About This Issue

DB118 begins with substantial excerpts from a text published originally by the Marxist Labour Party in Russia. Readers may remember that the English translation of the title and contents pages of the MLP journal MARKSIST were published in DB113. I would guess that a major project for any group that

ABOUT THE DISCUSSION BULLETIN

The Discussion Bulletin is a bimonthly magazine affiliated with the Industrial Union Caucus in Education (IUCE). It serves as the financially and politically independent forum of a relatively unknown sector of political thought that places the great divide in the "left," not between anarchists and Marxists but between capitalism's statist leftwing of vanguardists and social democrats and the real revolutionaries of our era: the non-market, anti-statist, libertarian socialists. They are organized in small groups of syndicalists, anarcho-communists, libertarian municipalists, world socialists, socialist industrial unionists, council communists, and left communists. The perspective of these groups with their rejection of capitalism's wage, market, and money system as well as capitalist politics and capitalist unionism constitutes the only real alternative to capitalism in both its market and statist phases.

In the DB the often antagonistic groups that make up this sector can debate and discuss the issues that divide them and gain some understanding of their history and future possibilities. Among the latter might be movement toward at least limited co-operation.

The pages of the DB are open to anyone in this political sector, the only limitation being that submissions be typewritten, single-spaced, and copy ready. We do no editing here. As to content, we assume that submissions will be relevant to the purpose of the DB and will avoid personal attacks.

NOTICE

The Discussion Bulletin will cease publication with number 120, the July-August 2003 issue. From now on it will not accept payment for new subscriptions nor renewals. Subs that expire before 120 will be extended free through the concluding issue. For subs that expire after 120, the DB will refund the purchase price if it amounts to $1 or more. The last issue of your subscription is indicated by the number on your address label. New subscriptions for the remaining issues will be sent free.

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The marxist anatomy of October 1917 and the present situation

[International Review note: "We reprint below extensive extracts from the text of The Marxist Anatomy of October and the Present Situation published by the Marxist Labour Party in Russia. We are unable to publish the full text due to lack of space: it can, however, be found on our website (www.internationalism.org)"]

After decades of Soviet power, we have been accustomed to call the Great October a socialist revolution. But much to which we have become accustomed has now disappeared. What is the fate, under such circumstances of the "credentials" of the October revolution?

Classical scientific Marxism asserts that the first act of the social revolution of the proletarian class itself of political power. According to Marx, capitalism is separated from communism by a period of revolutionary transformation. This period cannot be anything other than a period of the dictatorship of the proletariat. Consequently, if we see no such class dictatorship, then of course it is inappropriate to speak of overcoming capitalist relations. Moreover, the strongly entrenched appellations and official signboards signify nothing. They may be simple errors (whether well or ill intended). Marx was himself convinced that neither epochs nor persons can be judged on the basis of how they regard themselves. Each of us is already sufficiently convinced that membership in a party which calls itself communist does not signify communist conviction, nor does nostalgia for the Red Flag over administrative buildings in any way testify to the yearning for a new social relationship between people.

The Power of the Workers - Peasant Soviets or the Power of the Workers' Factory Committees?

Russia, as is well known, is a country "with an unpredictable [problematical?] past." That's possibly why there is no single opinion now, as to when the proletarian dictatorship perished in Russia, or whether it existed at all. In our view, the dictatorship of the proletariat in Russia did exist. But, firstly, it was not the dictatorship of the proletariat in "the pure aspect", that is, not a socialist dictatorship of the proletariat involving a single class, but a "democratic dictatorship of the proletariat", that is a union of the workers in the minority and of the poor peasants in the majority. Secondly, the span of its life was limited to a few months.

This is what happened. On the 13th (26th) January 1918, the 3rd Russian congress of Soviets of Peasant Deputies merged with the 3rd congress of Soviets of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies. Towards March the merger extended to the localities. In this way, the proletariat, whose political dominion should have guaranteed the socialist transformation, under pressure of the Bolsheviks, shared power with the peasantry.

The Russian peasantry itself in 1917 was not, as is well known, socially homogeneous. A significant part of it, 'kulaks' [rich land-owning peasants-exploiters, partly or even completely outside the still remaining village community, comparable to English yeomanry, - translator's comment] and middlers [medium peasantry, those who seldom or never hired themselves out elsewhere for keeping their own farm afloat, - the so-called 'thrift managers' not exploiting other community villagers - translator's comment] more and more were oriented in their economies towards the demands of the market. The 'middlers', in this way, became petty bourgeois, and the kulaks often engaged in an outright contractual economy, hiring labour - the 'btrakts' - and exploiting them; that is, they were already the village bourgeoisie. The institution of the traditional peasant community in most localities was formally preserved, but it was more beneficial not to the middlers, and less so to the kulaks - "the blood suckers"; the commune benefitted the mass of the poor peasants, which constituted over 60% of the peasantry as a whole. The laws of capitalist development
However, transformed many of the poor peasants into semi-proletarians. There were also in the village real proletarians - rural labourers who did not join the community and hired out to the landlords and kulaks along with the poor peasants.

Thus it itself the merger of the Soviet of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies with the general peasant Soviets indicated the abandonment of "the pure dictatorship of the proletariat". However, the "purity", even to this extent was very much conditional. The Soviets of Workers and Soldiers Deputies consisted not only of workers. The soldiers were fundamentally - up to 60% - former peasants; poor and middle peasants dressed in overcoats and armed by the Tsarist government. Factory workers among the soldiers constituted less than 10%.

The general arming of the people, and not solely of the advanced class, the proletariat, the merging of the two types of Soviets, and even the two-party coalition of the Bolsheviks and the Left SRs ('Socialist Revolutionaries') factually indicate the transition to the so-called "old Bolshevik formula" - the revolutionary-democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry. But this form of power was a step back, compared to what arose after the overthrow by the October revolution. At that time, as is known, power passed over to the 2nd congress of Soviets of Workers and Soldiers Deputies, that is, in fact the "democratic dictatorship of the proletariat" was introduced, although Lenin, leader of the Bolsheviks, also spoke of "the workers' and peasants' revolution" (PSS, vol. 35, p.2) and "the transition of local power to the Soviets of Workers', Soldiers' and Peasants' deputies" (op. cit., p. 1).

So the first experiment of establishing "the democratic dictatorship of the proletariat" was limited to the period of October 1917 to January/February 1918, and in addition a steady retreat occurred from the positions achieved by the working class in October to November. After that time, which is called "the triumphal procession of Soviet Power by soviet historians, not only the merger of the Workers' and Soldiers' Soviets with the Peasant Soviets occurred. An even more important circumstance was the fact that instead of strengthening and developing the system of authentic workers' organizations - the factory committees, the Bolsheviks, on the contrary, contributed to their dissolution. But only the factory committees were able to become the authentic basis of Soviet power, if we understand it in the perspective of real socialist dictatorship of the proletariat. In other words, exactly the Soviets of Factory Committees ought to have ruled over the country. Instead of this in January/February 1918 at the first Russian congress of trade unions and the 6th conference of the Factory Committees of Petrograd, a decision was accepted on the initiative of the Bolsheviks on the merger of the Factory Committees and the Unions. The unions themselves were put under the control of the party-state apparatus which had been formed. Membership in the unions was obligatory for all workers, not only in the enterprises, but also in the institutions. The working class, however, opposed such state policy and the Soviet Authorities only managed to eliminate the autonomous factory committees in the beginning of 1919.

The merger of the Workers' and Soldiers' Soviets with the Peasant Soviets, and the factory committees with the trade unions under statification were not the only things that washed away the proletarian constituent of the Soviet structure. Thus, in the course of the Civil War the Bolsheviks abandoned their prior ideas held before October to create Soviets of agricultural labour, independent of the Peasant Soviets - these would have been organs of rural proletarian power. Soviet farms were created on the lands of the former estate holders, but Soviets of agricultural labourers were not. But then again in March of 1919 trade unions of agricultural labourers were organized.

These and many other facts tell us that the Great October was in fact not a socialist revolution, as the Bolsheviks suggested, but merely the second, culminating stage of the bourgeois-democratic revolution in Russia, one of the fundamental goals of which was the settlement of the land question in favour of the peasantry. Despite all of the activity of the working class and the proletarian political revolution in the capitals, the socialist revolution in October 1917 in capitalistically backward Russia never occurred. Karl
Marx foresaw the possibility of such a situation in 1847. He wrote: "Therefore, if the proletariat overthrows the political rule of the bourgeoisie, its victory will be merely a short-lived one, will be merely an auxiliary moment in the bourgeois revolution itself, as was the case in 1794 (in France, ed), until in the course of history, in its "movement", the material conditions are again created, which necessitate the elimination of bourgeois means of production" (K. Marx, F. Engels, Collected Works, 2nd Russian ed., v. 4, pp. 298-299). At that, "a revolution with political soul, in conformity with the limited and dual nature of this soul, organizes a dominating stratum in the society at the expense of the society itself", he warned, for "socialism cannot be realized without a revolution. It is in need of this political act since it is in need of abolition and destruction of the past. But where its organizing activity begins, where its end-in-itself, its soul comes forward, there socialism throws off its political envelope" (op. cit. v. 1, p. 447-448 [written in July 1844]). It goes without saying that the Bolsheviks did not have "throwing politics off" in mind either under Lenin or after him.

(...) In this way, towards the beginning of 1919, the dictatorship of the proletariat in Soviet Russia, even in its undeveloped "democratic" aspect, suffered defeat. The factory committees and poor committees were abolished, the socialist perspective of the October revolution within the country was finally lost. After 6 months, the proletarian revolution in Europe also suffered defeat. The country in essence turned back to the revolutionary-democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry. However, it was a short-lived existence, as the real power was no longer in the deputies of the Worker-Peasant Soviets, but in their executive committees and the committees of the RKP(b). The Soviets were more and more separated from the workers' collectives, and in the Soviet apparatus bureaucratic tendencies began to grow. The Bolsheviks, with absolute sincerity, called on the masses, and on themselves, to fight these tendencies. This process went so far that Lenin, speaking at the Fourth Congress of the Comintern on November 13th, 1922, was obliged to confirm: "We adopted the old State apparatus, and this was our misfortune. The state apparatus quite frequently works against us. The fact is that in 1917, after we took power, the state apparatus sabotaged us. We were then very afraid and asked: "Please, return to us." They returned, and this was our misfortune. We have now a great mass of employees, but we do not have sufficiently educated forces in order to really have them under our control. In fact it very often happens that here, at the top, where we have state power, the apparatus functions in a fashion, while below they willfully manage themselves, and manage themselves in such a way that they often work against our measures. Above we have, I don't know how many, but I believe in any case, just some thousands, at a maximum some tens of thousands of our own. But below, hundreds of thousands of old officials, whom we received from the Tsar and the old bourgeois society, who work sometimes deliberately, sometimes unwittingly against us" (Lenin, op. cit., v. 45, p. 290).

