling themselves to confront their British and American competitors, who were starting from a more solid financial base. This was due not so much to the entrepreneurial talents of individual German capitalists as to the remarkable professional ability of a skilled labour force working with the most advanced technology, with specialised tools, and who were directly involved with questions concerning the modification of work systems. In this kind of sector the predominant figure was that of the worker-inventor, or at least of the worker collaborating very closely with technicians and planning engineers. One result of this situation in

Germany was the success of the industrial instrumentation and machine tool industry. While German agriculture and the German textile industry were in the throes of recession and crisis, Germany was producing the best agricultural and textile machinery in the world.

Let us examine the workers who were employed in these highly dynamic sectors: their metal work demanded utmost precision; they participated directly in modifications to the products they produced; as well as transforming their own techniques of work. 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 on the part of companies concerning higher wages, shorter working hours, and even profit-sharing (a method of pre-empting workers' demands that Western German employers were also to practice in the period 1950-65).

Individual capitalists were forced to pay in order to maintain stable skilled and specialised workforces. They favoured the crystallisation of labour aristocracies and sought to reduce as much as possible the mobility of their labour force, especially within the same sector.

Subsequently, some of these companies were to receive a powerful boost from the war. Thus, for example, Zeiss of Jena and the other major optics company, Leitz (Leica) developed on the basis of government contracts for the manufacture of aiming instruments; while Bosch benefited similarly in the production of the accumulators and electromagnetic hardware required by the military equipment of the period. Optical industries were located mainly in Wirttenberg and in Saxony, while light engineering, precision engineering and the electromechanical industries concentrated gradually around Berlin.

It is no accident that the experiments in workers' council systems acquired their most marked political and managerial characteristics precisely in those three regions - Wirttenberg, Berlin and Saxony - where the machine tool, electromechanic and optical industries were more concentrated, i.e. where highly specialised industrial workers were predominant within the overall labour force. These highly specialised workers of the machine and tool industry with a high level of professional ability, engaged in the precision working of metals, well-versed in the use of tools (both manual and machine tools) and collaborating with technicians and engineers in modifications to the labour process, were,

by the nature of their position, materially more susceptible to a political-organisational 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 workers' council movement without the presence of a labour force inextricably linked to the technology of the labour process, with a strong sense of professional values and naturally inclined to place a high value on their function as "producers". The concept of workers' control as a system of management was a concept that saw the worker as an autonomous producer, and the factory's workforce as a self-sufficient entity. It only saw the relation between the workers and individual employers or companies, and - as we shall see - it distrusted "politics" in its broad sense, i.e. the relationship between organisation and power, party and revolution.

This relationship between occupational structures and particular determining political-ideological attitudes is not a new discovery, but it is worth stressing, partly because Germany provides a very substantial illustration of the relationship, and partly to serve as a reminder to those with a taste for confused and inconclusive discussions of "class-consciousness", as if the latter were a spiritual or cultural fact. Another thing that should be

stressed is that the self-management element was the most significant aspect of the German council movement, it was by no means the only significant aspect in terms of revolutionary praxis and projectuality. It only constitutes its most typical feature.

Another feature of the German movement, directly linked to the first, was the virtually total involvement of the technician stratum. In this case too the material position of a particular sector of labour power within the engineering industry led to a specific political choice. At that time, technicians and engineers had not yet become the functionaries of the scientific organisation of exploitation, since Taylorism was adopted in Germany only in the post-War period. However, German companies in general, and not only those in the engineering sector, had a very advanced level of administrative-bureaucratic organisation. The German industrial boom preceding World War I was due primarily to two objective conditions: the use of technology and the application of advanced research (the number of patents registered was enormous) and the extreme efficiency of the bureaucratic-administrative apparatus. This was made possible by the existence of basic infrastructures such as an organisation of professional education much more advanced and well-articulated

compared with that of other countries; a close connection between university research and industrial applications; the tradition of administrative efficiency that had been characteristic of Prussian bureaucracy - both before and after Bismarck - which, during the industrial boom pre-World War I, spread to the company level. On the basis of reports written by engineers for the workers' council movement and published in its press, we know that the bureaucratic (ie administrative and accounting) organization of German companies was very efficient and was matched during this period by a higher percentage increase in the employment of white collar as opposed to blue collar workers.

Traditionally, German bureaucracy had always been a faithful executor of orders from above. This remained true in industry, but the executive position of the technical and clerical workforce, combined with the material and technically conditioned position of the technical workforce in the engineering industry of that time, tended to produce a homogeneity of the overall workforce in the company which at a given moment (and for a short time) was able to transform itself into political unity. Within the kind of enterprise described above it makes no sense to go looking for a managerial class with decision-making powers located between the owners

