

# Afterword

WHY HAS *Wildcat* reprinted these articles from *Solidarity*?

For as long as capitalism has existed, there have been groups of men and women who have reached the conclusion that the problems confronting the working class under capitalism can only be solved by the establishment of a communist society. The APCF was one such group, but there have been others before and since, emerging at different periods in history, in various parts of the world and often without being aware of each others existence. Communist ideas are a constantly recurring response to capitalism on the part of ordinary wage-labourers. But for the most part such revolutionary groups and individuals have formed only a tiny minority of the working class as a whole. This has made it easy for the capitalist class, with enormous propaganda resources at its disposal, to obscure the fact that they have ever existed, while the historians of the so-called socialist and 'communist' parties have been far more interested in the history of their own (actually capitalist) organisations than they have been in the history of the groups and individuals that have steadfastly opposed capitalism in all its forms. Thus this pamphlet is part of a continuing effort to reclaim the hidden history of rebellion against capitalism.

It is only to be expected that after more than 40 years, many detailed points of the APCF's analysis have been disproved or qualified by subsequent experience. The purpose of this 'Afterword' is to indicate briefly to what extent this is the case. By so doing we hope to strengthen the case for the APCF's – and our own – basic principles.

Recognising the war to be an imperialist one, the APCF's position of revolutionary opposition to it was, primarily, a matter of principle. With hindsight, it was doomed from the start to be no more than a symbolic gesture. When Lenin and a handful of fellow revolutionaries had called on workers during World War I to turn the imperialist war into a civil war they also seemed impossibly isolated from the mass of European workers who had rallied to the call of patriotism. Yet within four years Europe was engulfed by revolution. Superficially the APCF's position in World War II might have seemed similar. With hindsight the crushing defeat of the working class between the wars meant that a revolutionary response to World War II was never on. Events such as the bloody suppression of the IWW (the revolutionary syndicalist movement in America), the defeat of the British General Strike, the defeat of the German revolu-

tion and the rise of fascism, the massacre of Spanish workers in the civil war there, and above all the defeat from within of the Russian Revolution – none of these had any parallel in the years before World War I.

Despite this, the APCF's growing optimism as the class struggle intensified towards the end of the war was mirrored by the growing fears within the ruling class for the survival of their system. A capitalist economist stated in 1945 that it was 'not open to doubt that the decay of capitalist society is very advanced'<sup>1</sup>. The APCF hoped for revolution. More pessimistic members of the ruling class regarded it as a distinct possibility.

In 1946–47 there was a wave of strikes. In America these years saw the climax of a strike wave which had been building up since 1943. In Japan there were widespread strikes and demonstrations against redundancies, and calls for people's control over the distribution of rationed food, wage rises and redundancies. In Germany strikes spread through the Ruhr in 1947. Referenda were held around the question of large-scale nationalisation without compensation, recording massive majorities in favour. In France a strike by 30,000 Renault workers triggered off a widespread strike wave between April and July 1947.

The nature of the demands raised – a confused mixture of state capitalism and self-managed capitalism – reflects the dominant influence of the traditional Socialist and Communist parties. It was the influence of these parties which allowed the ruling class to suppress the post-war strike wave largely without resorting to violence, thus setting the pattern for the whole post-war era. Wherever workers' committees were in control of workplaces they were dissolved either by or with the support of the Socialist and Communist Parties, who denounced them as 'fascist fronts'. In Italy the CP called for hard work and labour discipline and used its influence to quell the strikes which had continued on and off since 1943. In Germany a British official report noted that SP and CP union officials had 'exerted a restraining influence on the workers, and had both preached and practised a policy of cooperation'. In Japan the CP supported 'responsible' strikes while denouncing the 'trend in the labour movement towards direct action and a frontal attack on the rights of the Capitalist owners of the means of production'. In France the CP more bluntly denounced strikers at Renault as 'Hitlerite-Trotskyist provocateurs in the pay of de Gaulle' (!).