The introduction of the NEP in 1921 in turn was the logical end of the revolutionary-democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry: the petty bourgeois peasantry accomplished their market goals, the industrial proletariat at that time completely lost their organizational autonomy (especially after the introduction of one-man management in the factories by the Bolsheviks), and besides it was already "thanks to the war and the desperate impoverishment and ruin, the is, they lost their connection to their class." (V. 1. Lenin, op.cit., v.44, p.161). The NEP itself indicated, in the words of Lenin, "a movement to the restoration of capitalism to a significant degree" (op. cit., pp. 158-160). If capitalism is restored, then the proletariat as a class is restored, engaged in the production of commodities". Lenin wrote (op. cit., p. 161). In addition, he declared that "to the extent that great industry was ruined, to that extent the factories stopped and the proletariat disappeared. It was sometimes accounted for, but it was not bound to economic roots." The leader of the Bolsheviks all the same oriented his comrades-in-arms to the
position that "the proletarian state power is able: leaning on the peasantry, to hold the capitalists in check and to direct capitalism in the state's course, creating a capitalism subject to the state, and serving it" (op. cit., p.161). Here is clearly visible the specifities of Leninism, which demanded, starting with the April Theses, "not only considerations of class, but also of institutions" (op. cit., p.31, p.123).

Thus, if there is any sense to call Soviet Russia "a workers' state", it's true only for the few months of its existence, and even then it is conditional. After all this, it is all surprising that the development of the USSR ended with the restoration of classic bourgeois relations with private property, "the new Russian" bourgeoisie, harsh exploitation and massive poverty?

What has been said is not at all an indictment of the Bolsheviks. They did what they had to do, under conditions of a backward peasant country - conditions which were aggravated by the defeat of the social revolution in the West. But without this revolution even the Bolsheviks under Lenin did not think of the construction of socialism in Russia. Although even their most immediate goal - a socialist society free of commodity relations - was not accessible, the Bolsheviks achieved, in the end, a great deal. For 70 Soviet years Russia (USSR) experienced a significant leap in productive power. But why call this socialism? Industrialization, supplanting small production (in the city, and especially, in the countryside) with large commodity production, improvement of the cultural level of the masses. all these are processes of the development of bourgeois society. We do not call France socialist just because many factories have been built in the country and the "socialist party" governs. On the contrary, socialism implies, presupposes the strongly developed industrial society, as well as the power of the class of workers. That such a society was only in process of creation in Russia - USSR, excluding the working class from power, indicates how far the country was from socialism.

(...)

[Due to lack of space we have had to cut the section on the "The Russian Marxists in the Role of Social-Jacobins," which attempts to compare the economic development of France between the bourgeois revolution of 1789 and the Commune of 1871 and that of the USSR between 1918 and the collapse of Stalinism in 1989.] [International Review note - fg]

(...)

What is the Soviet Power?

V. I. Lenin frequently called the October Revolution "the workers' and peasants' revolution", and he was undoubtedly correct in this. However the Great October, as already noted, was not a socialist revolution. It was the apogee of bourgeois democratic pressure - the revolutionary democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry with a short-term transition to "the democratic dictatorship of the proletariat." The anti-feudal transformation carried out by the Bolsheviks was not only in the workers' interest, but also in that of the broad peasant masses.

The October revolution itself, the victory of the Reds in the civil war, the suppression of numerous uprisings and mutinies were impossible without the support for the revolution by the common people - the basic mass of the toilers. What was the class composition of these toilers? From almost 140 million workers at the moment of the Revolution about 110 million were made up of the peasantry. Approximately 65% of the peasantry were poor peasants, the middle peasants were 20%, the kulaks were almost 15%. The urban petit bourgeoisie made up 8% of the population of the country. Proletarians were about 15 Million, just over 10% of the population, of whom industrial workers were only 3.5 million. (see 'Great October Socialist Revolution," "Soviet Encyclopaedia", Moscow., 1977, pp. 276, 497). Therefore, it is not surprising that the revolution expressed a tone not so much proletarian, as that of the semi-proletarian and petty bourgeois masses. The leading role of the Proletarian Party did not save the situation. For this there is a completely Marxist explanation: the base determines the "superstructure", even such a "superstructure" as the RKP (b). Here is what V. I. Lenin himself wrote in 1917: "Russia is seething today. Millions and tens
of millions of people who had been politically dormant for ten years and politically beaten by the awful whip of Tsarism and inhuman toil for the landowners and the factory owners, have awakened and taken eagerly to politics. But who are these millions and tens of millions? The greater part are small business owners, petit bourgeois, people who stand between the capitalists and the wage workers. Russia is the most petit bourgeois country of all European countries.

The gigantic petit bourgeois wave overwhelmed all, it suppressed the conscious proletariat not only by its numbers, but in ideas, i.e., it infected and held very broad circles in petit bourgeois views of politics." (Lenin "Tasks of the Proletariat in Our Revolution" Collected Works v. 24, pp61-2).

The moving force of the October revolution was the workers and peasantry dressed in soldiers' uniforms and the proletariat [who] held the hegemony under the leadership of the Bolshevik party. It seemed to the "New Bolsheviks" that with this act the socialist revolution itself began in Russia. However, later events demonstrated that the escalation of the political revolution of the proletariat beyond the boundaries of the bourgeois-democratic revolutionary process (that is, "the revolution in the narrow sense"), did not occur. The attempts at the elimination of money, introduction of production on a communist basis, direct distribution of products, rule by direct order, these and other measures of "war communism" were said to be not worthwhile. The Bolsheviks did not succeed in the exchange of products between the city and the country. The petty bourgeois elements demanded markets, the law of value demanded mercantile relationships. These demands could only be quelled together with the petty bourgeois environment. But this environment made up the fundamental mass of the armed populace, the revolutionary army.

Turning next to V. I. Lenin, we should again note, that he had fewer illusions concerning the character of the October revolution than did other "new Bolsheviks." In the end of 1920 a discussion flared in the RKP(b) about the role and goals of the "reservoir of state power," the trade unions, in Soviet Russia. Once the workers have the state, from whom are the unions to protect the proletariat? Not from our own dear state? To this the leader of the Bolsheviks sensibly remarked: "Comrade Trotsky speaks of 'a workers' state!' Excuse me, this is an abstraction! It's not just workers, that's the thing. Here lies one of the fundamental errors of Comrade Trotsky. Our state is in fact not a workers, but a worker-peasant state. That's the first thing. And hence a great deal follows. Our state is a workers' state", Lenin added, "with bureaucratic deformities." (PSS, v. 42, pp. 207-208.) It's true that the leader of the Bolsheviks sought the way out of this in the following dialectic: "Our present state is such, that the universally organized proletariat has to defend itself, but we must use these workers' organisations for their defence from our state and for the defence of our state by them. And this and other defence is actualized by the peculiar interlacing of our state measures and our agreement, our 'joint undertaking' with our trade unions...").

Lenin explained, "The understanding of this 'joint undertaking' includes the necessity of knowing how to utilize measures of state power for defence of the material and spiritual interests of the universally united proletariat from state power" (op. cit. p. 209).

(...) Although around the time of the introduction of the NEP V. I. Lenin had internally realized the non-proletarian nature of the Soviet power, his slogan, as we know, was: "To push the bourgeois revolution as far as possible." To push, in the hope of a quickly forthcoming social revolution of the European proletariat ('La Sociale', that is an authentically socialist revolution). This revolution would compensate for Russian backwardness, Lenin thought.

(...) For all of these reasons the leader of the Bolsheviks refused to publicly admit the non-proletarian nature of the society that arose out of the October revolution, and he even threatened any who publicly expressed these views with execution (see PSS, v. 45, pp. 89-90). This is that very Ulyanov-Lenin, who had himself
written in 1905: "The complete revolution is the seizure of power by the proletariat and the poor peasantry. But these classes, when they come to power, cannot fail to seek the socialist revolution. Consequently, the seizure of power, which is from the first a step in the democratic revolution, will be led by the force of events, against the will, and sometimes against the conscience, of the participants to the socialist revolution. And here the collapse is inevitable. But once the collapse of the socialist revolution is inevitable, then we, as Marx in 1871, who foresaw the inevitable collapse in Paris, should advise the proletariat not to rise up, to wait, to organize, to step back in order to better leap forward" (PSS, v.9, p.382).

The Marxist prognoses of Lenin the theoretician (as distinct from his non-Marxist aspirations as a social Jacobin politician and practitioner) were fully justified. The RKP(b) experienced a bitter intra-party struggle and elimination of a significant portion of the old guard. As history has shown, the completion of the entire cycle of bourgeois-democratic transformation in Russia took approximately as long as in France. There it was 1789-1871, and with us 1905-1991. In addition, the similarity is surprising, down to the details. Lenin himself reminds us of Robespierre. He, like Robespierre in his time, repeatedly fought against the Left, for instance at the 10th Congress of the RKP(b) the 'Workers' Opposition' was suppressed, which attempted to carry out one of the key positions of the new party program, that "the trade unions must come to real concentration in their hands for the management of the entire economy, as a unified whole." (see V. I. Lenin, PSS, v. 38, p.435).

The "Russian Robespierre" did not fall to the guillotine, but it is known that his wife N. K. Krupskaya suggested that Lenin would have been counted among the repressed in the years of the Stalin purges. After the death of the leader of the revolution, power in Soviet Russia, as in France in 1794, passed to a Thermidorian "Directorate" - to the more right-wing "NEPist communists", in the service of whom there were several former Mensheviks of pro-market inclination. The polemic which broke out around Trotsky's assessment of the Great October, testifies that the majority of the "new Thermidorians" in essence held "old Bolshevik" views?

When the NEP was replaced at the end of the 1929, there arrived a Russian Soviet bureaucracy headed by I. V. Stalina, who embodied many features of Napoleon I and even to an extent of Napoleon II (III - f). The specific Russian Bonapartism (which has led many astray, up to the present day) consisted in the Soviet 'Napoleonic' bringing a limit to the development of the revolution, introducing a regime of "State Socialism" to the USSR. "State Socialism" had been planned already in the 19th century by the Saint-Simonists, Rodbertus and others; it was a model of a society which Engels mercilessly criticized in the last years of his life. However, the fundamental characteristics of Bonapartism, described by Marx in the work 18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte (Marx/Engels Works, v. 8 p.115-217), can be seen in its special, Soviet variant. Here we have the cult of personality based on the "traditional faith of the people", and the "immense inner revolution" on its being discredited (op. cit. v.16, p. 376). Here is "the executive power and its immense bureaucratic and military organization", in which "every common interest is immediately torn from society, opposed to it as the higher, general interest, torn from the sphere of the initiative of members of the society, and made an object of governmental activity, starting from the bridges, school buildings and communal property of any sort of village commune and ending with the railroads, national property and state universities of France." (Marx/Engels Collected Works, Vol.11, p. 186)

The Russian revolution, like the Great French revolution "had to develop farther that which the absolute monarchy had started - centralization, but together with that it extended the capacity, attributes and number of the accomplices of government power" (ibid., v. 8, p.207). Stalina, like Napoleon, "completed this state machine" (ibid), and like Napoleon, he laid the basis of a new court-legal
system, introduced a new administrative-territorial division, etc.

(…)

However, there are enough real differences in the histories of France and Russia. Stalin conducted a social imperialist policy in relation to certain small peoples and neighbouring states, extending and strengthening the Soviet Union, but he was not defeated, as was Napoleon; on the contrary he defeated the Nazi aggressor in the world war. In France after the collapse of Napoleon I the European reaction temporarily restored the monarchy, but this has not yet happened in Russia. It's not necessary to emphasize again that the basic difference was, finally, in the elimination by the radical Russian revolution both of the nobility in total, and the old bourgeois class, while in France the matter was restricted to the extirpation and expulsion of the landed aristocracy.