and the working class. From this point of view, for all its extraordinary dynamicism, the German engineering 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. This particular nature of its workforce, characterised by high professional values, and its characteristic company structure, were not at all a vanguard in terms of capitalist industrial organisation. A remarkably authoritative testimony of this comes from Henry Ford himself, who, in his autobiography, scorns that type of machine enterprise, claiming that at the time when he was about to introduce the conveyor-belt and the assembly line, the engineering industry as a whole was static, backward, and unresponsive to the idea of changes in the organisation of productive process and in the modification of the organic composition of capital. By resisting the kinds of innovations proposed by Ford, the German engineering industry expressed an all-out determination to defend a particular kind of labour force, and therefore a particular kind of "labour aristocracy". This resistance could be seen across the board, among individual employers, as well as among technicians and workers. The model of the medium-scale engineering enterprise which maintained its capacity to keep coming up with new products and which, after more or less long

periods of experimentation and planning, was beginning to embark on serial production (but not mass production), was to be swept away by Fordism precisely in its fundamental component - that of labour. Ford's innovations were merely a qualitative advance in terms of machinery; in the long run, they represented the progressive extinction of the kind of worker who had ties to his machine, to his company, and to his craft. The highly skilled worker of the engineering industry was to give way to the modern assembly-line worker, who was de-skilled, without roots, highly mobile and interchangeable. Thus it is important to keep in mind that well before the German "labour aristocracy" was to become the "revolutionary vanguard", well before its "trial by fire", it had already been objectively doomed to extinction by the vanguards of capitalism.

Fordism not only profoundly altered the internal structure of the workforce by replacing the craftsman, or the "labour aristocracy", with the modern line-worker, the mass worker; it also considerably altered both the structure of the wage and the labour (and capitalist) view of the wage. For Taylor the wage as an incentives was directly linked to the position of the individual worker in the individual enterprise; this derived from the individualistic and atomistic approach typical of Taylor's

philosophy. For Ford, however, the wage became a general quantity of income to be used as a means of controlling the dynamics of the system; it was an overall quantity of capital to be injected within an overall framework of planned development. In 1911, Ford's ideas were nothing more than the intelligent discoveries of an individual entrepreneur. It took the threat of a generalised overturning of power relations in the factory (the threat that the workers' council movement, even in its co-management version, represented for capital as a whole), for them to become the strategy of collective capital - i.e. the Keynesian "income revolution". This threat was not because their projects for an industrial "New Order" were particularly advanced, or because the workers' council movement had such a strong base among the labour aristocracy, i.e. jeopardised the planned integration of the class into the system. The threat was rather due to the fact that it was an international class movement. Here the working class as a whole was attempting for the first time in history to reverse the trend in the process of capitalist development, in backward as well as in advanced sectors, at plant level as well as at the level of society as a whole. It was not so much its organisational, political-ideological, or sociological character, but its international character that constituted the revolutionary feature of

the workers' council movement. It was a world-wide 1905 in which only the weakest link broke.

In order to reconstruct the workers' council movement and to define it in political terms, we must follow the cycles of working-class struggle at the international level as well as class composition within the capitalist area.

So let us return to our example in the case of Germany. The discussion concerning the structure of the manual and technical workforce and its geographical distribution is absolutely inadequate and runs the risk of becoming incorrect and misleading unless we first investigate the political class composition as it existed in Germany. We might offer the following as a general methodological point: backwardness does not necessarily mean backwardness in the working class. If, in analysing political struggles, we retain the usual distinction between advanced (US, England, Germany) and backward capitalist countries (Russia, Italy), we run the risk of generating confusion and schematicism. At the level of subjective organisation, the particular characteristics of the struggle in Russia are as advanced as in other countries - if not more so. While in the periods 1904-6, 1911-13, and 1917-20, we find a capital that is characterised by major imbalances between advanced and backward areas, in terms of class political

activity we find a considerable degree of class homogeneity across all countries. We can thus speak of a series of cycles of struggle beginning in the 1904-6 period, which were international in nature. The specific characteristic of this first cycle is not easy to fix in precise chronological terms, but it stands out clearly: it is the mass strike arising out of a situation of endemic struggle and leading to violent and insurrectional actions. This is best exemplified in the US. Starting in 1901, a series of violent mass strikes shakes the whole US industrial structure. With its centre, 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 struggle, while the Soviets were coming into being in Russia, in the USA the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) was formed; the most radical proletarian organisation ever in the USA, the only revolutionary class organisation 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 to the US from Eastern and Western Europe, the IWW cannot merely be written off as the American equivalent of French anarcho-syndicalism.

What was there in the IWW that is so extraordinarily modern? Although it was based on an old class nucleus, the Western Federation of Miners, the merit of the IWW was that it attempted to organise 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 organised in a certain way. Secondly, it was a mobile proletariat, a fact which very much militated against identification with any particular job or skill, and which also militated against workers developing ties to individual factories (even if only to take them over). The IWW made the notion of the social factory a concrete reality, and it built on the extraordinary level of communication and coordination possible within the struggles of a mobile workforce. The IWW succeeded in creating an absolutely original type of agitator: not the mole digging for decades within the single factory or proletarian neighbourhood, but the type of agitator who swims within the stream of proletarian struggles, who moves from one end to the other of the enormous American continent and who rides the seismic wave of the struggle, overcoming national boundaries and sailing the oceans before organising conventions to found sister organisations. The Wobblies' concern with transportation workers and longshoremen, their constant determination

to strike at capital as an international market, their intuitive understanding of the mobile proletariat - employed today, unemployed tomorrow - as a virus of social insubordination, as the agent of the "social wildcat": all these things make the IWW a class organisation which anticipated present-day forms of struggle, and was completely independent of the tradition of the Second and the Third Internationals. The IWW is the direct link from Marx's First International to the post-communist era.