Workers in struggle after the war confronted a capitalism which was in essence as totalitarian as the APCF had predicted. But in the West at least it was a very different form of totalitarianism from Nazism – opposition forces were not eliminated. They were integrated into the state. The left formed a solid block with the right against any workers' struggles which seriously threatened capitalism. The fake alternative provided by the left, given credibility as such by the state-controlled media and education systems, gave an illusion of democratic choice.

This did not mean that the ruling class had renounced dictatorial methods. When the US ruling class decided that democratic rights should not extend to the Communist party, despite the latter's loyalty to American imperialism during the war, the McCarthyite purges did the job quite simply in a way that Stalin himself would have been proud of.

In Britain, the post-war Labour Government used troops against striking dockers and other workers. In Japan, US armoured cars were used to quell demonstrations, and strikes were threatened with 'action of most drastic nature'. The American governor of occupied Germany warned strikers that 'under the law of the military [you] can be punished with the death sentence. I have the power to cut the rations of anyone involved in work unrest... this would be drastic and extend for an indefinite period of time'. In other words, go back to work or we'll starve you to death!

But in general the ruling class in America and Western Europe did not have to resort to fascistic methods, because of the massive, sustained post-war economic boom which had been foreseen by almost nobody – certainly not by the APCF. Increased consumption, naturally, defused workers discontent. Indeed the consumer society was a central pillar of the whole structure of democratic totalitarianism.

In the light of the history of post-war capitalism, the concept of decadence which was the cornerstone of the ideas of the APCF and the left/council communist movement in general needs to be re-evaluated. In the thirties it was not hard to believe that capitalism had entered into a period of permanent economic decline. The post-war boom showed that this was not the case. Whether or not decadence is still a useful concept for the analysis of the development of the world economy remains to be seen. Attempts to reconcile the concept of decadence with the reality of the post-war economy have not been very successful<sup>2</sup>.

Paradoxically, the political 'side effects' associated with decadence have proved more permanent than the economic decline which is supposed to have caused them. Throughout the boom years the state continued to consolidate its dominance over all areas of social and economic life. The consolidation of global imperialism continued towards its ultimate stage: the division of the world into two great camps, armed to the teeth and engaged in permanent warfare with each other in SE Asia, the Middle East, Latin America etc.. The unions and 'workers' parties' confirmed their process of integration

into the capitalist state. Although the nineteen fifties and sixties resembled the nineteenth century economically, there was no equivalent growth of a working class reformist movement. Workers aspirations and discontent were channelled into the welcoming arms of the official opposition parties and the trade unions and thus neutralised.

In short it seems that while a more or less temporary respite from the economic features of decadence is possible, the political effects are irreversible.

However the present crisis confirms the single most important economic thesis drawn from the concept of decadence. That is, in decadence, once an economic crisis sets in, no recovery is possible. The crisis leads remorselessly towards world war. At the same time the effects of the economic crisis force workers – often despite their beliefs, to struggle outside of and against the official left parties and the unions. Faced with this threat the ruling class, without any fuss, drops its democratic mask and resorts to naked violence to defend its rotting system. Police violence during the miners' strike in Britain showed workers throughout the industrialised world what to expect in the future. Workers in the non-industrial world are already accustomed to such treatment. Compromise is no longer an option. The choice which lies at the heart of the concept of decadence remains: war or revolution, socialism or barbarism.

The APCF's principled stand against war is thus of the utmost practical relevance today. Revolution is a necessity, and unlike in 1939, it is also a possibility. The working class has suffered nothing comparable to the bloody defeats of the 20s and 30s. On the other hand, the threat of the complete destruction of human life in a nuclear war makes the need for revolution more urgent than ever.

Those who also understand the urgency of revolution, naturally want to organise to help speed things along. But how? The debate on the 'party question' in *Solidarity* failed to arrive at any definite conclusion. This was inevitable since virtually the only historical examples revolutionaries could base their ideas on were of parties and political organisations which had failed in the past. Unfortunately this is still the case today. But it is impossible to resist taking this opportunity to make our own contribution to the debate.

So, where does *Wildcat* stand on the Party Question?