The main thing however seems to be that in the 20th century in Russia that thing occurred, against which Marx and Engels warned the European revolutionaries: "In France the proletarians will come to power not alone, but along with the peasants and the petty bourgeoisie, and will be obliged to carry out not their own measures, but those of the other classes." (Marx/Engels, Works, vol. 8, page 585).

(…) [There follows a section on “State Socialism as a Catching-up Capitalism,” which demonstrates conclusively the capitalist nature of the USSR on the basis of Marx and Engels’ denunciation of “state socialism,” and identifies some of the main causes leading to the collapse of the USSR. However, it also contains the idea, fundamentally incorrect in our opinion, that the Stalinist counter-revolution in fact played a historically progressive role.]

[International Review Note]

(…) The Party-managerial “nomenklatura” has carried out the objectively progressive task of organizing large-scale industry and integrating it with the collective farm & co-operative sector into a single national-economic complex; thus there were overcome the economic orders, which the multinational country had inherited from feudalism and even pre-feudal modes of production. [Finally the section on “Post-Soviet Russia”, concludes as follows:] [International Review note]

To our mind, the tasks of the proletariat and Marxist intellectuals in this situation are the development of an uncompromising class struggle against all the factions of the bourgeoisie - from the compradors to the national-patriots and their political attenders of any party colours; creation of genuine class workers’ trade unions and rallying of the proletarian vanguard into a strong influential Marxist Labour party with a view to accomplish the genuine, international, worldwide socialist revolution and thus to abolish the whole system of commodity-money economy, class-exploiting structure of society and, consequently, any relations of social domination and subjection, the institution of the State.

At the same time the first step on this path may be the undivided power of that part of the proletariat which has been organized by the large-scale production and enlightened in Marxism, the power which it would establish in the course of radical social revolution, i.e. the socialist dictatorship of the proletariat. Only the socialist working class - the producer of the absolute majority of wealth [material values] in the present epoch - has the right to arm in order to avoid attempts of counterrevolution and restoration of old orders from anyone's side.

While the working class is in need of the state of this sort, the power
must belong to it undividedly and directly - such is one of the main lessons of the defeat of Leninism.

[Translated from Russian by Mark Harris (the IWW, USA) and Dmitriy Fomin (the MLP, Russia) in 2001]

MARXIST LABOUR PARTY

Response to the Marxist Labour Party

October can only be understood in its international dimension

First of all, we want to salute the seriousness of this text, the efforts of the Marxist Labour Party to translate it and circulate it internationally, and the invitation to other proletarian organisations to comment on it. The nature of the October revolution, and of the Stalinist regime which arose out of its defeat, has always been a crucial issue for revolutionaries; and it is a problem which can only be approached by using the Marxist method. As the title of the text suggests, this is an attempt to uncover the “Marxist anatomy” of the October revolution, and it does so by referring to and seeking to elaborate some of the classics of Marxism (Engels, Lenin, etc). As we shall see, there are a number of points in the text with which we agree, and others which, although we do not agree with them, raise important points of debate.

Nevertheless, we feel that the text does not succeed in its fundamental aim - to define the essential nature of the October revolution; and it is for this reason that we will focus mainly on our most important disagreements with the text.

It appears that the text is the product of a debate currently going on within the MLP. We do not know very much about the different points of view expressed within the debate, except that in the accompanying English translation of the preface to the MLP journal Marx, there is talk of a division between ‘Leninist’ and ‘non-Leninist’ views of the Russian revolution - the text we are commenting on being a product of the latter current.

In the past the ICC has carried out a good deal of polemics with the ‘councilist’ view of the Russian revolution - the notion that it was essentially a belated bourgeois revolution and that the Bolsheviks were at best an expression of the petty bourgeois intelligentsia, not the proletariat (see in particular our pamphlet 1917. Start of the world revolution). The MLP text certainly bears a close resemblance to this point of view in a number of respects, in particular when it talks about the Russian revolution as a “dual revolution” - largely a proletarian in the cities, but essentially dominated by the weight of the petty bourgeois peasantry, giving the formula that the October revolution “was not a socialist revolution. It was the apogee of the bourgeois-democratic pressure - the revolutionary democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry, with a short term transition to the democratic dictatorship of the proletariat.”

The language here is taken from the Bolshevik programme prior to Lenin's April theses; but the overall analysis of a “dual revolution” is strikingly similar to the thesis of the KAPD in the early 20s, which talked about a double revolution, proletarian in the cities, peasant/capitalist in the countryside, with the latter increasingly dominating the former. Later on, the remnants of the German-Dutch left were to increasingly favour the notion of a purely bourgeois revolution in Russia; the idea of a dual revolution lived on largely through the contributions of the “Bordigist” Current.

At the same time, the MLP’s approach bears little resemblance to councilism when it comes to their view of the Bolshevik party. While councilism concludes from the Russian experience that the party
is by definition a bourgeois form, the MLP, as its name suggests, advocates it quite explicitly. The first point of its "basic statutes" argues that "The MLP is a party of the working class... the party sees its task in enlightenmment and organisation of the workers for them to seize political and economic power, with the purpose of construction of a classless self-governed society". Neither does the MLP set itself as the retrospective judge of the Bolsheviks, ejecting them from the workers' movement because they were the victims of a defeated revolution: "What has been said is not at all an indictment of the Bolsheviks. They did what they had to do, under conditions of a backward peasant country - conditions which were aggravated by the defeat of the social revolution in the west".

This said, it seems to us that there is a crucial flaw at the heart of this text, reflecting councilist and even Menshevik theoretical weaknesses, and based on a failure to see the October revolution in its global historical framework. Certainly there are plenty of references to the international dimension of October, particularly to the failure of the revolution in Europe as the key reason why the Soviet republic could only go towards the development of Russian capitalism. But it seems to us that, as with councilism and Menshevism, the basic analytical starting point is Russia, not the entire capitalist globe; and this is why the text makes a radically false comparison between 20th century Russia and 19th century France: "As history has shown, the completion of the entire cycle of bourgeois-democratic transformation in Russia took approximately as long as in France. There it was 1789-1871, and with us 1905-1917". By the same token Menshevik argued that Russia was still in the phase of the bourgeois revolution in 1905-1917; Trotsky's notion of the permanent revolution was already a considerable theoretical advance on this view, since it definitely began from the international context of the coming Russian revolution, while the old Bolshevik slogan of the "democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry" was essentially a half-way house between these two positions, and one that we think Lenin effectively abandoned in the April theses of 1917 (see the article on the 1905 mass strikes in International Review 90; the relevant section has been appended to this text). For us, the bourgeois and proletarian revolutions are both the product of all historical and international evolution. Thus it's true that the era of bourgeois revolutions carried on in France through a good part of the 19th century; but this was because globally speaking capitalism was still in its expansive, ascendant phase. The epoch of the world proletarian revolution began in the early part of the 20th century because capitalism as a global system had entered its epoch of decline. And, as the comrades of Bilan insisted against both Stalinism and Trotskyism in the 1930s, the only possible point of departure for analyzing the revolution in Russia is that of the international maturation of the social and economic contradictions of the capitalist system, and not the 'maturity' of each country taken separately. We quote at length from the first article in the important series on 'Problems of the period of transition', published in Bilan no 28, in 1936.

"At the beginning of this study we underlined the fact that although capitalism has powerfully developed the productive capacity of society, it has not succeeded in developing the conditions for an immediate passage to socialism. As Marx indicated, only the material conditions for resolving this problem exist "or are at least in the process of formation".

These restrictions apply even more strongly to each national unit in the world economy. All of them are historically ripe for socialism, but none of them are ripe in the sense of possessing all the material conditions needed for the building of an integral socialism. This is true whatever level of development they may have reached.

No nation on its own contains all the elements for a socialist society. The idea of national socialism is in diametrical opposition to the international nature of the imperialist economy, to the universal division of labour, and the global antagonism between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. It is a pure abstraction to see socialist society as a sum of complete socialist economies. The world-wide distribution of the productive forces (which is not an artificial product) makes it impossible both for the 'advanced' countries
and for the 'backward' countries to complete the transition to socialism within their own borders. The specific weight of each of the countries in the world economy is measured by the degree to which they are reciprocally dependent, not by how independent they might be. England, which is one of the most advanced sectors of capitalism, a country in which capitalism exists in an almost pure form, could not operate in isolation. Facts today show that, even when only partially cut off from the world market, the productive forces begin to break down. This is the case with the cotton and coal industries in England. In the U.S.A. the automobile industry can only go into decline if it is limited to the home market, no matter how vast the latter is. An isolated proletarian Germany would soon see its industrial apparatus breaking down, even if it initiated a huge expansion of consumption.

It is thus an abstraction to pose the question of countries being 'ripe' or 'unripe' for socialism, because on these terms you would have to say that neither the advanced countries nor the backward countries were mature enough.

The problem has to be posed in the light of the historical maturation of social antagonisms, which in turn results from the sharpening conflicts between the productive forces and the relations of production. To limit the question to the material factors at hand would be to take up the position of the theoreticians of the Second International, of Kautsky and the German Socialists, who considered that because Russia was a backward economy dominated by a technically weak agrarian sector, it was not ripe for a proletarian revolution, but only for a bourgeois revolution. In this their conception was the same as that of the Russian Mensheviks. Otto Bauer declared that the proletarian state inevitably had to degenerate because of Russia's backwardness.

In The Russian Revolution Rosa Luxemburg remarked that, according to the conception of the social democrats, the Russian revolution ought to have stopped after the fall of the Tsarism.

"According to this view,[she said, fg] if the revolution has gone beyond that point and has set its task, the dictatorship of the proletariat, this is simply a mistake of the radical wing of the Russian labour movement, the Bolsheviks. And all difficulties which the revolution has met with in its further course, and all disorders it has suffered, are pictured as purely a result of this fateful error".

The question as to whether Russia was or was not ripe for the proletarian revolution can't be answered by looking at the material conditions of its economy, but at the balance of class forces, which had been dramatically transformed by, the international situation. The essential condition was the existence of a concentrated proletariat - despite the fact that it was a very minority in relation to the huge mass of peasant producers - whose consciousness expressed itself through a class party powerfully armed with revolutionary ideology and experience. We agree with Rosa Luxemburg that:

"The Russian proletariat has to be seen as the vanguard of the world proletariat, a vanguard whose movement is the expression of the development of social antagonisms on a world scale. What is happening in St Petersburg is the result of developments in Germany, England, and France. It is these developments which will decide the outcome of the Russian revolution, which can only achieve its goal if it is the prologue to the revolution of the European proletariat."

(...) We repeat that the fundamental condition for the life of the proletarian revolution is its ability to link up on a world scale, and this consideration must determine the internal and external policies of the proletarian state. This is because, although the revolution has to begin on a national scale, it cannot remain indefinitely at that level, however large and wealthy that nation might be. Unless it links up with other national revolutions and becomes a world revolution it will be asphyxiated and will degenerate. This is why we consider it an error to base one's arguments on the national conditions of one country".