The violence and the continuity of the American strikes during the first two decades of the century show how politically correct Marx's intuition was thirty years earlier when he wanted the headquarters of "his" International to move to New York. It is difficult to locate the high point of these struggles, but the trajectory of the cycle is roughly analogous to the European one and to that of the Russian proletariat. A particularly memorable moment was the 1905 struggle of 5,000 teamsters in Chicago, which ended in clashes with the police at a cost of 20 deaths and 400 wounded.

The year 1904 saw Italy's first general strike.

On 3 January 1905, the Putilov factory workers of St Petersburg came out on strike and the Russian revolution of 1905 began.

During the first months of that same year the great strike of the German miners broke out in the Bruchstrasse mine and spread throughout the Ruhr. This struggle in Germany had been preceded by the strikes of textile and paper workers during 1903 and 1904. The workers in these sectors had the worst conditions and the worst wages in German industry. In the paper industry there had been the highest incidence of permanent disability arising from workplace accidents and the famous German labour unions were more or less absent from the textile and paper sectors: these workers were not to obtain their first contract until in 1919, after the overthrow of the monarchy. The strike had broken out spontaneously, as had 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 with the ability to set in motion the whole social class fabric when it entered into struggle. A typical instance had been the sudden and spontaneous strike of 1889 which had immediately turned into a mass strike. The unions had only moved in at the last moment. The Kaiser and

Bismarck had to intervene directly in order to bring the struggle to an end in the face of the unions' negotiating and organisational inability, and the stubborn resistance put up by the coal barons. The miners succeeded in forcing the employers to accept all of their demands except the most important one, i.e. the eight-hour day, to include the time taken travelling to and from the workface. In fact, the 1905 struggle started precisely with this demand. As a result of large-scale mining, the mines had become deeper and the time needed to go down and come up had virtually doubled.

The crisis of the mining industry had forced about 9,000 miners to leave the district; the rate of occupational illness had shown a frightening increase; but, most of all, the miners were not prepared to tolerate the presence of foremen. The union had learned from the drubbing it had received in 1889 - which had cost it a lot at the organisational level (only 40% of the miners were now union members), and initially it sought to localise the struggle. But the strike very quickly communicated itself to other areas: within 10 days, 220,000 miners were striking, out of a total of 270,000 in the district. The demands had been rejected by the barons with their usual arrogance. They would not tolerate any challenge to their "I'm the boss here" principle. The characteristics

of the German miners' strike prefigured the characteristics of the great struggles of the workers' council period. Two in particular stand out: the non-violence of the struggle (even the bourgeois press praised the orderly behaviour of the workers), and the demands regarding power relations in the workplace. On the one hand we see the extreme sociality of the struggle (which, in this aspect too, was homogeneous with the high-communicability mass strikes in the United States, Italy and Russia), and on the other, demands were still directed to individual capitalists or groups of capitalists in a given sector. What this meant was that, for the German miners, power had to be changed first and foremost at the place of production. In other words, even in the most advanced class-pole we encounter the same characteristic of anchoring subversive activity to the place of production strictly defined. It is interesting to notice that, once again, the real force in the negotiations was the government as 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 "Labour 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 behaviour we can see characteristics which were to reappear later. In Germany the interests of collective capital were protected by the state or, in 1918, by the coming-to-power of social democracy. In 1905 the initiative of introducing labour representation in the factory came from capital. It was a far cry from anything like co-management: they were merely committees meant to deal with local disputes to prevent them from erupting into overt struggles which might eventually have led to a general struggle. Similarly, in 1920, under the pressure of the revolutionary movement, the social-democratic coalition government was to intervene against projects of socialisation meant to yield all power in the factories to the workers' councils, with the law of the Betriebsrate.

The Ruhr strike did not close the period of the mass strikes in Germany: in January 1906 a general political strike paralysed Hamburg's factories and harbour - this was the strike which Luxemburg defined as the "general test of the insurrection".

We have dealt at some length with the miners' strike in order to identify the most advanced class pole in Germany in the pre-War period. Unfortunately, we have not been able to use statistics broken down into specific

industrial sectors in order to reconstruct the whole German class composition in relation to the movements in struggle. The following absolute figures on the strikes at least confirm the statement that the 1904-6 period represents a quite 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 the change in the course of 1905-6: compared to 1905, the total of strikers in 1906 does not have 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 fallen by about 52% compared to 1905, the number of strikes decreased by 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 succeeded in setting in motion the mechanism of struggle in the engineering factories characterised by paternalism and a labour aristocracy.