Like the APCF we reject out of hand the idea of a revolutionary party which aims to seize power. But again like the APCF we also reject the extreme position argued by Mattick that all specialist political organisations are reactionary.

Mattick claims that class struggle spontaneously gives rise to widespread revolutionary consciousness. This is wrong on two counts.

Firstly in all class struggle, both in action and in politics, there is always a radical minority which takes the lead. In the miners strike it was a clearly defined minority which called for, and took part in, radical action. Only a minority of this minority drew more or less revolutionary

conclusions from their experience. Of course our aim is that the vast majority of workers should become actively involved in revolutionary struggle and revolutionary politics. A future revolution will fail unless it abolishes the rigid division between leaders and led which is the hallmark of class society. But we won't get any further towards this goal by shutting our eyes to the reality that this division reappears – 'spontaneously' – in every new episode of class struggle.

Revolutionary ideas do not arise spontaneously. This is the second error of Mattick's argument. Of course revolutionary ideas will only become widespread in conditions of mass class struggle. But conscious effort is equally necessary. Each new generation of revolutionaries has to re-learn revolutionary theory.

This theory has to be tested, refined, and – where necessary – revised in the light of detailed analyses of history and current events. A ceaseless effort is required to produce and distribute revolutionary propaganda. Finally, those who are convinced of the need for revolution should put forward their case not only by argument but also by example, by active involvement in struggles wherever they occur.

This work, undertaken – inevitably – by a minority, is revolutionary political organisation.

Mattick's claim that none of this would be necessary if it were not for the reactionary influence of political parties, without which revolutionary ideas would develop spontaneously, is irrelevant and impossible to judge. We have to deal with the world as it is, not as we would like it to be. Opposition to revolutionary political organisation means, in practice, refusing to allow the working class the means to effectively oppose the reactionary influences of the capitalist media, the Labour Party and its leftist hangers-on.

Although *Wildcat* agrees with the basic conclusions of the APCF on the party question we have some criticisms of the way the APCF itself was organised.

*Solidarity* was a forum for people who opposed the war for all sorts of different reasons. It is easy to understand how in the desperate circumstances of the war all those who opposed it would be drawn together. But the APCF was too tolerant in allowing views fundamentally opposed to their own to appear unchallenged in the paper. These included at various times, pacifism, trade unionism, and 'critical' support for Russia. The problem for revolution-

ary organisations is how to exclude reactionary views such as these without stifling debate. The solution is that membership of the organisation should be based on agreement with a clearly defined set of 'basic principles'. Within the framework of this basic agreement different views are freely expressed.

The APCF also seemed to suffer from a lack of proper organisation. It appeared to be content to remain a locally based group, with no interest in trying to form a national or international organisation. It is sometimes argued that revolutionaries should only organise informally in local groups, to avoid the dangers associated with larger organisations. This argument is at least implied in Pannekoek's 'The Party and the Working Class'. Certainly these dangers are real, and many. They include bureaucracy, routinism, hierarchy, and above all the danger that the organisation will become an elite, openly or secretly seeking power not for the working class as a whole, but for itself.

These dangers have to be faced up to, not run away from. Besides, even the smallest organisations, which claim to be simply groups of friends, are not immune from them. Anyone familiar with radical literature will have encountered the intellectual elitism of the small group of self-styled experts, who obscure their often banal ideas behind a veil of jargon. This is just as contrary to the spirit of communism as the 'Leninist Party' which admits it wants to take power 'for' the working class.

Capitalism is international. Class struggle is international. The revolution will have to be international if it is to succeed. It is absurd to argue that it is adequate for revolutionaries to be organised in small local groups. The fragmentation of today's tiny revolutionary movement is to be deplored. We set our sights on a centralised, international revolutionary organisation.

1 This quote, and the following information on post-war class struggle, comes from *Capitalism Since World War II*.

2 See especially: *The Decadence of Capitalism*, by the International Communist Current. See also *The Economic Foundations of Capitalist Decadence*, by the Communist Workers Organisation.