For Bilan - unlike for Trotsky, for example, or indeed the councilist current - the epoch of bourgeois revolutions was over because capitalism, taken not country by country, but as an integral whole, had become 'ripe' for the proletarian revolution. The consequence of the MLP's approach, however is that the
Stalinist era [regime] in the USSR [in Russia] ceases to be, along with such manifestations as Nazism in Germany, a classical expression of the bourgeois counter-revolution and of capitalism's universal decay. Of course, the MLP is perfectly clear that the Stalinist regime in Russia (like all the others across the world) was in no sense a workers' state, but a form of state capitalism; nevertheless, if you see it as an expression of the bourgeois revolution it inevitably becomes a factor of historical progress, laying the ground for the industrialisation of Russia and thus for the eventual triumph of the proletariat. And even though in their "basic statutes" the MLP correctly point out that the bureaucratied Russian soviet state "destroyed the Bolsheviks as the political party which had arisen in 1903", the 'Anatomy' text gives the impression of a real continuity between Bolshevikism and Stalinism. "Although even their most immediate goal - a socialist society free of commodity relations - was not accessible, the Bolsheviks achieved, in the end, a great deal. For 70 years Russia (USSR) experienced a significant leap in productive power". But, again applying the method used by the Italian left in the 30s, the criterion for judging whether Stalinism was playing a progressive role lay not in calculating the figures for economic growth under the five year plans, but in analysing its role as a profoundly counter-revolutionary factor on a world scale; on this level, it was evident that Stalinism was a reactionary phenomenon par excellence. At the same time, the Italian left -even while not fully grasping the capitalist nature of the Stalinist state - was perfectly well aware that the "formidable economic development of the USSR" was inseparable from the cultivation of a war economy in view of the approaching imperialist curve-up, and that this "development" - which was taking place in all the major capitalist countries at the time - was in turn the clearest expression that capitalism as a whole was an obsolete mode of production on a world scale.

The problem of the Soviet state

In locating the capitalist development of the USSR in conditions particular to Russia, the MLP, like the councilists, tend to deprive later generations of revolutionaries from drawing the vital important lessons of the Russian experience. If what the Bolsheviks did in Russia was determined above all by the unavoidable necessity for Russia to develop along capitalist lines, to pass through a kind of belated bourgeois revolution, there is little point in criticising the errors made by the Bolsheviks with regard to the Soviet state, the mass organs of the working class, the economy and so on, since the weakening of the dictatorship of the proletariat was simply a result of objective circumstances beyond anyone's control. This is very different from the approach of the Italian left, which devoted a whole series of studies to learning what the Russian experience can teach us about the policies needed by any future proletarian power. The pity of it is that in an area considered absolutely crucial by the Italian left - the problem of the transitional state - the MLP have some important insights. They note, in particular, the importance of the fact that the specific organs of the proletariat were merged into the general apparatus of the Soviet state: "This is what happened: On the 13th (26th) January 1918, the 3rd Russian congress of Soviets of Peasant Deputies merged with the 3rd congress of Soviets of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies. Towards March the merger extended to the local soviets. In this way, the proletariat, whose political dominion should have guaranteed the socialist transformation, and if? under pressure from the Bolsheviks, shared power with the peasantry. They also point out that the soviets of workers' and soldiers' deputies already had a very strong peasant influence because of the social composition of the army. Furthermore, "an even more important circumstance was the fact that instead of strengthening the system of authentic workers' organisations - the factory committees - the Bolsheviks on the contrary contributed to its dissolution" by compelling them to merge into the state-controlled trade unions.

These were indeed important developments; but for us the lesson to be drawn from them is that, while in any revolutionary situation, there will be a necessity for the mass of non-exploiting strata to be organised in the transitional state, the working class can by no means submerge its own authentic organs - the workers'
councils, factory committees, etc - into these general territorial bodies. In other words, the proletariat must maintain its autonomy towards the transitional state, controlling it but not identifying with it. And we must emphasise that this is not a problem specific to a country like Russia as it was in 1917, but concerns the entire world working class, which to this day does not constitute a majority of humanity. But instead of developing our understanding of how proletarian self-organisation was weakened by being subordinated to the transitional state, the MLP gets us lost in its rather ponderous theorisations about the passage from "the democratic dictatorship of the proletariat to the revolutionary dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry in 1919, and finally the subordination of the latter to a purely capitalist regime after 1921" - an experience that is presumably to be unique in history and thus carrying no lessons for the future practice of the proletarian movement.

Let us be clear: we have never argued that the dictatorship of the proletariat in Russia could have been saved by organisational guarantees, still less that it could have gone on to create a socialist society in Russia. Given the isolation of the Russian revolution, its degeneration and defeat was indeed inevitable. But this does not obviate the need to learn as much from its successes and failures as we can, because we have no other comparable experience in the history of the working class.

This leads us on to another question: the absence of communist economic measures taken by the Bolsheviks. As we understand the MLP's thesis, the revolution did not establish a "socialist dictatorship" but a purely political "democratic dictatorship of the proletariat"; and the text, although a little ambiguous about the nature of the measures taken under the heading of war communism, points out that, in essence, there was no abolition of commodity relations after the October revolution. But the implication here is that had the proletariat established a really socialist dictatorship, with no trace of power-sharing, through Soviets or factory committees, then it would have been possible to introduce really socialist economic measures. But here again the comrades seem to forget not only the international dimension of the revolution, but also the very nature of proletariat. The proletarian revolution can only commence as a political revolution, irrespective of the level of capitalist development in the country where it begins; this is because, as an exploited, propertyless class, the working class only has the lever of political power (which in turn expresses its consciousness and self-organisation) to introduce the social measures needed to move towards a communist order. Within a particular country, the proletarian revolution will certainly be compelled to take urgent economic measures to ensure its own survival. But it would a fatal illusion to think that capitalist relations can really be done away with in the confines of a single national economy. As the long quote from Bilan has already demonstrated, capitalism, as global relationship, can only be dismantled by the international dictatorship of the proletariat. Until the latter has been achieved through a more or less long phase of civil war, the proletariat cannot really begin to develop a communist social form. In this sense, the fundamental tragedy of the Russian revolution does not lie in any "restoration" of capitalist relations, since the latter never disappeared in the first place; it lies in the process whereby the working class took political power and then lost it; above all, it lies in the fact that this loss of power was disguised by a process of internal degeneration in which many of the old names were retained, while the essential content was utterly changed.

We will conclude by saying that the wider tragedy of the 20th century - the horrors of fascism and Stalinism, the whole devastating succession of wars and massacres - resides in the defeat of the world proletarian revolutionary wave of 1917-23 - the defeat of the hope offered by the October revolution. Humanity has paid a terrible price for that defeat, and continues to pay it today in a 21st century where the slide into barbarism is perhaps more evident than it has ever been before. The world-wide communist transformation of society was a material possibility in 1917, which is why we think the Bolsheviks were absolutely justified in calling for the Russian proletariat to take its first step.
Dear Editor

Robin Cox (DB115) claimed that my criticism of P. Lawrence's article, *Socialism: sudden and gradual change*, first published in the Socialist Standard, showed that I was being "totally inconsistent". According to him, my letter "vindicates a gradualistic explanation... in the case of the revolution from capitalism to socialism". He was, to put it mildly, utterly mistaken.

First, my objection to Lawrence's one and only example of "a sudden and far-reaching change in social relationships" was quite simply that he chose as an example something which simply did not happen in the way he claimed. This was simply being aware of the historical facts and noting that Lawrence's version of 1917 simply did not hold water.

But from this, Cox deduced, with no doubt impeccable logic, that because I criticised Lawrence's historical and factual inaccuracy, it follows that I must now be a supporter of Cox's "gradualistic view of socialist revolution". This does not follow, and is certainly not the case - perish the thought!

As I understand it, Cox's position is that, as the influence of Socialist thinking spreads, workers will establish communes and cooperatives, islands of non-capitalist relationships within the sea of capitalism. Over time, this non-capitalist part of the economy would expand while the capitalist part of the economy would dwindle. In effect, this argument is an assertion that members of the working class can gradually opt out of capitalism.

However, there are serious objections to this view, as we argued in Socialist Studies (no.8), in that article Cox described as "a piece of crass logic, sectarian dogmatism and downright dishonesty":

Spanner's revolutionary gradualism is totally removed from the facts of social life. If it means anything it means revolution by stages. Spanner's proposals include stripping the capitalist of his power and property gradually. As the workers become more revolutionary, so runs the theory, they will make greater demands on the capitalists, they will withdraw from undefined areas of production, form communes and co-operatives, which will be self-provisioning or self-supporting... This will undermine the power of the State and the capitalist economy by these workers withdrawing from commodity production. The State will be forced to grant a massive increase in free services in order to bribe or buy off the growing socialist movement....

A strong socialist movement is only possible when the working class are able to grasp the fact that they are potentially the real power in society, and have the means to change society immediately and decisively. Why should the wor-ing class accept bribes or reforms to defer the revolution? Why should they withdraw from social production when they can take over the means of production. Why should they become hermits within co-operatives or communes? Why should they delay the introduction of socialism by bartering with the capitalist class when they can get rid of them?

A strong socialist movement which would represent the most useful and intelligent section of society would reject with contempt and derision any suggestion that they should delay the establishment of socialism in order to accommodate the capitalists. They would get on with the business of revolution.

Does Cox really suppose the capitalist class would just stand by as mere passive onlookers while their class interests and power were gradually eroded in this piecemeal fashion? Does he believe they would not resist, in defense
of their class interests?

In his letter (DB115), Cox claims now that his position has been consistent, that he holds now, as he claims he did in the late 1980s, "a gradualistic view of socialist revolution to supplement (not replace!) the sudden view".

However, in the 1993 Anarchist Year Book, the objective of his journal, Spanner, was clearly stated:

It rejects both reformism and millenarianism, ... favouring instead revolutionary gradualism as the most practical alternative.

Question: if Robin Cox, ten years ago, rejected "millenarianism" (otherwise known as the Big Bang model, also the "sudden" model of socialist revolution) and favoured instead "gradualism as the most practical alternative", how can he now have the brass neck to claim that his gradualistic view is simply a "supplement" to the sudden view? Which way is it?

Readers of Discussion Bulletin will have noticed that although Pieter Lawrence, Adam Buick and Robin Cox were all in the same Party - the broad-based, woolly-minded Clapham-based Socialist Party -, they all seem to hold different views on whether the change would be sudden or gradual.

Ask Cox: he says gradual, or did so ten years ago.

Ask Buick: he says sudden, arguing that: It is unthinkable that a section of the population, knowing it was doomed, would continue to play its part in industry, calmly awaiting the taking away of its privileges piecemeal. (DB115)

It is not unreasonable to ask just what is their Party's position?

I understand that Robin Cox and the Socialist Party have now parted company, but this question remains a valid one. How can he square his "gradualistic" view of socialist revolution with his claim to be a Socialist?

That, to me, is something of a mystery. As too is his crazy campaign to persuade the various WSM parties to put out a welcome mat for religious believers. In the modern world, as never before, religion is not a private matter, nor is it politically neutral. Like the ideologies of racism and nationalism, religions divide the working class. As such, they can only hinder the movement for Socialism.