The overwhelming presence of 200,000 Ruhr miners in the German political class composition and the dominant presence of the coal-steel sector within Germany's industrial geography can be compared to the position occupied by FIAT workers and FIAT capital in Italy. In the years following 1905, however, a whole series of sectors underwent expansion and the dominance of these 200,000 miners from the Ruhr was balanced out, primarily through the creation of massive industrial centres in the Berlin region, in the Leipzig-Dresden-Chemnitz triangle, in Wirttenberg, as well as in the proximity of the ports of Hamburg, Kiel, and Bremen. Thus, in the third cycle of struggles, the decisive struggles of the 1917-20 period, these other class poles were to be the first to advance the struggle, first Berlin and the ports, then Saxony, and finally they would be joined by the Ruhr.

Turning again from political class composition to the structure of the labour force, it must be emphasised that the Ruhr miners and the skilled machine workers shared

a common element that was very important, especially in terms of the problems inherent in the modification of the organic composition of capital and in the innovative process necessary to capitalist development. Mine labour was not easily mechanisable. In the short and medium term it was unthinkable that a technological solution such as mechanisation could drastically transform the employment structure and the skill structure of the mining industry. In other words, the coal-steel barons realised that they were going to have to live with those workers for, given the situation of full employment, they could not have disposed of them and replaced them with workers of a different type: a Fordist solution in the mines (and in the steel industry) was not easily applicable. By the same token, the employers in the engineering industry wanted to keep their own workers, and were inclined towards paternalistic solutions, in order to create islands of privilege as regards both wages and conditions. Neither the authoritarian and arrogant barons of the coal-steel sector, nor the enlightened and paternalistic employers of the engineering sector, were able to set in motion a short- or long-run labour policy different from the one they were following. In other words, the particular developmental conjuncture of the two sectors posed very rigid limitations which severely conditioned the capitalists' freedom to manoeuvre and

imposed particular choices on them. The employers could have worked on modifying all other aspects of capitalist policies, such as improving the financial structure of their companies; accelerating concentration, improving their technical structure and the technologies used; finding new markets; creating new products; cooperating (or not) with the unions and the government; showing more entrepreneurial dynamism; favouring or opposing an external collaboration with the social democrats in government, etc. However, even if they had done all of this, they would not have been able to make any substantial alterations in the structural characteristics of their labour power. In my opinion this is very important because it shows how the rigidity of the German industrial system was one of the elements which made the overall workforce an independent variable such as to constitute, through the mere objective fact of its continued existence, a serious threat to further capitalist development in Germany.

The above considerations serve to correct the kind of interpretation that starts from the reformist character of the self-management project of the workers' councils, and goes on to deny that the struggles' had any real revolutionary import, except in terms of a revival of capitalist development. While from a theoretical point of

view this position is correct, and remains valid as a strategic position from which one can draw conclusions concerning workers' struggles, corrections from a historical point of view, or, better, the historical determination of that position, leads us to conclude that the post-War movement was of a subversive character. A labour organisation which merely reiterated the structure of the overall workforce in the factory, and which acted for workers only in their position and function as producers, an organisation whose overall demands merely sought to keep workers as they were within the factory, was a potentially lethal organisation for German capital: ultimately it would have blocked its possibility of manoeuvre by depriving the system of the element of flexibility which was so crucially needed if capitalist development was to be rescued by means of a modification of the organic composition of capital. This type of bottleneck was precisely what confronted Italian capitalism in the period before fascism, in more or less identical terms. Thus, the revolutionary import of a movement has to be calculated on the basis of an understanding of the historically determined stage of development in a specific situation. German capital's short-term impossibility of altering - over a twenty- or thirty-year period - the structure of the workforce, the wage structure, and the organic composition of capital,

left it with a lack of choices and alternatives which translated as an inability to find alternative political solutions even before the 1918 revolutionary wave or, rather, a lack of solutions that could be obtained through mere economic instruments means of development, or through a reformist recuperation of working-class struggle. Why did even a social-democratic organisational recuperation of 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 why did it have to present itself purely as an apparatus of repression of the struggles and of the workers' council organisations? Why, in 1918, did German social democracy have to abandon Kautsky and choose Noske? A combination of social democracy and repression, i.e. the social-Fascist solution, turned out to be the answer to match such a high level of subversive struggle. In order to clarify things, it is worth looking at the quite different solutions adopted by the American ruling class after the crisis generated by the struggles of 1904-5. One of the elements which greatly favoured the victorious response of capitalism in the USA was the radical transformation which took place in employment structures and the structure of the workforce. From 1905 to 1914, the USA received no less than 10 million immigrants. It is easy to imagine what

this mass of sub-proletarians meant in terms of the reserve army of labour and the undermining of occupational structures. The half-million foreign workers present in Germany (mostly Italian and Polish) were a relatively small figure in comparison. There is no doubting the genius of Ford's intervention, and the strategic importance of his projects in terms of advancing mechanisation and in the organisation of the wage as a function of consumption. But the main contribution of the Fordist solution was to render violent counter-revolution unnecessary in the USA as the only way out. Through a massive modification in the organic composition of capital, Fordism also succeeded in bringing about a major change in the skill structure of the workforce. The assembly-line worker at Ford was very different from the skilled worker in the German engineering industry. His very interchangeability (he could have been an Italian just landed and still unable to say "wage" in English) meant that he did not have that attachment to the individual factory which was still typical of the social figure that had created the workers' councils movement in Germany, in the conviction 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 manoeuvre, and even Bernsteinian social democracy represented an objective danger before the war (this, and not the Kaiser's "authoritarianism", was the reason why it was not co-opted into the government before the outbreak of war). These bottlenecks within the system forced German capital to intensify its already inherent tendency toward aggressive expansion in foreign markets in order to find a way out of the crisis, thus giving rise to the inter-capitalist conflicts described so well by Lenin in his pamphlet on imperialism. If the SPD wanted to join the government, it would have to abandon all intermediate solutions and totally accept social-imperialism. This occurred in 1914, with the approval of the war credits by the social democrats group. But even in this, as we shall see, things are not as simple as they are made out by the official historians of the labour movement when they talk of a "betrayal" by the social democrats.

After this summing-up the events of 1905 with reference to the high points of the international working class, little needs to be added when we come to the cycle of struggles of the 1911-13 period. The same class nuclei initiate the struggle and set in motion the working class in the various countries. Just to recall a few dates: 1911,

strike of the Harriman railway workers in the US; 1911-12, strikes by the coal miners in West Virginia, and the memorable struggle of the textile workers in Lawrence (even then there was a wave of repression against IWW militants); 4 April 1912, massacre of the precious-metal miners of Lena in Russia; in June 1912, Lenin writes his article on the "revival of revolution" in Russia; in 1912, the third mass strike of the Ruhr miners in Germany.

This time the struggle took place in a moment of high economic 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, we move from 155,000 strikers in 1910, to 400,000 in 1912, and 250,000 in 1913. This is the period when workers make the greatest use of the trade unions. Trade union membership jumps from 1,800,000 in 1910 to 2,300,000 in 1912. This was the highest figure since the turn of the century. But the workers were using the union without making a fetish of organisation. By way of illustration, in 1911 the number of steel- and metal-workers that were members of the socialist union was 133,000; an increase of 40,000 from 1910. But the number of members who then left the union in 1912 was as high as 67,000, i.e. a

negative mobility of 75%. Three quarters of the members were new members. These figures need to be cited in order to demystify the myth of the German workers' fetishism for organisation: for each member who remained, three left. Moreover, with 133,000 members, the steel- and metal-workers' union organised only 25% of the labour force employed in that sector, compared with 1905, when it organised 7%. When we remember the large number of strikes in those same years, it immediately becomes obvious that the great majority of these struggles were spontaneous.

The Theoretical Discussion in the International Working-Class Movement

The decade at the turn of the century was a period of intense and passionate theoretical debate within the international working-class movement. Obviously, it is impossible here to deal with every central theme. I shall limit myself to picking out a few, and particularly those which underlay the discussion and political planning of the workers' council movement: the relationship between spontaneity and leadership, between tactics and strategy, and the relationship between trade unions and the party. These are the themes around which the

battle raged among the three great currents in the working-class movement: the revisionist, the revolutionary, and the anarcho-syndicalist. Having dealt mainly with the struggles in Russia, Germany and the USA, I shall concentrate on the thought of Bernstein, Rosa Luxemburg, Daniel DeLeon and Lenin. It should 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 on a very important point. He maintained that the clash between capital and labour had to be seen in terms of the relationship between wages and profits. From this correct observation he drew a series of consequences which led to the labour movement losing the class perspective concerning the seizure of power. It is impossible to understand why his works generated so much turmoil unless we bear in mind that his initial formulation was correct. From it Bernstein drew two consequences: 1) that trade-union struggle, conceived as economic struggle, should take predominance over political struggle, so that unions were above the party; and the forms of struggle had to exclude mass demonstrative action in order to operate within the

domain of concrete contractual negotiation; and 2) that political struggle had to concern itself exclusively with the growth of the economic power of the labour force and should limit itself to creating an institutional framework for that growth or, in other words, be its juridical sanction. We might say that Bernstein's position meant losing sight of the final goal of socialism and left existing power structures untouched, but at the same time we have to say that it went beyond the fatalism, determinism and mechanistic thinking 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 embodied a dynamism and a possibility for immediate application. This was immediately seen by the leaders of the large German labour organisations, who took it on board, and in so doing moved a step ahead of the party's hesitant high priests (Kautsky) who were nervous about departing from the orthodox line. Because of the weight that the German organisations had within the Second International, this immediate acceptance by the trade unions gave Bernstein's doctrines an immediate popularity and diffusion, even if in some countries the unions were strongly influenced by the theories of anarcho-syndicalism (which, however, shared with Bernsteinism the rejection of "party" organisation or the