What with these widely divergent views on the "sudden and gradual change" theme, Cox's campaign to get the WSM parties to accept religious believers as members, and Lawrence's eccentric argument that Socialism will still require police, law-courts and jails, it seems that the Clapham-based 'Socialist' Party is a very broad church indeed. In that Party, disunity is the order of the day.

Yours for Socialism

Charnian Skelton
Socialist Party of Great Britain
I believe that we have the same ideals, but interpret them differently. I hope that solidarity will still be possible, even if we don’t agree 100% on every point.

Your phrase probably is more deeply rooted in revolutionary literature than mine—“social ownership” instead of “equalization of ownership.” Eugene Debs in his 1904 pamphlet, Unionism and Socialism, spoke of: "The collective ownership and control of industry…"

You concede that I am not reformist, yet you say that my article somehow helped the enemy. Isn’t that a contradiction? At any rate, I am not going to make an issue of it. In the next DB you may have the last word on this matter, if you choose. I will try to abstain from any reply. Maybe more beneficial than uniformity of opinion is good faith, which when present may help to keep any intellectual differences from driving us apart.

The DB has been a forum where, not merchandise—but ideas—can be shared and compared. You deserve credit for enabling it. If some of the writing has been tedious, much of it has been of high quality, and you have not restricted your selections to any one narrow point of view. You published my article in its entirety and gave me ample space for a rebuttal of your criticism.

Your fairness can be contrasted with Anarchy magazine #54’s treatment of my ideas. A full response to Anarchy would be more appropriate in an anarchist or syndicalist publication, but here I will say the following.

In a tiny blurb Anarchy dismissed my article as “confusionist.” The blurb correctly reported the article’s appearance in the DB, while omitting the fact that it was intended for and also came out in the Anarcho-Syndicalist Review. There was silence, too, about Brian Oliver Sheppard’s ASR article, which refuted the primitivist Feral Faun’s claim that anarcho-syndicalism is “bourgeois.”

Anarchy would have contributed to a useful dialogue had it even briefly said: Prisco and Sheppard allege X, Y and Z. They are wrong because…" “What in effect came out instead was: "Prisco is wrong," with no recap of my position or of Sheppard’s. Rather than an open exchange of free speech, it sounds more like a way of burying any anarchist viewpoints that conflict with primitivism.

I think the DB comes off better because—within the parameters of revolutionary socialism—it has been strong and broad minded enough to tolerate opposing opinions.

(from p. 2)
calls itself socialist has to be that of figuring out what exactly went wrong after the Bolshevik Revolution in October (November) 1917. As might be expected, the Marxist Labour Party (MLP), standing for revolution in the ruins of collapsed state capitalism and surrounded by the jerry-built new democratic structure of a mixed state and privatized capitalism, has attempted to understand the historical turn that headed the USSR in the direction it took for 74 years. This essay, “The Marxist Anatomy of October and the Present Situation” (abbreviated by its authors as MAO) concludes that the trajectory of the Russian revolution and the Soviet Union can best be understood by analogy to France in 1789, when like Russia in 1917, was rotten ripe for a transition from feudalism that would free rising capitalism to create a new ruling class and a new political system. MAO locates the demise of the socialist dictatorship of the proletariat established by the worker soviets at the moment two months later when the Bolsheviks united the peasant and worker soviets and effectively removed the industrial working class from power. Thus the dictatorship of the proletariat was replaced by a democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry that could be manipulated by the Bolsheviks. Lenin was then free to begin the task of industrializing Russia by building a state capitalist regime controlled by the Communist Party.

The excerpts published here were selected by the International Communist Current (ICC) [note: (to p. 18)
Dear readers,

On page 5 of DB 116, Adam of intGRACI criticized struggles to limit the work day as 'manifestly non-revolutionary', but, in a Nov. 23, 1880, letter to her husband Charles Longuet, Marx's daughter Jenny claimed the opposite (me46.474):

"As to the revolutionary side of the struggle for the limitation of the working day, he [Marx] thinks you have passed it over without notice in your answer to those revolutionists of the fire and sword. - From the Capital you will see that the fight of the English working class assumed more than once the character of a revolution, and that the governing classes only granted what they dared not refuse."

Sixteen years before the American SLP adopted its SIU program, its number one Social Demand (in its 1889 platform) was: "1. Reduction of the hours of labor in proportion to the progress of production."

That demand reflected the history of that era, as average hours of labor steadily declined from 1820 to 1920. After WWI, bossism stubbornly resisted further reductions. The resulting overproduction caused the Depression of the 1930's. The AFL responded to rising unemployment by supporting a 30 Hour Work Week Bill, which passed the U.S. Senate, and looked like a shoo-in for the House, before being scuttled on behalf of business interests.

Productivity surge forward, and investment in R+D accelerates. Noteworthy is Ray Kurzweil believe productivity is rising at a double exponential rate. The era of work is increasingly feared to be drawing to a close.

Marx wrote in "Wage Labour and Capital" (me9.226): "If the whole class of wage-workers were to be abolished owing to machinery, how dreadful that would be for capital which, without wage labour, ceases to be capital!"

Wouldn't it be funny if work gets abolished before the 'fire and sword' revolution gets off the ground? In his "Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy", Marx claimed that (me34.406): "Labour is the eternal natural condition for human existence." If Marx had a Roomba robot to automatically vacuum his floors, he might have written 'vanishing' in place of 'eternal'.

Ken Ellis <http://www.geocities.com/keneillis2020>

(from p. 17)

(omissions are indicated by ellipses (...)) and published in their English language journal International Review 111 Fourth Quarter, 2002 along with a response, "October Can Only Be Understood in its International Dimension." The response seems to center on what the ICC regards as the MLP's error in locating the demise of the Russian revolution only two months after the revolution, thus placing Lenin at the helm of the counter revolution long before the accession of Stalin.

Next Charmian Skelton writes to dissociate herself from the gradualistic view held by Robin Cox of the likely events leading up to a socialist revolution. And Ken Ellis questions Adam Buick's characterization of efforts to shorten the hours of labor as "non-revolutionary" and finds support in the writings of Marx and his daughter. I have some difficulty accepting Ellis's view that long hours of labor caused the Great Depression.

The conclusion of Dave Zink's review of Nelson Peery's book consists largely of Zink's reflections, which somehow lead him to regard the Labor Party of America, a third party experiment by some AFL-CIO leaders unhappy with the Democrats, as a potential party of revolution. Something tells me that Peery would agree.

Adam Buick takes issue with my comments on Wayne Price's article about William Morris. (to p. 21)
"Proletariat”? What’s that?

Nelson Peery explains that the word “proletariat” comes from the days when the Roman Republic was transformed into the Roman Empire. The introduction of slaves into Rome, from lands conquered and incorporated into the Empire, drove the workers off the farms and out of the workshops and into a new class of the permanently unemployed. The term “proletariat” originally referred to a basically idle group, not part of the new system.

One of my favorite dogmas—that working people like me constitute the revolutionary class with the “historic mission” to overthrow capitalism—takes a hit courtesy of Mr. Peery. He asserts that it is well-nigh impossible for steadily-employed workers to be revolutionary because they can be controlled by the discipline of the job. “If I speak up and act up, I might tick off the boss. I could get fired, lose my home and my car, and my kids won’t go to college.” But you can’t use that kind of discipline with people who don’t have a job, a home, or a car—and that describes a burgeoning new section of the working class. One way that this new proletariat can be controlled is jail— and jail-building, with privatization of the penal system and use of low-cost prison labor, is now a growth industry. Electronic surveillance is another method the rulers can and will use in their attempt to keep things from getting out of hand.

What sociologist William Julius Wilson once described inadequately as “the underclass” is here reformulated in a way that should give us on the left reason to reconsider some of our assumptions. Peery says that the new class which labor-replacing technology is bringing into existence is a true proletariat. Temporary and part-time workers already make up 30% of the work force. The number of minimum-wage workers is expanding rapidly, as are the numbers of homeless people. More and more people are wearing “Will Work for Food” signs on the streets of America. All this in a time of relative capitalist prosperity, not a depression as in the 1930’s.

Why is this happening? The only way to profitably sell anything today is to cut labor costs. That means “downsizing” of America’s industrial base and “outsourcing” jobs to the lowest-wage areas of the world. Computerized control facilitates Trans-National Corporations moving production elsewhere. As the numbers of unwanted, temporary, and minimum-wage workers swell, wide and deep unrest in urban America is growing. These people are to varying degrees outside of, and increasingly alienated from, capitalist society. The police fear this growing and unruly section of the population, and that fear and hatred is returned with interest.

This new American proletariat is more and more being forced into a position where it must attack and destroy this society in order to live. It is destined to be at the heart of the struggle to organize a new kind of society, based upon the distribution of commodities, health care, and services according to need, not money.

These changing economic and social realities were behind the Los Angeles Rebellion of 1992. The LA rebellion was contemptuous of anything smacking of bourgeois law, order, or property relations. The new proletariat is an uprising waiting to happen. To channel the inevitable growing popular discontent into positive directions, revolutionaries must work hard to make the growing, spontaneous, “fight-back” movement conscious of itself.

At this time, we are at the point where economic revolution calls social revolution into being. It’s only a question of what’s going to ignite it. Uprisings will most likely occur where the contradictions brought about by robotics are most glaring. A robotic factory humming away in plain sight of a homeless shelter might provide the spark.

What are some consequences of Peery’s thinking?
For one thing, the strategy of "industrial concentration" of revolutionaries needs to be reconsidered. Large concentrations of labor are rapidly disappearing from America due to labor-replacing technology. Large concentrations of workers can still be found in the third world—that's where this strategy may still be valid. Certainly, helping third-world workers to organize effective unions would help slow down the global race to the bottom.

Tactics are changing. Where we once had to stand on the street corner and hand out leaflets one-on-one, now we can get in touch with a thousand people by pressing a few buttons on a computer keyboard.

We are now deep in the process of economic revolution and at the edge of social revolution. Both of these are objective processes. The political response, however, is subjective. Peery says that people know that things are going wrong with the system, but they don't understand what they know. This is the point where revolutionaries—propagandists and agitators—are essential: to help people connect the dots. The youth will be pulled into this thing one way or another, either to the fascists or to the revolutionary movement.

Revolutionary socialists have, so far, objectively led struggles for reform of capitalism. For years, there has been a subjective desire for a new and better society, but until now there has been no objective possibility for it. The destruction of previous systems, based upon primitive communism, chattel slavery, then feudalism, was not possible until new means of production made those systems no longer tenable. In the same way, the destruction of capitalist property relations has not been possible without changes in the means of production that will make capitalist ownership impossible to maintain.

Peery says that to solve the problem of distribution, goods must be distributed free. The only class which can resolve this contradiction is the new proletarian class. To this, Peery now adds this conclusion: this modern version of "to each according to need" is communism for the contemporary era. Resolution of this contradiction is revolution, and the class that can lead this revolution is an "objectively communist" class—people who lack the money to pay for what they need.

The Left's weakness was that we've been an ideological movement without a practical, objective base. The problem today is the development of a practical movement without a subjective or ideological expression. As long as the working class votes for the two corporate-dominated political parties, there can be no meaningful proletarian political response to the unfolding economic revolution. The Communist Party sees the Democratic Party as the "lesser of two evils". Peery says the CP is revolutionary in rhetoric, but in its practical life it acts as the left wing of the "progressive" and reform movement.