idea that it had to be overcome. The official separation of the German unions from social democracy occurred in 1903. In reality it was simply a declaration of the trade union's autonomy from the party. Clearly, for the revolutionaries, the political element, or the importance of the "politicisation" factor in labour struggles, became fundamental in challenging Bernsteinism. They felt the need to reintroduce a strategic vision and at the same time formulate a type of organisation, a centre of decision, which could maintain a firm hold on tactics and strategy. This, however, had to emphasise spontaneity, as a means of challenging trade unions' institutional possibilities of controlling the struggle process in terms of individual actions (daily tactics) and in its overall line. But to speak of spontaneity was to use to a term which had been the battle-cry of anarcho-syndicalism. It was necessary to free the term "spontaneity" of its anarchistic content, and the term "politics" of its bureaucratic and unmilitant connotations. 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 begin talking about the workers not simply as labour power but as an autonomous political class. It was difficult to win this theoretical-political debate in terms of majorities in party organisations or in terms of better political

argumentations. What was needed was a crucial political event to throw on the scale and for all revolutionaries 1905 provided precisely that: a prospect of victory over revisionism.

The first revolutionary replies to Bernstein come before 1905. They begin with Luxemburg and her 1899 pamphlet "Reform or Revolution?" which defines once and for all the union's specific field of activity and its institutional domain. According to Rosa Luxemburg, such activity "is limited essentially to efforts at regulating capitalist exploitation" according to market conditions and "can in no way influence the process of production itself". Yet she emphasises how the trade-union economic activity could lead to a choking of capitalist development, thus laying the premises for a crisis of the system. At this point "political and socialist class struggle must be undertaken anew with fresh vigour". 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 organised defence of labour power against the attacks of profit. They express resistance offered by the working class to the oppression of capitalist economy." 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 by trade union activity, but rather applied. The other important point touched upon by Luxemburg concerns the relationship between political struggle and the struggle for democracy: "today the socialist working-class movement is, and is bound to be, the only framework for democracy... The socialist movement is not bound to bourgeois democracy, but on the contrary, the fate of democracy is bound with the socialist movement."

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 Bersteinism had precipitated a crisis in both the revolutionary line and 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 had meant the transition from a cadre party towards a party of opinion. Yet the slogan had the merit of forcing the organisation to face up to the problem of its relation to the mass movements and moving away from an excessive concern with the inner workings of party life

and a fetishisation of self-conservation. Bernstein introduced a dynamic element into party life and in the bureaucratic planning of a self-sufficient organisational growth. Another of his favoured slogans was: "Long live economics, down with politics", very reminiscent of the French anarcho-syndicalist slogan: "M'efiez-vous des politiciens!" Rosa Luxemburg realised that her criticism of the SPD line and of the unions might give fuel to theories aimed at abolishing the party, or any party, old or new. This might have led to 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 evaluation of the positive role of spontaneity. Might not her anti-bureaucratic polemic have strengthened the hand of those who criticised politics and the party-form in any shape or form? And might not her favourable attitude to spontaneism have strengthened anarchist spontaneism?

It was considerations of this kind that led Luxemburg to propose an intermediate solution, which led her to what Lenin defined as the theory of the "organisation-as-a-process" and of "tactics-as-a-process". In fact, in her 1904 article "Organisational Problems of Russian Social Democracy", she reiterated the idea that the masses go beyond the party while at the same time emphasising

how not everything of the old organisation was to be thrown out.In elaborating her politico-organisational line, Luxemburg must have been taking into account the conditions within which a revolutionary current would have had to move in Germany, i.e. a "boring from within" approach inside the SPD. Thus her sociological efforts were aimed at locating that stratum of cadres at the grass roots of the party which, owing to their origins and their preparation, could best learn the lesson of spontaneity and could best understand the trends and directions of struggles that were taking place outside, or independently of, the organisation. A new revolutionary outbreak would be needed if the party's internal situation were to be unblocked. In fact it is not accidental that some of the reservations in her 1904 position are dropped in 1906, the year of "The Mass Strike, the Political Party and the Trade Unions", in which she gave her analysis of the 1905 revolution in Russia. Having traced the phenomenology of the Russian-Polish mass strikes, she goes on to pose the most important problem - the question of leadership and organisation. Her proposals, however, are still too general. What we have here is basically standards for the maintenance of a correct relation with spontaneity. As yet they include no precise indications on how to organise and direct spontaneity. Once again, Rosa finds herself caught

between the sociology of organisation and the theory of the party. In other words, leadership still remains with the factory-based cadres of the party. In fact, in her analysis of the Russian strikes, she quotes with emphasis the report of the Petersburg unions as a model in terms of organisation and leadership. However, while we may indicate these limitations in Luxemburg's thinking, we should not forget that virtually all the young and working-class cadres who 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 Russian experience of 1905 was crucial. The "left" of the SPD exerted a strong influence on them, both through the leadership role played by Karl Liebknecht in the youth organisation - which later became such a centre of dissension that the leadership had to dissolve it - and through Rosa's pre-eminent position in the party cadre school.

Another important point in Luxemburg's 1906 essays is the final analysis she gave of class composition in Germany, which, not accidentally, begins with the miners, or rather with what she refers to as the misery of the miners. In emphasising the sociality of the struggle in the mass strikes, she points out the importance of the

political unification that was achieved between the working class, the poor proletariat and the 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 organisation, when he wrote What Is to Be Done? he found himself already beyond a whole series of problems in which Rosa was still entangled. Without embarking on a detailed analysis of Lenin's pamphlet, I shall outline the basic elements of the background to the great differences between Bolshevism and the workers' council movement.

A) All organisational discussion is subordinated to the political line, so Lenin begins by calling for a re-evaluation of theory, in order to be able to emerge from the clutches of "empiricist activism". Secondly, he traces as precisely as possible the dividing line between Bernsteinism/economism and the revolutionary position. Finally he tackles the problem of the relationship between leadership and spontaneity and accuses economism of giving in to spontaneity and therefore limiting itself to an agitational role in spontaneous struggles.

B) In Kautsky's formulation, bourgeois intellectuals have the task of bringing social-democratic consciousness from the outside, since it does not arise spontaneously among the working-class masses, whose natural tendency is towards trade unionism.

Starting with Engels' definition of economic and trade-union struggles as "resistance against capitalism", Lenin outlines the institutional boundaries between the union and the party. The union's task 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 relation to all classes in modern society, to the state as an organised political force." [Note 15: V.I. Lenin, op. cit., p. 56.] Thus, the tasks of political agitation and denunciation must not only be extended to workers' economic struggles, but to all possible domains.

D) The terrorist solution is also a mistake since it does not contribute in any way to the political organisation and leadership of spontaneity but, rather, it explicitly renounces them. E) It is when he comes to deal with the "primitivism" of social-democratic organisation in Russia that Lenin seems to dwell on the technical aspects of clandestine organisation. He stresses what he considers to be the specifically political aspect of the work, as

opposed to agitation and intervention in working-class struggles which are only aspects of that work - even if the most "essential" ones - and proposes to the party a kind of articulated and multi-faceted intervention similar to that of German social-democracy.

F) The impact of What Is To Be Done? derived from the extreme frankness with which Lenin tackled problems such as the function of intellectuals and workers. Although Lenin does not explicitly state it in this 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 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 which was still bogged down in questions which the Russian experience had already gone beyond. The tactical support given to Luxemburg cannot conceal their serious differences, particularly concerning 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, Daumig and, indirectly, with Rosa's theory of organisation-as-a-process, which he once again regarded as a submission to spontaneity, as the conflation of the party with the spontaneous movements, and as creating confusion between politicised workers, workers in struggle, and professional revolutionary cadres.

G) One thing was particularly clear, i.e. that it was not sufficient for a worker, for example, to have a correct view of the factory struggle, or of the struggle that he was materially involved in organising, in order to make him a revolutionary cadre, a professional revolutionary. It was not sufficient to reverse the social function that the system assigns to individuals in production and turn it into a political function as a minority acting at the point of production in order to obtain a Bolshevik cadre. On the other hand, Luxemburgian organisation represented a coordinated network of acting minorities eventually able to overthrow the reformist leadership in class organisations.

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 favour 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 this was that the scientific nature of this theory is wholly a function of the degree of correctness in analysing power relations between classes in a given historical moment.

The point is not to prefer one organisational crystallisation 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 insurrectional strike is a practical example of three different levels of spontaneity, or organisation 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 dykes which is always based on the highest levels reached by

the tide, the science of the party must theoretically grasp all the levels of the struggle and organisation 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-organisation of the capitalist system as a dialectical response to the class confrontation. Thus, the science of the party is always measured by means of the historical levels reached by capitalist organisation.

The revolutionary hypothesis seeks to anticipate theoretically 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 centralisation and the minority's right to dissent: in the historiography of the labour movement Lexemburg 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 better to 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 realised that it was impossible to wrestle the direction of labour struggles away from the opportunistic policies of the SPD merely by relying on political and minority means without reversing the relationship between class and unions. She realised 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-syndicalism. In the IWW founding convention, Heywood had shouted: "Everyone in the IWW! Out with the politicians!" Rosa Luxemburg realised that political organisation 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 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 realise 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" organisations and not a bunch of gangsters as Gompers' union in the USA. 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 programme, or of the party's policy. For Lenin the workers' revolutionary direction was to be attained by tying militants to this programme and thus disciplining them to centralisation. Rosa and Lenin spoke to two different types of working class: they spoke against two different types of reformism.

The conditions for the organisation of a political labour movement in the USA 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' council organisation, 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 United States. It is impossible to compare the maturity of the American entrepreneurial class and its stage of productive organisation with the corresponding European ones. The USA was faced with a gigantic input

of labour into directly productive labour. The greatest efforts were concentrated on the organisation of work: all the technical tools for an efficient apparatus were already available.