To counter the falling rate of profit, capitalists constantly strive to cut labor costs and improve the means of production, despite the fact that sometimes this takes a qualitative leap and creates conditions that could not envision. This is precisely the case with high tech. Thus, the ruling class creates the conditions that are going to destroy their rule. They can't help it—the systemic drive to increase short-term profit compels them to do so.

To Peery, social consciousness means to take a class stand. Class consciousness means to demand political power to achieve the things we need to do. With the founding of the Labor Party of America (LPA), we're seeing the first organized efforts toward full-fledged political independence from the ruling class. Some will sit on the sidelines and criticize the LPA without getting involved. The responsibility of revolutionaries should be clear.

The ruling class can't stop the economic revolution. All they can do is accelerate it. And the more they accelerate it, the more they create the conditions for their own destruction as a class. You cannot complete a revolution without seizing political power. Revolution is made by the broad masses, but the seizure of power is done by a special political organization. In this country, at this time, there is only one potentially mass organization which is class conscious, has a worker's agenda, and is based upon and led by the working class: the LPA.
The political stability of America has always rested upon that huge section of the population that had enough to give them the hope of getting some more. So long as they had hope, they wouldn't work to overthrow the system for love nor money no matter how hard they were hurting. This is changing. The majority of Americans watch as their income stagnates or goes down in buying power. Growing numbers are joining the ranks of the homeless. Entire families are increasingly showing up at homeless shelters. There are cuts in public schooling. Alienation is growing.

The polarization of wealth and poverty isn't just somebody's idea. It's a result of qualitative change in the means of production. When products made by robots are sold as if they were made by human beings, corporate wealth really takes off. Capitalists have reduced labor expenses, and electronics are quickly cranking out those products. How do you spread out this wealth short of social revolution?

Will the ruling class crack down with a fascist solution to the impending crisis? Can fascists stop the coming social and political revolution? Only under one condition, says Peery. A rapidly expanding economy enabled McCarthyism and the anti-communist hysteria of the 1950's. The economy didn't expand equitably, but it expanded enough to where almost everybody felt they had a stake in the capitalist system. Is this the situation today? Even though it will not succeed, we must prepare for a desperate reaction that will in all likelihood be vicious.

When Frederick Engels put forth the concept that socialism was necessary as the first stage of communism wherein the laws of value still operated and where society had to build the economic foundations for communism, he was observing societies long before electronics and robotics. Because of the tremendous productivity of the high-technology we have today, reconstruction of society along cooperative lines will be much easier than the staggering tasks that faced the USSR and inevitably led to undemocratic distortions.

Groups that are active in the struggle to reform this system need to reconsider their work in light of the profound changes society is going through. Without the creativity and labor of the working class, there would be no advances in technology. A central demand in the coming struggles must be that these advances be put to use for the benefit of the working-class majority instead of further enriching the ruling elite at our expense. This would mean universal health care, a drastically reduced workweek, and other improvements in our lives. Peery challenges us to re-evaluate strategy in light of these changes, ask new questions, and work for a new, cooperative America free of boring, repetitious jobs and no longer limited by artificial scarcity.

The website of the League of Revolutionaries for a New America, the group Nelson Peery is working with, is www.LRNA.org

The website of the Labor Party of America is www.thelaborparty.org

(from p. 18)

Somehow Morris's second thoughts on electoral activity—apparently for the purpose of destroying the state or perhaps rendering it powerless—may be in keeping with the SLP's electoral purpose of abolishing the state but hardly with the SPGB's idea of using the parliament and the state as the instrument for building socialism. True, Marx spoke in 1872 about an electoral road to revolution available in those days to the U.S. and British working class. But there is no reason to believe that he saw seizure of state power as a road to socialism. Rather the repressive powers of government were to be abolished and the form of government both in Paris and elsewhere in France were to find a new "communal" form. De Leonists see that new form in the socialist industrial union—truly replacing government over people with government over things.

World in Common is a non-party group consisting largely of World Socialist Movement supporters but open to all advocates of what the DB calls the non-market, anti-statist libertarian socialist sector. Readers will find here an article describing the new group and a statement of its principles. Next
Frank,
(...)
Now for your challenge. You wrote (DB 117):

"William Morris holds a position among members of the SPGB only slightly inferior to that of Karl Marx. That being the case we may well ask how to explain his anti-electoralism as described by Wayne Price in the anarchist journal Fifth Estate. In this connection I have a personal debt to the Fifth Estate: I remembered Marx's cautionary statement about the working class not laying hold of the state machinery in order to build socialism, but I couldn't remember the source and the exact wording. Now, thanks to FE it is available for me to throw at Adam Buick and other WSMers."

1. First William Morris. As Wayne Price explained in the reprinted article, Morris was against socialists contesting elections in the 1880s because he was against reformism. He felt that if a socialist party contested elections it would have to do so on a reform programme and that this would attract the votes of people who wanted the reforms rather than socialism; which would make the party the prisoner of its non-socialist, reform-minded voters and eventually lead to it becoming a reformist instead of a socialist party.

This was a shrewd assessment of what would happen if a socialist party contested elections with a reform programme, an assessment which the SPGB took on board and which has been confirmed by the fate of Social Democratic parties everywhere (look at them in 1914, let alone today). What Morris overlooked was the possibility of a socialist party contesting elections but without a reform programme, i.e. exclusively on the "maximum programme" of socialism. Which was adopted by the SLP of America in 1900 and by the SPGB when it was founded in 1904, and which showed that contesting elections and reformism didn't have to go together. Morris had thrown the baby out with the bathwater.

In any event, as Wayne Price acknowledged in his article, Morris was not entirely anti-elections, i.e. he didn't take up the dogmatic anarchist position on the matter. He did concede that at some stage the socialist movement might send delegates to parliament. This is confirmed by three letters he wrote at about the same time he drafted the leaflet/article "The Policy of Abstention" (for, after 1890, Morris changed his mind about a socialist party not contesting elections on a reform programme: he rescued the baby but brought back the bathwater as well).

In a letter to J. Bruce Glasier in December 1886 he wrote: "I did not mean that at some time or other it might not be necessary for Socialists to go into Parliament in order to break it up; but again, that could only be when we are very much more advanced than we are now; in short, on the verge of a revolution; so that we might either capture the army, or shake their confidence in the legality of their position" (P. Henderson, The Letters of William Morris to his Family and Friends, 1950, p. 263).

And in a letter to Dr J. Glasse on 23 May 1887: "I believe that the Socialists will certainly send members to Parliament when they are strong enough to do so; in itself I see no harm in that, so long as it is understood that they go there as rebels, and not as members of the governing body prepared by passing palliative measures to keep 'Society' alive".

And in a second letter to Dr Glasse dated 23 September 1887: "Of course, it's clearly no use talking of parliamentary action now. I admit, and always have admitted, that at some future period it may be necessary to use parliament mechanically: what I object to is depending on parliamentary agitation. There must be a great party, a great organisation outside parliament actively engaged in reconstructing society and learning administration whatever goes on in parliament itself" (R. Page Amot, Unpublished Letters of William Morris, 1951, p 5 and p. 8).

It all sounds common sense to me. In any event, there's nothing there to shock an SPGBer!
2. Now for Marx. I'm afraid, Frank, that despite Wayne Price giving "the exact wording" you were looking for, you still haven't recalled it properly. What Marx actually said (in The Civil War in France, the manifesto he wrote on the fall of the Paris Commune in 1871 for the First International, also quoted in the preface to the 1872 German edition of the Communist Manifesto) was: The working class cannot simply lay hold of the ready-made State machinery, and wield it for its own purposes" (my emphasis).

Your recollection that this means that Marx warned the working class against "laying hold of the state machinery in order to build socialism" ignores the word "simply". To say that someone "cannot simply" do something is not the same as saying they "cannot" do it; it is saying that they can, but not simply. And that was Marx's point: the working class can, and should, lay hold of the "ready-made state machinery" but should considerably reorganise the state, by lopping off its undemocratic features, before being able to use it (more or less briefly) to dispossess the capitalist class. Any other interpretation would turn Marx into a common or garden anarchist opposed on principle to the working class winning political power. Which he clearly wasn't, which was one of Wayne Price's criticisms of him (he even quotes Marx's 1880 statement, from the preamble to the programme of the French Workers' Party, about transforming universal suffrage "from the instrument of fraud that it has been up till now into an instrument of emancipation").

Marx's considered view on the whole question of the capture of political power and elections is perhaps best expressed in the speech he gave in September 1872 in The Hague (Holland) after the International's congress there: "The workers will have to seize political power one day in order to construct the new organisation of labour; they will have to overthrow the old politics which bolster up the old institutions, unless they want to share the fate of the early Christians, who lost their chance of heaven on earth because they rejected and neglected such action. We do not claim, however, that the road leading to this goal is the same everywhere. We know that heed must be paid to the institutions, customs and traditions of the various countries, and we do not deny that there are countries such as America and England, and if I was familiar with its institutions, I might include Holland, where the workers may attain their goal by peaceful means. That being the case, we must recognise that in most continental countries the lever of the revolution will have to be force; a resort to force will be necessary one day in order to set up the rule of labour" (K. Marx, The First International and After, Penguin Books, 1974, p. 324). Which seems a reasonable assessment for the time, with once again nothing to upset an SPGber (but much to upset an anarchist or a dogmatic anti-parliamentarian).

3. It only remains to add that what socialists should do today can't be settled by a battle of quotes from Marx and Morris from the 1870s and 1880s but only by us around today in the light of the circumstances we find ourselves confronted with.

Adam Buick, Brussels, Belgium.
The World in Common group was formed in November 2002. It is firmly rooted in what we call the "non-market anti-statist sector", a small but highly diverse sector within the spectrum of political opinion. Indeed, the membership of this group reflects this diversity which is likely to grow as the group itself grows.

The purpose of the group is to help inspire a "vision of an alternative way of living where all the world's resources are owned in common and democratically controlled by communities on an ecologically sustainable and socially harmonious basis". Of course, other groups and political parties in our sector have much the same objective which raises the question as to why it should be considered necessary to form yet another such organisation. The answer to that has to do with the role that we envisage for ourselves in this sector.

One of the most important reasons why the non-market anti-statist sector remains relatively small and ineffectual, in our opinion, has arguably to do with the extent to which its constituent components remain isolated from each other and regard each other with mutual suspicion and even sectarian hostility. This is regrettable. We are certainly not suggesting that everyone in our sector sink their differences and join together in one big organisation - which would be quite unrealistic - but there is clearly an intermediate position that one can adopt between that extreme and what we have now.

This is one of the reasons why "World in Common" was set up: to provide a meeting ground for different groups and individuals within our sector as well as a means of facilitating practical collaboration between them at some level. We recognise that there are sharp differences of opinion on many different subjects within our sector, but what we do not feel has been sufficiently recognised - and celebrated - is just how much we have in common with each other. It is these commonalities which are, in fact, rather more significant than the issues that divide us which the World in Common wishes to bring to the fore and highlight.