Humanitarian pretences 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 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 labour, an inexhaustible ability to turn conflict into rationalisation and development, a control over the labour 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 "labour" agitators who led the IWW, understood very well how in that situation a revolutionary political line and organisation must take on specific mass characteristics and that therefore the institutionalisation of a vanguard was something altogether questionable. Even less practical was a centralised direction understood as a military organisation 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 programme concerning the struggle as the only collective organiser engaged in a gigantic Cultural Revolution based on a few principles: wage and working hours, wildcat strikes, no bargaining direct, 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 fantasised 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 passwords 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 in 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's experience is the rejection of any institutionalisation of the conflict, the refusal to sign contracts so as to periodicise the struggle, and the refusal to consider the struggle as a factory affair seeking primarily to develop the struggles possibilities of social communication. What it resulted in was an organisation 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 fact that the struggle and the organisation 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 USA by overturning mobility into a vector of workers' organisation. Why was vagrancy the main charge through which the IWW cadres were thrown into jail? Why was the Wobbly agitator's work-style modeled 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 organisers 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 crystallise sectoral divisions, but has an egalitarian approach to income.

Therefore, the two pillars of the IWW organisation 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 labour was introduced by the assembly line, the mass worker was subjective reality shaped by Wobbly agitators. It was a programme 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 remodernisation of productive structures nor an organisation 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 labour and income. This is why, rather than laying down a list of grievances to be dealt with at the bargaining table, they one-sidedly 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 their 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 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 anti-egalitarian ideology of labour, the main differences between the Wobbly's world and that of the European Bolshevik cadre 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 organisation? 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 centralisation. 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 organisation. In other words, the issue was whether the IWW should have become a traditional union as the first step towards a convergence with the AFL, thus creating the premise for a unified labour organisation in the US and leaving the door open for a specific party organisation. As the cycle of struggles weakened, there arose problems of defence from repression so that resistance took priority over attack and the communist model appeared as the only possible solution. The American Communist Party succeeded in taking over a good part of the Wobblies' legacy and to integrate it in the great CIO operation of the Roosevelt 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 USA. The social figure at the centre of this first cycle of insubordination is the black run-away and later the black southern miner and the black worker in the first large steel mills in Birmingham, along with the white convict labourers. Neither the Knights of Labour 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 labour power had never been free social labour power. It remained trapped in the poverty of the south and until World War II 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 Labour, 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 organise successfully represent for American capital the river of human flesh which separated, and had to keep separated, the Southern blacks from the northern factories. A dyke of ten million

white proletarians prevented the blacks from assaulting metropolitan explitation. The IWW is historically bound to this colossal defence effort on the part of white capital. This explains the function of the IWW revolutionary initiative within this tactical-strategic plan of US 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 issue of class resistance to war and super-exploitation; 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' council 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. 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 workers' council cadres: during the war the unions had managed and guaranteed super-exploitation in the factories and had reported subordinate workers to the police. In the post-war period, the traditional organisation is assailed by a violent workers' revenge precisely in its role of political group of functionaries. The ideology of the workers' council movement, its generic accusation of the "professional political", 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' council

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 fact that Lenin and his group had armed the workers, while the Spartacist group had continued to view the organisation 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' council leaders, both Centrists and Spartacists. Unlike Liebknecht claimed, the ambiguity of the USPD did not lie in its participation in parliament (already in 1915 the Spartacist 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 organised 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 programme is well known: the transformation of workers' autonomy into counter-power, i.e. into the democratic organisation 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 socialisation: the formal scheme of bourgeois democracy applied to workers' autonomy. It was essentially Dauemig's conception of 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 labour, i.e. only in terms of workers' blackmail. Lenin attacked Dauemig very harshly precisely as the theorist of mere workers' autonomy. Actually, Dauemig was the only one among the councils' leaders who wanted to reintroduce a political perspective, i.e. a tactic aimed at determining the specific passage of power relations.

It is a mistake to view the workers' council 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 towards Germany operated precisely within the domain of the dual existence of the working class, i.e. as labour 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 further 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 labour power commodity. It is in this

sense that it entered the battlefield of the workers' struggle that the workers' council 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. The future possibilities of the workers' council movement were all here. Versailles and the NEP were ultimately two parallel movements: the first was a decision of the capitalist brain 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 defence of the institution of the workers' councils was the veil that covered this deadly struggle between capital and labour. It was not difficult for the union bureaucracy to manage this defence in terms of democratisation of unions. Union democracy was as much against workers' autonomy as it was a part of it. Thus Noske, for instance, first headed Kiel's military-worker insubordinational movement by accepting the

workers' council ideology, and then he went to Berlin to organise the White Guards. The councils movement immediately found itself on the defensive from December 1918 onwards. No sooner were they created than the councils had to be "defended": the workers' power thrust 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 Berstein, were left in the USPD to sow confusion in the field of workers' autonomy. They were quietly left to construct the utopia of labour democracy in the same way that capital let Rathenau fantasise about similar utopias. What was missing throughout the councils period was the armed power of the working class which was not merely self-defence 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 organising and managing demobilisation. The worker had to leave the guns they said - and return as soon as possible to his job. A specific programme 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' council movement failed not on the ground of workers' management of productive labour, 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' council 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 autonomy where the party is still an acting minority.

Maoist thought has gone further, 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'etat to long-range war. With Maoism, insurrection has become a spontaneist term.