It is for that reason that we urge anyone who feels at home within the non-market anti-statist sector to join the World in Common group to help us realise this goal. All that is required to join us is that you broadly agree with the contents of our core statement. We certainly do not see ourselves in any way as "rivals" to any other group in our sector, and indeed, some of our members belong quite happily to one or other such groups. Nor do we see ourselves, in any sense, as a political party. We are simply a network of individuals who identify with this sector and want to realise the kind of society that everyone in this sector wants ultimately to realise.

<www.worldincommon.org/
we also have a discussion forum open to anyone at <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/worldincommon/>

write to us at:
World in Common, Box 44 Greenleaf Bookshop, 82 Colston Street, Bristol BS1 5BB, UK

Where we stand

Our purpose is to help inspire a vision for an alternative way of living where the technological and material resources for creating wealth (factories, farms, land, communications etc.) are owned in common and democratically controlled by the community on an ecologically sustainable and socially harmonious basis. Individuals will voluntarily co-operate to produce goods and services and will freely take these from the stores and other such establishments, according to their needs. Buying and selling, money transactions, profits and employment for a
wage or salary etc., will cease altogether, along with the very idea of property itself (except for individual possessions for one's own use). Individuals will be able to freely develop their creative potential and to make meaningful decisions that will allow them, at last, to take real control of their own lives.

Such a society requires two things. Firstly, the technological capacity to produce enough to satisfy everyone's reasonable needs. This is something we have had for a long time now. Poverty persists, not because we lack the productive potential to eliminate it but, rather, because present-day society only meets human needs if they are backed up by "purchasing power" and because more and more of that productive potential is being squandered on socially useless activities whose only function is to keep our money-economy going. Secondly, the achievement of this future society requires that large numbers of people clearly understand what it will involve and support its establishment. This, however, is still far from being the case today and is one of the reasons why we have come into existence as a conscious and democratic organisation without leaders - to help this to happen.

To bring about this alternative way of living we must recognise the nature of present-day society as one in which a tiny minority - either through private corporations or the state - effectively own and control the means of producing and distributing wealth, leaving the rest of us relatively powerless and compelled to sell our working abilities to this owning class, usually in return for a wage or salary. Putting our trust in politicians or leaders to solve the many social problems we face today is ultimately futile since we currently live in a global society that is essentially organised to serve the interests of this minority only, rather than the population as a whole. Despite the courageous efforts of ordinary people the world over to resist the powerful political and economic forces that work against them, we are still faced with much the same kind of social problems that we had over a century ago.

To get rid of this society peacefully requires that the majority of people - without distinction of gender, sexuality, ethnic/cultural identity or religion - unite for this purpose and, at the same time, oppose those poisonous ideologies that strive to divide, distract and disempower us. It requires that we organise consciously and democratically to establish an alternative society of the bottom up, without the intervention of leaders or politicians and that we critically Support practical attempts in the present to empower ordinary people and strengthen their resistance to the global market and state. To that end, we call upon anyone sympathetic to this broad objective to join with us - irrespective of differences of opinion on matters of secondary importance - to help build a strong, inclusive, but principled, movement for radical change in a spirit of cooperation, friendship and solidarity.

(from p. 21)

Lillia Frantin raises some detailed questions about who actually deserves the appellation "working class." A group she doesn't mention are workers—often in construction—who are forced to work as "independent contractors" instead of being taken on by large construction companies as wage workers. As a result they must finance their own health insurance and pay income tax and social security out of their "profits." Nor does it include the "independent businessmen" who do yard work, snow plowing, carpet cleaning and the like.

Neil Fettes of Red & Black Notes writes to clear up what I considered the mystery of exactly what council communism is. As an element in the North American libertarian socialist political sector, it appeared as a short-lived group publishing the Boston based journal Root and Branch in the late sixties and early seventies. Next Curtis Price began publishing, Collective Action Notes (CAN) in Baltimore in the Eighties. It has since ascended to incarncate existence at a website on the Internet, a real loss in my estimation, for its survey of the international labor resistance was unmatched. So far as I know, Neil's

(to p. 27)
There are only Two Classes

Re: article on "Workers Democracy Network". While such a forum is very valuable, I did find a problem that might arise in reaching new workers due to the writer's description of 'working class vs. capitalist class'. The writer confused the clear distinctions between each, describing a capitalist as a group who "get their income mainly from stocks, bonds and real estate... the more profit they make, the less there is left for all of us" and excludes from the working class-"small employers or supervisors and managers who control workers". Aside from misleading assumptions about "income" and "profit," I would like to examine the writer's definitions of "class". Repeated by many, I believe they damage the movement we are engaged in, that is raising class consciousness, by overlooking important realities in light of today's conditions.

Let's consider"managers","small employers", and the current workplace designation of millions, "associates". Whether working in Wal-Marts, McDonald and Wendy franchises, gas-stations or even the "nostalgic" neighborhood mom & pop store, aren't all of these workers? Whether they are the ones paying out the mortgage, rents and wages as "managers", "franchise-owners" and the like, aren't they, actually, little more than clerks for the corporate owners/capitalists?.. Nor any more "capitalists" than those picking up a pay-stub each week? By failing to carefully analyse the current working conditions we fall into the old elitist(non-Marxian) rut that confuses "cultural constructs", style, etc with "economic facts" We alienate them and deny they are all part of our class. We also diminish access to a growing number of workers in the service, temp, in-home office/self-employed and "pink-collar" economies. How do we proceed?

I first suggest that we analyse without prejudice, the actual situation. While all these "jobs" are a bit removed from "production" ("point of production" via a vis the factory floor) , all serve as the last step in the"process" - as "distributors" of the privately-owned corporate commodity. Their jobs would all "disappear" if this locale of distribution- the store, fast-food place, their home-office or car, etc.- were to be cut off from the "product" they are distributing. Altho some in this group-may indeed "manage", they do not control. So, how do they fit in? A worker is by definition, exploited by the system; a capitalist exploits thru the ownership of the vast wealth & power incorporated in the means of production. So, how do we approach this "manager", resembling the "petit bourgeois" traditionally allied for security to the owners, but today as insecure and interchangeable as any other worker? As usual, capitalism itself is giving us the answer, so let's use it.

Whereas the historic class role of the "petit bourgeois" under early capitalism was often in fact more akin to that of the "owners", late capitalism and its unending concentration of wealth is transforming that role from being an ambiguous quasi-owner to that of just another "worker" exploited as part of the system. By recognizing the importance of their emerging historic role in the present context, and not consigning them to some "non-class" status for eternity, it is easier to clarify their stake in working to replace capitalism with a system that benefits us all. In other words, include them IN.

In your literature and website, point out the FALLACY that their interests are with the capitalists. That they do not own the means of production. That this is the conclusive distinction between capitalist and working class that never changes. That they are merely the last stop-off point in the system's marketing/distribution/servicing phase, a job assignment subject to the
changing needs of the market. While this may seem a minor detail to some, as socialists and "post-SLPers" without this analysis we support the fantasy that someone who won the lottery, or owns stock, or who tries to make a living at his/her computer after a lay-off by a major corporation, is indeed "free" of their class.... And consistently point out that --- unless you have accumulated such vast wealth to enable you to own the means of production in this multinational, global economy and never again receive a wage, are exploited at the point of production (OR YOUR ROLE IN THAT PRODUCTION) --- while you may be temporarily lucky or unlucky, you are no Capitalist.

Nor do your "values" or allegiances change your class. The poorest of the poor as well as the well-paid stock broker may defend capitalism to the death, but that doesn't change their class. And, likewise, clear class-consciousness tells us a worker need not be on a "factory floor"---that being unemployed or student, at-home parents or single, elderly or young, ill or infirm does not change your class interests, not even while you hold allegiances to your "Master" and identify with their interests. And finally, for all of us, being fully class-conscious means constant analysis of new conditions as they develop under capitalism... and that includes re-thinking 19th century notions of "exclusion" no matter how comfortable they may feel. Liberals and "Old Time Lefties" might be "anti-bourgeois" but let's realize that today, "bourgeois" is more a term for cultural "values" than of a factual "class". When we deny our fellow workers their legitimate role as fellow members of the working class, we set up artificial barriers to dialogue, and alienate without shedding light.

Lillia Frantis
N. Falmouth Village, MA
(from p. 25)

R&BN, which began publication in the 1990s is the only remaining hard copy councilist publication in the English language.

MacIntosh's posting on the Intisdicnet forum helps to clear up a question about that element of our political sector that I have always had reservations about. The negative attitude toward the Russian Revolution held by the revolutionary wing of the pre-WWI socialist movement--anarchists, syndicalists, the Socialist Party of Great Britain, and the Socialist Labor Party--was rooted in their existence as dissenting elements in a movement dominated by social democratic politicians. Their critique of the Lenin and the Bolsheviks derived from their conclusion that a real socialist revolution as they understood the terms socialism and revolution must await the industrial development of the USSR. None of these groups joined the Third International. The elements that became the council communists and the left communists did so early on as part of the left wing socialist movement in the Netherlands and Germany and in Italy when they split from the social democrats. The Dutch and Germans soon saw the direction Lenin and the Bolsheviks were headed and split from their national communist parties as early as 1920. The Italian left led by Bordiga held out a few more years until the advent of Stalin. As a result of its longer exposure to Leninism it seems to have acquired some of the ideological viruses Lenin developed to defend his authoritarian program for industrializing Russia, including the dictatorship of the proletariat and an undisguised contempt for the idea of democracy.

As usual DB118 ends with some notes, announcements and short reviews.

Finances

Thanks to contributions--as always--the DB kept its fiscal head above water; in fact it gained a bit on the
Dear Frank,

In *DB* no. 115, you wrote that *Red & Black Notes*' self-identification as a council communist newsletter, raised "the question of just what council communism is, since nothing in the contents of this issue would suggest a council communist program as such." The point is not to advocate "no program", but to understand the options and choices facing by pro-revolutionaries.

In practical terms, there is little difference between council communist organizations and other so-called revolutionary groups, but only in terms of political views and aspiration. For all their talk of the "crisis of leadership" most revolutionary groups, including the Leninists, are tiny sects without influence or membership. Those Leninist groups, which have achieved a degree of importance tend to function like their larger social-democratic cousins.

Those interested in a detailed history of the council communist tendency would do well to consult Philippe Bourrinet's excellent book *The Dutch and German Communist Left* published by the ICC in 2001. (Bourrinet has published a revised version of this book, which is available at the Left Wing Communism web site). Additionally, the latest issue of *Aufheben* contains an article entitled "Beyond the Ultra-left?" which attempts to assess some of the strengths and weaknesses of the current.

The earliest use of the term council communism seems to have been by small groups which had split from the Communist Workers Party of Germany (KAPD) in the early 1920s. While the KAPD differed with the Bolsheviks and the Communist Party of Germany on many tactical and political issues, its conception of the party still had points in common (although they sought to provide guidance to the class rather than the explicit role of leadership) This goal was summed up by Herman Gorner as building a party, "as hard as steel, but as clear as glass." The KAPD also maintained a separate workplace organization, the General Workers' Union of Germany (AAUD). The early splits from the KAPD including Otto Ruhle. saw no reason to maintain this distinction - Ruhle's post-KAPD organization was the German General Workers' League-Unify Organization (AAUD-E).

Within a few years the KAPD and the organizations it inspired were tiny sects: Basing themselves on the revolutionary wave that began at the end of the war, they could only disappear when the wave receded. The most important-organization to emerge from this period was the Dutch grouping, the Groups of International Communists (GIK). Founded in 1927, the GIK identified itself as council communist (ratekommunist), and as such its orientation was markedly different from Leninist organizations. Rather than churning out thick manifestos calling for the working class to rally around their banner, the council communist groups attempted to analyze capitalist society and in particular the mechanisms by which capital contained and recuperated struggle. For those readers fluent in French, *Echanges et Mouvement* has published an account of the GIK's activity written by Cajo Breidel, along with some essays by Pannekoek (I have a few copies available). As opposed to the Trotskyists and other leftists, who despite a fixation on betrayals and misleaders of the working class, saw the unions as basically working class organizations, the council communists saw them as being capitalist institutions. Likewise the political party and electoral system. (this should not be surprising since in the twenties Ruhle had famously noted "the revolution would not be a party affair.") Rather than attempting to capture these institutions, the council communists looked for signs in working class resistance to capital that went around them and developed new methods: wildcats, sit-down strikes and the establishment of workers councils were all seen as the future of struggle. Above all, council communists have looked to the self-activity of the working class as being the key to the transformation of society, rather than lying a course for workers to follow.

As to what a council communist organization does, I hesitate to lay down an authoritative role.
The French group Echanges et Mouvement publishes a regular bulletin documenting workers struggles, as well as a theoretical magazine and pamphlets. Other organizations influenced by council communism such as the Anarchist Federation in the UK are much more "activist." Red & Black Notes began as a leaflet written in support of striking grocery workers; the soon to be published 16th issue contains reviews of books on Italian autonomist Marxism and revolutionary praxis, articles on Iraq, revolutionary theory, and news from the "ultra-left" milieu.

Cgs

Neil /Red & Black Notes
Toronto
http://ca.geocities.com/red_black_ca

(from p. 27)

Encroaching flood of expenses. This time it was post office box rent that rose 20 percent. Not listed here are the many subscribers who have excused the DB's debt for subscriptions that extend beyond issue 120, July-August 2003. Many thanks to all of you.

Contributions: Joe Tupper "for the abolition of capitalism" $40; Steve Hoyle $25; Charles Davis $3; Ralph Forsyth $22; Rado Mijanovich $100; L. Frantin and H. Edwards $25; Total $215. Thank you, comrades.

BALANCE December 23, 2002 $ 28.92

RECEIPTS
Contributions $ 215.00
Subs and sales 64.00
Total $ 279.00

DISBURSEMENTS
Postage $ 138.00
Bank Charges 8.00
Printing 36.29
Postage Due 8.83
Annual P.O. Box Rent 48.00
Total $ 239.12

BALANCE February 25, 2002 $ 68.80

Fraternally submitted

Frank Girard
As someone fairly new to 'communist-left' politics I was hoping someone could clarify a few genealogical issues for me. What separates 'Bordigists' from other groups descended from the Italian communist left? What are the currently existing Bordigist groups? Are the politics of the ICC and the groups that came out of it based on the fusion of the German/Dutch and Italian 'lefts' developed by Bilan in France in the 30s?

Cheers, Peter

Bordiga, Bordigism and the Communist Left

While the Italian Left in exile (Bilan, Prometheus) of the 1930's, was the heir of Bordiga's faction of the Italian Communist party, it did not include Bordiga himself, who was either in jail or under house arrest from 1926 until the fall of Mussolini (1943). Throughout that period, the Italian Left in exile developed a political perspective shaped by Bordiga's original belief that Stalin's abandonment of internationalism, the policy of "Socialism in one country," and the involvement in imperialist power politics that that entailed, as opposed to the destruction of the workers councils or the dictatorship of the party, constituted the quintessence of the counter-revolution. Bilan's analysis of the world economic crisis and the course towards a second world war was not specifically Bordigist, and indeed had its theoretical bases in a version of Luxemburg's crisis theory.

Bordiga re-emerged on the political scene only in the 1940's with the formation of the Internationalist Communist Party in Italy, whose theorist he became. The theoretical hallmarks of Bordigism as it developed in the post-war period included an ultra-Leninist conception of class consciousness and the role of the party (the party is the locus of class consciousness; the party is the organ of the dictatorship of the proletariat); a vision of the Russian revolution as a "double revolution" (proletarian on the political level, bourgeois in its economic tasks); and a rejection of any vision of capitalism as a decadent mode of production, already incapable of developing the productive forces (Not only did Bordiga foresee a phase of reconstruction for Euro-American capital following World War Two, but the prospect of bourgeois revolutions throughout the Third World, in which Mao, or Castro, for example, were seen as twentieth century Jacobins, and their revolutions as "progressive," though certainly not socialist).

That part of the pre-war Italian Left constituted (during the war) as the Gauche Communiste de France (Internationalism) rejected Bordiga's theories, and sought to add elements of the theoretical arsenal of the German left to that of the Italian Left. This included a vision of Russia as state capitalist, in which sense Stalinism constituted a model for the whole capitalist world; a vision of capitalism as a decadent mode of production, in which the productive forces could no longer grow; and a vision of capitalism as condemned to a cycle of crises - war (to which was added a phase of reconstruction, though only later when the actual development refuted their claims of an imminent Third World War).

Internationalism disappeared in 1952, when many of its comrades scattered in expectation that the Korean War marked the beginning of World War Three, and its theoretical legacy re-emerged in Venezuela (to which its most important theorist, Marc Chiric, had emigrated) in the mid-1960's, and then in France in 1968, in the wake of the May-June mass strikes.

Out of that ferment the ICC emerged, having added to the basic theoretical legacy of Internationalism, a view of class consciousness and the role of the workers councils as the organs of proletarian struggle and dictatorship that had its bases in the German left. Meanwhile, in Italy, the clash between Bordiga and Onorato Damen had by 1952 led to a split and the formation of two separate ICP's: Programma
Comunista (Bordiga) and Battaglia Comunista (Damen). With Bordiga’s own death in the 1970’s several other splits occurred within the Bordigist ICP, largely over who had the best claim to be the legatee of Bordiga himself. Beyond the ultra-Leninism of each of these groups, however, there is a rich theoretical legacy of Bordiga, contained in his own writings and talks, especially on the developmental tendencies of capitalism in the twentieth century -- a legacy that has been synthesized and analyzed in an important essay by Loren Goldner, "Amadeo Bordiga, the Agrarian Question and the International Revolutionary Movement," (Critique 23, and now available on Loren Goldner’s web site).

Even before the death of Marc C, the ICC, in my view, had succumbed to theoretical stagnation and organizational sectism; both IP and the Paris Discussion Circle have provided a considerable dossier on both elements of the ICC’s degeneration. I cannot resist one last point. While the history of the communist left and its theoretical debates are of enormous interest to revolutionaries, it seems to me that that research should NOT be carried out with a view to finding the correct theory, the truth about capitalism and the struggle for communism, within the debates and texts of the past. However important those texts are (and I think that they are very important), they must be interpreted critically, and with the view that Marxism is an ongoing theoretical and practical task. The claims for an invariance of Marxism, made by the Bordigists, is, in my view, the clearest example of the repudiation of Marxism that can be found. While the analyses of the trajectory of capital by Bilan, beyond their historical interest, have to be revised by the real development of capital itself, there is one crucial element of the vision that animated the comrades of Bilan that has lost none of its power over the past 70 years: the frank acknowledgment that their theoretical analyses constituted a kind of “stammering”! Approach as the stammerings of revolutionaries, those texts and debates will be invaluable; seen as a codification of the Truth, they will be worthless.

MAC INTOSH

* * *

The response to Peter Jovanovic, on the genealogy of Bordigism, the rest of the Italian communist left, and the ICC, written by Mac Intosh, and forwarded by Sander to the list, was both informative and concise. I hope it helps Peter and any other list subscribers relatively new to left-communist politics to better understand its history.

However, Peter had also asked, in his posting: “What are the currently existing Bordigist groups?” In answer to this question, I can provide a link which lists (and links to) the five most prominent Bordigist organizations today (all of which call themselves the International Communist Party). The link is: www.broadleft.org/leftcomm.htm. The page lists (and provides links for) what it describes as various “left communist organizations of the world”. Included also are some ‘semi-Bordigist’ organizations, such as Robin Goodfellow, and others.

Eric

(from p. 32)

The Anarchist Archives Project is a one-man effort to collect, preserve, and—most importantly—catalog anarchist literature from the earliest times to the present. Begun in 1983 by Jerry Kaplan, the archive has grown to 18,000 items from—I would guess—every country that has anything that can be called an anarchist group that publishes. Nor is the archive limited to publications that label themselves “anarchist.” The IWW’s Industrial Worker is listed as is the Discussion Bulletin and Guy Aldred’s pamphlets as well as a booklet by Bob Avakian (on anarchism). All this is contained in seven consecutive catalogs and two multi-page printouts. The complete set is available for $5 from Anarchist Archive Project, P.O. Box 381323, Cambridge, MA 02238-1323.

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NOTES, ANNOUNCEMENTS, AND SHORT REVIEWS

Anarchist Black Cross Network Newsletter. Issue number 1, December 2002, is edited by Anthony Rayson, who deserves high praise for his efforts on behalf of prisoners. Rayson’s introduction explains his philosophy in regard to prisoner publications: “I believe that here in Amerika d.i.y. zines are to the nth degree what the samisdat press was in Soviet Russia. Prisoners’ zines are especially important as the exploding 2,000,000 plus population of our Brothers and Sisters is bursting with insight, talent, courage, awareness and the necessary analysis needed to fight this hideous system from within and help coordinate resistance from the outside the vast gulag system.” This 60-page issue includes information on a conference of Anarchist Black Cross groups held last July in Austin Texas. Delegates numbering 150 were there from 32 groups. One outcome was a “Draft Proposal for an Anarchist Black Cross Network,” which runs to some five pages and lays out the purpose, goals, structure and principles of the organization. The conclusion provides information on a similar conference of European ABC and prison support groups held in Ghent Belgium in June 2001. Also published here are the minutes of the Austin conference amounting to five pages along with a five-page statement on the conference by Lorenzo Komboa Ervin, who gave the conference keynote address. Ervin’s statement, as did a similar statement by another attendee, Ernesto Aguilar, focused on the role to be played by people of color in the ABCN, given the fact that more than half of all prisoners are non-white. In fact, the tension regarding race along with what Aguilar describes as a majority view that the prime direction of ABCN should advocate prison abolition rather than prison reform is what these two attendees see as the source of possible division in the ABCN. Articles include “Virginia’s Supermax Prisons and the Virgin Islands Connection,” “Death by Indifference,” “The Rebirth of Humanity in a Pathological Capitalistic Society,” “Incarceration and Racism,” “Upcoming Prisoner Lawsuit Challenges Anarchist Repression,” and “Report of the Break the Chains Collective.” The DB has followed Break the Chains since its first issue, reprinting articles and noting the connection of some of its contributors to the Industrial Workers of the World and to the World Socialist Party. The report notes their growth and the recent publication of their issue number 13. All this and more in the first issue of the Anarchist Black Cross Network Newsletter, South Chicago ABC Zine Distro, PO Box 721, Homewood, IL 60430.

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